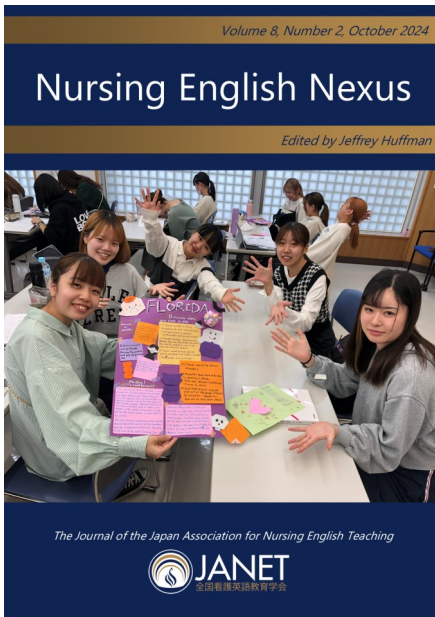


# The Social Networking Approach in Nursing English Pedagogy: Support for Students in Their Identity Transition Process

Izumi Dryden<sup>1</sup>, Takako Ueda<sup>1</sup>, & Laurence M. Dryden<sup>2</sup>

Mie Prefectural College of Nursing<sup>1</sup>, Aichi Shukutoku University<sup>2</sup>



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## The Social Networking Approach in Nursing English Pedagogy: Support for Students in Their Identity Transition Process

Izumi Dryden<sup>1</sup> (idumi.doraiden@mcn.ac.jp), Takako Ueda<sup>1</sup>, & Laurence M. Dryden<sup>2</sup>  
Mie Prefectural College of Nursing<sup>1</sup>, Aichi Shukutoku University<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *This paper considers ways that English education can support the identity transition process of nursing students and addresses some relevant challenges faced by students and faculty in nursing English education. The present study first explores the potential of Tohsaku's Social Networking Approach (SNA) to enhance nursing English education. Next, it investigates ways in which SNA methods can help nursing students develop empathy through English learning. Finally, it considers how nursing students can develop their identity as future professional nurses through English learning—focusing on the development of nursing self-efficacy, empathy, and sympathy.*

**Keywords:** Nursing Identity, Social Networking Approach (SNA), Empathy, Self-Efficacy, Nursing English Education

**About the Authors:** Izumi Dryden is an associate professor at Mie Prefectural College of Nursing. She teaches liberal arts courses in English reading, literature and medicine, and communication. Her research interests include the Social Networking Approach and the publications and correspondence of Florence Nightingale.

Takako Ueda is a full-time lecturer in charge of nursing pedagogy at Mie Prefectural College of Nursing. Her research interests include the professional role transitions of nurses, focusing currently on role transition from nursing student to novice nurse.

Laurence Dryden is an English instructor at Aichi Shukutoku University in Nagoya, where he teaches courses in academic writing and American Studies. His research interests include multicultural language identities and imitative behaviour in language learning.

High school students who want to become nurses enroll in university nursing programs but sometimes question their choice of career during their studies. By the second or third year, many students grapple with their nursing identity and motivations. They often seek guidance from faculty to explore their reasons for choosing nursing and reflect on their pre-university perceptions of the profession. These issues also arise and may be addressed in nursing English classes.

English teachers can play a role in supporting nursing students through their transition to a nursing identity. Traditional forms of language learning, e.g., studying medical terms in English, can help if these terms reinforce the motivations of students for becoming nurses. However, memorizing terms that are not used daily can be challenging and may not directly address nursing identity issues. A crucial question that governs

curricular choices comes down to whether students should learn about English or learn to use English.

Japanese nursing students typically receive their education in Japanese and have limited exposure to English. They rarely interact with English-speaking patients during their nursing practice, making it hard to assess their English skills in real-life settings. Consequently, there is a need for specialized English learning methods that integrate nursing education with broader social contexts.

The present study explores how nursing English teachers can help their students develop empathy and a nursing identity through activities informed by the innovative Social Networking Approach (SNA), a foreign language pedagogical theory that aims to put students in situations beyond the limits of conventional classrooms. Adapted to nursing English courses, SNA

methods can help students enrich their capacities for empathy and self-efficacy through active engagement in nursing scenarios, both imagined and real.

