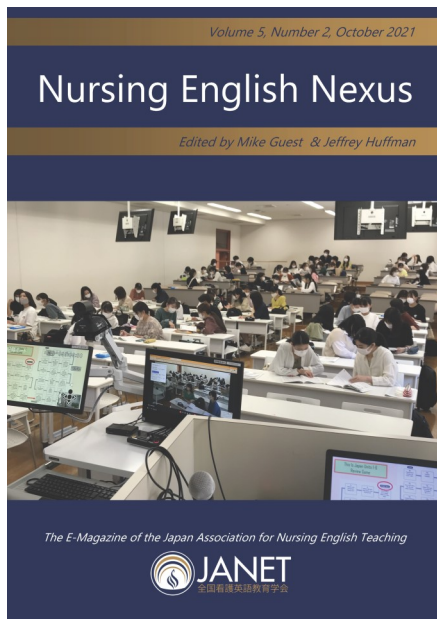


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Independent Work for Nursing Students in English for Medical Purposes Classes: The Voronezh Medical University Experience

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Nursing training is a part of general medical education in Russia. Its main objective is to develop a qualified specialist who is a creative person capable of life-long development and prepared for innovation, which is why it is not enough to simply transfer knowledge from teachers to students. This is also why independent work is essential. Students must acquire the ability to formulate a problem and analyze ways to solve it, applying their knowledge, skills, and competencies to achieve an optimal result. Additionally, the global coronavirus pandemic has caused drastic changes to the present system of nursing education. In this environment, independent work is becoming increasingly more important.

Independent work combines a variety of classroom and extracurricular activities, which may be supervised and guided by the teacher. This allows nursing students to be educated either by directly communicating with the teacher or through interaction with other students. Independent work promotes the ability to take responsibility and solve problems in both routine and emergency situations. It is in this process of independent work that students develop their skills to investigate and explore clinical solutions and methods of self-training. This approach can be said to contain a cognitive focus, intended not only for mastering a specific discipline, but also for developing the skills of independent work in social, academic, and professional environments.

Independent study in Russian Medical Education

Currently, independent work in Russian medical universities accounts for a significant proportion of the curriculum in various disciplines, including

English as a foreign language (EFL). There are only 32 contact hours a year designated for English, but a full 38 hours for independent student work, some of which may be used for further English study.

The overall academic load is rather large, however, and the level of the students' knowledge of English ranges from basic (the majority of students) to pre-intermediate (a small number of students) within each cohort (the number of students in a cohort normally being 16-18). However, according to university guidelines, both medical and nursing students are expected to be able to speak in English on professional topics, present the results of their research and academic activity in English at conferences, create academic texts, and work with databases and statistical findings of various studies.

In this context, the main purpose of independent study is to help medical and nursing students acquire and apply knowledge on their own, to show self-initiative in completing assignments, and to use a creative approach toward work. The main goal for the teacher is to help students establish cognitive independence. Teachers must thoroughly plan the overall independent work instructions and materials in order to motivate students while also drawing their attention to specific linguistic points. Therefore, effectively distributing and structuring the educational materials used for independent work is of paramount importance.

Independent work activities should include both reproductive (training) and productive (creative) processes. The reproductive process involves performing clinical actions according to an English-language model, repeatedly practicing language skills, or acting out typical

communicative situations. These are to build up vocabulary and grammatical competence, to develop basic communicative skills, and also to prepare learners for deeper analytical activities.

The productive approach is associated with the development of the student's creative abilities. It aims at transforming language knowledge into independent communication, confident performance in foreign language settings, and the production of language through independent tasks.

Both these approaches are used in our language teaching. While critical thinking is only possible with previously developed language skills, productive and reproductive approaches are closely connected and complement each other in language learning practice, and are enhanced by independent student work.

The most common type of student independent work in our setting is project work. Three stages of student project work can be distinguished:

1. Introductory (set-up)

This stage involves providing students with general information on the project, topics, work planning, and team making.

2. Preparatory (reproductive training)

Students experience/train for clinical situations using a combination of their linguistic training and theoretical knowledge. This includes choosing appropriate clinical actions and responses according to the contents of specific English model texts, directed dialogues (scenarios) offered by the teacher, taking notes, and solving simple tasks aimed at transforming knowledge into skills. Activities include gap fills, dictionary searches and notations for key vocabulary items, completing

comprehension tasks based on authentic readings, and true/false analysis of basic clinical statements.

3. Performance (productive work)

The productive (or, heuristic) stage assumes that students have independently obtained new linguistic and clinical knowledge, and will now independently carry out productive tasks based on new, objective clinical information. In foreign language teaching, speaking and writing are traditionally considered productive activities.

Such assignments help students develop both their research and creative capacities. Naturally, in any form of learning, students tend to move from simple to complex matters. Therefore, any initial success in independent work will primarily be determined by the students' level of basic knowledge. In this regard, it is necessary to consider differing EFL backgrounds among the students, which in turn demand multi-level tasks and exercises. In addition, students should have access to reference materials so they can improve and compensate for gaps in their knowledge.

