The Learning Experience of Graduate Nursing Students: Content Analysis

Parand Pourghane
Guilan University of Medical Sciences, Rasht, Iran, pourghanep@gmail.com

Maryam Rajab pour Nikfam
Guilan University of Medical Sciences, Rasht, Iran, rajabpur.maryam@yahoo.com

Fazlollah Ahmadi
Tarbiat Modares University,Tehran,Iran, ahmadif@modares.ac.ir

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Abstract

Learning is also considered as an important which can create changes in individuals' knowledge, attitude, values, and feelings. As learning requires a new conceptual framework where one can take decisions in which change and innovation manifests, it is evident that this conceptual realization is only possible through a qualitative research. The present study aims to explore and justify graduate nursing students' learning experience.The present study is a conventional qualitative content analysis research which was conducted in 27 graduate nursing students studying in Guilan university of Medical sciences in Iran. The study population was selected through purposive sampling, and the data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was performed as per the stages recommended by Graneheim & Lundman. Data strength and their scientific accuracy were evaluated, and ethical aspects of the research were also taken into consideration. Data analysis results were identified as three main themes and 10 subthemes which were named as per their nature:"effective learning,": learning from a qualified instructor, accessible equipment and resources, awareness of teaching objectives / "Effective learning strategies": pre-requisite knowledge before attending the class, participating educational workshops, joining group discussions, taking shorthand at home and in the class / "Decline in learning": the difference in learners' knowledge background, recurring lesson subjects, inappropriate time and place for learning. Graduate nursing students' experience confirmed the necessity for provision of a proper educational framework as well as decreasing or removing the factors causing the decline in learning for the purpose of improving the quality of education at universities.

Keywords

Experiences, Learning, Graduate Nursing Students, Qualitative Research, Content Analysis, Iran

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Acknowledgements

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Parand Pourghane and Maryam Rajab pour Nikfam
Guilan University of Medical Sciences, Rasht, Iran

Fazlollah Ahmadi
Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran

Learning is also considered as an important which can create changes in individuals' knowledge, attitude, values, and feelings. As learning requires a new conceptual framework where one can take decisions in which change and innovation manifests, it is evident that this conceptual realization is only possible through a qualitative research. The present study aims to explore and justify graduate nursing students' learning experience. The present study is a conventional qualitative content analysis research which was conducted in 27 graduate nursing students studying in Guilan university of Medical sciences in Iran. The study population was selected through purposive sampling, and the data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was performed as per the stages recommended by Graneheim and Lundman. Data strength and their scientific accuracy were evaluated, and ethical aspects of the research were also taken into consideration. Data analysis results were identified as three main themes and 10 subthemes which were named as per their nature: "effective learning": learning from a qualified instructor, accessible equipment and resources, awareness of teaching objectives / "Effective learning strategies": pre-requisite knowledge before attending the class, participating educational workshops, joining group discussions, taking shorthand at home and in the class / "Decline in learning": the difference in learners' knowledge background, recurring lesson subjects, inappropriate time and place for learning. Graduate nursing students' experience confirmed the necessity for provision of a proper educational framework as well as decreasing or removing the factors causing the decline in learning for the purpose of improving the quality of education at universities. Keywords: Experiences, Learning, Graduate Nursing Students, Qualitative Research, Content Analysis, Iran

New information is generated at a fast pace and everyone is generally influenced by the broad range of information (Soheili, Zeinaloo, Sedighigilani, & Khakbazan, 2002). In this context, training efficient and effective human resources is considered as the key responsibility of universities. Students studying at universities are considered as invaluable resources of their country, and it is of great significance to pay special attention to their scientific, research, and cultural training demanding correct planning for their education as a high priority (Hazavei & Fathi, 2004). In all educational systems, learners' education is realized in a cycle of teaching and learning process (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010).

Education is a complicated process simplification of which, of any type and degree, can lead to a great waste of resources and equipment, and thus thwarting of all attempts. Thus, improvement and revolutionization of education demands knowledge over education processes and new executive methods (Li, Chen, & Tsai, 2008). Nowadays, one of the challenges faced by nursing education is the attempt to overcome teaching problems in higher education (Beitz&

Wieland, 2005) and nursing education at nursing colleges pursues to equip nurses with self-directed learning, time management, increased self-confidence, establishing proper relationships (Hosoda, 2006), nursing knowledge transfer, as well as assisting nursing students with acquiring the required skills and attitude for nursing (Salsali, Cheraghi, & Ahmadi, 2009). Learning is also considered as an important issue in human's life, which can create changes in individuals' knowledge, attitude, values, emotions, beliefs and feelings (Abedini, Abedini, Aghamolaei, Jomehzadeh, & Kamjoo, 2009).