### How Can the Social Networking Approach Improve Nursing English Education?

The SNA, developed by Yasuhiko Tohsaku at the University of California, San Diego, is a progressive theory in foreign language teaching. SNA fosters curiosity about cultural exchange by building connections between classroom learning and the broader community. With its emphasis on practical foreign language use in real-world contexts, SNA can support nursing English education when learning to use English helps nursing students transition into their professional roles.

Tohsaku created SNA from his personal experience of struggling to use English in the United States despite extensive prior rote learning of English in Japan. SNA encourages using English as a tool for social interaction rather than for grammatical analysis. In such ways, Tohsaku aligns with educational reformers like John Dewey (1997/1938), who advocated project-based learning, and Paolo Freire (2018/1970), who promoted literacy for empowerment.

In nursing English courses, Japanese learners commonly lose motivation and retention when instruction focuses on generic vocabulary; a shift in focus to career-specific language may help improve student interest. For more significant improvements, however, a foreign language learning method like SNA, adapted in nursing English courses, can take students further by integrating practical, context-specific language use with engaging activities that together enhance student motivation and retention.

SNA is based on learning guidelines (学習の目安 *gakushu no meyasu*) developed by Tohsaku and his colleagues in Tohsaku et al. (2021a). SNA aims to help foreign language students achieve the

dual goals of connecting with others and understanding themselves better. Adaptations of SNA in nursing English can help nursing students develop a professional identity by giving them opportunities to learn to empathize with other people in diverse contexts. As explained in Tohsaku et al. (2021a),

In the SNA, the educational philosophy of foreign language learning is to “discover others, discover oneself and realize connections between them.” In other words, by learning a foreign language and culture, we can connect with other people of that language and culture. Knowing others makes it possible for us to know more about ourselves and establish our identity by comparing ourselves with others. (Tohsaku et al., 2021a, p. 7)

In this spirit, SNA can be adapted to nursing English courses in ways that help students establish their nursing identities and make progress in becoming effective and confident professionals who know how to use English—and express empathy in English or Japanese—in relevant healthcare situations.

### How Can Nursing Students Acquire Empathy in English Classes through SNA Methods?

Empathy is a virtue too often in short supply. Nevertheless, as Tohsaku et al. (2021a) observes, “according to an OECD study, the most important ability in 2030 will be empathy” (Tohsaku et al., 2021a, p. 7). [Note: OECD stands for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and is discussed later in the present study.] The nursing students at our college, like many in other nursing programs, often describe their dreams of becoming a nurse who is *close to patients* (寄り添う *yorisou*). When asked to explain, students typically say that being close to patients means being able to empathize with their patients’ feelings. Expressing empathy, of course involves

both verbal and non-verbal communication. In nursing and other health care situations, precise language surely matters, but sometimes words alone do not suffice in making vital connections between people. The ability to read a patient's moods and respond appropriately is a crucial skill in managing many health care situations.

The importance of expressing empathy in nursing is a recurring theme in several studies that share SNA's emphasis on connecting with others. One scholar of nursing education, Marie E. Pokorny, cites Joyce Travelbee's Human-to-Human Relationship Theory from *Interpersonal Aspects of Nursing* (1966, 1971), which involves developing empathy through stages of human relationships (Pokorny, 2014, pp. 50–51). Travelbee claims that effective nursing is accomplished through human-to-human relationships that tend to follow a particular order:

- 1) the original encounter and progression through stages of emerging identities,
- 2) developing feelings of empathy and, later,
- 3) sympathy, until
- 4) the nurse and the patient attained rapport in the final stage. (Cited in Pokorny, 2014, p. 50; underlining ours)

For Travelbee, empathy emerges after establishing clear role identities and culminates in feelings of sympathy between nurse and patient.

Another scholar of nursing education, Carla Mueller, cites a similar study on the importance of empathy in nursing. According to Mueller (2016), Delve, Mintz, and Stewart (1990) developed a service-learning model based on theories of moral decision making and values clarification. Their model includes five phases of development: exploration, clarification, realization, activation, and internalization. It illustrates that service learning is developmental, providing students with an opportunity to move from charity to justice as they become

more empathetic. Delve et al. (1990) believe that without that empathy, the student will not come to recognize the members of the patient population as valued individuals in the larger society and as sources for new learning. (Mueller, 2016, p. 527; underlining ours)

Taken together, the service-learning model of Delve et al. (1990) mentioned in Mueller (2016) and Travelbee's Human-to-Human Relationship Theory cited by Pokorny (2014) both highlight empathy as an essential feature of effective nursing. Such studies show that acquiring empathy is an important goal for nursing students to work toward as they pursue their professional training and form a nursing identity.

