

## The Effect of Nursing Communication Training on Empathy and Communication Skills of Nursing Students: A Quasi-Experimental Study

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Ayfer Öztürk\*

\* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Bartın Üniversitesi, Sağlık Bilimleri Fakültesi, Hemşirelik Bölümü, Psikiyatri  
Hemşireliği Anabilim Dalı, Bartın/Türkiye

E-Posta: [ayferozturk.83@yahoo.com](mailto:ayferozturk.83@yahoo.com)

ORCID: [0000-0002-3092-0671](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3092-0671)

### Abstract

*For healthcare professionals working with patients, empathy and communication skills are of very importance and they are an important aspect of nursing practice. Empathy and communication skills can be improved with education. This study aims to investigate the effect of communication training on nursing students' levels of empathy and communication skills. As a part of this quasi-experimental research, a 14-week intervention was implemented nursing communication targeting 70 nursing students. The research data were collected using a Personal Information Questionnaire, the Communication Skills Assessment Scale (CSAS), and the Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS). The students' post-intervention empathy ( $t = -4,680$   $p = 0.000$ ) and communication ( $t = -7.363$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) scores were higher statistically than the baseline scores. The mean ETS scores of students were significantly and positively correlated with their CSAS scores ( $r = 0.25$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). The communication training in nursing was determined to be effective in improving the empathy and communication skills of nursing students. This research will contribute to the development of an evidence-based curriculum for academics teaching nursing, in terms of teaching empathy and communication.*

**Key Words:** Nurse, training, student, empathy, communication, course

## Hemşirelik Öğrencilerinin Empati ve İletişim Becerilerine Hemşirelikte İletişim Dersinin Etkisi: Yarı Deneysel Araştırma

### Öz

Hastalarla çalışan sağlık çalışanları için empati ve iletişim becerileri çok önemlidir ve hemşirelik uygulamalarının önemli bir yönüdür. Empati ve iletişim becerileri eğitimle geliştirilebilir. Bu çalışma, hemşirelikte iletişim eğitiminin hemşirelik öğrencilerinin empati ve iletişim becerileri düzeylerine etkisini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu yarı deneysel araştırmada, 70 hemşirelik öğrencisine yönelik olarak, Hemşirelikte İletişim dersi kapsamında 14 haftalık bir eğitim müdahalesi uygulamasının etkisi incelenmiştir. Araştırma verileri Kişisel Bilgi Anketi, İletişim Becerileri Değerlendirme Ölçeği (İBDÖ) ve Empatik Eğilim Ölçeği (EEÖ) kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Öğrencilerin müdahale sonrası empati ( $t = -4,680$   $p = 0.000$ ) ve iletişim ( $t = -7.363$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) puanları, eğitim öncesindeki taban puanlarından istatistiksel olarak daha yüksekti ( $p < 0.05$ ) Öğrencilerin ortalama İBDÖ puanları, EEÖ puanları ile anlamlı ve pozitif yönde ilişkilidir ( $r = 0.25$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Araştırma bulguları hemşirelikte iletişim eğitiminin, hemşirelik öğrencilerinin empati ve iletişim becerilerini geliştirmede etkili olduğunu ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu araştırma, hemşirelik eğitimi veren akademisyenler için empati ve iletişim öğretimi açısından kanıtla dayalı bir müfredatın geliştirilmesine katkıda bulunacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hemşire, eğitim, öğrenci, empati, iletişim, ders

## Introduction

For healthcare professionals taking care of patients, communication skills are of great significance and are a crucial component of nursing practice (Mullan and Kothe, 2010). Effective communication skills are one of the most important tools with which healthcare professionals can transfer knowledge into implementation, empower patients to find the solutions to their health challenges, and increase students' self-confidence in caring for patients (Lau and Wang, 2013). Therapeutic communication is among the most critical communication skills employed in healthcare. Among the communication skills used in nursing, therapeutic communication is one of the most important and aims to solve some of the main problems through effective communication with patients such as expressing support, providing information, giving feedback, giving patients hope, and helping them deal with anxiety, etc. (treatment communication) (Xie, Ding, Wang and Liu, 2013).

