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# Attitudes of Nursing Students toward the Importance of Communication Skills in the English Language

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<sup>1</sup> Tatjana Badrov

<sup>1</sup> Ivana Jurković

<sup>1</sup> Technical College in Bjelovar, Nursing Department, Bjelovar, Croatia

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## Abstract

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Challenges posed in front of bachelors of nursing by the contemporary labour market, oriented toward the internationalization of knowledge, skills and competences, become more expressed with each new day. It is clear that future generations of nursing bachelors will have to face workplace requirements that may only be met through interdisciplinary approach in acquiring competences. Workforce mobility, geopolitical situation in Europe and the continual development of information technologies are only a few reasons why it is necessary for communication skills in foreign languages, especially English as a global *lingua franca* in business and science, to be included in nurses' competences.

For identifying the attitudes of future professional bachelors of nursing toward the importance of communication skills in English, research was conducted among students of the Professional Study Program in Nursing of the Technical College in Bjelovar. For this purpose, a questionnaire was compiled that fully meets the research requirements. The questionnaire includes five parts. The first part involves general data about the subjects, while the second, the third and the fourth part

contain five statements each about the importance of communication skills in English in the areas of speaking, reading and writing. The fifth part of the questionnaire contains three questions related to general assessment and self-assessment of communication skills in English. The results are described using the methods of descriptive statistics. Furthermore, inferential statistics tests were used for determining the difference between first-year and third-year students regarding their attitudes toward the importance of communication skills in English and learning English at college.

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**Keywords:** English language, communication skills, nursing, students' attitudes

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**Author for correspondence:**

Ivana Jurković  
Technical College in Bjelovar, Nursing Department  
Trg Eugena Kvaternika 4  
43000 Bjelovar, Croatia  
E-mail: [ijurkovic@vtsbj.hr](mailto:ijurkovic@vtsbj.hr)  
Phone: +385 43 24 11 31

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## Introduction

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Communication refers to transferring messages between a sender and a receiver<sup>1</sup>. The word “communication” originates from the Latin word *communicare* that means “to make something common or general”. The term “communication” means: to say, to inform, to be in connection with, to connect, to transfer, so a communicative person would be one that is capable of easy conduct with other people, that is talkative and easy to approach<sup>2</sup>. Communication has various roles. It may designate the transfer of information, problem solving, decision making and satisfying needs<sup>1</sup>. Communication is divided according to the manner in which it takes place and according to its purpose. From the aspect of the manner, communication is divided into verbal, non-verbal and paraverbal communication. Verbal communication refers to exchanging messages by speaking, i.e. words<sup>3</sup>. Verbal communication takes place by means of the spoken and written forms of language and serves the purpose of transferring standpoints, instructions, beliefs and feelings. It consists of listening and speaking. Non-verbal communication includes gestures, posture, facial expressions, look, appearance and personal space. Paraverbal communication refers to the speed, rhythm, voice strength and colour, articulation and other voice elements. From the aspect of purpose, communication in nursing is divided into information (diagnostic) and therapy communication<sup>1</sup>. Communication skills are one of the key competences for personal realization and development of a quality relationship between healthcare professionals and patients. Communication in medicine is a clinical skill that is learned, taught and practiced<sup>4</sup>.

As Dragičević<sup>3</sup> points out, everyone is aware of the need of knowledge transfer within a certain country and outside its borders. One of the most important roles thereat is played by language as a means of communication. Generally speaking, the difference between teaching a foreign language and the language of a certain profession, i.e. language for specific purposes, is that teaching a language for specific purposes combines both the linguistic and the professional content<sup>5</sup>. As Hutchinson and Waters point out, there is no clear-cut boundary between learning and teaching general English and English for specific purposes<sup>6</sup>. Dudley-Evans and St John describe learning and teaching English for specific purposes in the following manner: ESP is defined in the way to meet the students’ requirements, it uses the existing methodology and activities of the discipline it serves, and it is oriented

towards the language suitable for these activities – grammar, lexicon, register, learning skills, discourse and genre<sup>7</sup>.

The issue which is frequently discussed in academic circles refers to the question of whether foreign languages should be taught at higher education institutions. There are opposite attitudes, as some believe that students should have acquired fundamental foreign language skills and knowledge necessary for independent pursue of their studies during primary and secondary school education, while others propose that foreign languages should be taught to an even broader extent.

Differences may be observed regarding foreign language courses at higher education institutions that offer study programs in nursing in the Republic of Croatia. At some institutions foreign languages are taught as compulsory courses, at some as elective courses and at some institutions foreign language courses are not offered at all.

