

Language Challenges Facing Students from the Democratic Republic of Congo in a University in South Africa

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ABSTRACT This research aimed at investigating the learning challenges encountered by international Congolese French speaking students in using English as the medium of instruction at a University in South Africa and the strategies they used to cope with these challenges.

Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) the paper explored errors in written and spoken language in relation to the strategies used by Congolese students to cope with language challenges. Data were collected through individual interviews and document analysis. The participants of this study were eight University lecturers and nine Congolese French speaking students. The findings of the study revealed that students encountered several challenges in comprehending English concepts taught, as well as in expressing themselves during the lessons. Because of the challenges students devised coping strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of education is a well-established item on the agendas of many Universities worldwide. Universities promote their programmes by welcoming international students through their internationalization programmes (Cadman, 2000). In this regard, South Africa is no exception. In 1994, the shift away from the apartheid policies made it possible for South Africa to be a legitimate partner of the international world. This move opened doors for the South African universities to recruit students from all over the globe. However, for those students who have pursued their education in countries where English is not the medium of instruction, maintaining academic standards that are acceptable in higher education in countries like South Africa is a problem (Pineteh 2014). Subsequently, special effort has to be made to overcome the language barrier and help the international students pass their courses at the South African universities.

This study focuses on the international students from the Democratic Republic of Congo who pursue their degree studies in one of the tertiary institutions in South Africa. In their country, those students have been exposed to French as the medium of instruction for basic education as well as for most of the courses in higher education. The switch from French to English-medium education is likely to pose some problems for students from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The literature revealed that while universities require international students to meet the minimum language proficiency, many of them do not have such language proficiency (Kuo 2011) that can afford them ability to cope with the university's academic activities. Therefore it is deemed important to explore the language challenges facing the students from the Democratic Republic of Congo pursuing their degree studies in one of the universities in South Africa. Having such information would assist the university in designing an effective intervention programme for its international students hailing from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Language Learning Challenges for International Students

Language related difficulties are likely to be greater if the University students have to use a language that they have not used as a medium of instruction in their previous education (Burke and Wyatt-Smith, 1996). Communication skills become important for successful academic achievement at all level (Park, 2010). However, language difficulties pose considerable problems when the foreign students learn English as a second language. Due to various challenges affecting the academic performance of the international students, including language, many universities have developed initiatives aimed at facilitating the transition of international students. According to Pilote (2007), the academic problems of the

international students are tied to language adaptation to the medium of instruction. This is echoed by Antanattis (1990) who points out that a language deficiency is the major academic obstacle for the international students.

As revealed from the literature dealing with international students studying in a language other than one's mother tongue, one of the main difficulties for students is that they experience difficulties in the foreign language either on or off-campus (Selvadurai, 1992; Cammish, 1997; Macrae, 1997 cited in Mostafa, 2006). Their difficulties are mainly on reading, writing, speaking, and listening. According to Leaver et al., (2005), writing has been reported by many high-level language users as being one of the most difficult skills to acquire. Therefore, if students who speak English as a second language experience difficulties in writing assignments, it is likely to be more difficult for them to write research reports, dissertations or theses i.e. written communication. Burke and Waytt-Smith (1996) state that writing is the greatest difficulty for ESL students since there are differences between writing in their L1 and English. It is very difficult to make other people understand ideas if one cannot express it clearly in the language. The results of a study conducted by Sawir (2005) revealed that due to poor grammar the international students' written work was often hard to read and assess, according to their lecturers.

Furthermore, many of the foreign learner's spelling errors reflect an influence from their first language (L1) or occasionally, from some other language related to the target language. The foreign language learners' errors reflecting the difference between the spoken and written code may go either way. The learner may either mispronounce the word, being too greatly influenced by the way it is spelt. Foreign language learners' problem with writing stems primarily from their highly limited linguistic resources (Ringbom, 1987: 70-74). It means that many of the difficulties second language learners have with phonology, vocabulary and grammar of the L2 are due to the interference habits from L1 or other languages (Beardsmore cited in Bhela, 1999).

It is clear that improved academic writing becomes a concern for these students. One way of adjusting is for the international students to acquire new learning strategies suitable for the new academic environment in which they find themselves. According to Leaver et al. (2005), a learning strategy is an activity or a technique that the students use when they run into trouble in completing assignments or in making progress in what they are learning to gain proficiency in a foreign language. These learning strategies are: using a dictionary, note taking, asking clarification questions, or non-observable, for example, activating prior knowledge, scanning for key words, etc (Leaver et al., 2005).

