

Exploring the Coping Strategies Employed by Congolese Students in a South African University

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ABSTRACT The study sought to establish the coping strategies used by the international students from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) 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. Data was collected through individual interviews. The findings of the study revealed that DRC students indicated that they employed several coping strategies such as the use of dictionaries, asking other English speaking persons to explain the meaning of a sentence, practicing English with other English speakers, reading extensively, using computers, watching television and using the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) where students were getting intense individualized tutorship to get them to use correct tenses, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. It was concluded that the university management be made aware of the coping strategies used by the DRC students so as to introduce intervention programs to develop these strategies.

INTRODUCTION

With the end of apartheid and sanctions, South African universities opened up to the world. According to figures from the National Education Department in South Africa, the number of international students at South African universities has increased since first democratic elections in 1994, from 12,557 to 53,733 in 2006. In addition, Kishun (2005) points out that universities in South Africa have done exceptionally well in attracting foreign students and South Africa is the number one destination for foreign students in Africa. He further states that out of a total of 770,000 university enrolments, an estimated 60,000 came from outside South Africa. Many Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) saw this as an opportunity for their students to enroll for their degree studies in South Africa. Despite a large and increasing number of international students enrolled in South African universities, there has not been much research done to explore the strategies used by international students to cope with the academic activities, especially students from DRC. Therefore, the focus of this study is on the coping strategies used by the Congolese students (students from DRC) in order to succeed in their academic studies in South Africa. The language of instruction in both countries is determined by their colonial history. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo was colo-

nized by Belgium, whereas South Africa was a British colony. Therefore, the DRC and South Africa use French and English respectively, as their medium of instruction. It is therefore important to explore how the DRC students cope with the medium of instruction in a language that is foreign to them.

Lee et al. (2004) point out that the international students need to adjust to a new environment and face a variety of adjustment difficulties involving a foreign host language, a new educational system, different customs and norms, financial concerns and racial discrimination. In addition, Yeh and Inose (2003) state that for international students, host language proficiency is important for achieving their academic purpose and establishing a social network with host nationals. They further point out that language difficulties in studying and participating in class discussions affect international students' academic performance. The literature has revealed that the coping resources highly relevant to international students are social support, intercultural social self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and social connectedness, as well as English proficiency (Holaban et al. 1997).

According to Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002), the growth of English as the leading language for dissemination of academic knowledge has had a major impact around the world, on thousands of scholars and their competence in a foreign language and elevating this competence to a professional imperative. For many

people, including French-speaking students at universities in South Africa, English is an additional language either studied as a subject or acquired outside the school system. Therefore, the second language learners may not be comfortable using this language, which is likely to be a source of challenges in their studies. Burke and Wyatt-Smith (1996) found that participants who had not used English as a medium of instruction in their previous studies had difficulties in writing their assignments, whereas, participants who had attended English medium institutions for previous studies were more confident about their ability to successfully complete academic tasks. So, this suggests that using a language as a medium of instruction, introduces the students to academic language. In addition, the literature dealing with international students studying in a language other than one's mother tongue, reveals that the main difficulties for international 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: 48). Their difficulties are mainly with reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Sibomana (2010) states that the academic activities are the main concern of the international students and therefore one aspect of adjustment has to do with learning strategies. According to Cook (1991), a learning strategy refers to a choice that the learner makes while learning or using the second language. In this paper, the term learning strategy is used interchangeably with coping strategy. Coping strategy is defined as thoughts, behaviors, or may be strategies that are used to manage a negative or stressful event like an academic failure (Lazarus and Folkman 1987; Kamins and Dweck 1999; Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). Cummins (1996) illustrates learning strategy as purposeful behaviors or thoughts that the learner uses to acquire or retain new information or skills. They may be observable in note-taking, hard work, searching, understanding and analyzing concepts directly linked to their success. Different students use different learning strategies in different circumstances. Ramburuth and McCormik (2001) and Leaver et al. (2005) state that there will be students who prefer to study alone but in close proximity with friends or those who prefer to use a variety of learning styles, at times studying alone and at other times preferring to study

in a group. The literature has shown that there are coping strategies, which seem to work for many students. Some of these are cooperative learning, peer learning, and social adjustment (Sibomana 2010).