SNA provides teachers of nursing English with an array of activities for helping students develop empathy as a personal trait that enriches their professional lives. Moreover, by using SNA methods to help nursing students develop empathy skills, nursing English teachers typically gain some professional growth of their own. In SNA, "educators are also expected to keep up with the times, create new learning goals, and teach how to achieve them (OECD 2017, 2018)" (Tohsaku et al., 2021a, p. 7). As part of such professional growth, teachers of nursing English who do not have specialization in nursing might consider some collaborative efforts with their colleagues who teach nursing courses. In our experience, nursing English teachers who work on projects with their fellow nursing educators can create learning activities that foster empathy and support nursing identity development. Such collaboration, while desirable, is hardly obligatory, and nursing English teachers can and usually do pursue SNA-style activities entirely on their own.

One foreign language instructor whose work is inspired by SNA, Asami Tsuda, teaches in ways that can be adapted to support empathy training in nursing English, specifically by using SNA methods to enhance language and identity

awareness. Tsuda's Task Sheet #4: Language and Identity asks students to address issues of identity and empathy in videos pre-selected by the teacher, showing interviews and similar interpersonal exchanges, as noted in Tohsaku et al., (2021a):

Homework:

Go to the link below, and answer the following questions before coming to class.

*Title of the website and (URL)*

1. What is the purpose of this website? Think about the name of this site:
2. Read the overview of each interview and choose two interviews you would like to watch in class . . .

In-class activity:

Pair up with someone who chose the same interview. Watch it together and think about the following questions.

3. What kind of experience does this person have? What is the message of the interview?
4. Is there anything that gave you a strong impression, or any point you sympathized with? Why?

...

7. Think about why this person shared his/her personal stories on this website. Can you share a personal story like them? (Tohsaku et al., 2021a, p. 63)

This activity can be adapted to both nursing English and regular nursing classes. When viewing nursing-related videos, students will learn some nursing content in English. Moreover, Tsuda's activity gets students to engage in discussion about the content and think about what they have seen, bringing in personal experiences that can lead to empathy. Such activities—which involve analyzing interviews and reflecting on them through personal impressions—can be used in nursing English classes. Videos depicting situations between nurses and patients encourage nursing students to think in ways that help them

develop empathy in patient interactions.

Tsuda offers other activities which have the potential for supporting empathy training in the nursing English classroom. Tsuda's *Task Sheet #5: What is 'empathy'? Why is it important?* explores the differences between sympathy and empathy. Tsuda asserts that empathy is not simply an emotion but a skill that can be cultivated (Tohsaku et al., 2021a, p. 64). To explain empathy, Tsuda notes the importance of connecting with interviewees: "Identity' is a sensitive topic—students need to think about not only the language used in the interview, but also how to 'connect' with the people they are interviewing, to make them feel comfortable sharing their personal stories" (Tohsaku et al., 2021a, p. 63). Tsuda further clarifies matters by observing: "One way to consider the difference between sympathy and empathy is that while sympathy is an emotion, empathy is a skill. However, empathy is not completely detached from emotion" (Tohsaku et al., 2021a, p. 64). This distinction recalls Travelbee's Human-to-Human Relationship Theory, which holds that sympathy grows out of empathy, as noted earlier in Pokorny (2014).

In support of video-based activities like Tsuda's that ask students to explore their own affective responses to human interactions, nursing education scholar Brent W. Thompson advocates the use of videos specifically in nursing education. Thompson (2016) notes the effectiveness of video in representing scenes of emotional drama, notably in patient care situations that can help nursing students develop empathy:

Showing movies and videos has long been part of nursing education but the introduction of streaming videos simplifies their use. Videos can convey psychomotor skills, emotional situations, and patient care situations better than any other media (Edmonds, 2013). Streaming videos help engage students and encourage critical thinking (June,



Yaacob, & Kheng, 2014). Videos are particularly useful for addressing learning objectives in the affective domain (May et al., 2013). A video of a patient relating an experience with a disease can help students learn empathy for others. (Thompson, 2016, pp. 871-872; underlining ours)

Videos in the classroom have many uses across a range of subject matters and pedagogical purposes. In nursing English courses, well-selected videos can represent models of empathy itself but can also inspire empathy in the hearts of the viewers themselves and provide them with much to reflect on.

