

ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION SKILLS—WHAT ARE THE ISSUES FOR INTERNATIONAL PHARMACY STUDENTS?

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Like any other group of professionals, pharmacy graduates in Australia need good English. The authors teach pharmacy at the University of South Australia. Here they explore factors that appear to affect their efforts to help international students improve their English skills.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of English language competence is highly relevant for graduates entering the pharmacy workforce. The Competency Standards for Pharmacists,¹ developed by the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, have outlined the essential characteristics of pharmacists including ‘effective problem solving, organisational, communication and interpersonal skills, together with an ethical and professional attitude ...’ Pharmacists need to be able to communicate both verbally and in a written format with people in the community, colleagues and other health professionals using cognitively complex English.² It is acknowledged that: ‘The quality of communication between patients and health care professionals is fundamental to providing effective healthcare’.³

Developing appropriate language skills is a challenge for University of South Australia pharmacy staff, where a high proportion of pharmacy students are full fee paying international students—in 2007, 56 per cent of students in the third year of the program were international students from mainly south-east Asian countries, such as Malaysia and Hong Kong. Anecdotally, as many as 50 per cent of these full fee paying international students seek to obtain permanent residency subsequent to their completion of a traineeship period under the supervision of the Pharmacy Board of South Australia.

For entry into the pharmacy program

international students are required to meet the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 6.5. The 2006 IELTS handbook indicates that an IELTS band of 6.5 for linguistically demanding programs is ‘probably acceptable’, however it points out that further English study is required.⁴ University data indicate that only 15 per cent of international students are accepted for entry on the basis of taking an IELTS test. Entry through alternate pathways accounts for the remaining 85 per cent. The University of South Australia, along with most other Australian universities accepts alternative pathways into degree programs for example, 12 months study in English, in a recognised Foundation program.

The relationship between the IELTS score, basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic linguistic proficiency and the level of language competence, both oral and written, required of a pharmacist is not intrinsically clear. However, it is important to acknowledge that the Australian Pharmacy Examining Council, which is responsible for the recognition of overseas pharmacy qualifications, has specified an IELTS of 7.0 for candidates prior to commencement of examination processes, clearly providing an indication of pharmacy registering authority expectations. But international graduates from Australian universities are not required to demonstrate the attainment of this English language requirement prior

to meeting the skills component of an application for Australian permanent residence.

At the University of South Australia a compulsory English language comprehension task has been introduced into the assessment requirements for one of the third-year courses in the pharmacy program. The task involves the student reading an unseen article of a general nature from an Australian pharmacy journal and then proceeding to summarise the article to the examiner both verbally and in a brief written report. Students are required to pass this component in order to pass the course, and therefore there are opportunities to resit the assessment task. Failure to pass the course precludes progression in the program. Students who do not pass the assessment are directed to English language support from the University's Learning Centre. In 2007, 37 per cent of all students (both international and local) enrolled in the course failed the communication assessment task. All, except one student of this group, were international students. The remaining student was from an English-as-a-second-language background.

This study explores the differences between two groups of international undergraduate pharmacy students, those who passed and those who didn't pass this English language comprehension test. It then identifies language issues (both academic and social) and language behaviours in the group of students who didn't pass. The study aims to increase staff understanding of the similarities and differences in language backgrounds and language behaviours of these groups of students in order to facilitate development of further strategies to assist students to improve their English language abilities.

METHODS

Two international student groups were investigated. First, a group that passed the

English language comprehension test (60 students) and, second, a group of students who did not pass (39 students). The first part of the study used a questionnaire made available through the University of South Australia's online survey tool TellUs. This survey sought to clarify personal and schooling background details of these two student groups. Seventeen of the 60 international students who passed the test, and 29 of the 39 students who did not pass responded to the invitation to participate in the online survey. Data collected through TellUs are automatically de-identified.

The second part of the study used focus groups to gain insights from students who did not pass the English language test. The purpose of the focus groups was to elicit a multiplicity of views within a group context⁵ with the advantage that they can potentially become a forum for change.⁶ Data analysis of the transcribed discussions was carried out using content analysis and categorised according to the emergent themes. Two focus groups were run; 25 students participated.

An independent research assistant invited students by email to participate in the online survey and conducted the focus group sessions. This was to reduce the possibility of researcher bias, and to eliminate any power differential that might occur between the participants and the researchers. The study design was approved by the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (P167/07).

RESULTS

As indicated above, a higher proportion of students who did not pass the English test (74 per cent), than the students who passed (28 per cent), responded to the invitation to participate in the online survey leading to a potential bias in results.