All students who enter University without developing essential, critical listening, writing, reading, and speaking skills or who have never had practice with lecturers and peers are likely to face challenges. In other words, students who have a limited command of Standard English and who are new to South Africa's culture and University system require a period of adjustment.

Coping Strategies

International students find themselves in a new socio-cultural environment. According to Myles and Cheng (2003), Non-native English speaking international students must adapt to a socio-cultural system that is different from their own when they pursue their academic studies in an English medium University. For these students to achieve their goals, they must spend most of their leisure time with host nationals and by so doing they will have fewer problems with cultural, academic and social adjustments at the University (Myles and Cheng, 2003). For the interaction with native speakers of English to be possible, international students need to have interactional competence in English. In other words, learning by interacting with others, involves working with fellow-students or asking for the teacher's help (Cook, 1991). If cultural mixing does not take place, students will miss out on critical learning opportunities that can ease the process of adaptation (Myles and Cheng, 2003). Zimmerman, (1995) cited in Myles and Cheng (2003), hypothesizes that talking to native speakers is a prime factor for communicative competence.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The general aim of this paper is to investigate the learning challenges Congolese French speaking students encounter in an institution of higher learning in South Africa where English is the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) and how they cope with these challenges.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design

This paper adopted the qualitative research design. A research design employed in the paper gave in-depth and detailed study on challenges faced by French speaking students in learning English as a second language. Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews

and documents analyses from the selected participants on perceptions of the problems faced by Congolese students in their academic activities.

Research participants

Research participants comprised eight (8) University of Fort Hare lecturers particularly lecturers who had French speaking students in their classes as well as nine first year Congolese students. The researcher interviewed respondents to solicit information about the academic language barrier faced by French speaking students and the aid lecturers provided for them to cope with these challenges. Also, nine (9) Congolese students registered at the university were also interviewed. Those French speaking students were interviewed on the challenges they experienced in learning English as a second language.

Lecturers were selected to participate in the study because they had French speaking students in their Classes. The scope of the study did not allow for the interviewing of all the lecturers who taught Congolese students. The researcher therefore decided to choose one lecturer identified by each of the student respondents and considered to be easily accessible and willing to take part in the study.

Documents analysis

For this paper the following documents were also analysed; Congolese students' assignments, lecturers' comments and students' notes written in English. These documents helped to shed light on the degree of the problem.

Data analysis

Qualitative data was analysed thematically using descriptive analysis. Patterns, similarities and differences emerged and descriptive narrations on these differences enabled the researcher to establish the challenges French speaking students encountered in their academic activities using English as a second language.

Data presentation

Interviews: Students' Responses

The study sought to establish challenges encountered by Congolese French-speaking students at a university in South Africa. Data elicited from respondents indicated that French-speaking students had several challenges in using the language of instruction to learn other subjects. Students indicated that English was complicated because it has many rules, as well as

exceptions to the rules that become extremely confusing, for example, some words add 's' in the plural and others add 'es', while others simply do not change in singular or plural. Student SCMH cited the following words as examples: *Computer- computers; Lecturer- lecturers; Supervisor- supervisors; Concept- concepts; Material- materials; Mango- mangoes; Fish- fish, Sheep- sheep; Dictionary- dictionaries and Library- Libraries.*

Data also revealed that the figurative language and English vocabulary also led to a lot of misunderstanding both in giving information and receiving it. In response to this issue, Student SCHA mentioned the following:

I have a challenge of understanding complicated ideas. When lecturers speak they fully explain every detail of an idea. Sometimes they expect students to read hidden meanings and use metaphors. They say one thing meaning another. It is hard for me to pick hidden implications.

On the same issue, Student SCMH said:

What I find difficult is the use of difficult new words in my spoken and written forms because I come from a French-speaking country and English is not my first language or second. Sometimes the inputs are not understood because of mixed of languages, English and local one.

Respondent SSTC raised the challenge of failing to express himself in English due to the shortage of English vocabulary. He mentioned the following:

I find it difficult to fit words properly. I can choose a word which I think means what I want to say, but I see people looking at me with wonder! I then discover that I actually said something else. Beside that I am telling them not to mind my spoken English because French is different to English.

Student SCPD expressed concern about her challenge with the English tenses. She mentioned the following:

My challenge is in the use of tenses which is difficult because it involves changing many words to a particular tense form.

Lecturers' Responses

Data sourced from lecturers concurred with that of the students with regard to the language challenges facing students from the DRC.

