

English Language Grammar Challenges Facing Congolese International Students in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The study sought to establish the English language grammar challenges facing the Democratic Republic of Congo students pursuing their degree studies in one of the universities in South Africa. A purposeful sample of nine (9) Congolese French speaking students was used in this study. The study used document analysis for collecting data. The researchers analysed students' assignments notes written in English. Categories and themes became apparent during the document analysis. The results revealed that the Congolese students were experiencing challenges related to English tenses, concord, verbs, infinitives, prepositions, conjunctions, articles, punctuation and pronouns. The recommendations were made in order to eliminate the English grammar challenges facing the Congolese students.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The end of apartheid in South Africa saw the opening of a multitude of opportunities to South Africans and the international community within the context of higher education study opportunities (Rawjee and Reddy 2012). Many countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) saw this as the opportunity for their students to widen their academic horizons by taking their degrees at the institutions of higher learning in South Africa (SA). Such a move can never be free of problems as the two countries use different languages as medium of instruction. This difference in language instruction has its roots from the time of colonialism, for example, South Africa was a British colony and Democratic Republic of Congo a French colony. For that reason, these countries have maintained the languages of their former colonizers such that up to the present day the language of education, administration, government and business is French in DRC and English in SA (Bamgbose 1991). Therefore it is clear that students who move from DRC to study in South Africa do not have sufficient English language proficiency to deal with the challenges of academic life. In this study international students are defined as individuals who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of origin for the purpose of pursuing their studies.

Many studies have been conducted on the problems experienced by the international students who pursue their studies in foreign countries (Sawir, 2005; Cownie and Addison 1996; Groves 2013; Lawson 2012; Talebloo and Bin Baki 2013; Dzansi and Monnapula-Mapesela 2012). The results of a study conducted by Cameron (nd) on issues and challenges of international students, revealed that the problems faced by international students relate to differences in approaches to teaching and learning. Other studies reveal that the challenges faced by international students have been categorized by the following four categories: general living adjustment, academic difficulties, such as lack of proficiency in the English language, socio-cultural difficulties and personal psychological adjustment (Talebloo and Bin Baki 2013). The current study seeks to investigate challenges related to English grammar faced by students from DRC who are pursuing their tertiary studies in South Africa.

The literature has revealed that for academically and advanced second language students, mastering grammar is essential if they are to achieve their educational and professional goals (Baleghizader and Gordani 2012, Shaw and Liu 1998). This idea is supported by Cownie and Addison (1996) who point out that proficiency in English is vital for international students, especially grammar. Chin (nd) defines grammar as the sound, structure, and meaning system of language. He further points out that all languages have grammar and each language has its own grammar. Therefore, it is important to conduct a study that seeks to investigate English

grammatical challenges experienced by DRC students who are used to French as medium of instruction. Understanding the grammatical challenges of these students is likely to inform the intervention support that can be put in place in order to address the language problem, especially grammar. In addition, Cownie and Addison (1996) state that it is an important function of English speaking universities to provide language support in order to allow international students to function well in their new academic surrounding. However, there are contrasting views on how grammar should be taught to English second language speakers, students from DRC. The battle is between explicit instruction and the assumption that by simply studying in an English language environment the English grammar of the students will improve (Groves 2013). The results of a study conducted by DuFon and Churchill (2006) revealed that simply exposure to a foreign language does not lead to an increase in accuracy. This raises a concern about a need for an intervention programme that takes into consideration the explicit grammatical instruction in order to improve the grammatical competence of the DRC students.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the English Language grammar challenges facing DRC students studying in a tertiary institution in South Africa. In particular, the following research questions guided this study:

- Does English Language grammar pose any challenge for the DRC students?
- If any, which aspects of English grammar?

METHODOLOGY

This research was underpinned by a qualitative research methodology based on the understanding that qualitative research understands the human phenomena in context-derived terms and categories (Seliger and Shohamy, 1990). According to Halliday (2002), qualitative studies set up research opportunities designed to lead researchers into areas of discovery within the lives of people they are investigating. In this study, the qualitative research methodology was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to collect in-depth data directly from Congolese French speaking students through closely interacting with them and

listening to their voices, feelings, views, opinions, perceptions, and experiences about the challenges they were facing in an English medium university.