Table 1 presents compiled data from all questions. Several key differences between the two groups of students were

Table 1: Compiled data from questions administered in IENUS survey to international pharmacy students

Question	Option	Students who passed the English test Number and percentage (brackets) choosing this alternative 17 respondents	Students who did not pass Number and percentage (brackets) choosing this alternative 29 respondents
When did you commence studies in Australia?	2007	12 (70)	20 (69)
	2006	0 (0)	4 (14)
	2005	2 (12)	5 (17)
	2004	2 (12)	0 (0)
	Before 2004	1 (6)	0 (0)
What exams did you complete for your matriculation?	SACE in South Australia	1 (6)	0 (0)
	SAM in Malaysia	6 (35)	7 (24)
	GCE A Levels	3 (18)	5 (17)
	Canadian Pre U	0 (0)	0 (0)
	STPM	0 (0)	0 (0)
	UEC	1 (6)	2 (7)
	Foundation Program other	6 (35) 0 (0)	10 (34) 5 (17)
What are your accommodation arrangements?	I live in shared accommodation with students* from my first language background	6 (35)	21 (72)
	I live in shared accommodation with students from differing language backgrounds, e.g. Mandarin, Malaysian, Arabic, etc.	8 (47)	6 (21)
	I don't share with other students	0 (0)	1 (3)
	I live with my family	1 (6)	0 (0)
	I don't share	2 (12)	1 (3)
With your friends from the pharmacy program do you?	Always speak English out of class	7 (41)	3 (10)
	Mostly speak English out of class	8 (47)	10 (34)
	Mostly speak in your first* language	2 (12)	16 (55)
When you are with your family do you?	Mostly talk in English	11 (65)	4 (14)
	Sometimes talk in English	1 (6)	4 (14)
	Talk in English and first* language evenly	2 (12)	3 (10)
	Mostly speak in first* language	1 (6)	8 (28)
	Always speak in first* language	2 (12)	10 (34)
How often do you read books in English?	Everyday	4 (24)	3 (10)
	3-5 times a week	4 (24)	5 (17)
	once a week or once every two weeks	3 (18)	8 (28)
	occasionally—maybe monthly	6 (35)	11 (38)
	Never read English language books	0 (0)	2 (7)
How often do you read English language newspapers?	Everyday	3 (18)	3 (10)
	3-5 times a week	6 (35)	5 (17)
	once a week or once every two weeks	4 (24)	11 (38)
	occasionally—maybe monthly	4 (24)	8 (28)
	Never read English language newspapers	0 (0)	1 (3)

Question	Option	Students who passed the English test Number and percentage (brackets) choosing this alternative 17 respondents	Students who did not pass Number and percentage (brackets) choosing this alternative 29 respondents
How often do you watch English language television?	Everyday	12 (71)	5 (17)
	3–5 times a week	0 (0)	6 (21)
	once a week or once every two weeks	2 (12)	8 (28)
	occasionally—maybe monthly	3 (18)	5 (17)
	Never watch English language television	0 (0)	5 (17)
Have you attended any English language classes?	I have attended sessions at Learning Connection#	8 (42)	27 (93)
	I have attended sessions at the State Library	0 (0)	3 (10)
	I have used a private tutor to improve my English	1 (6)	0 (0)
	I have not accessed any English language sessions	8 (47)	0 (0)
	I have accessed English language using alternate methods/resources	1 (6)	1 (14)
Do you feel that the pharmacy program puts too much emphasis on written English skills?	Too much	3 (18)	19 (65)
	Appropriate amount	14 (82)	10 (35)
	Not enough	0 (0)	0 (0)
Do you feel that the pharmacy program puts too much emphasis on oral English skills?	Too much	5 (29)	12 (41)
	Appropriate amount	12 (71)	17 (59)
	Not enough	0 (0)	0 (0)
In view of your experience within the pharmacy program do you think your English skills are	Excellent—others can understand me when I speak and when I write	1 (6)	0 (0)
	Good/adequate—sometimes I need to repeat myself or restate/re-write but this doesn't happen often	12 (71)	13 (45)
	Just enough—I can get by but I am easily misunderstood	4 (24)	10 (34)
	I need some improvement—I often need to repeat myself or rewrite	0 (0)	4 (14)
	I need a lot of improvement—I really struggle to get myself understood both when I speak and when I write	0 (0)	2 (7)

Notes: * your first language is the dominant language spoken—it can be your mother's or father's language if not English
Learning Connection is a central university learning centre

condemned. In comparison with students who did not pass the test, students who passed were more likely to: share accommodation with students from a different language background, always speak English with friends outside of class and mostly speak English with family members. Additionally, a higher proportion of students who passed either read English language books and newspapers or watched English language television.

