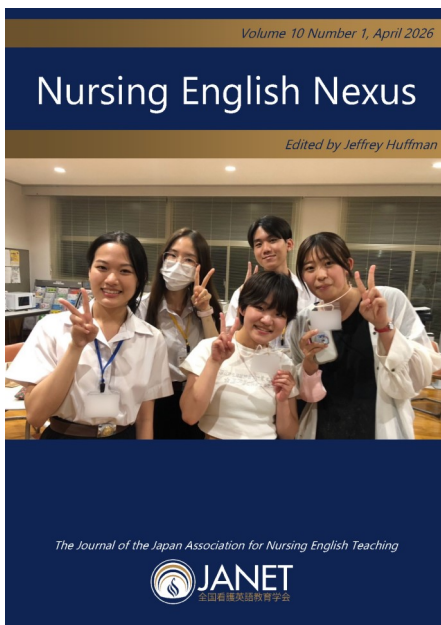


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Professional Identity Formation through International Nursing Exchange: A Reflective Qualitative Report of a Thai Male Nursing Student's Experience in Japan

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Abstract: *International exchange programs have become an important component of nursing English education, offering opportunities for linguistic development, intercultural learning, and professional identity formation. This reflective qualitative report examines the experience of one respondent, a Thai male nursing student in a short-term exchange program at a Japanese nursing college. The respondent's comments in a reflective questionnaire and a follow-up interview provided data that were then examined through theory-informed analysis. Accordingly, this report explores how English learning, hospital observation, and peer interaction can contribute to psychological growth, intercultural empathy, and the development of professional identity. The report draws on experiential learning theory and professional identity formation frameworks and considers data from a male nursing perspective. The findings suggest that international exchange programs can function as a transformative educational space where language learning, gender, and professional values intersect. Consequently, the report highlights the pedagogical significance of integrating student voices and reflective analysis in nursing English education.*

Keywords: experiential learning, international exchange, male nursing students, nursing English education, professional identity formation, reflective practice

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The globalization of nursing education has heightened the importance of English proficiency, intercultural competence, and gender diversity. In Thailand and Japan, nursing remains a predominantly female profession, with limited male participation. At the same time, international collaboration in healthcare requires students to develop sufficient English skills to function effectively in multicultural academic and clinical settings.

This report introduces the educational context of a Thai male nursing student in a student exchange program in Japan, focusing on English education, institutional requirements, and gender-related perceptions. Data on these subjects came from responses to a questionnaire and a follow-up

interview, completed by the second co-author, a Thai nursing student, referred to throughout this report as "the respondent." By integrating his reflections with his co-authors' analysis, the report suggests how international exchange programs can support professional identity formation from a male nursing perspective. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the report documents an individual case that highlights broader themes in global nursing education, male participation, and the role of English learning in shaping professional identity.

Context of the Study

The respondent's place of study—Mahidol University in Bangkok, Thailand—structures

English learning through placement based on the Mahidol University English Language Test (MUELT). First-year nursing students are assigned to one of four levels (LAEN103–106) according to their MUELT scores to strengthen foundational skills (LAEN=Language courses of English). In the second year, students take LAEN223, a situational communication course that emphasizes listening and speaking. Passing the MUELT is mandatory for graduation, reflecting the institution's systematic effort to ensure measurable English proficiency in students before entering professional practice.

English education in this context is closely connected to professional identity formation. Communication skills, particularly listening and speaking, are emphasized because effective nurse–patient interaction is essential to holistic care. The respondent expressed strong commitments to holistic practice and patient safety, suggesting that English learning can support not only nursing students' technical skill development but also their preparation for empathetic, patient-centered care.

Linguistic differences between Thai and English present additional challenges. Thai grammar does not mark tense through verb conjugation, and Thai includes gender-specific politeness particles (*krub* for males, *ka* for females). These structural and sociolinguistic differences require cognitive and cultural adjustment, underscoring the need for carefully designed English-for-nursing curricula.

Gender representation is another key dimension. In the year considered here, 2024, approximately 15 male students were enrolled among 237 nursing students at Mahidol University. While the respondent expressed a desire for more male participation in nursing, he acknowledged that many male Thai university students tend to pursue such fields as engineering. Motivations for entering nursing, however, appear similar across genders, including a desire to care for others and personal family experiences. Structural pathways,

such as admission systems, also influence male participation. Some students had originally wished to enroll in other faculties; however, they were not admitted and were accepted only into the School of Nursing.