Participants

The participants in this study were Congolese French speaking students who were doing their...???year at a university in South Africa. A purposeful sample of nine (9) Congolese students who studied in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty of Science and Agriculture, and the Faculty of Management and Commerce was used. The sample was selected from the 2009 cohort and included people who could provide information and excluded those who did not suit the purpose of the study.

Research Instruments and data analysis

The study used document analysis for collecting data. Document analysis refers to any written materials that contain data about the phenomena the researcher wishes to study (Bailey, 1994). According to Borg and Gall (1996), qualitative researchers often study written communication found in natural settings as data sources. Document analysis is unobtrusive and non-reactive and can yield a lot of data about the values and beliefs of participants in their natural settings (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). In this study the researchers analysed students' assignments and notes written in English. These documents helped to shed light on the degree of the English language grammar challenge facing the DRC students. Data was analysed according to the research questions. Categories and themes became apparent during the document analysis

Data presentation and discussion

The following aspects of grammar were observed to be challenges facing the French-speaking students (DRC): tenses, present, past, present continuous, past continuous, future, infinitive forms of the verb and perfect tenses, concord, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, pronouns and punctuation. The participants were labelled as participant one (1) to nine (9).

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), state 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 confused 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.

Past tense

Congolese students also used incorrect past tense in their assignments. According to Hawkins et al. (1996), English has the simple past tense, whereas French does not have this tense. Past tense is used to express an action or a condition that has passed already (Yarber to Yarber, 2004). Students used it incorrectly as can be seen in the following examples:

*There were no papers to write a letter or a phone **to sent** message in abrupt way. (3)*

The findings indicated that there were problems with the past tense form of verbs. The students incorrectly used past tense within the sentence. The verb used in a sentence can be in the past tense and the students mistakenly used this in the infinitive. These problems affected their assignments.

Past continuous tense or past progressive tense

French-speaking students had minor problems in using past continuous tense. Hawkins et al. (1996), state that English has past progressive tense such as ‘**was**’ and ‘**were**’+ **v-ing** (**He was writing**) and French does not have an equivalent special for this form. This tense is used to refer to a continuing action that occurred in the past and may be complete at the time of speaking. Past continuous tense is formed by using the past tense of the verb ‘**to be**’ and the present particle, ending in ‘**ing**’ of the main verb (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Students sometimes confused this form of verb with the simple present tense because of their French background, as was observed in the following examples:

*Though, it was difficult **to copier** since people **were not live** very close and ought to walk a distance in order to convey whatever message they had. (1)*

*Reducing sugars concentrations **were calculate using** a calibration curve. (5)*

Perfect tense

Incorrect use of perfect tense was another challenge faced by the students in writing their assignments. According to Kirkpatrick (2007), the perfect tense is used to refer to an action that began in the past but continued into the present time. French-speaking students did not know how to use the verbs in perfect tense, as can be seen in the following sentences:

*The new ICTs **have permit** communities from various geographical locations to communicate fast and easy. Hence, eliminating the issue of distance due to geographic location both in the social and economic sectors. (4)*

The examples mentioned above showed that students made mistakes when using perfect tense. These challenges were due to the French language that influenced the target language, English.

Concord

Incorrect use of concord affected French-speaking students' written assignments. Concord, according to Jarvie (2007), is a type of rule that ensures the harmonisation of various grammatical units. It includes a number concord and ensures that a singular subject needs a singular verb while a plural subject needs a plural verb. Students used incorrect concord in their assignments, as can be seen in the following sentences:

*Note: In the first tests, you **adds** 4-5 and drops of another solution to your test so you can assume that this addition causes on increase in the volume of the solution in the test tube. (5)*

The examples mentioned showed that students made a lot of errors when conjugating English verbs. They thought that plural subjects needed plural verbs by adding 's' at the end of the verb.

Auxiliary verbs

Congolese students also used auxiliary verbs incorrectly. An auxiliary verb, according to Jarvie (2007,) is called the helper for example '**be**', '**have**' and '**do**'. Students used these incorrectly as can be seen in these examples:

*A physical deployment was made first at a departmental level before deploying the system in the research area. Experiments that determined if the project objectives were met and how user-friendly the system **is were carried** out. (4)*

The findings demonstrated that students were unable to use auxiliary verbs in English. Students did not know how English auxiliary verbs were used. These challenges affected their academic writing.

