



An Analysis of English Learning Difficulties among Nursing Students

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Abstract. English plays an important role in supporting students' academic learning and future professional practice. In nursing education, students are expected to use English to understand field-related terminology, communicate in learning and clinical contexts, and engage with academic sources relevant to nursing. To support these needs, English instruction is commonly delivered through an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach that focuses on language use within the nursing context. Nevertheless, questions remain regarding how far ESP-based instruction responds to the learning difficulties experienced by nursing students. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the English language learning difficulties experienced by undergraduate students in the Nursing Science Program at the University of Bhamada Slawi. This study conducted a descriptive qualitative research design. Data were collected through a learning needs questionnaire and limited interviews involving undergraduate students from the Nursing Science Program at the University of Bhamada Slawi. The findings demonstrate that undergraduate nursing students experience a wide range of English learning difficulties across multiple language skills. These difficulties indicate that students' English learning needs are diverse and extend beyond general language competence. English is required not only to support students' current academic activities, such as understanding nursing texts and participating in clinical communication, but also to prepare them for future professional practice in healthcare settings where English is increasingly used. Based on these findings English teachers and curriculum developers are encouraged to design instructional materials and learning activities that align with the academic and professional needs of nursing students.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes; English Learning Difficulties; Language Learning Needs; Nursing Education; Nursing Students.

1. INTRODUCTION

English plays an essential role in nursing education, as most scientific literature, clinical guidelines, and evidence-based nursing practices are published in English. Nursing students are therefore required to develop adequate English proficiency to access academic resources, understand clinical information, and communicate effectively in professional contexts. This functional role of English in nursing education has been widely acknowledged in both international and Indonesian higher education settings.

From the perspective of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English instruction for nursing students should be designed according to the specific linguistic demands of the nursing field. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue that ESP focuses on learners' academic and occupational needs rather than general language mastery. In the nursing context, these needs include understanding medical and nursing terminology, reading research articles, and performing clinical and academic communication tasks. This theoretical framework provides a foundation for designing English courses that are relevant to nursing education.

Despite the recognized importance of English, empirical studies in Indonesia indicate that nursing students continue to experience difficulties in learning the language. Several studies have reported challenges in mastering nursing-related vocabulary and developing productive skills such as speaking and writing. Alimah and Suharyanto (2025) found that Indonesian nursing students face significant difficulties in speaking English due to limited vocabulary, pronunciation problems, and low confidence. Similarly, Putri et al. (2023) reported that foreign language anxiety negatively affects nursing students' clinical communication competence, indicating that language difficulties may also influence professional performance.

In addition to language skill difficulties, recent studies have highlighted a mismatch between English instruction and nursing students' actual academic and professional needs. A needs analysis study by Pramusita et al. (2025) revealed that English courses in nursing programs tend to emphasize General English, while students require English skills that support academic reading, clinical communication, and professional practice. Juliana et al. (2025) also emphasized that English learning for nursing students should be more context-based and aligned with nursing tasks to improve learning relevance and effectiveness. Furthermore, Solihin (2025) identified that English competence is increasingly required during clinical practice, particularly for understanding medical instructions and communicating in healthcare settings.

Third-semester undergraduate nursing students at Bhamada University Slawi represent a critical transitional phase from basic theoretical learning to more applied and clinically oriented education. At this stage, students begin to encounter English-language nursing literature, clinical instructions, and academic presentation tasks. According to Brown, 1995, identifying students' English learning difficulties and needs at this phase is essential to ensure that English instruction supports their academic progression and prepares them for future clinical practice.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the English learning difficulties and needs of third-semester undergraduate nursing students at Bhamada University Slawi. By grounding the study in ESP and needs analysis frameworks and by referring to relevant empirical studies in the Indonesian context, this research is expected to provide a factual basis for developing more relevant and effective English learning strategies in nursing education.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This research used a qualitative descriptive design. The research was conducted at the Bachelor of Nursing Study Program, Bhamada University Slawi. Data were collected using questionnaires as the primary data source, supported by limited semi-structured interviews to provide deeper insights into nursing students' English learning difficulties within an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context. The research population consisted of all third-semester undergraduate nursing students at the University of Bhamada Slawi, totaling 197 students, and total sampling was applied so that all students participated as questionnaire respondents. To strengthen and clarify the qualitative findings, 20 students were purposively selected for interviews based on their active participation in Nursing English classes, representation of varied English proficiency levels, and willingness to participate. The interview data served as supporting evidence to elaborate students' learning experiences, perceptions of English learning difficulties, and expectations for effective ESP-based English instruction in academic and professional nursing contexts.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study involved 197 students of Nursing Science at Bhamada University Slawi. Students from classes A, B, C, and D. Data collection conducted through an English learning needs questionnaire, observation of the learning process, and selected interviews.

