

ESP Needs Analysis for Nursing Students at a Sri Lankan Higher Education Institution

A.K.S. Jayarathna¹, W.M.K.C. Wanasooriya², D.D.H.G.Y. Senarathne³, B.D.S.V.U.de Silva⁴, D.R.W. Jayasinghe⁵, L.V. George⁶, H.D. Wijesekera*

^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7} School of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Sciences, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, Sri Lanka.

Corresponding author*: harsha.wi@sliit.lk

Abstract

This study analyzes the effectiveness of existing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) modules in meeting the English language requirements of the Higher National Diploma Nursing program at a non-state Higher Education Institute (HEI) in Sri Lanka. Drawing on the Nation and Macalister's Language Curriculum Design framework, a needs analysis was conducted. This comprised determining students' linguistic needs, aspirations, and gaps in academic and clinical settings through a validated questionnaire, followed by interviews with two lecturers of core subjects, one English language lecturer, and twenty-eight students. The data were analyzed thematically using an inductive approach. The findings indicate that the current EAP modules are insufficient to meet the professional communication needs of nurses. A substantial proportion (65%) of students reported not using English daily, while (52%) reported low confidence, mainly in oral communication, and (57%) emphasized the need for improving medical communication. Students and lecturers emphasized the need for interactive language instruction with a nursing focus. Next, the study compared the international ESP curriculum models with the existing EAP module, supported by the findings, and observed significant content differences. The study recommends that English for Specific Purposes or English for Nursing should be integrated into nursing school curricula along with faculty development support, differentiated instruction, and authentic materials. Language instruction should be keyed to actual communication needs to promote academic achievement and professional competence at the global level.

Keywords: Clinical Communication, Curriculum Development, EAP, ESP, Medical English, Needs Analysis, Nursing Education.

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a needs analysis conducted to evaluate the English language syllabus for nursing students enrolled in the Higher National Diploma in Nursing program (HNDNP) at a non-state HEI in Sri Lanka. Using the Nation and Macalister (2010) curriculum design model, the study assesses how effectively the current curriculum meets students' academic and professional language needs. It examines perspectives from students, English lecturers, and subject nursing lecturers. The study also compares the current English language modules with ESP courses offered in other nursing programs. The analysis focuses on students' needs, wants, and lacks in language learning, aiming to inform curriculum improvements.

Context and Background

The focused HNDNP aims to prepare students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills for the healthcare sector. Since nursing is a communication-intensive profession, English proficiency is crucial for academic success and effective interaction with patients, colleagues, and supervisors, locally and internationally. Specifically, since these students follow a pathway to degree programs in an English-speaking country, they require a minimum IELTS score of 7.0.

Currently, students are enrolled in a general English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course focused on academic communication skills. However, they also need English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which targets discipline-related language use. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1990), ESP tailors content and methods to learners' professional goals, while Febriyanti (2017) highlights that student 'needs should guide the learning process. Therefore, English instruction for nursing students should be directly linked to medical and healthcare contexts. Despite this, the existing curriculum remains focused on general academic purposes, highlighting a need for more targeted, professional-specific language training to meet the students' needs, wants, and lacks.

Purpose of the Study

The needs analysis aimed to evaluate the English language requirements of nursing students enrolled in the HNDNP at the non-state HEI across Years 1, 2, and 3. Given the essential role of English in both nursing education and clinical practice, the study aims to determine whether the current English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses adequately meet students' academic and professional needs. By collecting input from students, English language lecturers, and subject lecturers, the study sought to identify language proficiency gaps that may hinder or support academic success and effective communication in healthcare settings. The insights will guide future curriculum development to ensure students are equipped with the necessary language skills. The study was guided by the overarching question (1): What are the specific English language skills needed by Higher National Diploma in Nursing students for academic and clinical success? This was supported by the following sub-research questions.

