

Overcoming the English language barrier: Perspectives of graduates, following experience of practice-based learning.

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Executive Summary

The aim of this small-scale qualitative research project was to ascertain the strategies developed or used by graduate students to improve their spoken English language during their study experience. We hoped to identify the perceptions of 8 Bachelor of Nursing graduates from a range of ethnic backgrounds as to the inputs and experiences which had most influence on their spoken English language development, as well as the strategies they found most productive. We interviewed a small group of clinical tutors on the same topic, in order to gather their perspectives on the strategies students adopt and the key drivers of these.

Clinical tutors provided another window into these experiences, underlining some of the graduates' insights and adding their own observations on the ways in which BN students of EAL background effectively promote the development of their own language skills. These tutors presented diverse explanations of the ways that students learn to interact with patients, react to feedback, and develop a sense of professional identity as nurses.

The study has resulted in a number of significant insights and recommendations that will be informative to Nursing lecturers and students, and lecturers in other disciplines with work placement components. A key observation from this study is the way in which BN graduates emphasise benefit both from the social and interactional aspects of the clinical learning experience, and at the same time show ways in which they autonomously took responsibility for developing their own spoken English language skills.

Key achievements to date are the paper published in 2009 and invited presentations to BN staff and students. A paper is about to be submitted to an international journal of communication.

Background

As we noted in our application, graduates have made the transition from members of the BN academic community to members of the nursing profession. It seemed likely that their perceptions of the strategies and inputs which made a difference to the development of spoken English language would be insightful for students at other stages on BN programmes, and staff, both at Unitec and elsewhere. Our project focused primarily on strategies and inputs which have led to success, rather than adopting the problem investigation / deficiency approach of much research to date focused on EAL students. Clinical practice entails experiences that each nursing student has to live through to become a professional nurse. Therefore, in our view the meaning of the experiences for the individual can only be understood from each graduate's own perspective.

Aims and Objectives

1. This small-scale research project aims to ascertain the strategies developed or used by graduate students to improve their spoken English language during their study experience.
2. It will identify the perceptions of new graduates as to the inputs and experiences which had most influence on their spoken English language development, as well as the strategies they have found most productive.
3. Using the BN programme as a case study, some clinical tutors will also be interviewed on the same topic, in order to gather their perspectives on the strategies students adopt and the key drivers of these.

These were the aims and objectives stated in the initial funding application. These did not change during the course of the study but we have derived outcomes which go somewhat wider than those we initially stated; as the results reflect on BN academic and clinical curriculum design and delivery as well as on the strategies adopted by each individual graduate.

Methodology

A literature review was conducted on studies focusing on spoken language in health professional practice-based settings such as Pharmacy, Medicine, Osteopathy, Physiotherapy and Medical Imaging to complement the literature already located by the researchers. Building on the cross-disciplinary strength of our collaboration, we also drew extensively from literature on sociolinguistics, socio-pragmatics, communities of practice and learner autonomy.

As part of the case study approach, recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 BN graduates of EAL background. Interviews were also conducted with 4 hospital-based clinical nurse educators who had experience in working with EAL students. Our initial target was to interview 6 graduates and 3 tutors, and we were able to stretch the funding to exceed this. The approach to sampling was purposive, looking at the composition of groups of EAL BN students in recent years, and the group of hospital-based clinical tutors then attached to the programme. We arranged for a non-teaching staff member to make the actual selection and initial approach to our graduate participants, in order to minimise any sense of pressure or obligation to take part.

The approach taken to the study has been qualitative, and focused on the personal experience, views, perceptions and attitudes of participants. The data has therefore been analysed according to the procedures of grounded theory in which categories and themes are derived from the data through a process of analytic induction. As the interviews were conducted and transcribed the researchers scanned the data for themes and relationships, looking for both patterns across data provided by different participants as well as the distinctive insights of individuals. Explanatory or interpretive frameworks were therefore not pre-determined by the researchers but emerged from the process of reading and analysing the data, work we carried out both individually and together.

Outcomes/findings

From the interviews we have been able to conclude that these BN graduates took advantage of multiple opportunities to observe, listen, interact, ask questions and get feedback. They did not leave language development to chance, but made sure that they actively engaged with others and with resources. Explicit teaching of socio-pragmatic skills, as in the Communication in Therapeutic Relationships course, mentioned specifically by almost all graduates, provided them with the confidence to 'have a go' in the clinical setting, and helped them be more aware of social interaction around them. Repeated contextual interaction with patients, clinical tutors and other health professionals, not necessarily always positive in tenor, enabled them to refine their communication skills and develop their sense of professional identity. A sense of personal agency or proactive learning is also apparent in the comments of the participants, and this was recognized in various ways by the four clinical tutors we interviewed.

