

NARRATIVE REVIEW

The Role of English Language Proficiency in Nursing Research Literacy Among Sri Lankan Nursing Undergraduates: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

English language proficiency plays a pivotal role in shaping nursing students' capacity to engage with scholarly literature, interpret research evidence, and participate in evidence-based practice. In Sri Lanka, nursing undergraduates commonly pursue academic and clinical training in English-medium settings, while many enter higher education with limited English proficiency, creating barriers to developing research literacy. This structured narrative review explores how English language competency influences nursing research literacy among Sri Lankan nursing undergraduates and discusses educational implications for strengthening undergraduate research capability. A literature search was conducted using PubMed, CINAHL, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Sri Lanka Journals Online (SLJOL) for publications from 2000 to 2025. Search terms included nursing undergraduates/students, English proficiency, academic literacy, research literacy, evidence-based practice, and Sri Lanka. The reviewed literature indicates that limited English proficiency may hinder comprehension of scientific texts, academic writing, critical appraisal skills, and confidence in research utilisation, ultimately affecting engagement with evidence-based practice. Key challenges include unequal pre-university language exposure, limited structured support for academic English in nursing curricula, and insufficient opportunities for guided academic writing and research mentorship. Strengthening English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programmes, academic writing support, mentorship, and structured research-integrated learning activities may improve research literacy outcomes. Addressing English-related barriers is critical to enhancing research engagement, promoting evidence-based nursing practice, and supporting future nursing leadership and scholarship in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: English language proficiency, nursing undergraduates, research literacy, academic literacy, evidence-based practice, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Nursing research literacy plays a crucial role in the success of Nursing Education. In general, it is defined as the competency of nursing professionals to read, interpret, and apply research findings to enhance clinical practice and patient care.¹ Nursing research literacy is a key dimension of fostering evidence-based practice (EBP), a core element in improving patient outcomes.¹

This review explores the role of English language proficiency in shaping nursing research literacy among Sri Lankan nursing undergraduates, with particular emphasis on their engagement with evidence-based practice (EBP).

Methodology

This study was conducted as a structured narrative review to critically summarise and interpret existing literature on the role of English-language proficiency in nursing research literacy. Although a structured search strategy was used to enhance transparency, this review does not follow a full systematic review methodology.

Search strategy

A structured literature search was conducted using PubMed, CINAHL, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Sri Lanka Journals Online (SLJOL). The search included combinations of the following keywords:

(“nursing students” OR “nursing undergraduates”) AND (“English language proficiency” OR “language barriers” OR “academic literacy”) AND (“research literacy” OR “research utilisation” OR “evidence-based practice”) AND (“Sri Lanka” OR “developing countries”)

Boolean operators (AND/OR) were applied, and search terms were adapted across databases. Reference lists of selected articles were also screened to identify additional relevant studies. Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms were used where applicable, and duplicate records were removed during the screening process. Grey literature was considered selectively where relevant.

Time frame

The search was limited to studies published between 2000 and 2025 to capture contemporary developments in nursing education, English-medium instruction, and evidence-based practice.

Studies were included if they:

- Focused on nursing or health professional students
- Examined English language proficiency, academic literacy, or research literacy
- Addressed research engagement, comprehension, or evidence-based practice
- Were peer-reviewed articles or relevant educational reports

Table 1. Summary of literature included in the narrative review

<i>Area of review</i>	<i>Type of literature</i>	<i>No. of studies</i>	<i>Key research evidence</i>
English language proficiency and access to nursing research	Scoping reviews, cross-sectional studies	7	Limited English proficiency hinders access to and comprehension of nursing research literature ^{4,6,7,8,9,10,12}
English proficiency and nursing research literacy skills	Empirical and intervention studies	6	Language competence influences critical appraisal, academic writing, and confidence in research utilisation ^{2,3,6,7,8,12}
English-medium instruction in nursing education	Qualitative and mixed-method studies	5	English-medium instruction without structured language support contributes to learning challenges and inequities ^{4,5,6,9,10}
English for specific purposes in nursing education	Educational intervention studies	4	ESP and academic literacy training improve research comprehension and engagement ^{2,6,11,13}
Sri Lankan nursing education context	Context-specific empirical and review studies	2	Persistent English-related barriers affect research literacy development in Sri Lankan nursing education ^{4,6}

*Total unique studies included in the review: n=14

Studies were excluded if they:

- Were not published in English
- Were not related to education or research literacy
- Were opinion-only articles without relevant evidence

Study selection and data extraction

Titles and abstracts were independently screened by two authors, followed by full-text review for eligibility. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion among the authors.