1. How well does the current general EAP course align with students' academic and professional language needs?
2. What do current nursing students believe they need (want) to succeed in their academic and professional careers?
3. What language deficiencies (lacks) are identified by students, English lecturers, and mainstream lecturers?
4. What additional elements are needed in the curriculum to address the identified gaps?
5. What are the differences between the existing English syllabus at a Non-state Higher Education Institute in Sri Lanka and ESP modules used in international nursing programs?

Scope of the study

This study is limited to exploring the English language needs, wants, and lacks nursing students pursuing the HNDNP at a non-state Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Sri Lanka, with a pathway to a reputed foreign university. The analysis specifically focuses on students in Years 1, 2, and 3 of the programs. The primary objective is to identify gaps in English language skills that are critical for academic success and professional communication within the nursing field. By examining these areas, the study aims to inform the development of targeted language support strategies to enhance the learning experience and career readiness of nursing students.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore student experiences in English language learning and the perspectives of mainstream lecturers on supporting language development. The research included 31

participants in total: 28 students, one English language lecturer, and two mainstream subject lecturers. Data collection was conducted through a student survey using a Google Form and in-depth interviews with both mainstream lecturers and an English language lecturer, which were later transcribed for analysis.

Participants

The 28 students represented diverse academic disciplines and had varied experiences with English language learning. The English language lecturer focused on supporting students' language development, while the 2 mainstream subject lecturers taught courses in non-language-specific subjects but still interacted with students on language issues

Data Collection Instruments

Student Surveys:

A structured survey was administered to the students using Google Forms, consisting of six sections designed to explore different dimensions of the students' English language learning experience. These sections covered:

1. Demographic information, Self-assessment of English language proficiency.
2. Perceptions of the challenges faced in learning English.
3. Effectiveness of support received from the English language lecturer.
4. Experiences with mainstream subject lecturers regarding language support.
5. Open-ended questions for additional comments or suggestions.

In line with good questionnaire design guidelines, the purpose of the survey was clearly defined to gather insights into students' challenges, perceptions and support experiences related to English language learning. The target group was well-identified, ensuring that the questions were suitable and relevant for the participants.

The survey employed simple and clear language to make it accessible to all participants. Questions were kept short and focused to avoid misinterpretation. The survey followed a logical structure, beginning with general information such as demographic details and self-assessment of proficiency, and gradually progressing to more specific areas like feedback on lecturer support. A mix of closed-ended questions and open-ended questions was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

To ensure fairness, all questions were neutral and unbiased, designed to encourage honest and thoughtful responses. Clear instructions were provided at the beginning of each section to guide students through the process. Finally, the survey was administered electronically to enhance accessibility, and all responses were anonymized and stored securely, upholding standards of confidentiality.

Lecturer Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English language lecturer and the two mainstream subject lecturers. The interviews were conducted in person and lasted approximately 15 minutes each. They aimed to understand lecturers' perspectives on supporting students' language learning in their respective teaching contexts. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used, allowing lecturers to discuss their experiences, strategies, and challenges in providing language support. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants for accurate transcription and analysis.

Results

Needs analysis among nursing students and lecturers revealed significant professional and linguistic gaps that prevent academic and work achievement. The information was collected by means of a student questionnaire and lecturer interviews. The findings are presented thematically as: (1) Purpose and

Frequency of English Use, (2) Skills Emphasized vs. Desired, (3) Learning Preferences, (4) Student Challenges, and (5) Lecturer Perspectives.

Purpose and Frequency of English Use

In the questionnaire, students were asked why they studied English and when do they typically use it. The responses show a clear gap between required and actual language exposure among the students.

Table 1

Responses: Why do you study English?

Purpose	Percentage
Higher Education	42.9%
Future profession	39.3%
Communicating with patients	17.8%

Table 2

Responses: When do you use English?

Usage Context	Percentage
Only during classes	64.3%
During daily tasks	14.3%
With friends/family	21.4%

Hence, it is evident that most students (64.3%) have reported that they use English only during classroom activities, and not in everyday contexts, indicating limited exposure outside the formal classroom settings.