L1 explained:

The main problem these students face is in understanding meanings of written or spoken assignments. Vocabulary is the main challenge they face, but they are making extra effort to learn their subjects in English.

Respondent L6 and L2 also agreed that the students faced challenges. Student L6 highlighted pronunciation as a major impediment. L6 and L2 said:

Pronunciation really challenges students from a French background. At times, I only understand what some of the students mean when I ask them to put their utterance in writing. However after having the students around me for weeks, I begin to understand some of what they say.

Respondent L3 pointed out that:

Congolese students are challenged by tenses. Quite often they find it difficult to maintain a uniform tense when writing their assignments. They often move from present tense to past tense in one sentence. That means they are not clear about tense forms.

The data elicited from respondents interviewed, indicated that Congolese French-speaking students faced challenges in the comprehension of concepts because of word forms, limited English vocabulary, poor use of word forms, and poor vocabulary, as in pronunciation of words as well as the French accent that made people ask what they meant repeatedly. Sometimes students failed to understand the meaning of written or spoken language when metaphors were used. It was difficult to understand complicated ideas and hard to pick up hidden implications. It was also difficult to match words properly because English has too many rules and exceptions to the rules. That also revealed that some of the students' errors were from failure to keep up with the rules of the English language or exceptions to the rules.

Document Analysis

An analysis of documents used to understand challenges of Congolese French-speaking students revealed that spelling, pronunciation and grammatical errors and incorrect use of tenses, were among the challenges French-speaking students faced in learning English. They also used incorrect prepositions, articles, conjunctions and punctuations in their written assignments. The students wrote certain English words similar to French. In such cases one could easily deduce that their French background influenced their spelling of English words. This was also true of grammatical and tense errors observed. These errors were in the categories as discussed further in this chapter.

Spelling errors

Congolese students experienced problems with English spelling. The challenges of spelling reflected that students had to use dictionaries effectively as second language learners. In lectures or seminars they may not need to look up some words in a dictionary (Leaver et al., 2005). According to Kembo-sure (2004), spelling errors can be linked to their French background because the spelling of some French words is almost similar to English spelling as can be seen in the following examples:

English

Communication

Debate

Information

Paper

French

Communication

Debat

Information

Papier

Jarvie (2007) agrees that these are among words commonly mis-spelt by many English language users but they are particularly difficult for second language learners like the Congolese.

Grammatical errors

Grammar has been observed to be one of the problems experienced by French-speaking students in terms of verb forms in the following tenses, present past, present continuous, past continuous, future, infinitive forms of the verb and perfect tenses. L2 students depended on learning the rules of grammar and implementing the rules afterwards in order to write correct sentences. Grammar is the collation of words to have cohesion. This is done in a systematic way which takes into account the rules of the target language (Greenbaum and Quirk, 1990; Xin, 2010).

Present tense

The present tense was among the grammatical challenges faced by students. Sometimes they used the past tense instead of the present tense in their assignments. Hawkins, Towell and Lamy (1996: 234,) state that “some writers use the French present tense to refer to past events when they wish to render the past event more immediate”. The present tense, according to Kirkpatrick (2007), indicates an action that is going on now or a state that exists now. It uses the infinitive form of the verb and it changes in the third person singular when it adds ‘s’ to the base form of the verb. Yarber and Yarber (2004), state that the present tense is used to

express a condition or an action that exists or is going on now. It is also used to express an action that is usual or being the truth. In this study, the students confused the present tense with the past tense, because of their French background and this affected their written assignments, as can be seen in the following examples:

*This is an agreement with the term “present seismotectonic regime” used by Slemmons (1991) who **define** it as the period of time when the present tress field and tectonic process **came** into place.(2)*

The findings indicated that the present tense was wrongly applied. Students confused and mixed tenses within the sentence, for example the verb in a sentence can be in the present tense and the students used it incorrectly in past tense. The problem of incorrect use of the present tense was partly due to French which is the second language that interferes with the target language which is English (Tahaine, 2010).

Present continuous tense or progressive tense

French-speaking students also had challenges in using the present continuous tense Hawkins et al. (1996), say that English has the present continuous tense; ‘**be**’ and ‘**are**’+ **v-ing**’ (**I am reading**) and French does not have an equivalent special form for this tense. Present continuous tense or progressive tense is used when saying something that is going on at the very moment, when you are speaking or referring to an action continuing over a period of time. It includes the present tense of the verb ‘**to be**’, the present participle plus ‘**ing**’ at the end of the main verb, and shows an incomplete action at the time when one is referring to it (Kirkpatrick, 2007). French-speaking students sometimes confuse use of verb forms as shown in the following examples:

*The new ICTs **are be** widely used, there has been progressive reduction on the relative costs of communication although this differs from one region to another. (4)*

The example above indicated that there were problems in the use of present continuous tense of verbs. The students wrongly applied present continuous tense. These problems affected their written work.