A large number of students throughout the world who enter universities either drop out or cannot finish their program in due date. Furthermore, some students finish their program but their success in learning does not meet the expectations (Haghani & Khadivzadeh, 2009). The results obtained by Alikhani et al. on determining the factors causing students' academic failure and providing suitable solutions confirm how factors such as demographic and psychological properties intervene in students' educational behaviors which can be taken into consideration for improving the quality and progress of their education (Alikhani, Markazi Moghaddam, & Begle, 2006).

Considering the fact that the presence of some obstacles or facilitators can influence students' type of learning, the conducted studies indicate that there is a positive correlation between learning strategies employed by students and their academic success (Alikhani et al., 2006; Khadivzadeh, Seif, & Valayi, 2001). Attention to learning and teaching strategies was highlighted by the third international conference of medical education as one of the practical strategies for improving the quality of education (Haghani & Khadivzadeh, 2009).

Considering the fact medical students deal with huge loads of information during their university years, they need new strategies for organizing and learning the information (Weinstein, Husman, & Dierking, 2000) and considering the information explosion and advances in communication channels, the empowerment of students aims to present strategies so they can manage such deep and huge load of information (Garrison & Anderson, 2004). Learning strategies include any thought, behavior, belief or feeling that facilitates acquiring, understanding, and further transferring of knowledge and new skills (Weinstein, Husman, & Dierking, 2000), and nursing students' method of learning has been reported to be different throughout the world as per their cultural conditions (Katz, Carter, Bishop, & Kravits, 2004).

Different factors, some relating learners' characteristics and some relating the social grounds of leaning, can influence the learning process. In the study conducted by Merghati-Khoei et al., students believed that the supportive and directive role of professors in the formation of the stable emotional relationship as well as the high level of motivation and trust between the two parties can indirectly affect learning (Merghati-Khoei, Zareie, Dastoorpour, Bayat, & Rimaz, 2013).

Instructors and students are responsible parties to the teaching – learning process, and teaching is only one, and not all, of the facilitating strategies of learning. Learning, in fact, occurs through creating challenges in educational subjects (Prichard, Stratford, & Bizo, 2006). As nursing is in its initial stages of professionalism, the presence of a "professional learning approach" is an important key to success (Elahi, Alhani, & Ahmadi, 2013). Thus, it seems necessary for nursing professors to ask themselves about the effective teaching and learning method for nursing students (Barnett, Cross, Shahwan-Akl, & Jacob, 2010). With such an aim in mind, the only long-term solution is creating an educational environment in which students learn not only the content, but also the learning methods (Garrison & Anderson, 2004).

Provision of training materials and educational advice and consultancy (Safdari Dehcheshmeh, Delaram, Parvin, Kheiri, Froozandeh, & Kazemian, 2007), the physical and social environment of the classroom, students' motivation and interest in the courses and their academic major, as well as students' living conditions such as their economic, welfare, and family status affects their success, and failure, in their academic progress (Dehbozorgi, &

Mooseli 2003; Molavi, Mohammadnia, Arab, Rasoolzadeh, & Derakshani, 2007). Jones showed that personal attitude and understanding are the benefits of learning function as learning facilitators (Jones & Cox, 2005). Also, the findings of other studyindicate that graduate nursing students' experience of research-oriented independent learning and group learning was a dynamic and progressive experience (Noohi, Abbaszade, Maddahs, & Borhani, 2013).

As facilitation of learning brings about improved educational performance of students, identification of effective strategies is an essential step toward appropriate educational interventions which contribute to students' success through identification of their studying strengths and weaknesses using appropriate interventions (Khadivzadeh, Seif, & Valayi, 2004).

In another study conducted by Doyle, technology, accessibility of resources, interaction with others, application of multiple learning methods, time-wise flexibility, and occupational necessities were recognized as the key facilitators of learning (Doyle, 2008). Students' lack of progress can also be attributed to various factors such as professors' teaching methodology (Hazavehei et al., 2006; Tammanyefard, Niazy, & Amini, 2007), inappropriateness of internal and external educational factors such as: inappropriate time of learning, personal factors, high expenses, dissatisfaction, learning beyond capability (Doyle, 2008) and application of learning assistive techniques (Tagharrobi, Fakharian, Mir Hosseini, Rasoulinejad, & Akbari, 2009)

As learning requires a new conceptual framework where one can take decisions in which change and innovation manifests, it is evident that this conceptual realization is only possible through a qualitative research (Safdari Dehcheshmeh, Delaram, Parvin, Kheiri, Froozandeh, & Kazemian, 2007).