If one considers recent developments in the education and work of nurses, especially from the aspect of workforce mobility within the European Economic Area, it is clear that internationalization of knowledge, skills and competences has been occurring rapidly. Participation in student mobility programs such as Erasmus+, professional work and research activities require a good command of foreign languages and the ability to actively use professional literature in foreign languages.

As English has become a *lingua franca* in scientific and professional work, this paper focuses on learning English for specific purposes in the nursing profession at higher education institutions that offer bachelor degree programs in nursing. Bearing in mind that the core curriculum of study programs in nursing in the Republic of Croatia did not include English courses, the main question that this paper tends to answer is whether learning English during nursing studies represents an option or a necessity.

## Research objectives and methods

The main objective of this research is to identify the attitude of nursing students about the importance of English language skills in their prospective profession and compare the results with the tendency in nursing education in Europe that exhibits a constant trend oriented toward the internationalization of knowledge, skills and competences. Furthermore, it aims at identifying the differences in the attitude toward the significance of communication skills in English in the nursing profession between first-year and third-year students, whereat the authors hypothesize that third-students will have a more positive attitude than first-year students.

For the purpose of this research the authors created a questionnaire that fully meets the requirements of the research. The questionnaire rests upon the theoretical framework of communication, according to which communication is divided into spoken communication, written communication and reading competences. A similar framework is used in the methodology of foreign language teaching, according to which a foreign language competence, combined with grammar and vocabulary, involves four skills: speaking, listening, writing and reading.

The first part of the questionnaire includes general information about the subjects, while the second, the third and the fourth part include five statements each related to the attitude towards various elements of communication skills in English. The fifth part of the questionnaire contains three general statements related to the level of significance of communication skills in the English language in the nursing profession, the significance of learning English in the scope of nursing studies and the self-assessment of communication skills in English. Likert scale from 1 to 5 was used for identifying the degree of agreeing with the statements, whereat 1 meant "I completely disagree", 2 meant "I mostly disagree", 3 meant "I neither agree nor disagree", 4 meant "I mostly agree" and 5 meant "I completely agree".

The sample was selected randomly. The subjects received the questionnaire in the printed form during their lectures. The subjects were informed about the content and purpose of the research, as well as about the option to refuse participation. Furthermore, the subjects were given the information that the research was anonymous.

Sample distribution and research results were analysed using the methods of descriptive statistics.

There are two hypotheses that were tested in the scope of this research. The first hypothesis is related to the students' attitudes towards the significance of communication skills in English in the nursing profession, while the second one is related to their attitudes towards learning English in the scope of nursing studies. Therefore, two null hypotheses were tested by means of the t-test and Cohen's d.

## Results

This research included a sample of 199 full-time and part-time students of all three years of the professional study program of nursing at the Technical College in Bjelovar. Regarding the gender distribution, 82% of subjects were female, and 18% were male students. The sample included 43% of first-year students, 30% of second-year students and 27% of third-year students. Regarding the student status, 61% of the sample included part-time students, while the remaining 39% were full-time students. The majority of students (70%) had previously completed a four-year professional secondary school, 25% of the sample had previously attended grammar school, while the remaining 5% had completed a five-year secondary school before enrolling in the bachelor program of nursing. The majority of subjects had previously learned English for 8 to 12 years, as may be observed from Figure 1.

