



# Nursing Researchers + ESL Instructors = A Needed Professional Partnership

Richard M. Kantrowitz

## Abstract

English language educators situated in Thai health care environments are challenged to provide to their students and colleagues optimal learning opportunities which sharpen their English language abilities. Language learners' needs assessment is a vital tool for understanding and appreciating the obstacles encountered by all language learners. When one addresses the language learners' language receptivity needs of Thai in-service nurses, there are many available sources of information from which to glean. An underutilized, overlooked, but robust information pipeline is the research conducted in a Thai context by nurse researchers concerning public hospital work environments. Therefore, this article will offer a synthesis of selected observations generated by Thai nursing researchers provided for the express purpose of identifying relevant instructional implications for the EFL classroom.

**Keywords:** health care environments, optimal learning opportunities, needs assessment, language receptivity, and underutilization

Linguistic and emotional isolation are significant aspects in the working life of Thai-in-service nurses which need to be considered when planning for English language instruction. The language of use in Thai government hospitals is overwhelming monolingual, based upon the patient census, which affords little opportunity for in-service nurses to practice English with peers or patients. Moreover, the quality of

their working life tends from a psycho-social perspective to be relatively poor, punctuated by a high level of work-induced-stress<sup>1</sup>

A contributing factor, at least at the ward level, to in-service nurses' psychological distress is increased and intensified custodial patient care requirements generated by higher than normal patient loads, exceeding a nurse to patient ratio of 1:10. Such a high ratio yields decreased quality of patient

\* Lecturer (English), the Royal Thai Navy Department of Medicine, Medical Academic Affairs Unit.



care and increased vulnerability to emotional exhaustion by the care provider. In order to understand the magnitude of the problem, consider the fact that 41% of in-service nurses in 39 Thai government hospitals experience high levels of stress at the burn-out or compassion fatigue level<sup>1</sup>.

It seems apropos at this juncture to ask under these dire circumstances: who will take care the emotionally depleted health care provider? The answer to the aforementioned question is the **carer must take care of himself or herself!**

Doctoral level research conducted by a nursing researcher at Payap University's McCormick Hospital School of Nursing, Wallapa Songpakun, demonstrates the therapeutic advantages of reading a self-help manual as a means to promote emotional resilience among patients suffering from depression in a controlled study<sup>2</sup>.

Wallapa's fascinating study, in fact, highlights the significance of the selectivity of reading sources which inspire an informed interiority in the pursuit of emotional resiliency. The participants engaged in reading individually and collectively over an eight week period the Thai version of the *Good Mood Guide: a self-help manual for depression*. Topics included: the nature of depression and the need for physical exercise; the linkage between life events and depression; improving sleep; changing negative thought patterns to positive ones; positive coping strategies; and staying on a mentally

healthy track. In addition, all participants received a five minute follow-up call on a weekly basis. Moreover, between sessions homework exercises provided positive behavior models and exemplars. Self-assessment and self-monitoring were also encouraged so the patients could face obstacles in their life path more productively and resiliently than previously.

Most importantly, Wallapa posits that since the source reading material is in Thai, so it could be readily shared with concerned monolingual family members in order to improve the quality of a family's mental health. Indeed, Wallapa is a realist in that she is aware of the strengths and weaknesses of Thai culture vis á vis engaging students to read. She observes that, "... Thais, particularly adolescents and adults, dislike reading, preferring to listen to information on the radio or to watch television." Comparatively, in Australia, "... most people regard reading as a pleasurable activity, and read newspapers and magazines at least once a week."

Nursing researcher, Rana Pongruenphant, has suggested that in-service Thai nurses increase their awareness concerning unproductive stress management coping strategies, including: avoidance, withdrawal, and disengagement. These techniques should be classified as temporary in nature. Moreover, it is suggested that such behaviors as seeking social support and asking for advice should be viewed cautiously, because "... in Thailand, expression in public of personal problems



or difficulties in coping with stress is negatively viewed.” It is more culturally and religiously appropriate, Ajarn Rana contends, to pursue Buddhist-inspired meditation to assist nurses to address a variety of occupational stressors<sup>3</sup>.

Let us return to the planning phase of EFL instruction. It will be assumed that

our classroom will be populated by Thai in-service nurses working in a government health care setting. Armed with the insights garnered from the previously-cited selected nursing researchers, English language instructional implications will be formulated and conveyed graphically, as follows:

<i>Observation(s)</i>	<i>Implications for the ELT Classroom</i>
1. Restricted opportunities to practice English at work with colleagues and/or patients.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Select instructional strategies that maximize the usage of English while the in-service nurses are in the language classroom, i.e., role plays, dialogues,</li> <li>- Provide ample opportunities for in-service nurses to interact with native English speakers.</li> <li>- Create learning opportunities which are appropriate to the language skills level of the students—stimulating learning opportunities, rather than overwhelming learners with a great deal of content.</li> <li>- Selected textbooks should provide technological support so that students can practice at home, at work, before and after class.</li> <li>- Provide frequent feedback concerning the quality of students’ learning which is emotionally supportive as well as instructionally meaningful.</li> </ul>



Observation(s)	Implications for the ELT Classroom
<p>2. In-service nurses need an opportunity to address stress related phenomena both academically and practically with an eye toward developing in the long term a personalized stress management plan. The classroom setting should not be viewed as an opportunity to engage in a therapeutic encounter, but as a language learning environment designed for learners to practice and acquire new vocabulary, expressions, and fixed structures related to stress management. (Consider the possibility of offering material in Thai so that it can be shared with co-workers, families, and friends.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Select instructional materials and strategies that assist in-service nurses to understand the ways to reduce stress, provide valuable tips on time management, life style changes, relaxation techniques, diet, and exercise.</li><li>- <b>Content area concerns:</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- What is stress?</li><li>- What are the psychological and physical warning signs?</li><li>- How should nurses productively cope with stress?</li><li>- How does thinking influence stress?</li><li>- How do lifestyle, time usage, and interpersonal factors influence stress?</li><li>- What is meant by stress management?</li><li>- What are some coping strategies that have proven helpful to Thai in-service nurses suffering from stress?</li><li>- How can one devise a stress control plan?</li></ul></li><li>- <b>Language Learning Aspects:</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Identify essential terminology and expressions, i.e., self-care, stressors, and meditation.</li><li>- Locate and identify valuable and valid instructional materials, i.e., biographies of nurses positively coping with stress, healthcare brochures, and textbook passages from nursing instructional material.</li><li>- Each student should develop, produce, and share a stress control plan.</li><li>- Take into consideration issues related to psychological sensitivity and confidentiality.</li></ul></li></ul>



In marketing there is an aphorism, it is: “If you want to have a long term relationship with your customers, you will need to know them well.” This recommendation certainly applies to English language teaching as well, because ELT is a pedagogical discipline that may focus exclusively on the technical aspects of second language acquisition, i.e., grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary development, speaking skills, etc.

Language educators, especially those situated in health care environments, need to be immersed in the linguistic as well as the social and psychological features of the nursing work environment in order to select appropriate, stimulating, and pragmatic instructional material and plan for meaningful educative experiences. As this article demonstrates, nursing research can provide a rich source of information for language educators, especially in addressing in-service nurses’ learning needs. Forging professional partnerships between language educators and nursing researchers will create many derived benefits for in-service nurse language learners. The chief advantage is a better and sympathetic understanding of the affective needs of the language learners which will eventually help in the improvement of language instruction.

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