Study Purpose

Considering the above, the researchers decided to explore the learning process through a qualitative research approach and using graduate nursing students' experience, as these students have experienced a longer learning period. In addition to the fact that knowing the effective factors can play an important role in designing educational programs (Brown, 2003). One can take effective measures, through application of these factors, toward elimination or minimizing the obstacles and improving learning facilitators for boosting students' further educational progress.

Researchers were involved in this study P. Pourghane, M. Rajab pour Nikfam and F. Ahmadi. P. Pourghane, PhD. is an Assistant Professor in Department of Nursing in the Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery at Guilan University of Medical Sciences, Rasht, Iran. Her areas of research include education, cardiac rehabilitation and qualitative studies, Content analysis. M. Rajab pour Nikfam, Master is an instructor in Department of Nursing in the Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery at Guilan University of Medical Sciences, Rasht, Iran. Her areas of research include education, qualitative studies, Content analysis and Intensive Care. F. Ahmadi, PhD. is a Professor in Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran. His areas of research include Qualitative study, content analysis, nursing theory, psychometrics properties. P. Pourghane performed the data collection and was responsible for the study conception and design. M. Rajab pour Nikfam and F. Ahmadi performed the data analysis. P. Pourghane was responsible for the drafting of the manuscript. F. Ahmadi made critical revisions to the paper for important intellectual content.

Methods

Study Design

The present study was a conventional qualitative content analysis aimed at exploring graduate nursing students' learning experience. Qualitative research can be an important tool in understanding emotions and perceptions (Holloway, 2005). Research question and objective are among the important determining factors of research methodology (Seidman, 2006). Considering the main research question (what is graduate nursing students' experience of learning?) and the general objective of the research (exploring graduate nursing students' experience of learning), the conventional qualitative content analysis was determined as the appropriate methodology of the present research; such a designation is related to the nature of research question.

As the present study focuses on gaining insight into graduate nursing students' experience of learning, and as each individual may have a different experience due to their specific traits, the selected methodology, qualitative content analysis, appears to be the most appropriate methodology as it aims to find the relationship between ideas and opinions, the main content, tendencies and meanings. Content analysis is a systematic coding-and-categorizing approach, which can be used to explore unobtrusively a large amount of textual information in order to ascertain the trends and patterns of communication (Gbrich, 2007).

Participants

The research was conducted at Guilan university of Medical Sciences in Iran within 8 months in 2015. The study population was comprised of 27 male and female graduate nursing students studying at nursing, midwifery, and Paramedical colleges of the east of Guilan, and Shahid Beheshti college of Nursing in Rasht in Iran, an affiliate of Guilan University of Medical Sciences. Participants' age ranged between 25 and 48 years old and who were willing to take part in the study and share their experiences. The study population was selected through purposive sampling and the data acquired from first participants helped with selection of the next participants, who were selected based on the criteria whether they could contribute to further clarification of research question. This procedure was continued up to data saturation point.

Data Gathering

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews by P. Pourghane. Interviews lasted between 40 and 55 minutes. Interviews were started with questions for gaining information on students' experience of learning, and the next questions were determined and asked as per their answers to the questions for gaining further information on their experience and understanding of learning. Some interview questions were: "please talk about your own learning experience," and "can you please tell me about the factor effective in your learning?" The next questions followed as per the provided answers to these questions with a greater focus and for a better understanding of the issue. Data was collected up to data saturation point, where the collected data was a duplicate of the previous data and no new information was acquired.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted as per the steps recommended by Graneheim and Lundman (2004): 1. The interviews were transcribed, and then read for several times to achieve

a general and accurate understanding; 2. The whole interviews and observations were regarded as an analysis unit; analysis unit refers to the notes that were analyzed and coded; 3. The words, sentences, paragraphs were regarded as meaning units. In fact, meaning units were comprised of words and sentences that were related to one another for their content and thus were consolidated and put together considering their content and provisions; 4. The meaning units were then conceptualized and made subjective as per their behind meaning, and then were named with codes; 5. In the next step, the codes were compared and contrasted, and then were grouped under specific labels and in more subjective categories; 6. At the final step, the categories were compared to one another and after a close and deep study, the lies content in the data, which are called "themes," were introduced (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Trustworthiness

The criteria proposed by Guba & Lincoln were utilized to determine the accuracy and strength of data (Streubert Speziale & Carpenter, 2003): data credibility: data credibility was increased through long term participation and adequate interaction with the study subjects, collection of accurate information, and obtaining participants' confirmation on the data. Data dependability was achieved and increased through step-by-step data collection and their analysis as well as subject matter experts' review of the data. University faculty members' approval and opinion that were expert in the field of qualitative research was sought to increase data confirmability. A detailed and rich description of the research was provided to assess whether the research can be applied in other areas for the purpose of research transferability.