Skills Emphasized vs. Skills Desired

Students were asked which skills were emphasized in class and which they most desired to improve.

Table 3

Percentage: Which skills are emphasized in class?

Skill	Percentage
Grammar	35.7%
Reading	28.6%

Speaking	21.4%
Writing	10.7%
Listening	3.6%

Table 4

Percentage: Which skills do you want to improve?

Skill	Percentage
Speaking	50.0%
Listening	25.0%
Writing	17.9%
Grammar	7.1%

While grammar and reading are the most emphasized skills in the class, students have expressed a strong preference in proving their speaking (50%) and listening (25%) skills, reflecting their professional communication needs.

Learning Preferences and Classroom Practice

Students were asked about their preferred learning styles and teaching strategies.

Table 5

Preferred Learning Style

Preference	Percentage
Activity-based learning (role play, group work)	78.6%
Lecture-based only	21.4%

Table 6

Preferred Mode of Classroom Interaction

Interaction Type	Percentage
Group or pair work	82.1%
Individual tasks only	17.9%

Students show a clear preference for interactive, learner-centered approaches including role plays and group work, consistent with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) practices.

Table 7*Self-Perceived Challenges*

Students were asked about their perceived difficulties in learning and using English.

Challenge	Percentage
Lack of confidence in speaking	53.6%
Understand medical terminology	25.0%
Writing structured reports	17.9%
Grammar rules	3.6%

Over half of the students (53.6%) reported a lack of speaking confidence, highlighting the need for oral communication practice.

Lecturer Insights

English language and mainstream nursing lecturers provided valuable input. The English language lecturer saw a requirement for the integration of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction and suggested introducing specifically designed modules with medical vocabulary and patient communication. Existing modules (e.g., EAP and Communication Skills) were reported to give some background but lacked depth of clinical use.

Mainstream subject lecturers were unanimous that there are substantial language problems that students face, specifically at the start of the program. Normal problems were quoted as difficulties with oral presentation, academic writing, and the understanding of grammatical structures such as passive voice. While some improvement was quoted in year three, lecturers were focused on modifications to existing modules and not fresh ones added. They emphasized the need to coordinate language training with nursing material so that students would be able to work successfully within real-life professional environments.

Discussion

The needs analysis of the Higher National Diploma (HND) Nursing students at a Non-state Higher Education Institute in Sri Lanka clearly indicates that the existing General Academic English curriculum does not necessarily meet the students' academic and professional communication needs. The feedback from the students, nursing lecturers, and the English lecturer points out several serious gaps that need to be addressed in order to render the English program more relevant, practical, and beneficial.

One of the serious issues is the irrelevance of the course content. The current syllabus is directed to general English competence but without such major components as medical vocabulary, communication with patients, or healthcare records. According to Waters (1987) ESP standards, particularly students' professional requirements must be served straightaway by the course material. Otherwise, students will become bored because they cannot feel the applicability of what they are learning to their future profession in health care. This is also consistent with Vygotsky's note that learning makes sense only once it is linked with real-life use.

Moreover, the lack of focus given towards communicative competence can also be identified as another major issue. Although speaking and writing are included in the curriculum, these are not practiced within contexts relevant to healthcare. The students are not given enough practice in the kind of communication they would be conducting in hospitals, such as communicating with patients or reporting to the medical staff. Following Canale and Swain (1980), pragmatic and sociolinguistic abilities - apart from grammar - are a crucial part of actual communicative competence. Without this targeted instruction, learners may be left stressed and unready to manage real-life situations, substantiating Krashen's (1982) hypothesis that stress hinders effective language acquisition.

The various levels of proficiency of the students also stand as another problem. Some can cope with the material while others cannot. However, the curriculum currently does not offer differentiated instruction to help students of different levels. According to Tomlinson (2001) it stresses the imperative to customize teaching to suit different needs, but this is at the expense of further planning and resources.