Using various communication techniques such as self-knowledge, developing rapport with patients, active listening, asking questions, empathy, touching, using silence, providing information, and making explanations, nurses can give the message that they have accepted the healthy/ill individuals and attach importance to their individuality and take care of them (Üstün and Demir, 2019). In addition, the effective use of communication techniques supports better recognition of individuals, correct determination of their needs, mutual participation and cooperation (Yalçın and Astı, 2011).

Many nursing theoretician who regarded the profession of nursing as an 'interpersonal interaction process' such as Orlando, Travelbee and Peplau focused on the communication between patients and nurses as an essential ingredient of their theories (Williams and Stickley, 2010). The members of the nursing profession, which relies mainly on interpersonal communication, have important responsibilities in the care and treatment of healthy/ill individuals in terms of starting and maintaining the nurse-patient communication and creating a suitable environment for communication (Kumcağız, Yılmaz, Çelik and Avcı, 2011; Özdemir ve Kaya, 2013). In this process, the parties should be able to empathize with each other, i.e.,

placing themselves in the shoes of the other party, in order to understand each other (Turan et al., 2019).

Empathy is described within the nursing literature as "nurse's trying to understand the patient's situation, emotions and thoughts and communicating his/her perceptions to the patient in this process" (Arpacı and Özmen, 2013). The empathy skills of nurses play a crucial role in establishing a therapeutic relationship between patients and nurses (Üstün and Demir, 2019). For establishing good relationship with patients, nurses should have effective communication skills, be aware of their own emotions, manage their emotions and be able to empathize (Yılmaz, 2015). For this reason, effective communication is integral to empathy (Turan et al., 2019).

In nursing, learning of communication skills occurs primarily within the education process. Studies suggest that communication skills can be improved with education (Demir and Ercan, 2019; Hagemeyer, Hess, Hagen and Sorah, 2014; Lau and Wang, 2013). Likewise, it is emphasized in the research that the empathic communication skills, which are crucial for the nurse-patient relationships, can be taught and improved through effective education methods during the nurse education programs (Bas-Sarmientoa, Fernández-Gutiérrez, Baena-Bañosa and Romero-Sánchez, 2017; Bas-Sarmientoa et al., 2019; Gholamzadeh, Khastavaneh, Khademian and Ghadakpour, 2018; Karaca, Acıkgöz, Akkus, 2013; Özcan, Oflaz and Cicek, 2010; Özcan, Oflaz and Bakır, 2012; Özcan, Oksuz and Oflaz, 2018; Wünderich et al., 2017).

The primary objective of the nurse education is to ensure that students learn professional nursing and nursing practices. In this process, however, students are required to learn the knowledge and technical skills that are unique to nursing and, at the same time, learn and adopt basic skills that are prerequisites of quality nursing care such as establishing effective interpersonal relationships, helping and providing counseling (Arfioğlu and Razi, 2011). It is emphasized that courses for developing interpersonal relations or communications should be made part of the nursing curriculum in order to ensure that nurses can establish healthier communication with patients and relatives of patients (Demir and Ercan, 2014; Gamsızkan and Cangür, 2019; Hagemeyer et al., 2014; Karaca et al., 2013; Lau and Wang, 2013). In Turkey, the communication skills course is taught at least

once during the nursing education at nursing departments (Karaca, Açıköz, and Demirezen, 2019).

It is important to determine the empathic tendencies, empathy and communication skills of students as well as the level by which the courses designed to develop these skills can improve the empathy and nursing-related professional communication skills of students; in this way, these courses can be reorganized and their effectiveness can be increased. For this reason, the present study aims to determine the effect of the Communication in Nursing course, taught to first graders of nursing departments, on empathy and communication skills of students. It is believed that the present study will make original contributions to the literature on the empathy and communication skill levels of nursing students and the effect of education on these levels.