International mobility is shaped by institutional obligations. Students in Mahidol University's Ramathibodi School of Nursing program must work at Ramathibodi Hospital for two years after graduation, thereby limiting immediate overseas employment. Therefore, short-term international exchange programs provide realistic opportunities for global engagement during undergraduate study.

Theoretical Framework

Professional identity formation (PIF) is now widely recognized as a central outcome of nursing education. PIF refers to the gradual development of values, self-concept, ethical orientation, and professional responsibility through experience, reflection, and social interaction (Cruss et al., 2014, pp. 1447–1449). For male nursing students, professional identity formation may involve additional complexity, as nursing has historically been socially constructed as a female-dominated profession. Examining male nursing students' experiences is therefore important for promoting inclusive and diverse pathways into the nursing profession. Professional identity formation is understood as a dynamic and longitudinal process through which students internalize the values, norms, and responsibilities of the nursing profession. Rather than developing solely through technical skill acquisition, professional identity emerges through reflective engagement with educational, clinical, and social experiences. Interactions with peers, educators, and healthcare professionals play a crucial role in shaping how students come to see themselves as nurses.

Experiential learning theory views learning as a cyclical process consisting of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization,

and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984, pp. 186, 206). International exchange programs provide rich, concrete experiences that may challenge students' assumptions, prompting reflection and deeper learning. Reflection enables students to connect experience with professional values and future practice, making experiential learning particularly relevant to nursing education.

Research on male nursing students has highlighted issues related to minority status, stereotypes, and professional belonging (MacWilliams et al., 2013, pp. 39, 41). At the same time, studies have shown that male nursing students often develop strong professional commitment when educational environments emphasize patient-centered care, teamwork, and ethical practice over gendered expectations (Amin et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2024; Prosen and Čekada, 2025). Analyzing international exchange experiences from a male nursing perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of how professional identity is constructed in global and intercultural contexts.

Methods

This report employed a reflective qualitative design using a co-authored narrative approach. Reflective qualitative methods are appropriate for examining educational experiences that involve psychological and emotional dimensions—areas central to professional identity formation in nursing.

As mentioned above, the respondent was a Thai male undergraduate nursing student who took part in a short-term international exchange program at Mie Prefectural College of Nursing in Japan. The program included participation in English-medium nursing classes, hospital and home-care visits, and interaction with Japanese nursing students and faculty members.

Data were collected using a structured reflective questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions (see Appendix). The questions addressed

initial expectations, experiences of using English, observations of Japanese nursing culture, gender-related perceptions, psychological development, and perceived impact on future nursing practice. The respondent provided written responses in English in a follow-up interview, transcribed before analysis, which were then analyzed by the co-authors, including the respondent himself.

Data analysis followed a theory-informed reflective approach guided by experiential learning theory, professional identity formation frameworks, and literature on male nursing students. Analysis focused on interpreting how the respondent made meaning of experiences rather than on coding frequency or thematic quantification.

Ethical Considerations

This exchange of opinions was conducted after providing the respondent with a full explanation of the purpose and methods of the report and obtaining written informed consent to use the reflective data for publication.

Findings and Discussion

Data from the reflective questionnaire and the follow-up interview revealed the respondent's clear developmental trajectory in which intercultural exposure, linguistic challenges, and sustained professional reflection contributed to the formation and consolidation of professional identity in an international exchange program. Rather than presenting fragmented impressions, the respondent's observations illustrate a dynamic process that begins with uncertainty and culminates in transnational empathy and professional integration. Several interconnected dynamics emerged from six thematic domains: 1) liminality and identity destabilization, 2) professional agency, 3) communicative reframing, 4) psychological safety, 5) gendered belonging, and 6) the transfer of intercultural learning into clinical practice.

1. Liminality and Identity Destabilization

Upon arriving in Japan, the respondent experienced nervousness related to daily life, academic expectations, linguistic ability, and social adaptation. This stage can be understood as entry into a liminal learning space—a transitional phase in which familiar roles and identities are temporarily unsettled. As a male nursing student from Thailand, the respondent navigated multiple overlapping transitions in Japan: relocation to a new country, cultural adjustment, linguistic insecurity, and minority gender positioning within nursing.

While such uncertainty can inhibit participation, in this case, it functioned productively. Awareness of his linguistic and cultural limitations stimulated reflective self-assessment and motivated active preparation. The desire to improve English proficiency and learn about Japanese culture marked a shift in the respondent's outlook, from passive anxiety to purposeful engagement. Thus, uncertainty became a catalyst for identity reconstruction rather than fragmentation.