Infinitive

The written assignments of French-speaking students exhibited the incorrect use of the infinitive tense because the French infinitive is signalled by an infinitive ending (Hawkins et al., 1996). Kirkpatrick (2007) defines the infinitive as the form of a verb used without any indication of person, number or tense. It also consists of the base form of the verb with '**to**', and at times may not take '**to**'. In this form, the verb cannot be converted to the past tense

form taking **'ed'** at the end. Though referring to a past event it does not take **'ed'** when it is infinitive.

French-speaking students sometimes confused the verb and added **'ed'**, leading to incorrect use because French has three infinitives groups of verbs. In the first group, the verbs take **'er'** at the end, for example **'manger'** which means **'to eat'**. In the second group, the verbs take **'ir'** at the end, for example **'finir'** which means **'to finish'** and in the last group, the verbs take **'re'** and **'oir'** at the end, for example **'lire'** which means **'to read'**, **'asseoir'** meaning that **'to seat'**. The third group also covers the first **'er'** and the second groups **'ir'**, for example **'aller'** which means **'to go'** and **'ouvrir'** which means **'to open'** (Hawkins et al., 1996). **The French translation is:**

“Il ya trois groupes de verbes, qui se distinguent surtout d’après les terminaisons de l’infinitive, par exemple: le 1^{er} groupe renferme les verbes terminés en **'er'** à l’infinitif, le 2^e group referme les verbes terminés par **'ir'** et le 3^e groupe comprend les verbes terminés à l’infinitif en **'oir'**, **'re'** est aussi en **'ir'** et **'er'**” (Uitgeverij, 1980), as can be seen in the following examples:

Traditional communication was all about odd signs such as the star, the smoke and the pigeon. These signs were amply used to disseminated information to the neighboring villages. (3)

Thus, a variety of pretreatment techniques has been developed to improved the accessibility of lignocelluloses hydrolysis. (1)

In the examples mentioned above, students used the incorrect infinitive of the verbs in sentences. The infinitive was wrongly applied by adding **'ed'** in the verb because of their French background.

Future time

The students also made mistakes in using the future time because of their French background. Future time, according to Kirkpatrick (2007), is formed by using **'will or shall'** with the infinitive form of the verb, as can be seen in the following examples:

This work will enables the identification of the neotectonics zone of the Eastern Cape. (2)

The findings indicated that there were serious challenges observed in terms of verb forms used by students with a French-speaking background. Students also had problems when they tried to navigate from one tense to another. The students sometimes incorrectly used different

tenses within a sentence, for example, the verb used in a sentence can be in the past tense and the students mistakenly used these in the present tense. They also confused the progressive forms of verbs, auxiliary, concord, future time and wrongly used the infinitive verbs with the perfect tense.

Prepositions

Congolese students also confused prepositions because French prepositions can normally find an English counterpart which is not used in the same way. In other cases, there is no direct relation between the prepositions used in each language (Hawkins et al., 1996). Prepositions, according to Yarber and Yarber (2004), show the relations between words in a sentence. Downing and Locke (2006: 531) define the preposition as “relations between nominal units or nouns and nominal groups or words, and other units in the discourse environment”, for examples, ‘**of**’, ‘**in**’, ‘**on**’, and ‘**for**’, as can be observed in the following sentences:

*There are many procedures where acetic acid, sulfuric acid, and hydrochloric acid have been used for pretreatment of lignocelluloses materials to extract fermentable sugars by heating **on** reactor. (1)*

Examples mentioned above showed that students were unable to use correct prepositions within sentences. Each preposition has a different significance and usage. Students were not only inexperienced in using these prepositions, but were not always surrounded by English-speaking people to give them practice.

Conjunctions

Congolese students also had problems with conjunctions. A conjunction is a connector. It is used to join words or sets of words, such as phrases or clauses (Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad, 1986). According to Jarvie (2007: 54), conjunctions are linking or joining words.

Coordinate conjunctions

These students also used incorrect coordinate conjunctions in their written work. The coordinate conjunctions are also called coordinators because they connect the units of the same status such as sentences or words (Jarvie, 2007). Students did not know how to use a coordinate conjunction, as can be seen in the following sentences:

***And** those who were interested to hear sometimes had to pay the coins for the privilege. (3)*

Subordinate conjunctions

The subordinate conjunctions were other problems faced by Congolese students. The subordinate conjunctions connect subordinate or reliant clauses to the main sentences (Jarvie, 2007). Students also faced challenges in using subordinate conjunctions, as can be seen in the following sentence:

*The Bible told us how John spread out the revelation of new King Jesus Christ. Matthew Chapter (1: 21) says how he moved around the world disseminating about his coming and purposes. **And when** Jesus was born, people identified a strange sign glittering in the sky and this compelled them to believe that he was a king. (3)*

The findings showed that French-speaking students made a lot of mistakes when using conjunctions. They did not know how to use conjunctions. Sometimes, they mixed coordinate and subordinate conjunctions within the sentence. Students needed a lot of exposure to reading to see how conjunctions were used.

