

Francophone students' challenges in English language: An example of an Anglophone University in Ghana

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ABSTRACT: The phenomenon of students studying in countries whose lingua franca is different from theirs is normal and a century old practice. However, studying in an academic institution with different lingua franca has its difficulties. This study therefore sought to unravel the challenges that students from Francophone countries in a university in Ghana encounter specifically on four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The study also inquires about the participants' coping mechanisms and the institution's strategies to help such students have smooth university education. The phenomenological approach adopted to study the issues afforded the participants the opportunity to vent the challenges that the Francophone students had. The accounts provided by both students and lecturers, who constituted the study population and the evidence from documentary sources evince that the Francophone students encounter challenges in all four language skills. It also emanated from the interviews that the students employ various strategies to cope with the challenges. The study proffers some mechanisms which could help improve the students' capacity to thrive in such academic environments to inure to the benefits of both learners and the institution.

Keywords: English language, Francophone students, language skills, higher education, Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Although studying abroad has been a century old phenomenon, the practice has increased manifold in the twenty first century. The Institute of International Education (2014) reports that there has been a surge in the numbers of postsecondary students who decide to study outside their home countries. Across the world, more students enroll in programmes in foreign countries (Okoh and Ebi, 2013). Consequently, many are countries which have internationalised their educational systems to attract students from different countries. The internationalisation of tertiary education has been a major growth industry globally (Bodycott, 2009 cited in Ackah and Kuranchie, 2015). Universities in Ghana, including the one where the current study was conducted, have also internationalised their academic programmes to attract students from both Anglophone and Francophone countries. At the university, as in other universities in Ghana, all courses are taught in English except French and Ghanaian languages. So,

students from Francophone countries undergo their studies in the university using English. It is the sole medium of instruction in all academic activities; students have their lectures in English, undertake their assignments and examinations (all forms of assessment) in English and conduct their project work, dissertation or thesis in English. The Francophone students also study academic writing as a core course same as all other students in the university. It has also been observed that some of such students who pursue Bachelor of Education opt to specialise in English language education. These pieces of information highlight that the Francophone students need to be competent and proficient in the use of the English language so as to perform creditably well. This is because language proficiency is a major determinant of academic success for international students (Luzio-Lockett, 1998; Selvadurai, 1991). Consistent with this view, Hoff (2005) argues that language competence and proficiency are fundamental to

educational success and as Abdurahman et al. (2013) found, oral, spelling and writing skills in English constitute a strong predictor of academic success. Xu et al. (2008) discovered that most international students were able to pass standardised proficiency language tests but were unable to understand lectures, express ideas, or write reports. These students may have had challenges with the four key skills in the English language.

Empirical studies have unveiled that English language tends to be a challenge for students from countries where English is not a native language. This situation tends to affect their academic performance (Pinetheh, 2014). This is consistent with Tabiri (2016) assertion that as courses are taught in English, non-Anglophone students usually have difficulty in understanding the meaning of English words and sentences. Kuo (2011) found that a lot of international students were unable to meet the minimum language proficiency required for their academic work. Inadequate language proficiency constraints students to participate in class discussion in English (Roberson et al., 2000). In addition to language inadequacy is the issue of language adaptation to the medium of instruction (Pilote, 2007), which affects international students' academic performance in institutions whose lingua franca is not their first language. Several studies have unveiled that non-English speakers encounter challenges in academic institutions where English language is the lingua franca (Dayang, 2005, Sarfraz, 2011; Al-Badawi, 2012; Yan and Berliner, 2013). It is therefore non-negotiable for universities to build and sharpen the students' communicative ability to enable them overcome these challenges (Sekyi-Baidoo, 2003). This could be done via various means such as pre-entry classes and remedial classes. The classes could be fashioned for the non-English speakers on the language skills and/or general English language. It could also be tailor made for the students in groups or individually to sharpen their competence for the tertiary education.

Research questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges do the Francophone students have with listening, speaking, reading and writing in the English Language?
2. What are the coping strategies of the students in order to perform well at the university?
3. What support services does the university offer the students to enhance their studies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A search in literature on the challenges that Francophone students encounter in Anglophone countries revealed a

plethora of empirical investigations that have been conducted to date. They range from socio-cultural to language challenges. The current exercise focuses on the language challenges. Previous studies regarding errors that Francophone students committed in Universities in Anglophone countries disclosed that such students commit different kinds of errors. Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali (2000) explored the Jordanian students' writing errors. The findings unveiled that "tense error" was the most frequently committed error by the Arab students. Sarfraz (2011) analysed errors committed by 5 Bachelor students in Pakistan. The participants were found to commit more interlingual errors intralingual errors. A similar study was undertaken by Al-Badawi (2012) to examine the phonetic, morphology and syntactic errors in English of some Saudi Bachelor of Arts students. It emanated from the study that most of the students committed a number of the errors studied.