Ethical Considerations

The present study is result of the program ratified by Guilan University of Medical Sciences in Iran under the code IR.GUMS.REC. 325 dated 14th November2015. Researchers of the present study would also like to express their gratitude to the research deputy of Guilan University of Medical Sciences in Iran for their financial support.

Volunteer students were invited to take part in the research after research objective, the reason for recording the interviews, and confidentiality of their data, deletion of their data after extraction of results, their voluntary participation in the research, the possibility to opt out of the research, and possibility of having access to research results were explained to them and their informed consent was obtained.

Results

Categories and the Main Theme

The objective of the study was "determining graduate nursing students' experience of learning," and in general, 875 primary codes were extracted from the interviews and the detailed and rich description of data. After several rounds of code review and summarization as per their similarity and congruence, they were categorized in three main themes and 10 subthemes, and then were given conceptual and subjective names as per their nature. The obtained themes and their subthemes were: main theme: "effective learning," including subthemes: learning from a qualified instructor, accessible equipment and resources, awareness of teaching objectives / main theme: "Effective learning strategies" including subthemes: pre-requisite knowledge before attending the class, participating educational workshops, joining group discussions, taking shorthand at home and in the class / main theme: "Decline in

learning" including subthemes: the difference in learners' knowledge base, recurring lesson subjects, inappropriate time and venue of learning (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of the Themes, Subthemes and codes Constructed Based Learning Experience of Graduate Nursing Students

Main themes	Subthemes	Codes
Effective learning	learning from a qualified instructors	Learn from experienced instructor teaching method appropriate with Subject Availability instructors
	accessible equipment and resources	Availability of library resources Timely access to slides lessons Availability of patients assessment tool
	awareness of teaching objectives	Availability of Lesson plan knowledge of results of Learn
Effective learning strategies	pre-requisite knowledge before attending the class	Basic knowledge of the relevant subject Aware of the axiom of learning
	Participating educational workshops	Learning Research Methodology with Participation in workshop Importance of Participation in teaching methods workshop Participation in workshop for Masters students
	joining group discussions	Group discussion, Effective factor in learning progress reflective learning by participating in group discussions
	taking shorthand at home and in the class	Take notes in class Write a summary of daily lessons at home
	the difference in learners' knowledge background	Having different foundations in English Having different clinical experiences
Decline in learning	recurring lesson subjects	Repeat some subjects Undergraduate Lack of motivation to learn by repeating some subjects Undergraduate

inappropriate time and venue of learning	long classes in afternoon
	Improper ventilation for some classes
	Lack of concentration because of noise outside

Effective learning

In students' view, learning from a qualified instructors, accessible equipment and resources and awareness of teaching objectives have important effects and constructive for effective learning of students.

Learning from qualified instructors

Most students highlighted positive and effective learning and its effective factors. In students' view, presence of an experienced instructor equipped with adequate practical and theoretical knowledge, a teaching method appropriate to the subject matter, eloquence, and accessibility of professors are among the learning facilitators that contribute to effective learning.

In students' view, presence of an experienced instructor with adequate practical and theoretical knowledge is an important factor for effective learning. One of the students stated,

> Teaching methodology of an instructor assigned to graduate students affects the learning to a great extent. Learning from an instructor who has good theoretical and practical knowledge and is able to share his knowledge can prove to be a very good learning,

Some said about a teaching method appropriate as facilitators that contribute to effective learning. "Instructor's teaching method, for instance the question-and-answer method or lecturing, must be appropriate to the subject matter. Instructor's eloquence plays a significant role in drawing students' attention in the class and their optimum learning," mentioned one of the students. Another issue which was conspicuous in participants' discussions indicated availability instructors as an effective learning. They said accessibility of instructors as facilitators that contribute to effective learning. "Graduate students need the presence of their instructor a lot. We email most of our assignments to our instructor, but his/her physical presence is a necessity for our guidance, resolving our issues, and ultimately for effective and better learning," stated another student.