2. Professional Agency

Professional agency emerged most clearly in the respondent's proactive preparation for academic discussions. By preparing to discuss the Thai healthcare system and Thai culture, he positioned himself not as a deficient learner but as a contributor and cultural mediator. For male nursing students in intercultural academic settings, such agency may be particularly important in establishing professional legitimacy. Through intellectual preparation and active participation, the respondent enacted professionalism grounded in competence, reciprocity, and initiative. Importantly, this agency was relational. The respondent's reported intention to "share knowledge and exchange ideas" reflects dialogical professionalism, aligning with collaborative models of nursing education.

3. Communicative Reframing

The communicative environment in the exchange program in Japan further supported professional growth. The respondent described Japanese peers as "polite," "attentive," and "focused on mutual understanding" rather than preoccupied with linguistic accuracy. English functioned not as a marker of hierarchy but as a shared communicative resource among non-native speakers.

4. Psychological Safety

The respondent felt that the communicative environment fostered psychological safety, reducing fear of error and encouraging participation. Such communicative norms mirror patient-centered care practices in nursing, where attentive listening and shared understanding are central. Consequently, language learning became inseparable from professional formation.

A particularly significant conceptual shift emerged in the respondent's reflection that nursing communication is "about understanding others, not about speaking perfectly." This reframing moves from grammatical correctness toward relational competence. In clinical practice, safety and teamwork depend on clarity and shared understanding rather than linguistic perfection. By linking English learning to patient safety and multidisciplinary collaboration, the respondent felt that language development was integrated with ethical responsibility. English was no longer merely an academic requirement, but a tool for holistic and safe patient care, signaling maturation of professional identity.

5. Gendered Belonging

Regarding gender, the respondent reported minimal concern about minority status. Drawing from his experience in Thailand, where patient care is prioritized over gender distinctions, he perceived equal treatment in Japan. Professional identity was foregrounded over gender identity within the educational environment. Such

affirmation may stabilize identity for male nursing students, demonstrating how shared professional purpose can supersede demographic differences.

6. Transfer of Intercultural Learning into Clinical Practice

The most transformative dimension appeared in the transfer of intercultural learning into domestic clinical practice. After returning to Thailand, the respondent reported increased patience, attentiveness to detail, and cultural sensitivity. His experience of caring for a patient from Myanmar illustrates this transfer. Having experienced being a foreign student in Japan, the respondent reported feelings of heightened empathy for patients navigating cultural and linguistic displacement. This empathy, he felt, translated into more intentional and compassionate care.

To sum up, the data depict the respondent's progression from uncertainty to integrated professional identity. Liminality stimulated growth, proactive preparation fostered agency, supportive communication enabled confidence, and intercultural experience deepened empathy. Short-term international academic experiences can thus serve as sites of professional identity formation, fostering not only linguistic competence but also ethical commitment and transnational empathy in nursing practice.

Generally, the findings suggest that international exchange programs in nursing English education can support professional identity formation through experiential learning, reflection, and intercultural engagement. From a male nursing perspective, the exchange program provided an environment in which professionalism was emphasized over gender, supporting confidence and belonging. English functioned as a shared communicative tool, aligning language learning with nursing values such as empathy, attentiveness, and teamwork.

Conclusion

The analysis of the respondent's observations in a questionnaire and a follow-up interview demonstrates that structured English education combined with short-term international exchange can facilitate professional identity consolidation in male nursing students. Intercultural experience, supportive communication, and reflective learning contributed to enhanced empathy, confidence, and ethical awareness. Consequently, integrating language education with global engagement may strengthen inclusive and sustainable nursing education models in East Asia.

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Appendix

Responses of a Thai Male Nursing Student Who Participated in a Short-Term Study Program in Japan (Edited minimally for clarity)

Section 1: Initial Experiences and Emotional Responses

1. On arriving in Japan, did you have any uncertainty as a male nursing student from Thailand?

A: *Yes, I felt very nervous about adjusting to life in Japan, including daily life, making new friends, and acquiring nursing knowledge. In addition, my English communication skills were not fluent, so I needed to improve my English and gather information about Japanese culture.*

2. What was especially interesting or challenging about Japanese nursing culture? Did you feel nervous using English in academic discussions?

