Communication in Clinical Practice: 
Critical success factors for ESL students 

A thesis completed in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Philosophy at Massey University 
Palmerston North 

Janet Mary Eyre 
2010
Abstract

This study investigates the factors most likely to support effective communication in clinical placements for ESL nursing students in New Zealand. The experiences of ESL students as they complete a clinical placement are examined and compared with data from the students’ clinical lecturers and preceptors.

Data for the study was collected through interviews with individual students before, during and after their Transition to Practice placement. Interviews were also held with two of the students’ preceptors, and a focus group was held with clinical lecturers who had experience of working with ESL students. Results from the study underline the importance of facilitating students’ entry to the placement community of practice, and access to its interactions. A number of factors supported or inhibited students’ participation and learning within the placement community.

The study identified two critical factors intrinsic to the student, and two extrinsic to the student. Intrinsic factors included the student’s proficiency with English language: in particular, the sophisticated sociopragmatic language skills used by nurses in their daily interactions. The student’s use of learning strategies, including the proactive approach best suited to learning on placement, was also critical. Extrinsic factors likely to support the student’s integration within the community of practice were the quality of
the preceptor, in terms of attitude to and training for the preceptoring role, and the tone of the placement environment.

The major outcomes of this study point to the importance of providing direct instruction for ESL students in the kinds of language and learning styles required for placement. There are also implications for the selection and training of preceptors and for the placing of students in appropriate clinical environments. The study concludes with suggestions for a specific communication programme for ESL students.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank sincerely all those who have contributed to the process of developing, implementing, collating, analysing and completing this project.

Firstly, I greatly appreciate the input of Dr Gillian Skyrme and Dr Martin Paviour-Smith for their unfailing encouragement and for their guidance, advice and support over the last two years.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of all those who gave their time to participate in this project: students, clinical lecturers and preceptors. The students astonished me with their willingness to give up time during this extremely busy period of their lives, and with their openness to share their experiences. Their personal journeys, involving perseverance, commitment to their studies and sheer hard work made a great impact on me. Many contributed from a desire to help smooth the path for future ESL students, and it is my hope that this will be the case. I would also like to thank the clinical lecturers who took time out of their busy schedules to attend the focus group, and who were enthusiastic about and supportive of the project, and who contributed from a position of commitment to improving educational outcomes for their students. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the input of the two preceptors who met with me and shared their experiences of working with ESL students.

To Robin and Jonathan, thank you for your patience, support and understanding during the years of study. To Mike, thank you for providing space, a quiet place to think, and endless encouragement ... and above all, for the frequent reminders to ‘Harden up, girl!’
Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION.......................................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Background ............................................................................................................................. 1
  1.2 Nursing Training in New Zealand ........................................................................................... 3
  1.3 The Research Topic .................................................................................................................. 7

2 LITERATURE REVIEW..................................................................................................................... 9
  2.1 Competent Communication in a Second Language ................................................................. 10
  2.2 Pragmatic Language Skills in the Nursing Workplace .............................................................. 13
  2.3 How Do Nurses Learn Communication Skills? ......................................................................... 18
      2.3.1 Communication skills in undergraduate nursing programmes ................................ 19
      2.3.2 Learning communication skills through clinical placements .................................... 19
      2.3.3 Second language learning in clinical placements ......................................................... 22
  2.4 What are the Communication Problems for ESL Nurses? ...................................................... 25
  2.5 Helping ESL Students Acquire Communication Skills for Clinical Placement ...................... 28
      2.5.1 ESL programmes on workplace communication ....................................................... 28
      2.5.2 ESL programmes on communication for clinical placements .................................. 31
      2.5.3 Summary ....................................................................................................................... 32

3 METHODOLOGY.............................................................................................................................. 34
  3.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 34
  3.2 The Research Approach .......................................................................................................... 35
  3.3 The Research Process: Students .............................................................................................. 38
      3.3.1 Recruitment and selection of students ........................................................................... 38
      3.3.2 Characteristics of students ........................................................................................... 39
      3.3.3 Pilot study ....................................................................................................................... 40
      3.3.4 Student interviews ......................................................................................................... 41
      3.3.5 Emails on placement ....................................................................................................... 48
3.4 The Research Process: Clinical Lecturers .......................................................... 48
  3.4.1 Focus group ................................................................................................. 49

3.5 The Research Process: Preceptors ................................................................. 50
  3.5.1 Recruitment and selection of preceptors ....................................................... 50

