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Negotiating the Role of English in Early Midwifery Training: A Qualitative Study of Students' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT
This study investigated the first-semester midwifery students' perceptions of the role of English in early professional training. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected from 41 students through a Likert-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively to identify general perception trends, while interview data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings indicate that students strongly perceive English as essential for accessing professional knowledge, understanding English-language references, supporting clinical practice and facilitating professional communication. Early exposure to English is viewed as important for professional preparation; however, students also reported challenges related to confidence, limited vocabulary and the need for more practice. The thematic analysis revealed three major themes: English as a gateway to professional knowledge and credibility, negotiating confidence and anxiety, and bridging classroom English with future clinical practice. The study underscores the importance to enhance integrating ESP into early midwifery education to enhance relevance, confidence and professional readiness.

Keywords: ESP, midwifery students, students' perception, professional training

INTRODUCTION

English has become an indispensable component in healthcare education due to its role as the dominant language of scientific publication, international clinical guidelines, and cross-cultural communication (Schkinder, 2024). In midwifery and other health professions, English proficiency facilitates students' access to professional literature, evidence-based practice, and effective communication in increasingly multicultural clinical environments (Kyei et al., 2023). Because healthcare systems are becoming more integrated, midwives must be able to communicate successfully across language barriers with patients, families, and coworkers (Gerchow et al., 2021). This highlights the necessity of using English as the primary medium of communication (Warde et al., 2018). In Indonesia, midwifery education has incorporated English as part of the curriculum to prepare students for global competence (Hidayati & Susilowati, 2025). Consequently, English is no longer viewed merely as an academic subject, but as a professional tool embedded within healthcare practice.

Despite the acknowledged importance of English, prior research reveals a persistent gap between theoretical expectations of English competence and students lived experiences in health education contexts. Studies focusing on nursing and medical students show that although learners perceive English as important, they often struggle with confidence, relevance, and contextual application of language skills in professional settings (Ching et al., 2020; Fang & Baker, 2018). In midwifery education specifically, empirical studies remain scarce and tend to emphasize language needs analysis or curriculum design rather than students' own perceptions of English in relation to their emerging professional roles. Furthermore, little attention has been given to first-semester students, whose perceptions are still forming and may strongly influence future engagement with learning English.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how first-semester midwifery students negotiate the role of English in their early professional training. By integrating Likert-scale questionnaire data with semi-structured interviews and analyzing the data through Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, this study seeks to capture both general attitudinal tendencies and deeper, experience-based perceptions. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how English is perceived not only as an academic requirement but also as part of professional identity development and anticipated clinical practice, thus extending existing ESP and health education research.

The urgency of this research lies in the potential consequences of overlooking students' perceptions at the early stages of professional education. If English instruction continues to be delivered without alignment to students' professional expectations and perceived realities, learners may experience reduced motivation, increased anxiety, and limited transfer of classroom learning to clinical contexts. For midwifery students, this misalignment may affect their readiness to engage with international literature, participate in professional development opportunities, and communicate effectively in diverse healthcare environments. Ultimately, the lack of perception-informed instruction may impact not only student learning outcomes but also the quality of maternal healthcare services.

This study is then beneficial for multiple stakeholders, including English instructors, midwifery educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers in health education. By providing empirical evidence on how novice midwifery students perceive and negotiate the role of English, the findings can inform the development of ESP-oriented curricula that are contextually relevant and professionally meaningful. Additionally, this research contributes to the growing body of qualitative studies on language education in healthcare by foregrounding student voices and emphasizing the importance of early professional socialization in language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines existing research on English for Specific Purposes in healthcare education, with a focus on midwifery and nursing contexts. It outlines healthcare professionals' English language needs and identifies key gaps that this study addresses—particularly the perceptions of first-semester midwifery students during foundational training (Alhamami, 2024; Eren et al., 2024). ESP is designed to meet the specific communicative needs of targeted social groups through a learner-centered

approach, tailoring curricula to learners' immediate and future professional demands (Tercan, 2018). For example, studies on nursing students emphasize materials customized to their unique needs, as general English courses often fall short in preparing them for professional roles (Tercan, 2018; Williams et al., 2024).

