Abs-63

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A corpus linguistics study of the undergraduate nursing curriculum

Health-care has its own language, and each discipline has a distinctive lexicon which can be extensive and complex. However, to date, no studies have documented the language learning burden of nursing students, or how they acquire the language of their discipline. This presentation describes an ongoing project to characterize the language used in the Bachelor of Nursing program at the University of Newcastle, Australia, and to document the process of language acquisition.

A corpus of approximately four million words has been created from learning materials used in the undergraduate degree. Using the program WordSmith tools, keywords have been identified by comparison to a corpus of general English. The keywords are incorporated into questions on language assessments which will be administered over three years as students progress through the course, permitting mapping of vocabulary acquisition.

The study has identified recurring phrases and approximately 5000 keywords, which characterizes the nursing language at the University of Newcastle. A lexicon has been generated for each year of study, which each quartile of the 3 respective cohorts is expected to have mastered. Preliminary assessments have identified some inconsistencies between the nursing language used throughout the nursing degree and the communicative competence of these students.

This information can be used by others involved in course design to target the materials to the level of communicative competence of the students. Identification of the vocabulary will also better equip the nursing students with transitioning into the workforce.

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