According to Myles and Cheng (2003), non-native English speaking international students must adapt to a sociocultural 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: 81). Sometimes, they withdraw from such groups and prefer to interact with their colleagues of similar linguistic and social backgrounds or with other outsiders (Leaver et al. 2005; Myles and Cheng 2003). 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: 259). Zimmerman (as cited in Myles and Cheng 2003) hypothesizes that talking to native speakers is a prime factor in international students' perceptions of communicative competence.

Another coping strategy mentioned in literature is cooperative learning. Webb (1989) points out that cooperative learning involves small groups of students working together with their peers to share ideas and obtain a common learning objective through activities based on interdependent cooperation. Webb further states that in reality, students challenge each other's opinions and exchange views more than they can with lecturers in the class and in those groups they are likely to seek and obtain assistance from one another. Therefore, cooperative learning does not only help in academic activities, but it is also facilitative socialization especially for students who are new to the learning community. In addition, Webb (1989) and Cummins (1996: 82) assert that cooperative learning is recognized as an extremely valuable instructional strategy for promoting participation and academic growth in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

Peer learning is one of the learning strategies mentioned in literature and is a form of cooperative learning that enhances the value of student-student interaction and results in various advantageous learning outcomes (Christudason 2003). Christudason further states that interaction with peers can result in the development of cognitive or intellectual skills or increase knowledge and understanding. In addition, Leaver et al. (2005) state that in a peer learning situation a more knowledgeable student explains the materials to other peers who can also participate in this class. According to Cummins (1996), both tutor and tutee benefit academically from this form of collaboration. Thus, the more one explains the process to somebody, the more one's learning insight develops into it. Based on the literature discussed above, it is deemed important to explore the coping strategies employed by the Democratic Republic of Congo students pursuing their degree studies in one of the universities in South Africa. The university management's awareness about the coping strategies used by the DRC students might assist them in providing an enabling learning environment for their international students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the coping strategies employed by Congolese students in order to overcome the challenges they were facing in learning in English as a medium of instruction in a South African university. In particular, the following research question guided this study:

What coping strategies do students from DRC employ in order to overcome their learning challenge in English medium of instruction?

METHODOLOGY

Design

The study used the qualitative approach based on the understanding that qualitative research understands the human phenomena in context-derived terms and categories (Seliger and Shohamy 1990). 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. The study followed a case study of one university in South Africa.

Participants

A total of nine (9) first-year Congolese French speaking students were purposefully selected for this study. The students were selected from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty of Science and Agriculture, and the Faculty of Management and Commerce. The sample was selected from the 2011 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

This study relied on the interviews with the nine (9) Congolese students who were enrolled for their junior degrees at a university in South Africa. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to collect data. According to Maykut and More (1994), interviews are data production strategies conducted by the researcher with the respondent to move beyond the surface talk to a rich discussion of thoughts and feelings. Each of the interviewees was given a pseudonym for the purposes of anonymity and to easily keep track of the stories. The interviews were felt appropriate for this study because they 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. The data was analyzed thematically using descriptive analysis.

FINDINGS

The study sought to establish what strategies Congolese French-speaking students used to overcome the challenges they were facing in learning their subjects in English as medium of instruction. Data received from students indicated that they devised several coping strategies such as the use of dictionaries, asking oth-

er English speaking persons to explain the meaning of a sentence, practicing English with other English speakers and reading books and articles. As a coping mechanism, students also watched television and used the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) where students were getting intense individualized tutorship to get them to use correct tenses, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

In response to the question of how they managed to cope in the challenging situation inside and outside the classroom, respondent 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 laptop is accessible. I check the synonym and quickly get the meaning. That way I overcome some of the challenge."

Asked the same question, respondent SGEB remarked as follows:

"In the event that a lecturer 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, respondent SSTC explained 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 respondent 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 con-

texts 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 know swear words and know where and why they should not be used."

Another coping strategy was mentioned by respondent who said the following:

"I always have to spend time going for coaching at the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC), which means I lose on time to get a head on the subject still learning the language barrier".