Another major issue identified is the separation of English instruction and nursing curriculum. The English modules are learned in isolation and not fused with nursing study. It discourages the ability of the students to apply language learning in clinical settings. Based on Content and Language Integrated (CLIL) theories, mixing up language study with nursing material can increase interest and relevance.

In addition, no well-trained teachers are available. Good ESP instruction for nursing requires some awareness of English and healthcare. Subject lecturers observed that English teachers are not aware of nursing-specific vocabulary, which affects the quality of the lessons. As Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) emphasize, ESP instructors are supposed to possess at least some subject area knowledge.

Finally, testing methods practiced today do not reflect the real language skills required in nursing. It's all about traditional academic testing, and not on functional communication skills like writing patient records or speaking with patients. As Bachman and Palmer (1996) assert, tests should reflect real-life functions for the learners' profession.

From these findings, a series of key recommendations can inform curriculum development. First, the content of the course must be specific to nursing, specifically including relevant vocabulary, documentation skills, and interaction ability. It needs to be combined with nursing modules as well, so students get the opportunity to apply their language skills in meaningful, subject-specific contexts. The new course can also promote experiential learning via role-plays, simulations, and case studies to give students real-life practice in clinical communication. In the meantime, the curriculum must also include differentiated learning pathways to accommodate students with different proficiency levels. Besides that, ongoing formative assessment together with regular feedback can help track improvement as well as confidence building. Finally, if these changes are going to be implemented, there needs to be faculty development. Instructors need to be educated not only in the methodology of teaching English, but also in the working knowledge of nursing jargon and health communication techniques.

Conclusion

Needs analysis indicates that the existing EAP course provides a general language base, yet it fails to address the needs of communication by nursing students. It lacks an ESP component of focused content, causing huge gaps in clinical communication, medical vocabulary, and communicating with patients. Not practicing English sufficiently outside the classroom renders it difficult to develop skills and self-confidence. To address these issues, the report recommends the incorporation of healthcare-specific ESP courses, authentic materials, and experiential approaches such as simulations and role-plays. There ought to be improved collaboration between the language and nursing departments to align teaching with employment requirements.

In addition, frequent evaluation and increased opportunities for daily use of English are necessary for improved clinical communication. Research in the future must investigate how the integration of ESP impacts things over a long period of time and the effectiveness of instructional approaches such as Task-Based Learning and Content-Based Instruction. Overall, curriculum change is necessary to equip nursing students with effective communication in various healthcare environments globally.

References

Allum, V., & McGarr, P. (2008). *Cambridge English for Nursing*. Cambridge University Press.

- Arain, F. K., & Khadim, H. (2023). Need analysis in English for nursing purposes: The case of staff nurses in Pakistan. *International Journal of Language and Literature*, 11(2), 45–56.
- Bachman, L. F. (1996). *Language testing in practice: Designing and developing useful language tests*. Oxford University Press.
- Brown, H. D. (2010). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices* (2nd ed.). Pearson Longman.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/1.1.1>
- Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL: Content and language integrated learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dudley-Evans, T., & St John, M. J. (1998). *Developments in English for specific purposes: A multidisciplinary approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Grice, T., & Greenan, J. (2010). *Oxford English for careers: Nursing*. Oxford University Press.
- Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning-centered approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Irianto, D. P., & Nurniati, E. (2022). Analysis of English needs in students of nursing study program STIKES Ngudia Husada Madura. *Journal of English for Academic and Specific Purposes*, 5(1), 12–23.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.
- Macalister, J., & Nation, I. S. P. (2010). *Language curriculum design*. Routledge.
- Riza, N. A., & Ratmanida. (2023). A need analysis of English for specific purpose teaching material for nursing students at STIKES Mercubaktijaya Padang. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 12(1), 34–47.
- Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms. *ResearchGate*.