A number of free text questions were asked in the online survey. These questions are not included in Table 1.

The first of these was: 'Have you ever had difficulty following lecturers' language in classes—please expand/give examples'. In the group of students who passed (n=17), 11 students responded to this free text question. Four of these students responded that they had never had any difficulty in following lecturers' language. Comments recorded from the other seven students are typified by comments such as: 'Yes. I did at first because I was not used to their Australian slang. ... however, I got used to it after a period of time and was able to understand them'. In the group of students who didn't pass (n=29), 15 students responded to this free text question. Eight of these students responded that they had never had any difficulty in following lecturers' language. Comments recorded from the other seven students are typified by comments such as: 'Yes, I have difficulty following lecturer's language in classes. It is most probably due to their styles of speaking and speed of delivering lectures'. In both groups comments were recorded about accents of staff and speed of lecture delivery.

The second free text question was: 'Have you ever had difficulty writing an exam response because of difficulties with English language expression? Please give examples'. In the group of students who passed, 13 students responded to this free

text question. Comments recorded from this group acknowledged difficulty with the writing of exam responses and are typified by comments such as: 'Yes it's just that I have to think longer to phrase my sentences so that I think the lecturers will understand, also it is harder writing down "professional" language than what we normally speak'. In the group that didn't pass 16 students responded to this free text question. Four of these students indicated that they had no difficulty, whereas eight indicated explicitly that they did have difficulty. Comments recorded are typified by comments such as: 'Yes, I know what the answer [is] but just can't express very well in writing that might result in loss of marks'.

The third free text question: 'If you have attended English language sessions what prompted you to attend?' This was answered similarly by both groups of students—those who passed, and those who didn't pass. Students indicated that 'lecturers' emphasis on the need of having good communication skills' was a primary driver. The group who didn't pass also indicated that they attended English classes as they had 'failed an important English test'.

The study was driven by the need to develop strategies to help students improve English language abilities. The next phase of the work therefore entailed data analysis of transcribed discussions of the focus group interviews with students who did not pass the English language comprehension test.

The focus groups discussed points of interest around living arrangements, situations in Australia where students spoke their home language rather than English, and the strategies that assisted students in practising English.

There are several points that came from these discussions. When the interviewer asked about when a student would use English, the conversation was as follows:

with my housemates and with one of my friends who is Chinese.

Interviewer: Why do you speak English with her? Is that because she doesn't speak Mandarin?

No not really, because we just after last semester we decided to speak English, so it is practicing for both of us.

The students reported that socially the chances to mix with Australians were good; however they said there was a tendency in these large groups for them to 'stick to Asians' as it was more comfortable. When asked further about mixing with other students' comments were as follows.

You get comfortable in your own space.

That is about including people or mixing groups, that is hard work and people get comfortable like it is hard work for us as well. try to encourage us to go and mix with the locals, but you have to sacrifice sometimes the time together with your own peers, but you know we don't want to betray our own people. We stick to our own peers. It is very uncomfortable, when together with them you don't know what they are talking (about) then you are being isolated.

Interviewer: Well you're living with an English speaker has that been helpful?

Not really. ...because we are too busy with our study. Because when my housemate comes back and they just stay with their boyfriends watching the TV or go to the internet so I don't talk to them because I don't want to disturb them.

Interviewer: So it doesn't necessarily work living with someone who speaks English?

Yes and they will just go to sleep then. So I don't have chance to talk to them and sometimes I am too busy to sit in front of the TV so I really don't have chance to talk. Actually one of my housemates is an English teacher she teaches English as a second language but I don't have chance to interact with her.

interviewer: Have the classes been useful?

Yes, the classes are very useful.

Interviewer: Do you feel safe to speak in English in this environment?

Yes

Interviewer: ... in normal classes?

Yes, we have no confidence at all actually ... When you see someone else (who looks like us) speaking so fluently in the class.

Interviewer: And is it worse when it is someone who looks like that [looks like you] speaks fluently?

Yes.

Of interest to the central issue of communication skills and the role of the pharmacist was the following comment.

Interviewer: So that even though your English is different and they might struggle to understand the words, can you get the meaning across in other ways.... sometimes do you find that?

Very hard I guess; because like, my senior told me when she is in the placement in the pharmacy and she is trying to tell the patient about the drugs, take this drug two times a day with food, but the patient because she is quite old, she doesn't really know what she is trying to say and [my senior will] repeat it, and repeat it again, and then the ... pharmacist ... commented that my senior is having problems in communication, it is like my senior is top student, she is quite good actually, just that because of the communication stuff that the patients couldn't understand the main point. How much language you know you have in yourself but you cannot translate it, you cannot give the signals to the patients that is the problem that you can't do that. They wouldn't get to know your knowledge if you don't know how to let them know.