Accessible equipment and resources

Furthermore, students considered the accessibility of the equipment and training material, such as English and Farsi resources, having access to course summary slides, as well as tools for study of the elderly among the most effective factors in efficient learning.

In students' view, accessibility of the equipment and training material, such as English and Farsi resources was an effective factor in efficient learning. "In my opinion, effective learning occurs when you have timely access to adequate number of resources so you can plan in time for studying them," said one of the students. Some believed that having access to course summary slides have an important role for effective learning. Another participant stated: "the majority of students take note in the class, but the huge load of lesson content does not allow taking note of the full content. We use the slides provided by our professor." Some cited the availability of suitable tools to efficient learning when considering elderly patients in hospital. They said that the exact scale and standard scale is necessary for careful examination of the patient and effective learning. "Working with the elders requires specific tools such as examination tools. Learning will be complete with these tools," mentioned one of the students.

Awareness of teaching objectives

Students believed that prior knowledge about the objectives of the lesson before class commencement would significantly affect how the lesson is learnt. "If we know about the objective of the course before the class, then we would study and understand the lesson better," stated one of the students. They believed that such prior knowledge of lesson objectives would increase their willingness and interest in learning effectively. Another participant stated: "provision of a summary of the course plan by professors helps a lot with our awareness of the teaching procedure and learning the lessons."

Effective Learning Strategies

Graduate nursing students' experience of learning indicates that efficient and effective learning is linked to having prior knowledge about the pre-requisites of the lesson before attending the class, Participating educational workshops and joining group discussions.

Pre-requisite knowledge before attending the class

In their view, basic information is considered as a key requirement for learning specialized courses. "Having the initial background helps with learning any subject. As all of us have studied nursing during our bachelor's program, then we understand 'healthcare for the elderly' lessons better," stated one of the students. Another participant stated: "some of the lessons are almost new, especially for a number of students who have had graduated long ago. For a more effective learning, it is better to learn the basic principles before the class."

Participating educational workshops

Some participants mentioned about the effectiveness of participation in educational workshops specially designed for graduate students. From the perspective of some participants, participation in educational workshops on research methods is an important factor for research learning. "As research methodology is used a lot by us, then some workshops on essay writing and research methodology can be quite effective beneficial to us," stated one of the patients. Some participants stated that teaching methods provided by participating in the workshops. One of the students mentioned,

> One of our credits is on teaching methodology for Bachelor's students. As the
> majority of us have no teaching experience, and also we might be teachers in
> the future, then these educational workshops are of great value for our learning,

Essay composition considered as important and efficient strategies for their learning that can be provided with participation in workshop. Another participant stated: "the timing and subject of workshops must fit graduate students' needs. This improves the effective learning of the courses we need to learn."

Joining group discussions

Students mentioned that group discussions in the class that helps them share their experiences with other classmate's plays an effective role in their learning. "When learning is joined with students' active participation and cooperation, such as participation in group discussions, students' interest and level of learning increase," stated one of the students. Some said that learning by oneself and merely listening to class lecture contributes only to short-term learning. "Our internship period, when we have discussions with our professor on an elderly patient, his problems, and possible solutions, can be very effective and to create a stable learning," mentioned one of the students.

Taking shorthand at home and in the class

Write a summary of daily lessons at home in the class can be a constructive learning strategy. "Note taking in the class contributes to learning. Because during note taking, you take note of important points in your own terms which are considered a good learning resource for studying," stated one of students. Another student said about the effectiveness of learning to write a summary of daily lessons at home:

> In my opinion, when you get back to home or dorm, if you can review the lessons in your mind and take notes of them, then on exam day you have studied and reviewed them once and your notes can be a very good resource for a more effective learning.

Decline in Learning:

Participants considered differences in learners' basic knowledge, recurring lesson subjects and inappropriate time and venue of learning as effective factors in decline in learning.

The difference in learners' knowledge background

One of the factors contributing to decline in learning was the difference in learners' knowledge background. In their view, have great knowledge of English language can facilitate learning in a way that further clarifications, which are provided due to the lack of such basic knowledge in learners with less clinical experience, were boring to them. One of the students mentioned,

> The majority of slide is in English, and I have a poor command of English. But younger students who have been graduated recently are of better English language skills. Most of the times, translation and reading become quite time-consuming for us.

Some said about extensive clinical experience in some of the students that can facilitate learning which are provided due to the lack of such basic knowledge in learners with less clinical experience, were boring to them. One student stated,

> We, as individuals who have some years of clinical experience, can understand most of the issues. But some of our students do not have such experience and the professor has to repeat some of the issues which become kind of repetitive.

