English Language Grammar Challenges Facing Congolese International Students in South Africa

Baba Tshotsho[1], Madoda Cekiso[2] and Lydy Mumbembe[3]

University of Fort Hare King Williams Town Road, Private Bag X 1314 Alice, South Africa 5700
[2]Department of Applied Languages, Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa
Telephone: 27406022402, Mobile: 0822021783
E-mail: [1]<BTshotsho@ufh.ac.za>, [2]<cekisoM@tut.ac.za>, [3]<mlydy@ufh.ac,za>

ABSTRACT The study sought to establish the English language grammar challenges being faced by students in the Democratic Republic of Congo 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 and 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, punctuations and pronouns. The recommendations were made to eliminate the English grammar challenges as being faced by the Congolese students.

INTRODUCTION

The end of apartheid in South Africa saw the opening of various 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 an 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 their medium of instruction. This difference in language instruction has its roots in the times of colonialism; for instance, South Africa was a British colony and Democratic Republic of Congo, a French colony. For this reason, these countries have maintained the languages of their former colonizers such that until the present day the language of education, administration, government and business is French in DRC and English in SA (Bam-

gbose 1991). Thus, 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 pursued 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 (n.d.) on issues and challenges of international students revealed that the problems faced by these students relate to differences in approaches to teaching and learning. The other studies revealed that the challenges faced by international students have been categorized into the following four categories: general living adjustment, academic difficulties, such as lack of proficiency in the English language, sociocultural difficulties and personal psychological adjustment (Talebloo and Bin Baki 2013). The current study sought to investigate the 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,

---

Address for correspondence:
Dr. Baba Tshotsho
University of Fort Hare
King Williams Town Road,
Private Bag X 1314 Alice,
South Africa 5700
Telephone: 27406022402,
Mobile: 0822021783
E-mail: BTshotsho@ufh.ac.za

mastering grammar is essential if they are to achieve their educational and professional goals (Baleghizader and Gordani 2012; Shaw and Liu 1998). Cownie and Addison (1996) support this idea and point out that proficiency in English is vital for international students, especially grammar. Chin (n.d.) defines grammar as the sound, structure, and meaning system of language. He further pointed out that all languages have grammar and each language has its own grammar. Thus, 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 to address the language problem, especially grammar. In addition, Cownie and Addison (1996) stated 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 students from DRC who have English as a second language. 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 the need for an intervention program that took 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 was to investigate the English Language grammar challenges faced by DRC students studying in a tertiary institution in South Africa.

Research Questions

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 pose the challenge?

METHODOLOGY

The present 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). Halliday (2002) viewed that 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 first year in 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). Borg and Gall (1996) viewed that 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 shed light on the degree of the English language grammar challenge facing the DRC students. Data was analyzed accord-

ing to the research questions. Categories and themes became apparent during the document analysis.

RESULTS 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 punctuations. 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 's's. 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, due to 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 defines 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 (Tahaineh 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 indicates 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 and 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 progres-

sive 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 in-crease in the volume of the solution in the test tube. (5)

The examples mentioned show 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 example: le 1er groupe renferme les verbes terminés en 'er' à l'infinitif, le 2e group referme les verbes terminés par 'ir' et le 3e groupe comprend les verbes terminés à l'infinitif en 'oir', 're' est aussi en 'ir' et 'er'" (Uitgeverij 1980), as 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 pre-treatment 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 Tense

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 di-

rect 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 prepositions 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 show 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 et al. 1986). According to Jarvie (2007: 54), conjunctions are linking or joining words.

Coordinate Conjunctions

The 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). The 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. The 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) said that 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:

Punctuations

Punctuations were 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. Punctuations make meaning intelligible to the reader (Yarber and Yarber 2004). According to Jarvie (2007), punctuations are 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 punctuations 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 punctuations 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 a 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.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the English language grammar challenges facing international students from DRC 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. Thus, these students find it difficult to use their French background as an academic support. In order to solve this problem the study recommended that the university introduce a special English grammar course that focuses on the differences and similarities between English and French grammar. It is envisaged that such an intervention program is likely to develop the DRC students' level of grammatical competence and in so doing improve their academic performance.

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 the medium of instruction. 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 recommended an English grammar oriented intervention program that seeks to build an English language foundation gap for the international students, especially those from DRC. Although, it is unrealistic for non-native students to expect to reach 100 percent accuracy, they should aim to continuously improve their grammar accuracy 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 program 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.

REFERENCES

Bamgbose A 1991. *Language and Nation: The Language Question in Sub- Saharan African.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Baily KD 1994. *Methods of Social Research.* 4th Edition. Canada: Maxwell Macmillan.

Borg WR, Gall MD 1996. *Education Research: An Introduction.* New York: Longman.

Baleghizadeh S, Gordani Y 2012. Academic writing and grammatical accuracy: The role of corrective feedback. *Gist Education and Learning Research Journal,* 6: 159-176.

Cameron B (n.d.). Supporting the Transition to University of International Students: Issues and Challenges. From<www.otago.ac.nz/quality/resources/publications.html> (Retrieved on 12 February 2015).

Cownie F, Addison W 1996. International students and language support: A new survey. *Studies in Higher Education,* 21(2): 221-231.

Downing A, Locke P 2006. *English Grammar: A University Course.* 2nd Edition. London: Routledge.

Du Fon M, Churchhill E 2006. *Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts: Multilingual Matters.* Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Dzansi DY, Monnapula- Mapesela M 2012. The nature of international student's adjustment problems in a South African university: Implications for international students and student administrators. *Journal for New Generation Sciences,* 10(3): 28- 49.

Groves M 2013. An investigation of students' grammatical ability in an International University Branch Campus. *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research,* 9(1): 29-42.

Hawkins R, Towell R, Lamy MN 1996. *French Grammar and Usage.* 2nd Edition. London: Arnold.

Hirai DLC, Borrego I, Garza E, Kloock C 2010. *Academic Language Literacy Strategies for Adolescents: A "How To" Manual for Educations.* London: Routlege.

Jarvie G 2007. *Bloombury Grammar Guide: Grammar Made Easy.* 2nd Edition. London: A & C Back.

Kirkpatrick B 2007. *Better English.* Scotland: Polska Book.

Lawson C 2012. Students' voices. *Australian Education International,* 6(2): 61-85.

Leech G, Deuchar M, Hoogenread R 1982. *English Grammar for Today: A New Introduction.* London: Macmillan Education Ltd.

Marshall C, Rossman EB 1999. *Designing Qualitative Research.* London: Sage Publications.

Rawjee VP, Reddy K 2012. Exchange Students Communication Challenges: A Case Study of a University in South Africa. *International Conference on Communication, Media Technology and Design,* 9-11 May 2012, Istanbul, Turkey.

Sawir E 2005. Language difficulties of international students in Australia: The effects of prior learning experience. *International Education Journal,* 6(5): 567- 580.

Seliger H, Shohamy E 1989. *Second Language Research.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shaw P, Liu ET 1998. What develops in the development of second-language writing? *Applied Linguistics,* 19(2): 225- 254.

Talebloo B, Bin Baki R 2013. Challenges faced by international postgraduate students during their first year of studies. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science,* 3(13): 138- 145.

Tahaineh YS 2010. Arab EFL university students' errors in the use of prepositions. *MJAL2,* 76-112.

Yarber LM, Yarber ER 2004. *Reviewing Basic Grammar: A Guide to Writing Sentences and Paragraphs.* 6th Edition. New York: Pearson Education.