DISCUSSION

In the discussion above about the TellUs survey, students who passed the English language test on their first opportunity in third year could be described as having 'acceptable' English language skills, whereas those who do not pass on their first opportunity could not (at that time point).

The data indicate that the noteworthy differences between the two groups of students, that is those who passed and those who didn't pass, are that students who passed are: more likely to live in shared accommodation with students from differing language backgrounds rather than students of their own language background; are more likely to speak in English with their friends from the pharmacy program and with their family; and show quite different behaviours with respect to engaging far more in the reading of English language books, English language newspapers and watching English language television. The other noteworthy differences between the two groups are the students' perceptions of the emphasis that the pharmacy program places on written and oral communication skills. The group that passed the test tend to view the emphasis as appropriate. The group that passed the English language test are also more likely to view their English language skills as good or adequate.

Do students select housemates, read English language newspapers, watch English language television and speak English with their classmates on the basis of their own language skills? Or do students' language skills develop as a response to their living arrangements, newspaper reading, television watching and classmate communication? These questions deserve further interrogation.

Of particular concern are the proportions of responses to the free text questions from some of the students who didn't pass the test with respect to the

questions: 'Have you ever had difficulty following lecturers' language in classes—please expand/give examples' and 'Have you ever had difficulty writing an exam response because of difficulties with English language expression?' These responses indicate that these international students are likely to need to devote significant efforts to developing an understanding of materials presented in a lecture format and in developing strategies to succeed in traditional examinations.

The focus groups identified that international students who failed the English comprehension test on the first opportunity are time poor, as are local students, and so opportunities to speak English with those co-sharing accommodation are not always taken up. This group's confidence to mix with Australian students and to speak English in group situations also appeared to be problematic.

A recent report from the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) has provided advice that: 'International students should be more successfully mainstreamed into the wider student body, both academically and socially'.⁷ Academic and social mainstreaming could be presumed to increase opportunities for language practice. However, as our study identifies, there are underlying issues around international students' confidence for interaction both in social and academic situations. A recent conference presentation⁸ has identified student motivation and personality as factors that may influence English language development during academic study; this paper presents some data around this proposition.

Behaviours with respect to accommodation and language spoken with friends and family are quite different for the group of international pharmacy students who were identified as having acceptable communication skills as

opposed to those who were not. Anecdotally, University of South Australia pharmacy academics believe that students from an international background should share accommodation with students from other language backgrounds, particularly Australian language backgrounds, to improve their English language. However this advice may be irrelevant if in fact very little communication occurs in the home setting.

Other beliefs include those that international students should mix with Australian students. However, this is also irrelevant if international students deliberately seek out students of an Asian background. The views expressed by employers, albeit of accounting graduates, capture the need to mix *and* speak English: 'I think the international students have a tendency to stay within their own communities ... I don't think that helps their language at all. So I would like to see international students join a student society where they are constantly speaking English ...'.⁹

However, lack of confidence with respect to communication was identified in this study and has also been reported to be a barrier in studies with other health professional groups.¹⁰ The mixed classroom setting, that is, one with students with differing language abilities, may be very discomfoting for students with poor English language skills, even though these same students may be very comfortable in group settings with students of like language ability. There are two phases proposed in the US literature around this in nursing programs which can be brought together in order to approach this. First, reciprocal understanding of culture and communication patterns, between American and Asian faculty and students respectively have been proposed to be critical to student learning outcomes.¹¹ Second, encouraging international students

not be influenced by others, and the associated concepts of 'face', and moving from a passive to an active mode of operation and the associated Eastern concepts of 'respect for the teacher' have also been recommended.¹²

Our study was undertaken so that academic staff teaching in the pharmacy program could develop strategies to help students improve their English language abilities. Increased emphasis on students developing an active self-directed approach to learning may well be highly appropriate for the international students with poor English language communication skills; however staff also need to be aware of their own culture-based assumptions and expectations. It was of interest to note that students with poor English communication skills recognised that this deficit could impact on their ability to provide advice to patients. An increased emphasis on the direct link between communication skills to an authentic post graduation function for these students may also be a useful strategy.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided insight into the differences, both social and academic, between two groups of third-year international students studying in the pharmacy program at the University of South Australia—those who can be viewed as having acceptable English language skills and those who can not. Previous work from our group has shown that international students' written English language skills improve between third and fourth year.¹³ Some of the differences reported in this study are reflected in the approaches taken by students to improve. Further work needs to be undertaken around the development of longitudinally scaffolded authentic learning opportunities and around the approaches which best assist international students to develop an active self-directed approach to their learning.

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