Example of independent work at Voronezh Medical University

We will give an example of the materials used for nursing students' independent work based on the topic of "The Respiratory System (RS)". This unit includes sections on anatomy, physiology, pathology, and prevention. The introductory stage involves giving and guiding students to general information to be used in the final product, which is a health education leaflet on common RS disorders and supporting materials: a written text about anatomy and physiology, a list of topic-related vocabulary, and topic references (Appendix 1).

Reproductive tasks consist of two steps

which include both a grammar focus and a content-based focus. In the first step, students are supplied with grammar reference material and perform exercise drills in grammar (for example, a review of the passive voice). In the second step, they read the text about RS pathology and then complete the tasks (such as, organizing paragraphs in the text and then asking about symptoms, diagnoses, and treatment of the disease using passive voice questions). We have also prepared a textbook with exercises that help students prepare for this activity (Appendix 2).

As for their *productive* activities, nursing students carry out independent research on features of RS disorders: ways of transmission, types of classification, prevalence in different countries and in different environments, epidemiology statistics, and compare risk factors and other variables. Sometimes, they perform simple on-campus research from their first-year in the context of their clinical placements. After that, they create a leaflet about ways to prevent respiratory system disorders and present it to the class.

It should be mentioned here that at the introductory stage students are given some reference materials (e.g., links to the WHO site, PubMed, www.nhs.uk, etc.) but are free to choose any valid source for relevant information. The main pedagogical purpose for this is to teach how to use various English references and databases, which is an essential skill for their future professional careers.

Assessment of Independent Work

Assessment of independent work needs to be conducted in a timely and relevant manner. At the introductory stage, teachers should announce the assessment criteria and feedback schedule. Our assessment is twofold, consisting of a written test (grammar and vocabulary) and an oral presentation of the leaflet (pathology

and its prevention). In this way, both reproductive and productive skills are assessed. Moreover, the design of the students' leaflets is also graded. This allows students with a low level of language competence to showcase their visual presentation skills, thereby supplementing their overall score and further developing positive attitudes towards EFL learning.

Conclusion

It can be said that our concept of independent work involves maximizing student activity and cognition in various domains, such as the organization of intellectual inquiry and the ability to effectively search for information, with the end goal of enhancing both knowledge and competencies. Prerequisites for the development of student independence include their previous academic accomplishments, a positive attitude towards learning in general, and enthusiasm for the particular subject.

Most importantly, the effectiveness of creative and independent student activity depends largely upon effective initial organization of learning activities by the teacher, while also encouraging student interest in the particular topic in order to motivate them for independent cognitive activity. However, it should be noted that the success and quality of the students' independent work is often directly dependent on the quality of the preceding didactic lessons and the level of previously learned content. Therefore, in order to match the diverse range of student cognitive levels, the teacher must carefully prepare suitable assignments and instructions consisting of diverse activity types, clear didactic goals, and practical applications.

Although the practices described above are typical of Russian medical and nursing universities, they may be dissimilar to practices found elsewhere. However, the principles and

methods underlying our independent work education for nursing students can be applied effectively anywhere in the world, so we hope that nursing educators in a variety of settings will find this discussion useful.

Appendix 1

Introductory Tasks

Vocabulary: Find the word in the dictionary, write its meaning in English and in Russian (see the example)

Word in English	Meaning in English	Word in Russian
respiration	the process of breathing	дыхание
mediastinum		
chest supply		
throat		

Reading: Read the text below and do the two tasks that follow

(Adapted from University of Rochester Medical Center Health Encyclopedia, Anatomy of the Respiratory System)

**INTRODUCTION TO THE RESPIRATORY SYSTEM
ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY**

The respiratory system is made up of the organs included in the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. These are the parts: nose, mouth, throat (pharynx), voice box (larynx), windpipe (trachea), large airways (bronchi), lungs.

The lungs take in oxygen. The cells of your body need oxygen to live and carry out their normal functions. The lungs also get rid of carbon dioxide, a waste product of the cells. The lungs are a pair of cone-shaped organs made up of spongy, pinkish-gray tissue. They take up most of the space in the chest (thorax). The lungs are surrounded by a membrane (pleura). The lungs are separated from each other by the mediastinum, an area that contains the heart and its large vessels, trachea, esophagus, thymus gland, lymph nodes.

The right lung has 3 sections called lobes. The left lung has 2 lobes.

Appendix 2

Reproductive Tasks

Task 1. True/ False

1	The respiratory system is made up of the organs included in the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide.	
2	The lungs take in oxygen.	
3	The lungs get rid of carbon dioxide.	
4	The lungs take up most of the space in the abdomen.	
5	The lungs are separated from each other by the pleura.	
	

Task 2. Use the text to fill in the gaps

1	The _____ of your body need oxygen to live and carry out their normal functions.	
2	Respiration is the _____ of _____ that results in the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide.	
3	Main function of respiratory system is _____.	
4	Supply of _____ is maintained by respiratory system.	