Respondent Characteristics

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Class.

Class	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
A	50	25.4
B	48	24.4
C	49	24.9
D	50	25.4
Total	197	100

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents based on class. The number of students in each class is relatively balanced, with Class A and Class D each contributing 50 students (25.4%), Class C contributing 49 students (24.9%), and Class B contributing 48 students (24.4%). This relatively even distribution indicates that the respondents are proportionally represented across all classes, suggesting that the data are representative of the overall population.

Difficulty Levels of Learning English

Students were asked to identify the most difficult areas of English in the academic and clinical contexts of nursing.

Table 2. Types of English Learning Difficulties.

English Aspects	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Nursing & medical vocabulary	168	85.3
Speaking (clinical communication)	155	78.7
Speaking (academic presentation)	149	75.6
Reading nursing journals/texts	142	72.1
Writing reports & abstracts	138	70.1
Listening (instructions & explanations)	131	66.5

Table 2 shows that nursing and medical vocabulary is the most challenging aspect of English learning, with 168 students (85.3%) reporting difficulties. This is followed by speaking in clinical communication (155 students, 78.7%) and speaking in academic presentations (149 students, 75.6%). Reading nursing journals and texts was difficult for 142 students (72.1%), writing reports and abstracts for 138 students (70.1%), and listening to instructions and explanations for 131 students (66.5%). Overall, the data indicate that vocabulary mastery and speaking skills are the main challenges for nursing students, particularly in clinical and academic contexts.

English Learning Needs of Nursing Students

Students expressed the need for English language learning that is contextual and relevant to the nursing field.

Table 3. English Language Learning Needs.

Learning Needs	Agree & Strongly Agree (%)
Practice-based nursing vocabulary	88.8
Communication training with patients	84.3
Academic presentation simulation	81.2
Reading nursing journals	79.7
Short report writing practice	77.6
Clinical conversation listening practice	74.1

Table 3 shows the English language learning needs expressed by nursing students. The highest priority, reported by 88.8% of students, is practice-based nursing vocabulary, indicating that students find it essential to learn vocabulary that is directly applicable in clinical settings. This is followed by communication training with patients (84.3%), reflecting the importance of effective patient interaction in clinical practice. Academic presentation simulation is also highly needed (81.2%), suggesting that students seek support in presenting medical or nursing content in English. Overall, the data indicate that nursing students prefer English learning that is practical, context-specific, and directly supports both their clinical communication and academic performance.

Learning Strategies Considered Effective

Students assess the effectiveness of the learning strategies that have been implemented.

Table 4. Effective English Learning Strategies.

Learning strategies	Effectiveness (%)
Task-based speaking practice	86.8
Role clinical communication play	85.2
English-language clinical simulation	82.7
Guided reading	80.4
Group presentation assignment	83.1

Table 4 shows students' assessments of the effectiveness of various English learning strategies. The highest-rated strategy is task-based speaking practice, considered effective by 86.8% of students. This is closely followed by role-playing clinical communication (85.2%) and English-language clinical simulation (82.7%), indicating that strategies involving active participation and real-life scenarios are highly valued. Group presentation assignments (83.1%) and guided reading (80.4%) are also regarded as effective, supporting both collaborative learning and comprehension skills.