Sokeng (2014) examined essays of 250 Francophone students who were learning English in Yaounde. The study revealed that the students had shortfalls in English grammar especially verb tense and form, subject-verb agreement, preposition and word order. Dayang (2005) also found that some Francophone students underused prepositions due to inadequate motivation while the speaking challenges experienced by the international students in the study mostly related to pronunciation and use of inappropriate words. The students also had challenge with English fluency (Yan and Berliner, 2013). Zhang and Zhou (2010) study also disclosed that the foreign students found it difficult to understand professors because of the latter's accent and rate of speech.

In their study of non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) students in an Australian university, Mulligan and Kirkpatrick (2000) found that about 10% of the participants "understood the content and intent of their lectures very well" but almost 25% of them did not understand "much of the lectures at all" (p. 332). Their study findings portrayed that the majority of the students had difficulty at lectures. Trice (2003) study also identified language difficulties as a major challenge for international students. The students had difficulty with various aspects of the English language as it was not their first language. Tabiri and Budu (2017) studied difficulties Francophone students encountered in the Ghana Telecommunication University College (GTUC). A questionnaire was administered for the data gathering. The study revealed that the students faced academic, social, religious and political challenges. Particularly, their academic challenges centred on language imperfection.

A cursory analysis of the studies presented thus far unveils that apart from Tshfish et al. (2015), none of the studies touched on all the four essential language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), which are critical for foreign students' academic success. Tshfish et al. (2015) studied challenges that Cameroun students encountered in the University of South Africa and the

coping strategies they adopted to deal with the challenges. Their study used the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the students' errors in written and spoken language and how they coped with the language challenges. The study revealed that the students had challenges with understanding English concepts and expressions. The strategies the students used included the use of dictionaries, asking the meanings of words and sentences from other students and reading of a lot of books. Although Tshftsho et al. (2015) touched on various essential language skills, they did not find out what the university did to help the students' studies. The current study's scope transcends beyond their work to ascertain the efforts that the institution has in place to ameliorate the language challenges that Francophone students faced. The question "do such students receive special attention, tuition or support service to aid their studies?" is very appropriate as availability of remedial, special classes or tutorials for the students can help improve the students' competence in the language. To help such students to have smooth education in the anglophone countries, the university has to help to improve the foreign students' communicative competence. The question "what do the students themselves do to upgrade their English competence in order to live up to expectation?" is also crucial. The efforts that the students themselves make toward improving their performance or upgrade their English proficiency is vital for their education. This study was conducted to explore the language challenges that the Francophone students in the university encounter and their implications for their academic activities.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study adopted the phenomenological approach to qualitative study; which seeks to gain access to individuals' world of experience (Koul, 2011). The phenomenological design enabled exploration of the challenges in the language skills the students encountered in their studies and the coping mechanisms they resorted to manage the language challenges.

Population and sampling procedure

The exploratory study used both students and lecturers as participants. The study utilised students from seven Francophone countries, where French is the lingua franca. The countries are Togo, Benin, La cote d'ivoire, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Gabon and Chad. The students were pursuing various academic programmes at the university. However, students from Francophone countries who had their pre-tertiary education in an English-speaking country did not meet the inclusion criteria for the study.

Snowball sampling technique was relied on to get the sample. As there is an international students' association at the university, the executives of the association were contacted first as key informants. Through the process, 14 students from the Francophone countries were recruited to participate in the study. Five lecturers who were teaching the French speaking students also participated in the study to provide data to enhance the study. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select five (5) lecturers who were teaching Academic Writing (2), Social Ethics (1), Science and Technology of our time (1) and Introduction to Information Technology (1). These are courses that all students in the university take as value-based. These courses also require students to make elaborate use of the English Language. The lecturers' responses provided data to supplement that of the students.

The respondents were given pseudonyms as: STD 1, STD 2, STD 3, STD 4, STD 5, STD 6, STD 7, STD 8, STD 9, STD 10, STD 11, STD 12, STD 13 and STD 14, and the lecturers as LR 1, LR 2, LR 3, LR 4 and LR 5.

Data collection procedure

Face-to-face interviews with the Francophone students and lecturers were conducted within a period of two weeks. Semi-structured interview guide was developed for the data gathering. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were recorded and transcribed afterwards.

The strategies of member checking, re-reading and peer review were employed as means to improve trustworthiness of the study outcomes. After the study, the participants were contacted to check the findings and conclusions arrived for the validation. The interview transcripts were also read several times to ensure that the data captured were a true reflection of what were provided by the participants; to avoid misinterpretation. Finally, two colleagues who are conversant with the subject studied reviewed the paper to improve accuracy of the conclusions. These steps contributed immensely to enhance the quality and credibility of study results.