3.6 Data Analysis ................................................................................................... 53

4 RESULTS: FINDING A VOICE ................................................................. 55

4.1 Intrinsic Factors: English language proficiency ............................................... 57
  4.1.1 Express ideas clearly, confidently and appropriately ..................................... 60
  4.1.2 Engage in and maintain conversations .......................................................... 65
  4.1.3 Pronounce clearly .......................................................................................... 68
  4.1.4 Comprehend others’ speech .......................................................................... 70
  4.1.5 Understand Kiwi/New Zealand English ......................................................... 73
  4.1.6 Use medical terminology correctly ............................................................... 74
  4.1.7 Pressure points .............................................................................................. 76

4.2 Intrinsic Factors: Proactive approach to learning ............................................ 82
  4.2.1 Asking questions ............................................................................................ 83
  4.2.2 Seeking and responding to feedback ............................................................. 84
  4.2.3 Acting assertively ............................................................................................ 85
  4.2.4 Identifying as a nursing student ...................................................................... 86

4.3 Extrinsic Factors: Effective preceptor .............................................................. 88
  4.3.1 The role of the preceptor ............................................................................... 88
  4.3.2 Student perceptions of ‘good’ preceptors ....................................................... 89

4.4 Extrinsic Factors: Supportive environment ...................................................... 94
  4.4.1 Discrimination in placements ........................................................................ 94
  4.4.2 Supportive environments .............................................................................. 97

5 RESULTS: THE PATH TO CONFIDENCE ........................................ 100

5.1 Group One: Two steps forward, one step back ............................................... 103

5.2 Group Two: Full steam ahead ........................................................................... 107

5.3 Supporting Students in Placement .................................................................... 109
5.4 Conclusion.............................................................................................................111

6 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS..................................................................113
   6.1 Question One:..................................................................................................113
      6.1.1 Intrinsic factors: English language proficiency.....................................113
      6.1.2 Intrinsic factors: Proactive approach to learning ...............................117
      6.1.3 Extrinsic factors: Effective preceptor..................................................118
      6.1.4 Extrinsic factors: Supportive environment............................................119
      6.1.5 The role of confidence............................................................................120
   6.2 Question Two:...............................................................................................123
      6.2.1 Specific instruction in the language and communication required for
            placement..................................................................................................124
      6.2.2 Proactive approach to learning .............................................................128
      6.2.3 Matching ESL students with supportive preceptors and colleagues ....128
      6.2.4 Fostering an inclusive atmosphere throughout the programme ..........129
   6.3 The Optimum Situation.................................................................................130

7 CONCLUSION.....................................................................................................133
   7.1 Practical Implications....................................................................................134

APPENDICES.........................................................................................................138

BIBLIOGRAPHY....................................................................................................161
# List of Appendices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Student invitation to participate</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Student information sheet</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Student consent form</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Student interview guide (1)</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Student interview guide (2)</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Student interview guide (3)</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Language acculturation exercise</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Clinical lecturers’ information sheet</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Clinical lecturers’ consent form</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Clinical lecturers’ focus group topic guide</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Preceptors’ invitation and information sheet</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Preceptors’ interview guide</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Preceptors’ consent form</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Tables and Figures

1.1 Interpersonal interactions, inferred from Competencies for the Registered Nurse Scope of Practice (NCNZ, 2007) 5

2.1 Interpersonal interactions, inferred from Competencies for the Registered Nurse Scope of Practice (NCNZ, 2007) 11

2.2 Bachman’s model of ‘language competence’ 13

3.1 Background and characteristics of the students 41

3.2 Example of completed Confidence in Communicating exercise 44

3.3 Aspects of spoken language use exercise 45

3.4 Example of ‘aspects of spoken language use’ exercise 46

3.5 The data collection timeline 52

4.1 Factors influencing the development of competent communication on placement 56

4.2 Language proficiency factors ranked by importance 58

4.3 Elements of ‘good’ English for communication in placement 60

4.4 Pressure points for communication 77

4.5 Pages from a ‘Health History’ form 79

4.6 Summary of language demands on placement 81

4.7 Qualities of a ‘good’ preceptor as perceived by students 89

4.8 Relationship between confidence, interaction and communication: positive cycle 98

5.1 Confidence in communicating, as reported at each student interview 101

5.2 Paths to confidence in communicating in placement 102

5.3 Group one: predicted difficulties in placement 103

5.4 Group one: actual difficulties in placement 106

5.5 Group two: predicted difficulties in placement 107

5.6 Group two: actual difficulties in placement 109

5.7 Participants’ suggestions for ESL student support 110

6.1 Factors and support mechanisms to facilitate effective communication 132