DISCUSSION

Based on the abovementioned results it was clear that the Congolese students used a wide range of strategies in order to cope with the amount of academic work presented in English language, which was foreign to them. Looking up the meaning of word in the dictionary was one of the coping strategies they used. They used the dictionary to check spelling, pronunciation, opposites, and examples of phrases or sentence construction and word usage. This resource is rich, easy to use and can be accessed anywhere because it can be kept in the second language learners' pocket, and it allowed them to improve their language vocabulary. Several scholars, such as Allen (2002), Hirai et al. (2010) and Redman and Shaw (1999), endorse the use of a dictionary as a coping strategy. The literature reveals that there have been mixed views among language teachers on whether or not dictionaries actually aid learning (Carduner 2003). The results of a study conducted by Laufer (2010) revealed that dictionaries were popularly used to improve international students' productive second or foreign language skills such as writing and speaking. However, the more recent approaches such as the communicative method seem to undermine the use of dictionaries to learn a foreign language. According to Marmol and Sanchez-Lafuente (2013), the use of dictionaries was replaced by inferring from context, a strategy, which was thought to be more efficient and effective for dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary. The results of the current study revealed that the Congolese students claimed to be using dictionaries and that strategy worked well for them. This finding is supported by Knight (1994), Hulstijn et al. (1996),

and Fraser (1997) who point out that dictionary use in foreign language learning contributes positively to language learning.

Another strategy that the Congolese students claimed to be using was reading extensively. Grabe and Stoller (2011) point out that extensive reading (ER) is an approach to reading pedagogy that encourages students to engage in a large amount of reading. Many studies report on extensive reading's positive effects on a range of second language skills and abilities (Yamashita 2008; Bell 2001). The Congolese students also mentioned that when they engaged in conversation with the local students or lecturers they always asked them to explain the meaning of words they did not understand or simply to repeat the message. Krashen (1981) states that speaking the foreign language promotes acquisition and conversation in which the acquirer has control over the topic and in which the other participants exert an effort to make themselves understood. In addition, Washburn and Christinson (1995) point out that when native speakers and non-native speakers hold conversations they must generally work together to avoid and overcome communication backgrounds. Repetition is also cited in literature as a positive coping strategy. The findings of a study conducted by Long (1980) revealed that repetitions either by the native speaker himself or by foreign student are interactional resources available to repair the discourse when a breakdown occurs. In using a computer, Congolese French-speaking students accessed a lot of well-written language. It also meant that the students had a large amount of information from which to learn (Bekleyen 2007). The computer is a tool that avails the Internet system, which provides focused well-selected articles, journals and a lot of ideas used in learning the subjects. Cunningham (1998) listed the use of language laboratories, to include use of film, radio, television, and computers.

The skills foreign language students develop through computer usage are wide and include vocabulary building, through such facilities as synonyms, web dictionaries, antonyms, contextual word usage and definitions (Derwing et al. 2005; Alderson 2000; Liu et al. 2000). The results of a study conducted by Liu et al. (2000) indicated that interactive chat websites on a computer improved the students' comprehension, vocabulary, and speaking skills, as the stu-

dents debated and exchanged information on virtually any topic.

The Congolese French-speaking students revealed that they also used the television as a source of learning. This was found to be viable and convenient for the reason that it was easily available to students in their rooms, in common rooms and in laboratories. The students indicated that they gained a lot of language use and meanings while watching television. The television expose the second language learners to a variety of speakers ranging from first language speakers to those who learn English as an additional subject (Williams and Thorne 2000). Students also indicated that there were immense advantages for them to use television for educational purposes. The results of a study conducted by Bates (2002) revealed that most students believed in the television as an authentic source of factual material. The Congolese students also mentioned that they practiced pronunciation of English words so as to make themselves understood by other fellow students. This finding is supported by Ahmad (2011), who studied pronunciation problems among Saudi learners. His findings revealed that the Arabic speakers had difficulties in pronouncing certain English consonant sounds.

CONCLUSION

The literature on international students has shown that they need to adjust to a new environment and face a variety of adjustment difficulties involving a foreign host language since proficiency in host language determines their academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to investigate the coping strategies used by the French speaking Congolese students studying in a university in South Africa. To this end, the study revealed that these students were using a wide range of coping strategies in order to keep pace with learning in English as a medium of instruction. The Congolese students used dictionaries, asked other English speaking persons to explain the meaning of a sentence, practiced English with other English speakers, read extensively, used computers, watched television and used the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) as coping strategies. These coping strategies helped them overcome their language barrier to learning. It is suggest-

ed that the university management becomes aware of these coping strategies used by the Congolese students so as to introduce intervention programs that develop these strategies.

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