English proficiency is vital in healthcare and midwifery education amid globalization and the growing need for international collaboration (Lastari et al., 2024). This extends beyond basic skills to specialized language for clinical and social contexts in nursing (Ahmed et al., 2024). As English dominates scientific publishing, healthcare professionals must access global research (Williams et al., 2024). Thus, ESP curricula are recommended for midwifery programs to build relevant competencies for professional development (Williams et al., 2023). Indeed, English enables access to current information, books, articles, and research essential for academic and career growth (Phong, 2024).

Yet, ESP literature often overlooks materials for midwifery students, prioritizing general medical or nursing contexts (Pravitasari & Rahayu, 2021). This leads to reliance on generic materials ill-suited to midwifery's specialized terminology and communication demands, hindering engagement with discipline-specific content and evidence-based practices (Pravitasari & Rahayu, 2021; Puluhulawa et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2024). These needs are especially acute in midwifery, which requires not only medical terms but also sensitive patient-provider interactions (Liu et al., 2023).

Students' perceptions are critical, as they shape motivation, engagement, confidence, and language acquisition success—particularly in fields like midwifery demanding precise communication (Gayessa & Mohammed, 2024; Guan & Asavisanu, 2023; Wannas & Hassan, 2023). Educators and curriculum developers must understand these views to create aligned ESP programs (Simanjuntak et al., 2024). Studies show students recognize English's professional value but face confidence gaps and anxiety due to mismatches between classroom instruction and workplace demands (Pravitasari & Rahayu, 2021; Williams et al., 2024).

By examining first-semester midwifery students' perceptions, this study fills a key gap in exploring early professional identity formation and language challenges (Alharbi, 2022). Early medical English exposure is crucial for nurses in ESL contexts like Saudi Arabia (Banafi, 2023), yet pre-college courses often prove inadequate despite strong academic performance (Alboliteeh, 2022; Banafi, 2023). It also investigates self-motivation, attitudes toward communicative language teaching, and learning styles in medical English—underexplored among Saudi nursing students (Banafi, 2023)—and how English barriers affect achievement, communication, and group work (Alboliteeh, 2022). While prior research notes ESL challenges in health sciences (Rabea et al., 2018), few address novice midwifery students' views on English during initial professional socialization. This qualitative study provides those insights, advancing ESP and health education literature.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with an exploratory orientation to investigate first-semester midwifery students' perceptions of the role of English in

early professional training. To enhance depth and credibility, the study adopted a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach, integrating descriptive questionnaire data with in-depth interview findings. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which allows for systematic identification and interpretation of patterns across qualitative data.

The study was conducted in bachelor of midwifery study program at Faculty of Health of IIK Bhakti Wiyata Kediri in the 2025/2026 academic year where English is a compulsory subject in the first semester. Participants were the first-semester midwifery students who were in the early phase of their professional education and had recently been introduced to English for academic and professional purposes. A total of 41 students participated in the questionnaire phase, while 10 students voluntarily participated in the semi-structured interviews. This sample size is considered appropriate for qualitative perception studies, allowing for depth of data.

Two primary instruments were used for data collection, they are Likert-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. A self-administered questionnaire was designed to explore students' perceptions of English in relation to professional relevance, confidence, motivation, and anticipated clinical use. The questionnaire consisted of 20 statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), meanwhile semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into students' experiences and perceptions. An interview guide was developed based on questionnaire findings and relevant ESP and healthcare education literature. Key guiding questions explored students' views on the importance of English, challenges in learning and using English, and expectations of English use in future professional practice. Each interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Data collection was carried out in two stages. First, the questionnaire was distributed to all participating students during a scheduled class session. After completing the questionnaire, students were invited to participate in follow-up interviews. Participation in interviews was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

To analyze the collected data from the questionnaires, the researchers made use of Likert scale requiring the respondents' perceptions and/or opinions in the form of five statements (Riduwan, 2008); Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Then, the researchers carried out the following procedures in analyzing data from the Likert Scale. First, scoring each item in the scale; 5 (SA), 4 (A), 3 (N), 2 (D) and 1 (SD). Second, calculating the score range for each set of questionnaires as follows; maximum score (Q1/K/Q) = 41 x 5 = 205 x 20 = 4.100, Minimum score (Q1/K/Q) = 41 x 1 = 41 x 20 = 820 and Score range (R) (Q1/K/Q) = 4.100 - 820 = 3.280. Last, determining the criteria of score interpretation of each questionnaire set dan drawing a continuum diagram for the score interpretation as the following:

Table 1. Total Score Interpretation

Score Q1/K/Q	Interpretation
4.100 – 3.281	Strongly agree
3.280 – 2.461	Agree
2.460 – 1.641	Neutral
1.640 - 821	Disagree
820	Strongly disagree

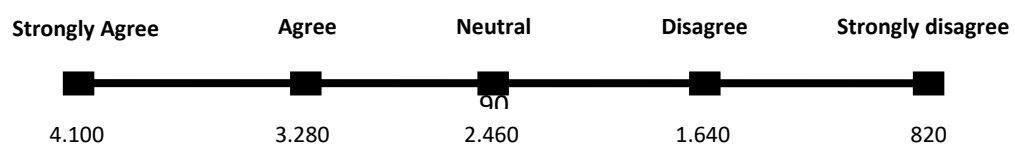


Figure 1. **Continuum Diagram**

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A total of 41 first-semester midwifery students participated in this study. All participants completed the Likert-scale questionnaire, and 10 students voluntarily took part in semi-structured interviews to provide deeper insights into their perceptions of English in early professional training. The participants were novice learners at the initial stage of professional socialization, with limited prior exposure to English for midwifery-specific purposes. Table 2 and figure 2 below summarize the result the students' perceptions of the role of English in early midwifery training.

Table 2. Students' perceptions

	ITEM	1 (SD)	2 (D)	3 (N)	4 (A)	5 (SA)	Item Score
1	English is essential for midwifery students	0	0	5	15	21	**180**
2	English proficiency supports the professionalism of midwives	0	0	6	18	17	**175**
3	English is essential in midwifery profession	0	0	6	20	15	**248**
4	Midwifery students need to learn English from the first semester	0	0	5	17	19	**178**
5	English plays a vital role in the development of midwifery	0	0	9	14	18	**173**
6	Many midwifery terms use English	0	0	6	20	15	**173**
7	English is necessary to understand midwifery references	0	0	4	22	15	**175**
8	Midwifery instructions or guides are often presented in English	0	1	10	20	10	**162**
9	English language skills assist in the practice of professional midwifery duties	0	0	7	13	21	**178**
10	English supports professional communication in the healthcare field	0	0	5	16	20	**179**
11	I find it difficult to understand English midwifery terms	0	4	28	6	3	**131**
12	The English material is quite challenging for me	0	5	17	12	7	**144**
13	I feel confident when studying English midwifery	0	0	20	13	8	**152**
14	I need more practice in English related to midwifery	0	1	4	15	21	**179**
15	Limited vocabulary is a barrier to understanding English midwifery material	1	4	14	13	9	**148**
16	English learning should be tailored to the context of midwifery	0	0	11	22	8	**161**
17	I am interested in learning English directly related to the midwifery profession	0	0	8	17	16	**172**
18	Midwifery English materials need to be linked to real-world practice	0	1	8	22	10	**164**
19	Learning English helps prepare me to become a professional midwife	0	0	3	19	19	**180**
20	English in midwifery will be more applicable and relevant	0	0	5	21	15	**174**
	TOTAL	**1**	**16**	**181**	**335**	**287**	
	TOTAL Score X Option Value (1,2,3,4,5)	**1**	**32**	**543**	**1.340**	**1.435**	
	TOTAL SCORE			**3.351**			

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD); 2 = Disagree (D); 3 = Neutral (N); 4 = Agree (A); 5 = Strongly Agree (SA)

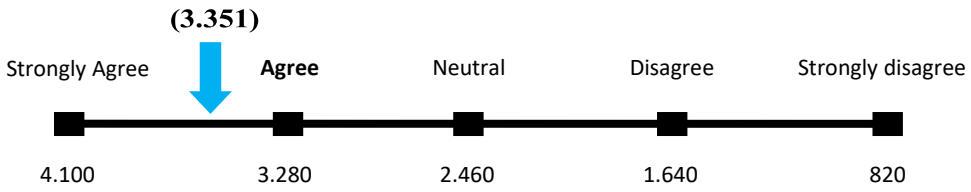


Figure 2. Continuum Diagram of Students' Perception

The Likert-scale results reveal a strong positive perception of English among first-semester midwifery students, with the majority agreeing or strongly agreeing that English is important for midwifery students (87%), the midwifery profession (85%), and the development of professional midwives (85%). Students also strongly supported early English instruction, as 87% believed that English should be learned from the first semester, indicating awareness of its foundational role in professional preparation. Although slightly fewer participants (78%) perceived English as crucial for long-term professional development, the overall findings suggest that students view English as an essential component of professional identity and readiness, highlighting the need for early and profession-oriented English instruction in midwifery education.