Tsuda's SNA activities (cited in Tohsaku et al., 2021a) are supported by streaming video advocated by Thompson (2016) and can be adapted in nursing English classes. Such activities encompass an understanding of the order in which human relationships commonly evolve, in ways previously described by Travelbee's Human-to-Human Relationship Theory (cited in Pokorny, 2014): Such relationships, especially in helping situations like nursing, typically start from emerging identities, then develop into feelings of empathy, and finally attain a condition based on sympathy. In nursing English courses, seeing and reflecting on models of nurses interacting with patients can help nursing students manage their human-to-human relationships—i.e., patient-to-nurse or nurse-to-patient. Foreign language activities like Tsuda's that follow SNA principles can help nursing students understand and apply the concepts of empathy and sympathy as they prepare to become nursing professionals.

### **Empirical Studies Related to Nurses' Motivation to Learn English**

Empathy training in nursing education helps fulfill a fundamental need nursing students—the development of a solid professional identity. Graham McCaffrey asks, "What is nursing?" and

concedes that the answer has evolved over time (McCaffrey, 2020, p. 37). McCaffrey (2020) traces the word "nurse" to its ancient roots and explains that modern nursing, which began in the mid-nineteenth century, arose from the need for trained professionals to keep pace with medical advances and serve a rapidly growing public (pp. 37–39). In this regard, Florence Nightingale's contributions—establishing nursing as a vocation to service based on moral and scientific principles—significantly shaped the modern concept of nursing. McCaffrey (2020) further discusses the ongoing debate about nursing identity and status, noting that nurses have historically sought to enhance their professional standing through claims of caring and compassion (pp. 40–42). If nursing is seen as a humanist practice, it relies on language, images, and objects to express human values (p. 47).

In the nursing English classroom, vocabulary development is not an end in itself but should serve larger purposes—e.g., stimulating intellectual growth and enriching life experiences. These aims, in line with SNA principles, are presented in a pioneering work on vocabulary learning by Dale et al. (1971), and can be applied to nursing education, where mastering nursing vocabulary is an important aspect of developing a nursing identity. As Dale et al. (1971) contends,

That a student's vocabulary level is a good index of his mental ability has been a generally accepted fact. . . . Students need to realize that vocabulary is an index of the nature and quality of their lives. It reflects what they have studied, where they have been, the subtleties and refinements of their mind. A good mind means a good vocabulary and a good vocabulary means a good mind. (p. 9)

These reflections on the importance of vocabulary learning are certainly relevant to nursing English education. What nursing students learn through English vocabulary contributes to the formation of

their nursing identity. To help nursing students acquire self-efficacy through nursing vocabulary, English teachers face choices in selecting suitable learning materials. Dale et al. (1971) suggests possible directions that are also consistent with SNA principles:

It is necessary to see vocabulary development as conceptual development. ...Vocabulary development means more than adding new words to your repertoire of experience. It means putting your concepts in better order or into additional orders or arrangements. To change your vocabulary is to change your life. (p. 10)

In effect, Japanese students in nursing English courses learn and master nursing language as instrumental ways to develop a nursing identity. Simply memorizing nursing English vocabulary removed from real contexts, however, is likely to result in students forgetting the words soon after encountering them. Instead, students should learn to use vocabulary in real-life situations that stimulate their growth in self-efficacy—and, not inconsequentially, increase their vocabulary retention.

To bridge the gap between vocabulary learning and nursing identity, we use a textbook based on the SNA, featuring familiar anime characters to engage Japanese students. The textbook is *Doraemon's Japanese Anywhere* (ドラえもんのどこでも日本語 *Doraemon no Dokodemo Nihongo*), (Tohsaku et al., 2021b). It helps Japanese students view their language and culture from a non-Japanese perspective, thus supporting their professional development and enhancing their language learning experience in unconventional ways. In our presentation at the 6th JANET Conference in June 2024, we showed images from Tohsaku et al. (2021b) and sample student work on worksheets related to the textbook. In such ways, we argued that using this textbook in nursing English courses takes

advantage of the familiarity that Japanese students already have with Doraemon and the other characters in the Doraemon animation series. Along with their entertainment value, Doraemon characters turn out to be quite effective at reducing the aversion that many Japanese students have toward learning English. Significantly, in the manga stories in Tohsaku et al. (2021b), the original Doraemon characters created by Fujiko F. Fujio encounter a new supplemental character named Tom, an overseas visitor who views Japanese life, customs, and culture (including situations in hospitals and clinics) from his own non-Japanese perspectives.