A: *I felt very nervous during the first few days. I prepared [for] academic topics such as the healthcare system in Thailand and Thai culture to discuss with professors and students. I wanted to share my knowledge, exchange ideas, and gain new knowledge from others.*

3. Did these experiences lead to self-reflection or emotional growth?

A: *Yes, they encouraged me to reflect on my strengths, limitations, and attitudes toward learning in an international environment. Facing cultural differences and communication barriers helped me develop self-confidence and emotional resilience.*

Section 2: English as a Lingua Franca in Nursing Education

4. Did you feel that English in the Japanese classroom was not "owned" by anyone? How did Japanese students communicate with you?

A: *Yes, I felt that English was not owned by anyone. Japanese students spoke politely, made efforts to speak clearly, and listened carefully. They respected my opinions and focused on mutual understanding rather than linguistic*

accuracy, which increased my confidence.

5. Did using English in Japan help you focus more on [communicating] meaning rather than [on grammatical] accuracy?

A: *Yes, communication focused more on meaning than perfect accuracy. This made communication more comfortable and effective. It also reinforced my belief that nursing communication is about understanding others. Shared understanding among nurses and healthcare team members is essential for safe and holistic patient care.*

Section 3: Clinical and Professional Learning

6. Did hospital visits influence your understanding of nursing?

A: *Yes, I was very impressed by hospital visits. I observed nursing practices, medical equipment, and patient cases I had never seen before, such as preterm infants born at less than 28 weeks of gestation and [older patients in] psychiatric care. Nurses and healthcare teams welcomed me warmly and answered my questions. I realized that Japanese nurses are very attentive and professional.*

7. As a male nursing student, were you aware of being a minority? How were you treated in Japan?

A: *I was not concerned about being a minority. In Thailand, healthcare focuses on patient care rather than gender. In Japan, I felt I was treated equally and accepted as a nursing student by nurses, healthcare professionals, professors, and students.*

8. What experience strengthened your confidence in working in international settings?

A: *Visiting the home of a bedridden patient strengthened my confidence. I communicated with nurses, physicians, and healthcare team members, observed the care process, and spoke with the patient [briefly in Japanese]. This experience increased my confidence in working in international healthcare settings.*

Section 4: Social and Psychological Development

9. Did spending time with Japanese students outside of class influence you psychologically or emotionally?

A: *Yes, traveling [with them] to places such as Kyoto and Nara and sharing meals helped me feel relaxed. Although I am a homebody, these experiences made me very happy and motivated me to visit Japan again.*

10. Did your experience make you more patient and culturally aware?

A: *Yes, I became more attentive to details and more patient in caring for patients. For example, when caring for a patient from Myanmar [after I returned to Thailand], communication was sometimes difficult. My experience in Japan helped me try harder to understand the patient's needs and feelings, especially as [the patient was] living in a foreign country.*

11. Did your experience in Japan change your professional identity?

A: *Yes, it increased my confidence in applying my knowledge to patient care. I also realized that patients have loved ones who care deeply for them. This motivated me to provide the best possible care.*

Section 5: Educational Context and Gender Perspectives

12. How many male students are in your year [in your nursing program in Thailand]?

A: *Approximately 15 students.*

13. Could you describe the English program at your university?

A: *English courses are based on the Mahidol University English Language Test (MUELT). Students must also pass an English proficiency test before graduation.*

14. What English courses did you take?

A: *1st Year: LAEN103–106 (English Levels 1–4)
2nd Year: LAEN223 (Situational-Based Communication English)*

15. What skills are emphasized in [these] English courses?

A: *The courses mainly focus on listening and speaking, particularly in communication contexts.*

16. Is Thai grammar different from English?

A: *Yes, Thai grammar differs from English. For example, Thai verbs do not conjugate, and polite particles ("krub" for males and "ka" for females) are added at the end of sentences.*

Section 6: Career Perspectives and Gender in Nursing

17. Are other male students interested in studying abroad?

A: *Currently, most students are not interested because they are required to work at Ramathibodi Hospital for two years after graduation.*

18. How many students are in your cohort?

A: *There are 237 students.*

19. Do you think there should be more male nursing students?

A: *Yes, but many young men in Thailand prefer fields such as engineering, which may explain the lower number of male nursing students.*

20. Do you think more men should work as nurses?

A: *Yes. [In my case,] I want to be a nurse because I enjoy caring for people and helping patients return home. Holistic care is very important to me.*

21. Why do [you think] male students choose nursing?

A: *Their reasons are similar to [those of] female students, including a desire to care for others and [prior] experiences with [helping] elderly family members. Some [male] students also enter nursing because they were accepted only into this faculty.*