

Multilingual nursing education: Nursing students' and teachers' interests, perceptions and expectations

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## **Multilingual nursing education: Nursing students' and teachers' interests, perceptions and expectations**

### **Abstract**

This study investigates the interests, perceptions and expectations of nursing students and teachers with respect to multilingual nursing education. Students were invited to take part in a survey with open ended questions, and nursing teachers were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews. Participants were recruited from three nursing programmes in two Dutch speaking institutes of higher education in Brussels. One of the three programmes has an international and multilingual focus with courses taught in Dutch, French and English. Results show that students preferred separate targeted language skills courses to integrated content and language courses. The teachers were mostly positive towards the idea of integrated multilingual nursing education. Teachers expected more time allocation and linguistic support from experts for integrating foreign languages into the curriculum, as well as setting clear objectives for students. The study concludes that successful multilingual integration in nursing education depends on implementation policies that take into account proper support for the teachers and clear learning objectives for the students.

**Key words:** Multilingual education, nursing education, higher education, CLIL

## **Introduction**

Language skills are an important asset in today's labour market. This is particularly true for nurses who regularly encounter foreign languages in the field. Therefore, nursing education should prepare new nurses with better intercultural competences and language skills (Gasoriek & Van de Poel, 2018; Jaspers, et al, 2017; Tytgat, 2011; Van Rosse, et al., 2016). For this reason, in recent years many nursing programmes have started offering language support and training (Angulo, et al., 2013; Pitkäljärvi, 2012).

The main objective of this study is to investigate the interest in multilingual education of students and teachers. The research questions guiding the study are:

1. How do nursing students and teachers perceive multilingual education?
2. What are the interests and expectations of the nursing teachers and students concerning multilingual nursing education?

## **Evidence in Literature**

The introduction of language skills in nursing programmes is an important development resulting from a general internationalization trend in higher education (Dafouz, Camacho, Urquia, 2014; De Wit, 2002; Pitkäljärvi, 2012; Van der Wende 2001). As a result, English has become the dominant language as many academic texts, sources and materials are available in English, particularly for courses such as evidence-based practice in nursing (Coleman, 2006; Lahtinen, Leino-Kilpi, & Salminen, 2014). In non-English-speaking countries, multilingual education initiatives often tend to focus on English, however they can also be an excellent opportunity to strengthen other languages (Garone & Van de Craen, 2016; Ljosland, 2005).

A number of studies testify that multilingual education is necessary and appropriate also in higher education and will become even more so in the future. Studies focusing on the outcomes of applied language and communication courses tailored for health care professionals had mainly positive learning outcomes for students (Chiang & Crickmore, 2009; Chur-Hansen et al., 1999; Engelbrecht & Wildsmith, 2010; San Miguel et al., 2006). Other studies focusing on Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in higher education had mixed outcomes where the results were dependent on the language skills of the lecturers (Angulo, et al., 2013; Arnó-Macià & Mancho-Barés, 2015). As an approach, CLIL entails the facilitation of language learning by supporting content teachers through specialized training and collaboration. The expected outcome of a CLIL programme is students improving their language skills implicitly through the learning of content subjects (Marsh, Oksman-Rinkinen, & Takala, 1996; Van de Craen, et al., 2007). While CLIL is well known to be effective in primary and secondary education, however, some concerns have been raised about the effectiveness in higher education. Dafouz et al. (2014) compared the academic performance of first year business students in Spain who study in English CLIL courses, with students who study in their native Spanish language. Results showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups of students in their exam scores. The authors, however, do advise caution with regards to assessing course content within the context of the foreign language, and to take the subject context into account.

Focusing on the language skills of teachers, Valcke and Pavón (2013) studied a speech and pronunciation coaching intervention method involving non-native English speaking university professors teaching in English, which produced relatively successful outcomes. Students' pre-existing language skills are also an important factor, especially for those studying in a language that was different from their native tongue. Two studies

investigated the experiences of such students, with findings showing that language proficiency is an important factor for successful completion of studies (Caputi, et al. 2006; Sanner and Wilson, 2008). Furthermore, a recent study by Gasoriek and Van de Poel (2018) investigated nurses' and student nurses' ability to communicate in cross cultural settings using their second languages, and similarly to the previous two studies, results indicated that language skills are important components of preparedness, and confidence in nursing practice.