Additionally, Likert-scale findings indicate that students strongly associate English with professional work in midwifery contexts. More than 85% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that many midwifery terms and instructional materials are presented in English, highlighting students' awareness of English as the dominant language of professional knowledge. An even higher proportion (90%) acknowledged the importance of English for understanding English-language references, underscoring its role in accessing evidence-based resources and up-to-date professional information. In addition, 80% of respondents perceived English skills as supportive of practical midwifery tasks, suggesting that language competence facilitates the application of knowledge in clinical settings. Furthermore, 88% agreed or strongly agreed that English supports professional communication in the workplace, reinforcing the view that English proficiency contributes to effective interaction and professionalism in midwifery practice.

In addition, related with learning experience and academic demands reveal a nuanced picture of students' engagement with English learning. While only 22% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they experience difficulty in understanding English midwifery terminology, a larger proportion (46%) perceived English learning materials as highly challenging, indicating that complexity goes beyond terminology alone. Slightly more than half of the students (51%) reported feeling confident when learning English, suggesting a moderate level of self-efficacy at the early stage of training. However, an overwhelming majority (88%) expressed the need for more English practice, highlighting students' awareness of the importance of continuous exposure and skill development. Additionally, 54% identified limited vocabulary as a barrier to understanding English materials, emphasizing vocabulary development as a critical area to be addressed in early midwifery English instruction.

Based on students' attitudes and needs, it indicates a strong preference among students for contextually relevant and profession-oriented English instruction. A substantial proportion of participants agreed or strongly agreed that English should be tailored specifically to the midwifery context (73%) and that English materials should be directly linked to real-world practice (78%), reflecting students' desire for meaningful and applicable learning experiences. Notably, an overwhelming majority (93%) perceived English learning as a key factor in preparing them to become professional midwives, highlighting the perceived instrumental value of English in professional readiness. Furthermore, 88% agreed or strongly agreed that English instruction in midwifery would be more applicable and relevant when aligned with professional contexts, underscoring the importance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approaches in early midwifery education.

Meanwhile, referred to the thematic analysis of the interview data guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, revealed three major themes that illustrate how first-semester midwifery students negotiate the role of English in their early professional training. The first theme, *English as a Gateway to Professional Knowledge and Credibility*, reflects students' perception of English as a crucial tool for accessing professional literature, understanding clinical guidelines, and enhancing professional legitimacy. The second theme, *Negotiating Confidence, Anxiety, and Self-Doubt*, highlights the affective challenges students experience when engaging with English, particularly in relation to speaking and using professional terminology. The third theme, *Bridging Classroom English and Future Clinical Practice*, underscores students' expectations for English instruction that is closely aligned with real clinical tasks and professional communication, emphasizing the need for context-specific and practice-oriented English learning in midwifery education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that first-semester midwifery students hold a strong and positive perception of the role of English in their academic preparation and future professional practice. The Likert-scale results reveal a high level of agreement regarding the importance of English for the midwifery profession, professional credibility, access to English-language references, and effective workplace communication. Students also emphasized the importance of early exposure to English, recognizing its foundational role in supporting professional development. However, the questionnaire data also indicate ongoing challenges, particularly related to perceived difficulty, limited vocabulary, and the need for more practice, suggesting a gap between students' recognition of English importance and their confidence in using it.

These quantitative findings are further enriched by the interview results, which reveal how students actively negotiate the role of English through three key themes: English as a gateway to professional knowledge and credibility, negotiating confidence and anxiety, and bridging classroom learning with future clinical practice. Together, the results highlight the importance of integrating English for Specific Purposes (ESP) into early midwifery education, with a focus on authentic clinical contexts and sustained practice opportunities. Addressing both cognitive and affective dimensions of English

learning can enhance students' professional readiness, confidence, and engagement, ultimately supporting more effective and contextually relevant midwifery education.

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