Coping Strategies

Students’ Responses

The study also sought to establish what strategies Congolese French-speaking students used to overcome the challenges they were facing in learning their subjects, while learning the

language of instruction at the same time. Data received from students indicated that they devised several situational strategies such as the use of dictionaries, asking other English speaking persons to explain the meaning of a sentence, practising English with other English speakers and reading books and articles. As a coping mechanism, students also watched television. In response to the question of how they managed to cope in the challenging classroom situation, Student SCHA explained:

When a lecturer uses a word I do not understand, I open my pocket dictionary and check it out. I am in seminar where my lap-top is accessible; I check the synonym and quickly get the meaning. That way I overcome some of the challenge.

Asked the same question, Student SGEB remarked as follows:

In the event that a lecturers or other students say something I do not understand, I ask them to explain what the sentence or utterance means. They explain in very simple language, sometimes giving examples that make the concepts clear. Even repeating, and substituting some words in the first sentence usually makes it very clear.

Still on the same question, student SSTC responded as follows:

I have overcome most challenges by practicing some particularly challenging aspects of the English language. Pronunciation of words with “th” was so difficult for me and caused people to ask repeatedly what I was saying. I then made it a point to deliberately practice words with that sound till I mastered it and as a result I am now better understood.

Another coping strategy was given by Student SCMG who explained that:

I have improved my English through reading a lot of written literature in English. I read everything I can lay my hands on, from research books, novels, magazines, newspapers. I now know even the differences forms of language of research. I read words and check their meaning in dictionaries too.

Respondent SCPD also said he was using television to learn a lot of English. He explained as follows:

I use television as my coping mechanism. When I watch speakers in action and the contexts in which things are said I get to understand the use of different types of language use. I get to know words frequently used in sports, in advertising, in family settings, in class as well as at table. That even helps me to know swear words and know where and why they should not be used.

LECTURERS' RESPONSES

The lecturers indicated that the Congolese students used a wide range of coping strategies including the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) where students were getting intense individualised tutorship to get them to use correct tenses, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

Asked about the coping strategies used by international students from the DRC, L2 and L3 explained:

Students have several coping strategies, but one of those they use frequently is the TLC. This specialised unit services students with language and other learning difficulties... It has proved immensely helpful to Congolese French-speaking students as well as others who can now learn independently.

Still on the same question respondent L1 mentioned that:

Students who are from French-speaking background use many strategies including asking lecturers to explain in detail what they have not understood.

Based on the above mentioned results, it was clear that the Congolese students were using a wide range of coping strategies in order to cope with the academic activities at a university in South Africa.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The purpose of the study was to investigate the challenges the Congolese students faced at a university in South Africa, and how the students dealt with those problems and the coping strategies they used to handle those challenges in order to succeed in their studies.

The study established that one of the challenges facing Congolese French-speaking students was limitations of vocabulary. Kirkpatrick (2007) explains vocabulary as the stock of words a person commands or has available to communicate. Students did not have a wide range of vocabulary to express themselves. That also limited their versatility and affected their style of writing, as well as their way of speaking. When they wanted to exclaim, or use emotive language, they failed to do so effectively because of language limitations. They simply failed to convey the intended meaning and feeling because of that. This finding is supported by Kirkpatrick (2007) who points out that when vocabulary is limited, a person fails to express himself or herself well. This also becomes problematic when the student fails to understand information expressed in metaphors.

Students also faced problems of words that were spelt the same, yet had different meanings, for example, words like: **'pain'**. Downing and Locke (2006), say that words such as

‘cricket’, which refers to a **‘game’** and an **‘insect’**, **‘trip’** which refers to a **‘journey’** as well as a near fall, or **‘jumper’** which is a cardigan and a sports person, are examples of vocabulary that confused students such as the Congolese who were from a French-speaking background.

