# Learning experience of Chinese nursing students in an online clinical English course: Qualitative study

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## A R T I C L E   I N F O

## S U M M A R Y

The low English proficiency of Chinese nurse/nursing students affects their performance when they work in English-speaking countries. However, limited resources are available to help them improve their workplace English, i.e. English used in a clinical setting. To this end, it is essential to look for an appropriate and effective means to assist them in improving their clinical English. The objective of this study is to evaluate the learning experience of Chinese nursing students after they have completed an online clinical English course. Focus group interview was used to explore their learning experience. 100 students in nursing programs at Tung Wah College were recruited. The inclusion criteria were: (1) currently enrolled in a nursing program; and (2) having clinical experience. Eligible participants self-registered for the online English course, and were required to complete the course within 3 months. After that, semi-structured interviews were conducted on students whom completed the whole and less than half of the course. One of the researchers joined each of the interviews as a facilitator and an observer. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Finally, 7 themes emerged from the interviews: technical issues, adequacy of support, time requirement, motivation, clarity of course instruction, course design, and relevancy of the course. Participants had varied opinions on the 2 themes: motivation and relevancy of the course. Overall, results of this study suggest that the online English course helped students improve their English. Factors which support their learning are interactive course design, no time constraint, and relevancy to their work/study. Factors which detracted from their learning are poor accessibility, poor technical and learning support and no peer support throughout the course.

## Introduction

Chinese nurses were found to have limited English proficiency. Their poor English affected their clinical work. However, resources in relation to clinical English are rarely found. Current available English learning materials only help improve their general English but add limited value on their clinical English. Web-based learning seems a good approach for their English learning as evidence showed that web-based learning had a great flexibility in course attendance, course design and use of teaching aids. It can offer targeted English language at the nurses' convenience. Benefits of web-based learning in English for nursing are therefore going to be explored.

## Background

In this globalized society, nurses in their home countries inevitably need to care for patients from foreign countries, and nurses often migrate to other countries for work. In both these cases, English is often the most common language. In the latter case, when a Chinese nurse migrates to an English-speaking country, a certain level of English fluency is essential for their clinical duties because miscommunication may lead to medical errors, conflicts among colleagues, and conflicts with patients, all of which subsequently can result in poor quality of care. Recent studies on English proficiency in non-English speaking nurses/nursing students did highlight the needs of improving their English especially in the workplace, i.e. the clinical setting. Yang (2011) documented the poor English level of nurses in Mainland China. Nearly 90% could not speak or write English, and they had difficulty to understand foreign patients' requests. Not just affecting the communication, poor English level also affects their confidence in work. Deegan and Simkin (2010) reported that English deficiency was one of the major factors causing feelings of incompetence among non-English speaking nurses. Despite this well-known fact and despite the seriousness of it, no suitable resources are available to help nurses improve the English they need in clinical settings (Yang, 2011).

It is not difficulty to find classes teaching general English such as spelling, pronunciation, and grammar. But the problem now that

Chinese nurses/nursing students face is not merely the language itself. Several studies highlighted that non-English speaking nurses needed to learn not merely English but also English in context, the intercultural understanding in order to achieve an effective communication between patients and themselves (Coupland and Coupland, 2001; Roberts et al., 2004). O'Neill (2011) conducted a thematic analysis to explore nurses' experience in using English in clinical setting. The study showed that the most frustrating situation that nurses are facing was adapting the clinical environment with English. A recent critical review from Olson (2012) also supported this. In his review, he found that English deficiency was a significant barrier to non-English speaking nursing students. Even though they had attended English classes in school, they still had difficulty to understand supervisor's instruction and patients' requests. They did not have sufficient communication skills with patients, and did not understand medical and nonmedical terminologies. Thus, an alternative which can fit both English learning and clinical usage would be a best-fit approach to help Chinese nurses/nursing students.