In different ways the participants in this study assert that they were successful in developing skills for effective communication and therefore at language learning in a challenging sociocultural setting (Toohey

and Norton, 2003). This seems to be because they became aware of ways of interacting that worked and learnt to take advantage of these, applying them as appropriate to the specific nursing context. All acknowledge that they are still aware of problem areas.

Conclusions

While we acknowledge that identified deficits in EAL nursing students' English proficiency may often limit academic achievement, this research affirms that students who adopt conscientious and proactive attitudes towards the full range of learning experiences have a good chance of success. Our study also highlighted that some of the opportunities for active learning in the workplace identified by the EAL participants as contributing to the development of spoken English were sometimes identified as challenges in the literature. Gaining awareness of perceptions of successful EAL students on the significant communication experiences in their programme, may assist both academic and clinical teaching staff to be more cognizant of the impacts of sociocultural and professional contexts on the spoken English development in these students. The study suggests that positively focused initiatives to further develop active campus learning and clinical practice opportunities by academic faculty and clinical staff will help more EAL students succeed.

Implications

Knowing the specifics of successful student learning strategies is helpful for future students and for staff. We knew at the outset that the students in our study had been successful in achieving their goal, but clearly the strategies adopted by successful students can be disseminated to students at various points in the 3 year degree trajectory. This could be valuable for a programme like the BN degree, which experiences student attrition from year to year. Similarly the opportunity exists to make clinical tutors more aware of the range of ways in which students acquire communication skills; for example, through shadowing experienced nurses and targeted observation as well as through more direct, hands on work with patients.

In terms of further research, through our links with the Language in the Workplace project at Victoria University of Wellington, we have a possible lead on research with a staff member at Waitemata District Health Board (North Shore). We plan to follow this up once we have submitted our article for publication. In addition to our plans for conference presentations this year, we also hope to write up an article focusing specifically on the data from our clinical tutor participants, as we deem this of sufficient interest for publication in its own right.

Recommendations

Given the wealth of insights into learning that our graduate participants were very willing to share, one recommendation is that the practice of asking graduates and senior students to address first and second year students, which has occurred to date as part of the whanau cultural evenings initiated by designated cultural advisors, becomes a routine feature of each year.

Publications and dissemination

Internal dissemination has involved:

1. an invited presentation to a BN programme staff meeting
2. invited lectures to BN students in two courses: Communication in Therapeutic Relationships (year 1) and Nursing Research (year 2).
3. session for BN students of EAL background on Spoken Language in Clinical Practice, with provision of follow-up handouts and resources for the lecturer to add to the Moodle course.

Externally the researchers collaborated on the following related output in 2008:

Malthus, C. & Lu, H. (2008). *It takes two: Sharing language skills and cultural insights with EAL students preparing for work placements*. Paper presented at the 'Research that works: Successful collaborations' ITP Research Forum Conference, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, Tauranga, 2-3 October 2008.

At the closing of the conference, we were awarded a prize for runner up to Best Paper (written) by the conference committee. In 2009 this paper was published in the refereed conference proceedings:

Malthus, C. M., & Lu, H. (2009). *It takes two: Sharing language skills and cultural insights with EAL students preparing for work placements*. In H. Hamerton & C. Mercer (Eds.). *Research that works: Successful collaborations* (pp. 67-73). Tauranga: Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics New Zealand.

At this stage in 2011 we have a major article almost ready to be submitted to our target journal (Journal of Asian-Pacific Communication) in early May. Currently it is in the final stages of checking and peer review by internal colleagues, in order to maximise our chances of acceptance.

In 2011 both authors have submitted abstracts based on this research to separate conferences in Australasia. Target conferences are:

Academic Language and Learning in Adelaide, Nov 23-25 (paper presentation accepted)

Australasian Nurse Educators Conference 2011 in Hamilton, Nov 23-25 (awaiting acceptance)

References

Toohy K. & B. Norton. (2003). Learner autonomy as agency in sociocultural settings. In P. Benson & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Learners' stories: Difference and diversity in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.