Multilingual education is seen mostly as a gateway to internationalization and an opportunity for experiencing intercultural communication in higher education (Jäppinen, 2006). Successful multilingual education depends strongly on collaboration efforts between “content” and “language” teachers, to ensure that themes and concepts are continued so as to facilitate better information retainment through implicit learning (Hartiala, 2000; Jäppinen, 2006; Marsh, 2002). Ideally in higher education, inter-faculty collaboration and clear implementation guidelines would facilitate effective implementation, yet in practice these are often found lacking and thus affecting the quality of multilingual programmes in higher education (Arnó-Macià & Mancho-Barés, 2015; Räisänen, 2009). A literature review [authors] has produced a list of guidelines for effective integration of language skills into nursing education, primarily indicating that student's pre-existing language skills and interfaculty collaboration can have an impact on the development and governance of successful multilingual education.

## **Methodology**

Data was collected from three nursing programmes in two Flemish institutes of higher education in Brussels (Schools A and B). To explore the thoughts, reasons and contexts behind the participants beliefs and attitudes towards multilingual education, the

data collected was mainly qualitative. The belief and attitude dimensions of the students are looked at in more detail in the quantitative results of this study found in appendix A, which details the survey items and results from the factor and regression analyses. The survey contained six open-ended questions where the students could write freely about their experiences based on the following themes: Collaboration with students from other schools, lectures in English, and general language experiences and attitudes.

The survey was developed using information from prior discussions with the two institutes. It was decided to aim the questions surrounding the “planned” multilingual experiences that the nursing students are exposed to: collaboration projects with students from other schools (French speaking and/or different health care programmes), guest lectures in English, and literature published in English. Furthermore, it was acknowledged in these pre-discussions that the linguistic demographic of students is very diverse in both institutes, many of whom are not mother tongue Dutch.

Institute A has one regular Dutch speaking nursing programme and institute B has two nursing programmes, one regular programme in Dutch and one international programme offering courses in Dutch, French and English. The international nursing programme is an example of multilingual nursing education, however it is not CLIL as there is no emphasis on improving language skills by using content courses. Instead, the programme is aimed at attracting students who are already bi- or multilingual. Both institutes have policies that recognize the value of language diversity, and the importance of linguistic support to cater for the diverse patient population in Brussels.

To complement the data gathered from students, additional semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with teachers from both institutes were organized. The nine structured interview questions focused on exploring the teachers’ views on how students deal with

the multilingual environment during their studies and clinical internships, and were asked to reflect on the future of nurses of the big city context such as Brussels.

### *Data collection*

Informed consent was obtained and signed by all participants. Data was collected from both institutes in the period of February to April 2017. The survey was completed using an online survey platform. The interviews took place during the same time period as the survey. Participating teachers were asked to read through and sign an informed consent. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed manually into summaries.

### *Participants*

Second and third year nursing students were asked to participate in the survey, teachers were selected who had a minimum teaching experience of one year. Sufficient experience was a necessary inclusion criterion, because the study gathered data on experiences in the working environment in Brussels as well as experience with course materials in other languages. From institute A 146 students responded (89.02% response rate), from institute B, 26 students responded (24.07% response rate) from the regular nursing programme, and 9 students responded from the international programme (47.37% response rate). In total 180 nursing students took part in the survey. 7 teachers across all programmes agreed to be interviewed, four from institute A and three from institute B.

### *Data Analysis*

All qualitative data was manually deductively coded using a hierarchical frame, based on the open-ended questions, or the interview questions respectively. Thereafter, these were recoded into emerging themes, with corresponding codes and sub-codes. This procedure was chosen to ensure high coverage of themes and to reduce the data so that commonalities and contrasts become logically apparent.

## **Students' perceptions and interests: Results from the open-ended survey questions**

Four themes emerged from the responses: 1. Perceived advantages of multilingualism in nursing practice, 2. Perceived positive experiences with multilingual education, 3 Perceived barriers within multilingual nursing education and 4. Students' learning needs and interests (See Table 1).