Web-based learning is a good approach for teaching clinical English because it allows greater flexibility in the design of a course, and in the selection of teaching aids, e.g. video for simulated clinical situation, online tutors to solve students' problem immediately (Lam and Bordia, 2008; Williams and Williams, 2010). It can offer targeted course materials that can be updated as needed. Equally important, students can access learning resources without restriction to space and time, which overcomes one important limitation of classroom learning (Chin, 1999). This characteristic is especially good for nurses as they need to work various shifts throughout a 24-hour period. Previous studies have found that web-based learning did not affect students' performance and even enhanced their performance. Findings from previous studies have showed that no significant difference in students' performance in online and classroom courses (Bernard et al., 2004; Ruiz et al., 2006; Piccoli et al., 2001; Johnson et al., 2000). Other studies have reported a significant improvement in students' performance in an online course as compared to a classroom course (Andrewartha and Wilmot, 2001; Ladyshewsky, 2004; Hu et al., 2005). Besides performance, students' were found to be as satisfied with online courses as with classroom courses (Blackmore et al., 2008; Chumley-Jones et al., 2002; Suanpang et al., 2003).

To help Chinese nurses and nursing students to better prepare themselves to work in English speaking countries, the research team tailor-made an online clinical English course for nurses. And this study aimed at gaining understanding from those participants their learning experience on it. With these findings, we could learn more how online learning can facilitate nurses in learning clinical English.

## Methods

Focus group interviews were used to evaluate the learning experience of Chinese nursing students after taking an online clinical English course. 100 nursing students enrolled in either the Higher Diploma in Nursing (HDN) or Bachelor of Health Sciences (Hons.) (BHSc) programs at Tung Wah College, Hong Kong, were recruited to participate in this study. The study was promoted on campus via email and poster.

### Online Nursing English Course

The online course in this study was adopted from LanguageMate. It is an online, video-based course mimicking the roles of a human tutor by Authentic Context Tutor (ACT) system to facilitate students' English learning in a clinical setting. ACT helps students to acquire, reinforce, and apply language skills in an authentic clinical context. Simulated clinical situations were used for teaching. Video-based tutors were available to provide coaching and reinforcement throughout the course. User management tools were available for teachers to track students' progress.

The course comprises 6 levels, from foundational to advanced. After finishing the coursework in each level, students were required to sit in an online exit quiz. They were informed of their performance throughout the course.

### Participants

The recruitment of participants was started in mid-January 2013. Inclusion criteria were (1) currently enrolled in nursing program and (2) having clinical experience. Students who were interested in the study registered themselves online. Information sheets and consent forms were delivered to eligible participants through email. They were informed that participation was voluntary. Their performance in this study would not count in their academic performance. They could leave the study without penalties at any time. They were told that their results would be kept strictly confidential, and only personnel involved in the study would have access to the data.

### Data Collection

After self-registration, participants started attending the course; they were asked to finish within three months. They were suggested to attend one module per week. At the end of the three months, participants were divided into two groups according to how many modules they had completed. High participation (HP) referred to those who had completed the course, while low participation (LP) referred to those who had completed less than half of the course.

After that, semi-structured interviews were arranged for 10 randomly selected participants with high participation and low participation separately. One of the researchers joined in the interviews to be a facilitator and observer. Videotaping was used to record the conversation and the gestures/postures of those interviewees. Each interview was about 1–2 h.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to code and categorize the data. Student helpers were recruited to transcribe the video tape. The observer counterchecked to make sure the transcription was accurate based on his observations, such as the non-verbal behavior of the participants during the interviews.

After checking the transcription, one of the researchers went through the content line by line, paragraph by paragraph to look for significant statements. She compared the codes based on similarities and differences to sort them into categories, and finally grouped them into themes.

To validate the analysis, the other two researchers checked the analysis again to ensure their accuracy. In case of inconsistency among researchers, they discussed and came up with an agreement as to the final categorization.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Review Committee, Tung Wah College. Participants were informed of the purpose and design of the study by both verbal and written forms. Informed consents were obtained from all participants prior the start of the study.

## Results

In 100 participants, only 20 (20%) of them completed the whole courses while the rest either dropped out from the courses or completed less than half of it. Similar themes emerged from both high and low participation groups, although their opinions on some themes were different. Both groups considered the following 7 themes as essential factors in their online learning experience: technical issues, adequacy of support, time requirement, motivation, clarity of course instruction, course design, and relevancy of the course.