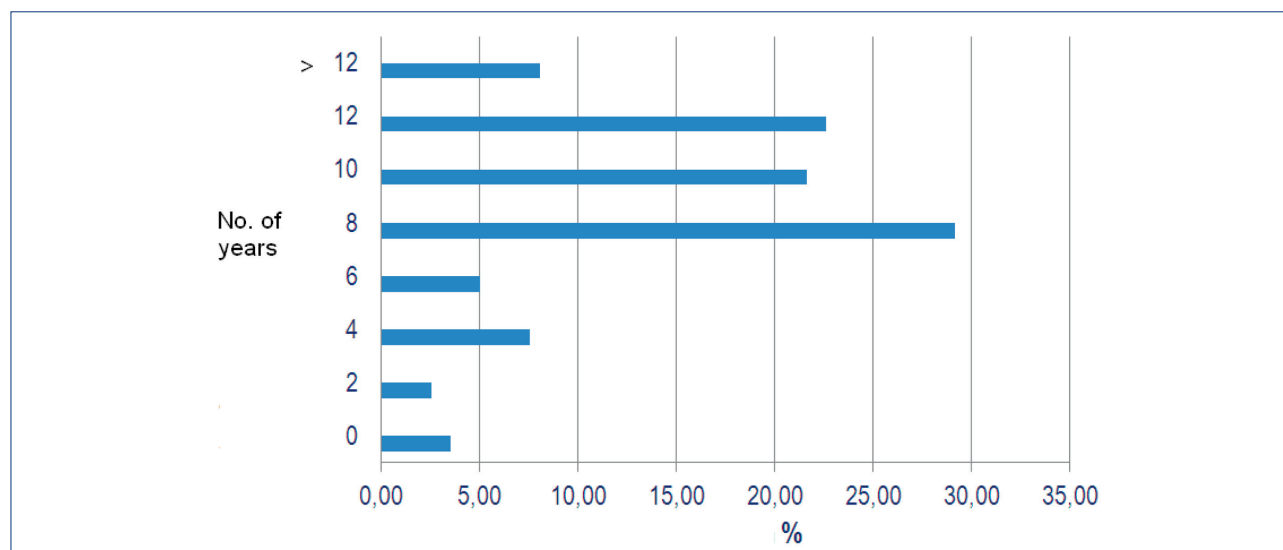


Figure 1. Number of years of learning English within formal primary and secondary education

The second part of the questionnaire was related to the significance of spoken communication in English in the nursing profession. The results are shown in Table 1.

QUESTION	MEAN
It is important to be able to understand a patient who speaks in English.	4.49
It is important to be able to understand professional communication of consultants and other medical staff.	4.18
It is important to be able to communicate clear information to a patient in English.	4.27
It is important to be able to clearly communicate professional information with consultants and other medical staff in English.	4.08
Self-assessment of spoken communication in English.	3.30

The third part of the questionnaire aimed at identifying the subjects' attitude toward reading competence in English. The results are presented in Table 2.

QUESTION	MEAN
It is important to be able to read professional texts in English using various sources (books, journals, Internet...).	3.84
It is important to be able to note professional information from texts written in English upon reading them.	4.18
It is important to be able to summarize key thoughts of a text in English.	3.72
It is important to be able to read texts in English that are not necessarily connected with the nursing profession.	3.76
Self-assessment of reading skills in English.	3.56

The fourth part of the questionnaire included statements related to writing skills in English. The results are shown in Table 3.

The final part of the questionnaire included three general statements related to the significance of communication skills in English in the nursing profession, the significance of learning English in the scope of nursing studies and the self-assessment of communication skills in English. The results may be found in Table 4.

QUESTION	MEAN
It is important to be able to prepare written instructions for a patient in English.	3.93
It is important to correctly use spelling and grammar in instructions written in English.	3.80
It is important to be able to check if written instructions in English are understandable to patients.	4.06
It is important to be able to write a professional paper in English.	3.50
Self-assessment of written communication in English.	3.17

QUESTION	MEAN
Significance of communication skills in English in the nursing profession.	3.87
Self-assessment of communication skills in English.	3.34
Significance of learning English during nursing studies.	4.11

The authors hypothesized that third-year students, getting close to graduating from college and entering the labour market, have a more positive attitude toward the significance of communication skills in English and the significance of learning English at college. For the purpose of confirming this, two null hypotheses were tested by using the t-test and Cohen's d.

The first null hypothesis is as follows: There is no statistically significant difference between first-year and third-year students regarding the attitude toward the significance of communication skills in English. The t-test was applied with the test significance of 5%. The results are shown in Table 5.

	1 <sup>st</sup> year	3 <sup>rd</sup> year
N	85	55
Mean	3.67	4.05
SD	0.94	1.10
Difference		-0.33
t		-2.21
p		.014523 (<0,05)
Cohen's d		0.371408

The t-test and Cohen's d have shown that the first null hypothesis is discarded. There is a statistically significant difference between the attitude of first-year and third-year students regarding the significance of communication skills in English in the nursing profession.

The second null hypothesis is as follows: There is no statistically significant difference between first-year and third-year students regarding the attitude toward the significance of learning English at college. The t-test was applied with the test significance of 5%. The results are shown in Table 6.

	1 <sup>st</sup> year	3 <sup>rd</sup> year
N	85	55
Mean	3.82	4.49
SD	1.08	0.77
Difference		-0,67
t		-3.97
p		.000057 (<0,05)
Cohen's d		0.714364

The t-test and Cohen's d have shown that the second null hypothesis is discarded. There is a statistically significant difference between the attitude of first-year and third-year students regarding the importance of learning English at college.

## Discussion and conclusion

Research studies conducted among engineering students<sup>8</sup> and students of humanities and social sciences<sup>9</sup> have shown that students generally regard speaking skills in a foreign language as being the most important element of foreign language competence.