[Table 1 near here]

### *Theme 1: Perceived advantages of multilingualism in nursing practice*

Students who described situations where language skills were useful indicated and described experiences from their clinical internships. Situations where reported such as foreign patients that could not speak French or Dutch, or French speaking patients in a Flemish hospital, or Dutch speaking patients in a French hospital Students described experiences of interpreting for patients in minority languages such as English, Persian, Arabic, Kiswahili. They also described varying situations from urgent, to assisting with educating and informing patients to contacting family abroad:

*“During my internship I had to contact the family member of a patient that stayed in America, and who only spoke English. All the nurses on duty during that shift could not speak English”.*

### *Theme 2: Perceived positive experiences with multilingual education*

Students who had positive experiences with English lectures also said that they had no understanding problems. Often these same students also mentioned that their English skills were sufficient to understand the lecturer and course content. Many students felt that language skills were relevant to the Brussels context, and that non-French speaking students should have the opportunity to prepare their French skills prior



to starting their internships in Brussels. Other students commented further on the value of internships, how it is an immersion opportunity where they are forced to speak and practice their language skills. Similarly, many non-Dutch speaking students from Brussels choose to study in Dutch institutes for this reason. Some students specifically commented on the diversity of students within their institutes and wished for more integration:

*“I find it regrettable that in the first year, students [who speak other languages] cluster together in cliques instead of integrating...”*

And a further student commenting on the Brussels/Belgian context:

*“It is high time that we have bilingual programmes – Dutch/French, rather than focusing on English, otherwise [the linguistic] talent in Belgium is lost.”*

On the one hand, many students viewed the possible integration of other languages within their curriculum as an opportunity and were pleased with the internationalization possibilities that come with it. Students who liked the idea of integrating other languages into the existing curriculum gave many suggestions of specific courses they felt would be appropriate for being taught in another language. Overwhelmingly, students preferred “easy”, practical, applied courses such as communication competences (26 responses) and general practical skills/courses (22). Other students preferred theoretical courses, such as the medical sciences (29), including anatomy and physiology, or evidence-based practice (15), saying that since many of the reading materials provided are already in English, that it would make sense to offer this course in English.

On the other hand, students who valued language skills were not necessarily enthusiastic about their courses being taught in other languages. Many students preferred separate, extra courses instead, that are aimed at developing practical French and English

skills needed to work in hospitals in Brussels. Other students found the English reading materials and the internships in French speaking hospitals to be sufficient to satisfy the need for multilingual education. Other suggestions were towards increasing internationalization and providing easier and cheaper opportunities for students to go abroad, while setting up a “buddy” system for incoming exchange students.

### *Theme 3: Perceived barriers within multilingual nursing education*

Many students, even though they agreed that language skills are a valuable professional asset, did not agree that this should be addressed through integrating other languages into the existing nursing curriculum:

*“We are not [enrolled into] a linguistics programme, students are expected to know the languages beforehand”.*

Most students cited the reason being their negative experiences with guest lectures in English, which were either related to their own lacking English skills:

*“My English is very bad, so I understood almost nothing”,*

or to the spoken English of the lecturers:

*“The lecturer did not speak very clearly in English, and so I did not understand most of the lecture...”.*

Or finally to the course content:

*“Sometimes the vocabulary used was very complicated... mostly from the academic articles”.*

These students thus concluded that learning in another language would make studying too difficult for them.

Content and perceived subject difficulty are not the only reasons why students preferred the status quo. Many students argued that their nursing studies should focus on core competencies needed in the clinical field, and that students should either be required

to know the needed languages beforehand or take time to improve their language skills outside of their studies. When students were asked to suggest which subjects they preferred to keep in Dutch, many students simply replied “all” (33 responses), or commented on the status of their institutes being “Dutch-speaking”, and as such these institutes are obligated to deliver courses taught in Dutch:

*“All. We are, after all, paying for a Dutch speaking programme”.*

Some students even suggested that the current curriculum needed improvement without focusing on languages.