Recurring lesson subjects

Some students talked about some subjects from bachelor's which were recurring and overlapping with some lessons in their master's as an important issue bringing about a sense of boredom and waste of time. A Participant said: "in my view, some issues, both theoretical and internship-related, are recurring which becomes quite boring, especially to me who has some years of clinical experience." Another student said lack of motivation to learn by repeating some subjects Undergraduate:

> When you get to a higher level, you expect all subjects to be new. But in my view and as I have heard from many other students from other majors, repetition of some of the subjects that have previously been studied is quite boring.

Inappropriate time and venue of learning

Learning at an inappropriate time, late in the day when the learner is tired, as well as the inappropriate condition of some classes, such as loud noises or improper air conditioning, were other factors contributing to the decline in students' learning. Long classes in afternoon were one of the factors in decline in learning. "The afternoon classes that sometimes last up to 5 pm are quite exhausting and our learning capacity decreases at such times," mentioned one of the students. Improper ventilation was identified as another significant factor in reducing learning for some classes: "The condition of some of the classes with respect to their size, air-conditioning and large population of students in the class, Is not a suitable environment for learning." Other issues which stand out in participants' discussions was lack of concentration because of noise outside and thus reduce the learning. "In some classes, the noise coming from the surroundings and outside of the classroom, complicates our learning and we not hear the teacher's voice," mentioned one of the students.

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore graduate nursing students' experience of learning. As per students' statements, learning from qualified instructors, using appropriate and accessible equipment and resources, and students' prior knowledge about the objective of lessons before class contribute to their effective learning. They also stated that learning is useful when they have studied prior to instructor's teaching, have participated in educational workshops especially designed for graduate students, have participated in discussion groups or have taken shorthand in class or at home. Furthermore, they mentioned that factors such as the differences in students' background knowledge, recurring subjects previously studied at bachelors, inappropriate time and place of learning all contribute to the decline in learning.

Effective learning

Learning from a qualified instructor:

The results obtained from interviews indicate the important role of instructor with specialized theoretical and practical experience, using an appropriate teaching methodology proportionate to the taught subject, great level of eloquence, and instructor's accessibility in effective learning.

Instructor' effectiveness in the class encompasses several aspects such as: respecting students, ability to engage the students and stimulate their mind, organizing the lesson structure, lecturing skills, and appropriate presentation of the lesson (Gholipour Moghaddam & Yaghoobi, 2012). Educational researchers have identified effective learning as the most important factor of students' educational progress and learning (Brades, Hayes, Falcone, Hajjar, & Alonso, 1998). Therefore, there must be a balance between students' demand and instructor' capabilities (Merghati-Khoei, Zareie, Dastoorpour, Bayat, & Rimaz, 2013). In this regard, Merghati-Khoei et al. concluded that expertise, scientific experience, teaching skills and mastery were among instructors' qualification indexes for effective learning (Merghati-Khoei, Zareie, et al., 2013).

In the study conducted by Alavi and Abedi, trainers' skills and characteristics contribute to an effective learning (Alavi & Abedi, 2005). Other studies have also highlighted professors' scientific capabilities and their mastery over the taught subject (Abedini et al., 2010; Gholami & Asadi, 2002; Moezi et al., 2010; Tabarsa, Hasanvand Mofrad, & Arefnejad, 2012).

Regarding access to instructors, Naami mentioned that graduate students need more regular access to their professors for their greater involvement with lesson contents and for issues such as presentations, papers, translations and theses. Therefore, access to professors and their adequate advice and assistance is of great significance to students (Naami, 2011).

Appropriate equipment and resources

In the present study, students identified factors such as using appropriate equipment and resources such as timely access to educational slides, access to library resources, and proper tools for working with elderlies as prerequisites of an effective learning.

In this regard, it can be claimed that students' growth and development occurs when adequate resources are available for performing educational programs. The quantity and quality of resources and articles, research services, research via computer, and the student population in class are among resources required by students at universities (Naami, 2011). In the study conducted by Alavi and Abedi, appropriateness of the educational environments with regard to equipment and learning condition is one of the factors predicting effective learning (Alavi & Abedi, 2005). In the study conducted by Shahraki Pour, it was concluded that employing modern learning technologies such computers and digital libraries has great effect on the quality of education (Shahraki Pour, 2012). The results obtained by the present study conform with those obtained by Yamani and Bahadori Hesari as well as those of Tabarsa et al., on the significance of resources and adequate equipment for effective learning (Tabarsa et al., 2012; Yamani & Bahadori Hesari, 2009)

Knowledge about teaching objectives

In students' view, acquaintance with teaching objectives can be acquired through a course plan and knowledge about the results of learning.