This textbook serves SNA principles in several ways. It helps our Japanese nursing students see their own language and culture from the viewpoint of a non-Japanese person—which helps students acquire empathy for people different from themselves. The textbook also encourages nursing students to develop their own ideas about what needs to be done to make themselves helpful for their imagined future patients, both Japanese and non-Japanese people. Moreover, the textbook plays a role in connecting language learning and lived experience, which is a basic principle of SNA. Since there are hardly any Japanese nursing students who do not know Doraemon, this textbook gives the nursing students a sense of familiarity through the visualizations of Japanese manga, overlapping the world of Doraemon and the characters in the textbook with situations and experiences in the lives of the students themselves.

The educational pragmatism of John Dewey (1997/1938) underscores the importance of hands-on learning for effective education (Dale et al. 1971, p. 38; Tohsaku et al., 2021a, p. 1). A pragmatic approach, which undergirds SNA, is relevant to nursing English education, by virtue of the fact that SNA emphasizes the importance of incorporating practical experience to connect language learning with real-world applications.

Gordon and English (2018) offer perspectives on Dewey's pragmatic approach to education, highlighting the need to integrate empathy with imagination in education, noting that empathy involves understanding other people's experiences, which is a critical skill for nursing students (Gordon & English, 2018, p. 3). One conclusion to draw is that effective nursing English should be contextually framed, focusing on patient care rather than general medical English.

The SNA aims to connect human capabilities for global communication and problem-solving (Tohsaku, 2013). Humanistic education like SNA fosters connections across knowledge domains (Tohsaku, 2013, p. 116; Miller & Spellmeyer, 2006, p. xix). Moreover, SNA aligns itself with organizations dedicated to global communication, notably the OECD, which offers a *learning compass* to help progressive-minded educators and their students find their bearings:

The OECD Learning Compass 2030 is an evolving learning framework that sets out an aspirational vision for the future of education....The metaphor of a learning compass was adopted to emphasize the need for students to learn to navigate by themselves through unfamiliar contexts, and find their direction in a meaningful and responsible way, instead of simply receiving fixed instructions or directions from their teachers. (OECD, n.d.)

In the spirit of SNA, the OECD Learning Compass 2030 encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and explore for themselves the realms of unknown territory. Much like the OECD, SNA methodology views language learning as a means of bringing together people in different communities—allowing them to connect and communicate their honest thoughts and feelings. There are rich frontiers of learning to explore beyond conventional textbooks and the confines of the classroom, and nursing English students have much to gain from both the OECD Learning

Compass 2030 and SNA as they enter uncharted waters in their education and in their future professional lives.

### Conclusion

When nursing students understand that becoming a nurse involves expressing identity, empathy, and sympathy, their idealistic ambitions of caring for patients can become realistic goals—with an end result, over time, of increasing their self-efficacy. Activities based on the SNA help students explore their potential across diverse disciplines. To give one example, an advanced SNA activity involves students enacting scenes from literature, film, or manga in ways that can enhance the motivation of students to learn English. By role-playing different characters, students practice the skills of understanding and navigating the diverse emotions and situations that are crucial for developing empathy. Through such imaginative play, students develop the emotional resources they will need as future nurses dealing with the changing feelings and conditions of their patients.

Empathy is central to the humanities, the creative disciplines that foster understanding of other people's experiences, hopes, and fears in ways that connect people with widely different outlooks. From SNA perspectives, language courses, including nursing English, should incorporate the humanities—literature (including manga), music, drama, and film. Learning through such media, students can acquire empathy for their interlocutors and, consequently, learn to engage in more effective interpersonal communication. Such an expanded view of teaching and learning redefines language learning beyond desk-bound test-taking skills. A curriculum for empathy training moves language learners, including nursing English students, away from learning about English and centers them instead on learning to use English as a tool for communicating with other people for real



purposes. As Miller and Spellmeyer (2006) suggest, the humanities should be viewed not just as a knowledge area but as the human dimension of all knowledge (p. ix). Similarly, language pedagogy, including nursing English education, should engage students in activities supported by SNA and OECD, which are connective methods with the ties that bind people together. Language learning should focus on practical applications rather than isolated skills—and thereby make communication real in the classroom and in life for many language learners, including Japanese students in nursing English courses.

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