#### *Theme 4: Student’s learning needs and interests*

Students voiced many concerns specifically about multilingual education. In addition, some students were concerned about the reading materials that they have received in English, and that they often cannot cope with the highly specialized academic language. Non-Dutch speaking students commented on general difficulties with studying in Dutch and therefore being afraid of further complicating their studies by introducing courses taught in English. While Dutch speaking students commented on the desire for being better prepared to deal with French during their internships in Brussels. Students were also concerned with the language skills of the teaching staff, as mentioned in the previous theme, students felt that their ability to understand the lecturer during the lectures affected their ability to learn, with one student suggesting:

*“attract native speakers or lecturers that really can speak the language...”.*

The students themselves admitted that their pre-existing language skills affected their experiences with courses taught in other languages thus far:

*“Since I have a good basic understanding of English, I could understand [the entire lecture]”*

*“It was interesting but difficult to understand, [since I am] not yet confident enough [in English] to follow a lecture in this language”.*

Thus, some students suggested that language skills should be tested before they commence their nursing studies. Concerning linguistic support, some felt that it should be the student’s own responsibility, while others felt that this should be included in the nursing programme, especially since their language skills should include knowledge of the professional jargon needed in the clinical field:

*“Nursing jargon needs to be provided in English as well as French. The students need to know how to use these in urgent situations or when they inform their patients”.*

### ***Teachers’ perceptions and expectations: Results from the semi-structured interviews with the teachers***

The objectives of the interviews were to determine the teacher’s attitudes and experiences concerning language skills within nursing practice, such as perceived barriers and learning needs of the students, as well as how they envision multilingual nursing education. The interview transcripts were coded into four themes which are detailed in table 2: 1. The relevance of language skills, 2. Experiences with language integration, 3. Expectations: The practical implementation of multilingual nursing programmes, and 4. Teachers’ perceptions of student attitudes and interests.

[Table 2 near here]

#### ***Theme 1: The relevance of language skills for nurses***

All interviewed teachers emphasized that language skills in the context of studying and working in Brussels are important. Their personal experiences included many multilingual encounters in hospital settings. Teachers from both institutes spoke about the importance of the “Brussels context”, referring to the linguistically diverse

student and patient populations. Both institutes aim to tap into this linguistic potential to provide the next generation of multilingual nurses best suited to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse patient population.

All teachers mentioned the importance of scientific English literature in evidence-based practice within the nursing profession, and that students are required to have a minimum level of understanding English texts to cope with the reading materials.

Teachers from Institute B reported that the multilingual programme developed out of a “top-down” initiative specifically to address the Brussels multilingual context and to attract more bilingual Dutch/French students:

*“Our school wanted to be the first to take advantage of this new gap in the market, so we moved quickly to start a new international nursing programme... It was a strategic move, if we would not do it, then others will”.*

#### *Theme 2: Experiences with integrating foreign languages in the programme*

Nursing teachers from the institute B international programme reported their experiences, describing them as “learning by doing”. Many of the problems encountered by attempting to integrate French and English skills into the curriculum were mostly brought about by insufficient planning and forethought. One problematic course was evidence-based practice, initially taught in French, but soon it was decided to continue in English because most of the available materials were in English. French was then instead integrated in the form of and another course, medical French, with the objective to teach clinical communication skills. Concerning the experience with French, one teacher reported that despite some help from the school’s romance linguist, the main problem was vocabulary:

*“The French have their own word for everything!”.*

Nursing teachers from institute A, when asked about possible language integration strategies, suggested that teaching some “easier” (non-theoretical) courses or parts of the course evidence-based practice be taught in English. Most importantly, the teachers mentioned that most problems arise with scientific English, as most articles and materials for evidence-based practice are available only in English. Other suggested strategies included encouraging students to complete their internships in hospitals, either in Flanders or Brussels, where they will have the chance to practice their weaker languages.

*Theme 3: Expectations: The practical implementation of multilingual nursing programmes*

Teachers who taught in the regular nursing tracks (institute A and B) were asked about whether they were interested in teaching their courses in another language. Four teachers considered it possible, if they had enough assistance and support to transform their courses, and one teacher preferred not to:

*“...No. it would be too much effort. I can deal with English literature in EBN”.*

The types of support that the teachers cited were linguistic training and translation support, as well as sufficient time. Most importantly all teachers mentioned the importance of institutional support, which includes the allocation of sufficient funding to the process. Possible obstacles mentioned were lack of time and energy, as well as lacking language skills of the teachers as well as students.