Bölüm başlıkları bold, 11 punto ile yazılmalıdır. Makalelerde problem, amaç gerekçe ve önem giriş bölümü içinde açıkça belirtilmelidir. Giriş bölümünü sırasıyla Yöntem, Bulgular, Tartışma ve Sonuç, Kaynakça bölümleri izlemelidir. Makale yayın kabulü alındığında Genişletilmiş İngilizce Özet en sonda yer alacak şekilde hazırlanmalıdır.

## **Methods**

### **Design**

This is a quasi-experimental research with pretest-posttest measurements of a single group.

### **Setting and Participants**

The study population consisted of 70 freshmen from the Nursing Department of the Faculty of Health Sciences of a public university in Turkey. Communication course in nursing is included in the first year of the nursing department curriculum. There was no sample selection process for the research. All 70 of the first-year nursing students, who were all volunteers, were included. None were excluded as a result of absence. The nursing students were administered the data collection tools - Personal Information Questionnaire, the Communication Skills Assessment Scale, and

the Empathic Tendency Scale - during the first week of the second semester (February 2020) of the 2019-2020 school year. The classes were conducted 2 hours a week, for fourteen weeks. The class was taught face to face in a classroom environment two hours a week for the first 5 weeks. In line with the measures taken due to the pandemic, the course was taught online using facilities allowing interaction between students and the instructor. The nursing students were re-administered the data collection tools at the end of the semester (June, 2020).

### **Intervention**

Communication course in nursing is included in the first year of the nursing department curriculum as two hours a week, for fourteen weeks. It was taught by a faculty member from the Department of Psychiatric Nursing. The course content includes the concept of communication, types of communication, factors affecting communication, effective communication skills, factors affecting effective communication, factors facilitating communication, importance of communication in nurse-patient relationships, therapeutic communication and nontherapeutic communication, communication in special cases, conflict management, responsibilities of nurses in communication, self-awareness, self-disclosure, developing rapport, listening, empathy, empathy steps, and place of empathy in interpersonal relationships. Communication training to nursing students was carried using teaching methods such as explanation of the subject in line with the objectives, activities and case studies, scenario exercises, discussions and getting feedback. Communication training to nursing students was taught using teaching methods like explanation of the subject in line with the objectives, activities and case studies, scenario exercises, discussions and getting feedback. The students who would take part in the study had not taken any course for teaching/developing empathy and communication skills, and the Communication in Nursing was planned to improve these skills.

## Measures

Research data were gathered by using a Personal Information Questionnaire, the Communication Skills Assessment Scale (CSAS), and the Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS).

*The Personal Information Questionnaire:* Students were given a questionnaire, which was developed by the researchers. These items were chosen by the researchers and included information such as age, gender, place of living, mother and father's employment status and family type, the reason for choosing the nursing department, and satisfaction over attending the nursing department.

*Communication Skills Assessment Scale (CSAS):* Scale has been developed by Korkut in 1996 to understand how individuals evaluated their communication skills (Korkut, 1996). It is a 5-point Likert type scale scored from "always" to "never" and consists of a total of 25 items scored a maximum of 100 and a minimum of 0. A higher score indicates that the respondent has a more optimistic view of his or her ability to communicate. The scale has no cutoff point. In the same author's validity and reliability study of the scale, the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was found to be 0.80 (Korkut, 1996). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values of the scales in the present study were 0.86 for the CSAS.

*Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS):* The scale is designed to measure the emotional aspect of empathy. Empathic tendency refers to the behaviors of participants that are associated with having empathy towards individuals in different circumstances. The ETS is calculated by implementing a 5-point Likert-type scale consisting of 20 items. A 100 is the highest and 20 is the lowest possible score for the scale. A higher score suggests a greater empathizing ability. In the study of Dökmen, the reliability, validity, and test-retest consistency were found to be  $r=0.82$ , and the Cronbach's alpha value was calculated as 0.83 (Dökmen, 1988). The Cronbach's alpha value was calculated as 0.86 in the present study.