Data synthesis

A thematic narrative synthesis approach was used. Findings were grouped into key themes, including access to research, academic writing skills, and engagement with evidence-based practice. Due to heterogeneity in study designs, populations, and outcomes, findings were synthesised narratively rather than quantitatively, and no statistical synthesis was performed. A total of 14 unique studies were included in this review. Some studies contributed to more than one thematic category; therefore, the total number of studies reported across themes exceeds the number of unique studies included.

Results***English as the global language of nursing research***

In the modern context, English is the primary language of research, providing access to medical journals, databases, and a wide range of academic literature.⁹

Definition and components of research literacy in nursing

Research literacy in nursing encompasses the ability to read, interpret, and apply research findings in clinical settings. It comprises a thorough understanding of research methodologies, statistical analyses, and critical appraisal techniques.²

English for specific purposes (ESP) in nursing education

The integration of courses based on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) principles into the nursing curriculum has been identified as a key strategy for improving English Language proficiency among nursing students. One of the most important values of ESP courses is that they aim to enhance the specific language skills required in the nursing profession. This includes medical terminology, academic writing, and research comprehension.³

English proficiency among Sri Lankan nursing undergraduates***Medium of instruction in Sri Lankan nursing programs***

In Sri Lanka, English-medium instruction (EMI) is the primary mode of instruction in nursing education⁵.

Nevertheless, some institutes conduct their lectures in Sinhala and Tamil. This transition to EMI poses significant challenges for students who have been exposed only to their native language. This can result in anxiety among the students and may lead to barriers to their academic success.⁴ Nonetheless, this becomes a root cause of the gap between English language skills and the demands of their coursework.⁵ This gap can negatively impact their ability to comprehend complex medical terminology and engage with research literature, ultimately impacting their research literacy and clinical competencies.⁶

Levels of English proficiency among Sri Lankan nursing students

As indicated in the research, there are marked differences in the levels of English language competency among nursing students in Sri Lanka, with a wide range of students facing challenges in meeting global standards such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and Occupational English Test (OET) benchmarks.⁴ In addition, research has shown that many nursing students struggle with academic writing and comprehension. These are crucial elements for nursing students when conducting research in English.⁷

Barriers to research literacy in Sri Lankan nursing education

The development of research literacy among nursing undergraduates in Sri Lanka is influenced by multiple interrelated linguistic, educational, and institutional barriers. One of the most prominent challenges is the transition from native-language schooling (Sinhala or Tamil) to English-medium instruction (EMI) in higher education. This shift creates significant disparities in students' ability to comprehend academic content and engage with research literature.^{4,6}

Limited proficiency in academic English further constrains students' capacity to interpret scientific texts, understand research methodologies, and apply critical appraisal skills.^{7,8} Many students experience difficulty with discipline-specific terminology, academic writing conventions, and synthesis of evidence, all of which are essential components of research literacy.

In addition, insufficient integration of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and academic writing support within nursing curricula exacerbates these challenges. Without structured opportunities to develop research-related language competencies, students may struggle to effectively engage with evidence-based practice.⁶

Institutional factors also play a role. Limited access to mentorship, lack of guided research training, and

inadequate exposure to scholarly reading practices contribute to reduced confidence and engagement with research activities.⁴

Collectively, these barriers hinder the development of research literacy and highlight the need for integrated language and research capacity-building strategies within Sri Lankan nursing education.

Impact of limited English proficiency on evidence-based practice

Challenges in accessing international research

Low levels of English language proficiency can negatively affect nursing students' ability to access and engage with international research. Many students face difficulties reading, interpreting, and applying findings from English-language journals, which are essential for enhancing their skills in evidence-based practice.⁸

Consequently, difficulties students encounter in accessing and comprehending high-quality research published in English may adversely affect the quality of patient care.

Discussion

Although this review focuses on Sri Lankan nursing undergraduates, a substantial proportion of the included literature originates from international contexts. This reflects the limited availability of context-specific empirical research in Sri Lanka on the relationship between English-language proficiency and research literacy. Although some included studies address broader aspects of health literacy and academic performance, these were included where they provide relevant insights into skills closely aligned with research literacy, such as critical appraisal, comprehension, and evidence utilisation.

Therefore, evidence from international studies has been synthesised and critically interpreted in relation to the Sri Lankan educational context. This approach enables the identification of transferable insights while acknowledging contextual differences in language background, educational systems, and resource availability.