Articles

Articles were other problems encountered by French-speaking students. Articles are words used to identify nouns (Hirai et al., 2010: 224). Jarvie (2007) says there are two kinds of articles in English, definite and indefinite articles. Students confused definite article '**the**' with indefinite '**a**' and '**an**' in their written assignments. The definite article according to Kirkpatrick (2007) and Hirai et al. (2010) can be used to identify someone or something as the only one of its kind. It is also used to refer to a whole class or group of things or people. An indefinite article '**a**' is used before the words that begin with consonants while the form '**an**' is used before words that begin with a vowel. In the following examples '**the**', '**a**' and '**an**' are used in these ways:

Punctuation

Punctuation was another challenge faced by French-speaking students. They tended to use certain English punctuations incorrectly in their written assignments. Sometimes, they did not use punctuation marks in their written assignments. In such cases, the meaning changed completely. Punctuation makes meaning intelligible to the reader (Yarber and Yarber 2004). According to Jarvie (2007), punctuation is used to mark off units of grammar and clarify a writer's meaning of texts, words or sentences. In speech, its emphasis and pauses are used to

help get the spoken message across. The problem of punctuation was observed in the written work of French-speaking Congolese students.

*Neotectonic activity is largely to **earthquakes** but human activities such as deep underground mining may contribute to neotectonic activity. (2)*

The findings demonstrated that punctuation affected French-speaking students' work because they did not use punctuation marks correctly within sentences. The students sometimes, forgot to use punctuation in their assignments.

Demonstrative pronouns

Students did not have major problem in using demonstrative pronouns, because French demonstrative pronouns are almost similar to those used in English. According to Hirai et al. (2010: 218), "demonstrative pronouns specify the person or thing referred to. Words like '**this**', '**these**' refer to things that are near in proximity, '**that**' and '**those**' refer to things that are far away. '**Those and these**' are plural while this and that are singular. This can be seen in the following examples:

***These** ICTs are cost-effective and do not need any form of qualification or experience to operate them. (4)*

The findings indicated that demonstrative pronouns were easy to use.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings of the study, it is clear that the DRC students experience challenges with regards to English grammar. According to the results of the study these challenges are partly caused by the fact that the level of English grammatical competence of these students is not strong enough to support them academically. Yet, many studies have revealed the importance of mastering grammar of the language that is used as medium of instruction (Baleghizadeh and Gordani 2012; Pilote and Benabdeljalil 2007). Such studies have argued that for academically oriented and advanced second language learners, grammar instruction is essential if they are to achieve their educational and professional goals. Subsequently, the current study recommends an English grammar oriented intervention programme that seeks to build an English language foundation gap for the international students, especially those from DRC. Baleghizadesh and Gordani (2012) echo this idea by stating that although it is unrealistic for non-native students to expect to reach 100% accuracy, they should aim to

continuously improve their grammar accuracy in order to make their work as readable and efficient as possible.

In the literature review the researchers have drawn a distinction between explicit and implicit grammar instruction. Given the definition, strengths and weaknesses of the two approaches to grammar teaching, the current study recommends an English grammar intervention programme that focuses on explicit grammar instruction. This choice is motivated by the fact that these students already have the French language rules based on their background studies in DRC. Therefore, an intervention programme that focuses on the grammatical differences and similarities between English and French could eliminate the English grammar challenges experienced by these students.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the English language grammar challenges facing DRC international students in South Africa. The results indicated that these students experience challenges as far as English grammar is concerned. Their problem emanates from the wide gap between French and English language. Therefore, these students find it difficult to use their French background as an academic support. In order to solve this problem the study recommends that the university introduces a special English grammar course that focuses on the differences and similarities between English and French grammar. It is envisaged that such an intervention programme is likely to develop the DRC students' level of grammatical competence and in so doing improve their academic performance.

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