Overall, the results suggest that interactive, student-centered, and contextually relevant learning strategies are the most effective approaches for developing English language competency in nursing students, particularly in clinical and academic context

Discussion

The results of this study show that nursing students at the University of Bhamada Slawi experience several difficulties in learning English, especially in medical vocabulary, speaking skills, and academic English. These findings can be clearly explained using the framework of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which states that English learning for nursing students should be different from General English because it must support academic and clinical activities (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

First, the difficulty in understanding nursing and medical vocabulary indicates that the English instruction received by students does not fully match their academic needs. Nursing students are required to understand technical terms and expressions commonly used in clinical and academic contexts. According to ESP theory, language learning becomes effective when it is directly related to learners' field of study. This finding is in line with previous studies conducted in Indonesia, which reported that nursing students need English materials that focus on nursing terminology and real clinical situations (Pramusita et al., 2025; Juliana et al., 2025).

Second, speaking skills were identified as a major challenge, particularly in clinical communication and academic presentations. Many students feel unconfident when speaking English, especially when they have to interact with patients or healthcare professionals. This result supports the findings of Alimah and Suharyanto (2025), who found that limited

vocabulary and low confidence are key factors affecting nursing students' speaking ability. In addition, Putri et al. (2023) explained that anxiety in using a foreign language can reduce students' ability to communicate effectively in clinical settings. Therefore, speaking difficulties should be addressed because they are closely related to students' future professional roles.

Third, the findings also show that students have difficulty reading international nursing journals and writing academic reports. These skills are important because nursing students need to access scientific information and complete academic tasks. Based on needs analysis theory, reading and writing skills are essential components of English learning for nursing students (Brown, 1995). Similar findings were reported by Solihin (2025), who emphasized that English proficiency is increasingly needed for understanding written medical information and producing academic texts during academic and clinical practice.

To respond to these difficulties, interactive and student-centered learning strategies are considered more suitable for nursing students. Role-based learning and clinical simulations help students practice English in meaningful and realistic situations. This approach is supported by constructivist learning theory, which explains that students learn better when they actively participate and connect learning with real-life experiences. In addition, this learning strategy is consistent with ESP principles because it uses authentic tasks that reflect actual nursing activities.

In summary, the findings of this study confirm that English learning for nursing students should be designed based on their specific academic and clinical needs. By applying ESP, needs analysis, and student-centered learning principles, English instruction can become more relevant, effective, and supportive of nursing students' academic achievement and professional competence.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that English learning remains a major challenge for third-semester nursing students at Bhamada University Slawi. The students experience difficulties in all main English language skills, including vocabulary mastery, speaking, reading, writing, and listening. However, the most significant difficulties are related to nursing and medical vocabulary and speaking skills, especially in the context of clinical communication and academic presentations. These two aspects are closely connected, as limited vocabulary often makes it difficult for students to express ideas orally with confidence and accuracy. The findings indicate that students' English learning difficulties are not only caused by limited language ability, but also by learning conditions that are not fully aligned with the needs of

nursing education. Many students have limited exposure to English that is used in nursing and clinical contexts. In addition, opportunities to practice English through real or simulated clinical communication are still limited. Learning activities also tend to focus on general English and teacher-centered instruction, which reduces students' chances to actively use English in meaningful situations. Furthermore, this study highlights that when English is taught mainly as a general subject, students find it difficult to apply their language skills to academic and clinical tasks. As a result, students struggle to communicate with patients and healthcare professionals and to deliver academic presentations effectively. These findings emphasize the importance of aligning English instruction with nursing students' academic and clinical demands, particularly by focusing on nursing-specific vocabulary, clinical communication, and academic literacy. The results also show that interactive and student-centered learning strategies play an important role in addressing these difficulties. Learning activities such as task-based speaking exercises, role-playing, clinical simulations, guided reading, and academic presentation tasks provide students with meaningful opportunities to practice English in nursing-related contexts. Through these activities, students become more engaged in learning, develop greater confidence, and gradually improve their ability to use English for academic and clinical purposes. In conclusion, effective English learning for nursing students should prioritize the development of nursing and medical vocabulary and speaking skills as the most critical areas of need. By designing English instruction that is contextual, interactive, and student-centered, nursing education programs can better support students' academic success, improve their clinical communication skills, and prepare them more effectively for professional practice in the healthcare field.

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