Currently, nursing education practice in Sri Lanka heavily relies on English-medium instruction (EMI), with the primary aim of integrating English to improve students' academic performance and enhance access to nursing research. Although the above-mentioned approach has the potential to enhance students' engagement with global literature and evidence-based practice, it is often implemented without systematic support for academic English or research literacy development. Hence, many undergraduates pursuing nursing degrees face challenges in comprehending research articles, developing academic writing skills, and confidently applying research evidence in clinical contexts.⁸

There are conflicting perspectives in the literature regarding the effectiveness of EMI in improving research literacy. Some studies indicate that prolonged exposure to the English language in academic settings may gradually enhance language competence,⁹ while other studies highlight common challenges in comprehending research and academic writing, particularly among students from non-English-speaking educational backgrounds.¹⁰ The discrepancy mentioned above emphasizes that EMI alone may not be sufficient to support research literacy without complementary interventions such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and guided research skill development.¹¹

As evidenced by the literature, several gaps in knowledge remain. There is a dearth of empirical literature examining the association between English language proficiency and nursing research literacy among nursing undergraduates in Sri Lanka.⁴ Furthermore, it is also important to note that a limited number of studies have conducted a systematic evaluation of ESP-based curricula, academic writing support, or technology-assisted language tools in terms of enhancing research capacity within nursing education.¹² The above-mentioned gap in the literature emphasizes the necessity of engaging in further investigation, as outlined in the Future Research section of this review.

Implications for Nursing Education

Strengthening English for specific purposes (ESP) in nursing education

To improve the research literacy among nursing undergraduates in Sri Lanka, there is a strong need to establish English for Specific Purposes (ESP) within nursing education. This can be achieved by integrating academic writing and research comprehension into ESP curricula. It would equip students with the skills required to conduct a literature search.⁶

The use of simplified research articles and a focus on student engagement in structured reading activities have the potential to improve students' comprehension levels.¹³ Moreover, training the students with tailor-made vocabulary related to medicine and research will enable them to enhance their skills in academic writing. This contributes to improvements in their overall research literacy.⁶

Enhancing research literacy through institutional support

Institutional support plays a critical role in improving research literacy among nursing students. Therefore, organizing workshops to improve research skills will be of paramount importance. Furthermore, encouraging students to read and summarise journal articles provides them with practical experience in conducting research effectively.³ The university lecturers can guide the students and encourage them to read and engage in English-language research through the mentoring

programs. Moreover, the assignments can be planned with the objective of making the students engaged in reading and analysing international studies. This will enable the students to apply their learning in a real-world context. It would expand their understanding and the applicability of evidence-based practice.

Leveraging technology for language and research skill development

Given the rapid developments in technology, technology plays a vital role in enhancing language and research writing skills among nursing students.¹⁴ The employment of digital tools, namely Grammarly, AI translation services, and activities related to summarising and paraphrasing, will enable the students to improve their skills in writing and comprehension. Furthermore, students can be encouraged to use online platforms such as PubMed, the Cochrane Library, and ResearchGate, which provide exposure to a wide array of knowledge and access to valuable research findings. In addition, promoting e-learning modules can help them explore a wide range of nursing research.

Policy recommendations for nursing education in Sri Lanka
The implementation of strategic policies is essential for addressing the challenges faced by nursing students in Sri Lanka. When designing curricula for nursing students, English-medium instruction (EMI) should be prioritized. In addition, developing partnerships and international collaborations with nursing institutions will be a rewarding experience for nursing students, as it provides them with exposure to global research and literacy.

Future Research

Future research should focus on generating empirical evidence on the relationship between English language proficiency and nursing research literacy among undergraduate nursing students in Sri Lanka. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how English competency influences students' ability to engage with research evidence and develop evidence-based practice (EBP) skills over time. In addition, intervention-based research is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of integrating English for Specific Purposes (ESP) modules, academic writing training, and medical terminology instruction into nursing curricula, particularly in strengthening research comprehension and critical appraisal skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, English language proficiency plays a critical role in promoting research literacy amongst nursing undergraduates in Sri Lanka. Limited English language proficiency remains a major barrier preventing students from accessing and engaging with international research. This can ultimately negatively impact their decision-making

and the delivery of better patient care. Hence, it is imperative to improve English-language proficiency among nursing students to elevate the standards of their research literacy.

Authors' contributions

Concept and design: SS, GW

Literature review: SS, GW, RP, EF, WS

Data collection: SS, GW, RP, EF, WS

Compilation of manuscript: SS, GW, RP, EF, WS

Reviewing and proofreading of the manuscript: SS, GW

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