According to the teachers from institute A, the curriculum is already quite intense, thus some of the teachers liked the idea of a CLIL approach to improve student’s language skills without having to burden the students with extra courses, while many teachers stressed the importance of setting clear objectives for what concerns focus on language skills. Teachers referred mostly to evaluation problems as currently some teachers may

penalize students for making language mistakes in their essays and exams, while others do not. Teachers felt that a clear vision and learning objectives, defining teacher's roles and student roles as well as expectations were all important factors that need to be taken into account when planning multilingual nursing education.

#### *Theme 4: Teachers' perceptions of student attitudes and interests*

Teachers from both institutes stressed that the students should have some basic knowledge of the languages by the time they finish high school. They believe that students without any basic English skills would struggle with their courses, as one teacher explained:

*“when you are 18 it is already too late to start learning a new language and you will not learn it in a few weeks”.*

Currently, students who wish to study at the school need to prove at least a B2 level of Dutch proficiency, however some teachers believe that the students need to be made aware of the English requirements before they apply to study nursing.

Some teachers that had experience with language and content integration mentioned that it is challenging to address the intrinsic motivation of the students concerning their language skills and felt that since most of the focus is on the content, the effort on the language part can feel like a waste of time, this was a particular concern of institute B teachers in the international programme, whose students tend to struggle most with courses taught in English. Since the official language of both institutes is Dutch, some teachers talked about how non-Dutch speaking students tend to struggle with their studies in Dutch, and are often in need of Dutch linguistic support, which has become more of a priority than English or French linguistic support at these schools.

Finally, all teachers felt that adding a focus on languages within their respective programmes suits the “Brussels context” very well, and as seen through the experience of the international nursing programme, tends to attract students who are already multilingual. One teacher mentioned that students often talk of wanting to join international organizations as a key motivator for developing their language skills alongside their nursing studies.

### **Discussion**

The results revealed that both teachers and students felt that multilingual education is relevant for the Brussels context. However, there still seems to be a prevalent attitude among the students, regardless of their native language, that Dutch institutes should not offer nursing courses in other languages. Many nursing students tended to find the idea of converting their standard nursing courses into specialized multilingual (or CLIL) courses too difficult, but instead preferred separate language courses specific to nursing practice.

Teachers felt that students who had no basic English skills to begin with, struggled the most with academic articles in English, as well as with lectures in English. In the open-ended questions, students reported similarly that their knowledge of English affected their ability to understand and learn from lectures taught in English and reading materials in English. According to the teachers, there is not enough time to teach them basic English during their studies. Hence, the question remains if certain language skills other than Dutch are required prior to student enrollment. Since pre-existing language skills are not an issue that can be addressed at higher education level according to the teachers, this is a significant barrier that can affect multilingual integration into higher education.



Future research recommendations include studying evidence-based implementation of multilingual nursing education, while measuring student learning outcomes systematically. Further qualitative research into students' perceptions and interests in the form of in depth interviews can help to guide the implementation of multilingual education.

## **Conclusion**

Both teachers and students were aware of the multilingual environment and accepted that language skills therefore play an important role for functioning as nurses in Brussels. The open-ended questions revealed many reasons for objections to converting existing courses into other target languages, the main reason being that the studies would then become too difficult. Instead, many students requested that language skills be introduced as a separate subject. The teachers were more optimistic towards the idea of multilingual education and about integrating CLIL into the nursing programme, yet they were wary of the amount of effort required to invest into the initiative.

In conclusion, successful multilingual integration depends on overcoming certain objections from the students and the reservations of the teachers. The former is an indication that the teachers need for coaching and support for implementation, and the latter is an argument for the introduction of multilingual education at an earlier educational level. More possibilities should be offered to students to improve their language skills, before they start tertiary education. With clear policy making and careful planning, while taking into account the practice guidelines from literature, as well as lessons learnt from existing initiatives, the future multilingual nursing education does indeed look promising.

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