## **The Research Variables**

The total mean scores of the empathy levels and communication skills are the dependent variables, while the communication training is the independent variable of the study.

## **Data Analysis**

SPSS 22.0 was used to analyze the research data after the measurements. Descriptive analysis results included n, %, median (min-max), mean ( $\bar{X}$ )  $\pm$  and standard deviation. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov was used to check the normality of the distribution of the research variables. The group data did not normally distribute. Therefore, a paired samples t-test was used for the pretest-posttest comparisons of the CSS and ETS scores concerning the two different syllabuses. Correlation between the variables was tested using Pearson and partial correlation tests. Significance was determined as  $p < 0.05$ .

## **Ethics**

The ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Bartın University with the no: 2020/33. It was the greatest ethical concern of the researchers to guarantee informed consent without any prejudice and to maintain conditions of complete confidentiality and anonymity. The records of the participating students' personal information and the anonymous code numbers they were assigned with were kept separate from the actual research data. Written and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the data collection. The participating students were verbally assured that participation in the study would in no way have an impact on their grades or educational experience.

## Results

### General characteristics of participants

A total of seventy students were included in the research and the mean value for the age variable was  $19.72 \pm 2.70$  (years). Of the total number of students, 68.6% were female, 84.3% came from nuclear families, 52.9% reported that their mothers were employed, 64.3% of the participants stated that they chose the nursing practice voluntarily and 71.4% were satisfied with their field (Table1).

*Table 1. General characteristics of the students*

	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	31	20.9
Male	67	45.3
<b>Mother employment status</b>		
Worker	37	52.9
No worker	33	47.1
<b>Father employment status</b>		
Worker	38	54.3
No worker	32	44.7
<b>Family type</b>		
Nuclear family	59	84.3
Extended family	11	15.7
<b>Place of residence</b>		
Province	34	48.6
Village/town/district	36	51.4
<b>Cause of choose the profession of nursing</b>		
Voluntarily	45	64.3
Involuntarily	25	35.7
<b>Satisfaction in choosing nursing</b>		
Satisfied	50	71.4
Not satisfied	20	28.5
<b>Age (years)</b>	$19.7224 \pm 2.70$ (min: 18, max:40)	

*Differences between the groups of nursing students in empathy and communication skills levels:* Communication Skills Scale (CSS) score the was determined as  $75.98 \pm 8.96$  in the pretest and  $81.28 \pm 8.04$  in the posttest.

The pretest total mean score for Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS) was determined as  $68.51 \pm 8.99$  and the posttest total mean score was  $73.60 \pm 7.65$ . When the total scores of ETS and CSS were analyzed, a significant difference was determined between the pretest and posttest scores ( $p=0.000<0.05$ ) (Table 2). Thus, when compared to the pre-training scores, the students' post-training empathy and communication skills scores were higher.

**Tablo 2. Comparison of pre- and post-test scores of scales after the communication training program on students**

Scales	Pre-test	Post-test		t-value*	p-value**
		Mean $\pm$ SD (min-max)	Mean $\pm$ SD (min-max)		
Communication Skills Assessment Scale (CSAS)		75.98 $\pm$ 8.96 (47-95)	81.28 $\pm$ 8.04 (51-100)	-7.363	0.000
Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS)		68.51 $\pm$ 8.99 (45-94)	73.60 $\pm$ 7.65 (56-90)	-4.680	0.000

\*Paired samples t test      \*\*p < 0.001

**Correlation Between Communication Skill Assessment Scale (CSAS) and Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS):** The relationship between the mean communication skills and the mean empathic tendency scores of the students are presented in Table 3. Partial correlation corrected for the class was found to be a weak positive. As can be seen in Table 3, there was a statistically significant ( $r = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) correlation between the two scores.