The study revealed that since students had a limited English vocabulary, they did not easily understand concepts in the subjects they studied. This is in line with the observation by some scholars like August, Carlo, Dressler and Snow (2005), who point out that English language learners with limited vocabulary are not able to comprehend issues easily comprehended by their peers. Furthermore, they observed that if the number of unknown words in a text is high, it disrupts comprehension. In addition, the task of learning concepts in a subject such as Chemistry or Agriculture while grappling with learning English as a medium of instruction is an uphill struggle. Biemiller and Slonim (2001), point out that when second language learners start reading in English their peers who speak it as a first language will already have acquired between 5000-7000 words. It was clear that challenges of learners such as the French-speaking students were enormous.

Among the problems experienced by the Congolese students was to understand the meaning of words in various contexts. August, Carlo, Dressler and Snow (2005: 51), explain that knowing a word implies comprehending “its literal meaning, its connotations, the sorts of syntactic constructions into which it enters the morphological options it offers and semantic associates such as synonyms and antonyms”. It is sometimes difficult for third language learners such as the Congolese French-speaking students to distinguish the incorrect use of words with multiple meanings, for example, the word **‘ring’** which is used as a **‘wedding’** ornament that symbolically unites two people, and its use for the **‘sound a bell makes’**. If used in one sense, it sometimes confused the second language learners who attached only one meaning and failed to decipher the meaning of the second usage.

Data elicited from the interviews as well as documents revealed that Congolese students failed to use tenses correctly. Tenses are used to indicate the time when an action occurs. In the English language, the main tenses used are present and past tenses (Kirkpatrick, 2007). The students did not know which tense to apply at a particular moment for which action. They used present tense forms where they should have used past tense forms or past tense forms for actions occurring right away. A common problem observed, was that English rules seemed inconsistent, especially to non-English speakers. Some irregular verbs do not follow the pattern of other regular verbs when changing tense. This finding is supported by Yarber and Yarber (2004) who states that examples of the scenario include a regular verb like

‘move’ (present tense) which becomes **‘moved’**, adding **‘d’** in the past tense, and irregular verbs like **‘go’** which becomes **‘went’**, **‘buy’** which becomes **‘bought’**, or **‘hit’** which remains **‘hit’**, in the past tense.

The study further revealed that Congolese students appeared to face many challenges when writing English assignments. Writing skill includes the ability to competently address proper language conventions, as well as more complex syntax and sentence structures, using appropriate organisation in the text, and reference detailed evidence to reinforce the topic (Hirai et al., 2010: 107). This finding is supported by a study conducted by Hirai et al (2010) who observed that L2 students were not able to organise their ideas since English was not their first language.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the learning problems encountered by Congolese French-speaking students, who came from a French-speaking background in which a language other than English was spoken as a primary language, and who were commonly referred to as second language learners of English (Sabler, 2002). The purpose of this research was to identify, describe, and analyse the learning challenges encountered by Congolese students studying in English at the University of Fort Hare. The discussion of data was done under the broad headings of challenges faced by Congolese students in using English, strategies they used to cope, as well as support services available to them.

The fact that Congolese second language learners struggled with English is in line with Burke and Wyatt-Smith (1996); Hirai et al. (2010); Leaver (2005) and Meyer (2000), say that second language learners are likely to face challenges in using the medium of instruction in learning academic activities. It is for this reason that learning challenges in second additional or foreign language was also addressed in the literature review. Strategies and support offered to French-speaking students were also investigated. Critical discourse analysis was used to unearth the writing problems of students. It was used to unveil the characteristics of the language they used.

For each of the sections, related literature was used to show that the findings were indeed part of the students’ experiences. The interpretation and discussion of the findings revealed that Congolese students faced challenges in the use of language with regard to vocabulary choices, tense use, pronunciation, use of prepositions, conjunctions, articles, punctuation and demonstrative pronouns. They also failed to comprehend other concepts at times.

The study also revealed that students received support at the University from such sections as the TLC, the library, using computers, and from the lecturers and their peers. The study also showed that French-speaking students used strategies for the challenges they faced. They used devices such as computers, the television, dictionaries, asking explanations from lecturers, exchanging views with peers, and reading more.

At UFH, real opportunities for Congolese students to interact with their lecturers and peers as real participants in the construction and interpretation of assignments seem to exist (Mohamed and Banda, 2008). It appears Congolese students managed to cope with the challenges they faced, given the support at UFH. It is clear that they progressed in their studies and completed the course or programmes they set out to study.

This study has limitations in that it has not assessed the problems that other students from Africa, whose second language is not English, face. Future research can be broadened to include challenges faced by other students from Africa, whose second language is neither English nor French, who are in universities in South Africa., ,

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