As it is visible from the results of this research, spoken communication in English is regarded as being the most important element of communication in English in the nursing profession from the standpoint of nursing students enrolled in the professional program of study of nursing at the Technical College in Bjelovar. The question that was assessed as being the most significant is related to the ability of understanding a patient when speaking in

English, as the subjects graded it with the average mark 4.49. This points to the conclusion that nursing students are generally aware of the importance of practical use of communication skills in English within the clinical setting. Other elements of spoken communication in English are also positively assessed, as all of them were evaluated with average marks above 4.0. However, while students are aware of the importance of spoken communication in English, the self-assessment of their speaking skills in English is much lower. Thus, it may be concluded that the students' attitude towards courses that may help them improve their speaking skills in English is positive.

Reading competence in English and written communication in English were not assessed as being as important as the spoken communication, but as the means are higher than 3.5, it may be concluded that the students' attitudes toward these elements are positive as well. The lowest mark (3.5) was attributed to the significance of being able to write a professional paper in English, which may be connected to the self-assessment of writing skills in English (3.17), which was the lowest among the three elements of communication skills in English.

From the results of the t-test and Cohen's d it may be concluded that third-year students consider communication skills in English in the nursing profession to be significant. There is a statistically significant difference in the aforementioned attitude of students with respect to the year of study, whereat third-year students have a more positive attitude than first-year students respectively.

The results of the t-test and Cohen's d also point to the conclusion that students, generally speaking, consider learning English for specific purposes in the nursing profession to be important. There is a statistically significant difference between students in this respect, whereat the third-year students' attitude is much more positive than the first-year students' attitude.

Multicultural environment, workforce mobility and tourism, as one of the most important elements of the Croatian economy, presuppose a good command of English and a solid foundation related to professional terminology. This research has shown that nursing students are aware of these requirements and the need of implementing interdisciplinary courses in the nursing curriculum at higher education institutions. Further research may be useful for the purpose of confirming these results on a larger sample of students who study nursing at different higher education institutions and, potentially, opening a discussion about prospective amendments to the nursing core curriculum in the Republic of Croatia.

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## STAVOVI STUDENATA SESTRINSTVA O VAŽNOSTI KOMUNIKACIJSKIH VJEŠTINA NA ENGLSKOME JEZIKU

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<sup>1</sup> Tatjana Badrov

<sup>1</sup> Ivana Jurković

<sup>1</sup> Visoka tehnička škola u Bjelovaru,  
stručni studij sestrinstva

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### Sažetak

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Izazovi koje pred prvostupnike sestrinstva stavlja suvremeno tržište rada usmjereno prema internacionalizaciji znanja, vještina i kompetencija svakim su danom sve izraženiji. Stoga je sve razvidnije da će budući naraštaji prvostupnika sestrinstva biti suočeni sa zahtjevima na radnome mjestu koji se mogu ispuniti samo kroz interdisciplinarnost u stjecanju kompetencija. Mobilnost radne snage, geopolitička situacija u Europi i svijetu te kontinuirani razvoj informacijskih tehnologija samo su neki od razloga zašto je nužno da u sestrinske kompetencije svakako budu uključene komunikacijske vještine na stranim jezicima, a prvenstveno na engleskom jeziku koji u današnje vrijeme služi kao *lingua franca* u poslovnom, stručnom i znanstvenom svijetu.

U svrhu utvrđivanja stavova budućih stručnih prvostupnika sestrinstva o važnosti komunikacijskih vještina na engleskome jeziku, provedeno je istraživanje među studentima stručnoga studija sestrinstva Visoke tehničke škole u Bjelovaru. U tu je svrhu izrađen upitnik koji u potpunosti odgovara ciljevima istraživanja. Upitnik sadrži pet dijelova. Prvi dio uključuje opće podatke o ispitaniku, dok drugi, treći i četvrti dio sadrže po pet

tvrdnji o važnosti komunikacijskih vještina na engleskome jeziku u područjima govora, čitanja i pisanja. Peti dio upitnika sadrži tri pitanja opće procjene i samoprocjene komunikacijskih vještina na engleskom jeziku. Rezultati istraživanja opisani su metodama deskriptivne statistike, dok su metode inferencijalne statistike primijenjene za utvrđivanje razlika između studenata prve i treće godine s obzirom na stavove prema važnosti komunikacijskih vještina na engleskom jeziku te važnosti učenja engleskog jezika kao jezika struke u okviru studija.

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**Ključne riječi:** engleski jezik, komunikacijske vještine, sestrinstvo, stavovi studenata

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