Instructor' education characteristics such as clarifying the lessons, teaching flexibility, and the level of class discussions play an important role in provoking the learners (Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1995). Determining regular and definite lesson plans, setting targets, and assigning tasks and home-works are among the important factors in students' education success (Wubbels, Brekelmans, & Hooymayers, 1991). Talayi and Hekmatpou also, in their study on "exploring medical students' experience of effective factors in learning process," concluded that an appropriate course plan including lessons plan, educational discipline, consolidate class plan, balance between the volume of lessons and the duration of the course are among the factors influencing active learning (Talaei & Hekmatpou, 2012). In the study conducted by Mahmoudi et al., course plan acquired the highest rank in the realm of professors' teaching techniques, indicating the importance of order and plan in class schedules and the emphasis of faculty management on presenting a course plan before the commencement of classes (Mahmoudi, Pazargadi, & Edadi, 2009). Keshtiaray et al. also highlighted the significance of planning in higher education (Keshtiaray, Fathi-Vajargah, Zimitat, & Foroughi, 2009). Also, in the study conducted by Naami, clarification of lesson plan and setting orderly and definite lesson programs were identified as contributing to learners' motivation (Naami, 2011).

Effective learning strategies

Pre-requisite knowledge before attending the class

In the present study, having prior knowledge on the subject of the lesson and the main subject of learning was mentioned as one of the learning factors.

Learning, as one of the most important educational objectives, is a product of teaching. There is a mutual relationship between the two concepts of learning and teaching (Gholami & Asadi, 2002). Teaching is a procedure with five basic steps including: preparation: (teacher's level of mastery over the lesson contents, teaching method, the presentation order of the lesson); presentation: (preparation of the lesson contents in advance and determining how they are going to be taught); application: (students learning the contents, and presenting them for problem resolution); criteria: (learning technical and mental skills by students); and assessment: (determining students' level of learning and identifying their weaknesses and strengths; Ghoochian, 2009).

In the study conducted by Merghati-Khoei, Zareie, Dastoorpour, Bayat, and Rimaz (2013), studying before class is identified as a part of professors' skill. Also, Instructor's seriousness and interest in teaching, the positive interaction between Instructor and students, as well as Instructor's qualifications were mentioned in addition to above factors (Merghati-Khoei et al., 2013).

Participation educational workshops

In participants' view, participation in educational workshops and learning research methods as well as workshops specially designed for graduate students contribute to efficient learning. As per the conducted studies, graduate students form around 0.55 of the whole researchers of the country; 90 percent of this population is formed by master's students (Moztarzadeh, 1997). Thus, such educational workshops, especially those on research methodology, seem to be necessary for such students.

 In the study by Hedjazi and Abbasi (2002) also, a significant correlation was found between empowerment and familiarization of students with research as well as their familiarity with research regulations and the quality of their thesis (Hedjazi & Abbasi, 2002). However, in the study conducted by Mahmoudi et al., in students' view, creating motivation for research

on the subject of the lesson was of the lowest score within professors' technical field (Mahmoudi, Pazargadi, & Edadi, 2009). Such a difference in the current study can be due to the level of under-study students who were bachelors.

Joining group discussions

According to the interviews, participation in group discussions results in progress in learning as well as stimulating the sense of interaction in students for a more effective learning.

Group discussions allow students to air their views. The interview-like structure of classes allows professors to be more flexible, and as a result, it leads to the discovery or identification of answers and personal concerns of students without any coercions or (time) limitations (Merghati-Khoei et al., 2013). Also, group discussions make students think, and promotes their creativityand interest in learning (Noohi, Abbaszade, Maddahs, & Borhani, 2013). Merghati-Khoei et al. mentioned that employing various teaching patterns, such as group discussions, can improve learning (Merghati-Khoei et al., 2013). As per the results obtained by Noohi et al., group discussion and exchange of views for the experience of being an active learner was one of the factors mentioned by participants (Noohi, Abbaszade, Maddahs, & Borhani, 2013), while Valizade et al., identified using diagrams and professors' notes, person-to-person teaching, lecturing, and self-learning through reading material as recommended teaching methods (Valizadeh, Fathi Azar, & Zamanzadeh, 2006).The difference in academic level can account for such a difference in the students' idea about learning methods.

Taking shorthand at home and in the class

Taking shorthand in class and at home was recognized as another factor contributing to effective learning.