**Tablo 2. Correlation between the students' levels of communication skills (CSAS) and empathic tendencies (ETS)**

Scales	*r	**p
Communication Skills Assessment Scale (CSAS)	0.252	0.003
Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS)		

\*Pearson correlation analysis.      \*\*p < 0.01

## Discussion

One of the most important components of a quality healthcare establishment is quality nurses. Not only are nurses the first to interact with patients in a clinical setting; but also they take care of patients during their

entire stay. Thus, it is important for nursing students to be prepared and assessed on communication competency prior to exiting their program of study (Xie et al. 2013). The results of the present study indicate that the empathy and communication skills of the students increased significantly with the empathy and communication skills training provided as part of the Communication Course in Nursing taught to the nursing school freshmen. The mean empathic tendency score rose from  $68.51 \pm 8.99$  before the training to  $73.60 \pm 7.65$  after the training, and there was a statistically significant difference between the two values. Numerous studies were conducted to determine whether empathy skills of nursing students can be improved with training (Bas-Sarmiento et al., 2017; Bas-Sarmiento et al., 2019; Gholamzadeh et al. 2018; Karaca et al. 2013; Özcan et al. 2010.). The results indicate that experiential training is effective in the acquisition of empathic competency, as noted by other similar studies (Bas-Sarmiento et al., 2017; Bays et al., 2014; Cunico et al., 2012; Henry et al., 2011; Nosek et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2014). Gholamzadeh et al. (2018) reported that the empathy skills training improved the empathic attitudes of nursing students toward the elderly. Likewise, in Bas Sarmiento et al. (2017), 'the training was shown to be effective for improving the empathy of the university students in the study. Our research findings support the findings of similar studies. At the same time, in the present study, the post-training communication skills scores of the students ( $81.28 \pm 8.04$ ) were higher compared to the pre-training scores ( $75.98 \pm 8.96$ ). This finding is supported by the findings of other studies suggesting that communication skills of nurses can be improved with education (Lau and Wang, 2014; Hagemeyer et al., 2014; Shafakhak et al., 2015; Yas and Mohammed, 2016).

In the present study, there was a positive and significant correlation between the students' communication skills and empathic tendencies. This result indicates that communication skills of individuals increase as their empathic tendencies increase. Empathic tendency is considered as a major facilitator for nurses to perceive emotions of patients and communicate it. In addition, this result supports the relevant publications that suggest that empathic tendency should be improved for effective communication (Arifoğlu and Razi, 2011; Şahin and Özdemir, 2015).

## **Conclusion and Implications Practice**

In conclusion, proper communication and empathy is required also to develop the sense of acceptance and trust of patients, ensure their psychosocial integrity and implement quality nursing care. Programs drafted to enhance the students' empathy and effective communication skills during the nursing education will make significant contributions to the way nursing students as health professional of the future use effective communication skills. Current study demonstrate that the communication course in nursing increases nursing students' levels of empathy and communication skills.

This research will help nursing instructors build an evidence-based program to teach students empathy and communication. It is believed that this will provide guidance to educators in this field in electing teaching methods and contribute to the improvement of existing applications. In addition, it will help students realize their status and assess themselves. Programs constructed to enhance the empathy and effective communication skills of students during nursing education will make significant contributions to the way nurses of the future use communication skills effectively. It is suggested that structured programs should be created taking into consideration the factors that affect empathy and communication skills (cultural characteristics, etc.) and these programs should be made part of the nursing curriculum.

## **Research Limitations**

The limitations of this study can be explained as follows. This study design was designed as quasi-experimental research and it was conducted with a small sample group. Considering that a small convenience sample was utilized, the participants may not represent all nursing students. Thus, the results can only be generalized to this group. Therefore, it is recommended that other randomized-controlled trials with further details be conducted in other countries. Lastly, research analysis was limited only to EST and CSS scales data. Other studies can be done using other scales evaluating empathy skill.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared the there are no conflicts of interest.

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