Various factors such as learning style can affect the learning. Learning style is in fact a habitual and distinct behavior for acquiring knowledge, skills or attitudes through studying or experience, or a method preferred by students from a variety of other methods for learning lesson contents (Seif, 2005; Smith & Dalton, 2005).

In the study conducted by Karimi Mooeghi et al., multiple learning styles such as learning through question-and-answers and examples, active cooperation and participation, listening, and note-taking as the essential processes in nursing training (Karimi Mooeghi, Dabbaghi, Oskouie, & Vehriliäinen Julkunen, 2009). Furthermore, Talayi and Hekmatpou (2012) concluded that note-taking during studying provides a better learning condition for students.

Decline in Learning

The difference in learners' knowledge background

The results obtained by the present study showed that differences in learners' scientific knowledge background and clinical experience, as a factor, account for the decline in learning.

It is nowadays recommended that teachers take into consideration the differences between learners and their learning styles so that an appropriate level of learning can be achieved in all learners (Valizadeh et al 2006). In the study conducted by Gholami and Asadi, it was shown that students' educational background and intelligence affects their learning to a large degree (Gholami & Asadi, 2002).

Recurring lesson subjects

Another factor of decline in students' learning, as per the results of the current study, was the lesson subjects recurring both in Bachelor's and Master's programs which led to students' lack of motivation. Gunter et al showed that recurring subjects which do not stimulate learners' curiosity, creativity and innovation bore students or decrease their motivation for learning (Gunterm, Esterm, & Schwab, 2003).

Inappropriate time and venue of learning

In interviewed students' view, the inappropriate time and place of learning such as long classes in the afternoon, improper air-conditioning in the classes, and students' lack of concentration due to the surrounding noise were among the factors contributing to the decline in their learning. Factors affecting learning are divided into two "individual" and "environmental" categories. The environmental category is subdivided into "environment" and "physical resources" subcategories (Merghati-Khoei et al, 2013). The study conducted by Changizi-Ashtiyani and Shamsi (2010), pointed at improving the welfare facilities at universities. Also, in the study conducted by Karimi Mooeghi, Dabbaghi, Oskouie, and Vehriliäinen Julkunen (2009), students' understanding about the environment, time and resources was one of the factors affecting their adaptability to the education atmosphere.

In conclusion, as per the results obtained by the current study aiming to explore graduate nursing students' understanding of learning experience, their experience encompasses three main categories: "effective learning," "strategies for effective learning," and "decline in learning."

Therefore, an attempt should be made to improve the quality of education at universities through providing a proper educational basis such as appropriate equipment and resources, qualified instructors, regular planning for employing modern methods, clarifying educational objectives which decrease or obviate the factors contributing to decline in learning through considering the difference in learners' knowledge background and adapting lesson plans accordingly, recommendations for revisions in lessons by the respective ministry to remove any recurring contents, and providing appropriate plans for the time and venue of classes.

The present study reported the learning experience of Graduate Nursing Students in Iran. The study will be useful for managers in universities for planning to improving the learning and eliminating or reducing the factors disrupting learning in the Iranian culture and context. This study focused on the learning experience of Graduate Nursing Students in the Iranian culture and context. Therefore, conducting further studies in different cultures and contexts is suggested in order to substantiate and follow up the present study's findings, as well as to improve our knowledge regarding the different aspects of factors affecting learning. Also, this study was a conventional qualitative content analysis, thus due to the small number of participants than quantitative research, attempted to assessing data saturation and utilizing theoretical to explain the learning Experience of Graduate Nursing Students.

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Author Note

P. Pourghane, PhD. is an Assistant Professor in Department of Nursing in the Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery at Guilan University of Medical Sciences, Rasht, Iran. Her areas of research include education, cardiac rehabilitation, qualitative studies and content analysis. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: p.pourghane@yahoo.com. Telephone: +98 9112447644; Fax: +98 1342537171

M. Rajab pour Nikfam is a Master of Intensive Care Nursing, Instructor in Department of Nursing, School of Nursing, Midwifery and Paramedicine, Guilan University of Medical Sciences, Rasht, Iran. Her areas of research include education, intensive care nursing and qualitative studies. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: rajabpur.maryam@yahoo.com. Telephone: +98 9115011943; Fax: +98 1342537171

F. Ahmadi, PhD. is a Professor in Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran. Her areas of research include qualitative study, content analysis, nursing theory and psychometrics properties. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: ahmadif@modares.ac.ir & ahmadi_fazl@hotmail.com; Tel: +98 21 82883553

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