Documentary analysis was also used to gather secondary data to complement the primary data provided by the students and lecturers. Kuranchie (2016) explains documentary analysis as the examination of relevant documents for research data. Consequently, the students' assignments, exercise books and lecture notes were scrutinised to ascertain the language skills errors that they might have committed in writing activities.

Data analysis method

The data were transcribed, organised, coded and concluded in themes and categories. The data generated were analysed using Nvivo, version 7 software. The data were analysed thematically using descriptive analysis.

Patterns, similarities and differences emerged and descriptive narratives helped to ascertain the challenges the students encountered and the strategies they adopted to navigate the challenges. The results are presented thematically.

Ethical consideration

To be ethically responsible, the researchers gained the trust and co-operation of the participants. The participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Their consent was sought and they were also informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary; they had the right to withdraw at any point in time. They were also assured that in reporting the findings of the study, their responses would be merged and where direct quotes were done, pseudonyms would be used in order not to identify them.

The research subjects were treated with utmost respect. Good rapport was established and maintained with the participants throughout the process to enhance generation of authentic data. Excessive guidance, leading questions and other factors were eschewed (Walliman, 2006) as they could have caused distortion of facts.

RESULTS

The results of the study are presented in the following order: students' responses, lecturers' responses and documentary data. The student and lecturers' responses on the challenges that the Francophone students encounter are presented under the major themes that guided the study, which are listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Students' response (Challenges in the skills in English)

The study aimed at unraveling challenges faced by Francophone students at a university in Ghana and how they navigated the challenges. The responses generated from the students disclosed that the French speaking students had myriad of challenges in using English language, which tended to negatively impact on their academic performance.

Listening

The results show that most of the students have challenges with listening during lectures. According to them, they did not hear all lecturers clearly especially those who spoke fast. Some of them indicated that they had difficulty with pronunciation.

STD2: It was difficult for me to understand lecturers' pronunciation and vocabulary was a problem.

STD3: I was not able to write because the accent of the lecturers was a problem, Initially, I had problems with some lecturers' pronunciation of some words.

STD5: I understand what the lecturers say, but some of them are fast and that makes it difficult to understand them.

STD7: I had small problem with accent.

STD10: I had difficulty with the understanding of some words.

The responses revealed, however, that a few of the students did not have challenges in English. They indicated that:

STD6: I did one-year proficiency in English in Accra. So, I had gone through all the challenges of learning English prior to the commencement of my study at CUCG. Therefore, I did not encounter difficulty of understanding lecturers.

STD9: I understood my lecturers. I had extra classes with some of the lecturers and that helped.

STD13: I easily understand my lecturers. I had preparatory classes in English before my study here.

Speaking

The accounts as poured out by the students demonstrated that the students had problems with speaking of the English language. Most of them disclosed that they had challenges with speaking with lecturers, administrators and colleague students. Some of the challenges they pointed out are:

STD3: Initially, I had difficulty with speaking; pronunciation and accent

STD5: At the beginning, it was not easy. I had problem with the pronunciation of words. The vocabulary was a problem and the lecturers also speak fast.

STD8: It was very difficult for me to speak English because I did not do proficiency in English before joining the university.

The students also expressed concern about their challenge with pronunciation. They were unable to pronounce some words in the English language. They said the following:

STD14: At the beginning, I could not speak a word in English. I could not even respond to a simple question like "what is your name?"

Some of the students also raised the challenge of their inability to express themselves well in English due to inadequate vocabulary. They said:

STD 2: I do not have a lot of vocabulary to use in speaking and writing in English.

STD9: I have much difficulty in the language.

A few of the students indicated that they did not have difficulty with speaking English. They said:

STD 6: I do not have much difficulty in speaking the language. I'm better than most of my friends from the French countries.

STD9: I could speak well. The Francophone accent was still strong though.

STD 13: I speak with confidence depending on where I find myself. In the lecture rooms, I speak less confidently.

Reading

The students' responses disclosed that the students had challenges with reading. They pointed out that they had challenges with reading in English, especially when they started their education at the university. Some said that:

STD3: I understand what I read only with the help of a dictionary.

STD8: Sometimes, we understand, at other times. We fall on the dictionary to understand most words, otherwise, it is a problem.

STD2: Initially, I did not understand what I read. Now I understand what I read. However, occasionally, we found some words and expressions difficult to comprehend.

Some students claimed that they did not have difficulty with reading. They are those who had preparatory English activities prior to the commencement of their education at the university.

STD6: I had difficulty with only big words. Mostly, I could understand all things I read.

STD9: I understand what I read except some instances where I fail to understand what I read.

STD13: I understand what I read.

Writing

The results revealed that most of the students admitted

that when they started their education at the university, they had difficulty with respect to writing in English. They said:

STD1: It was difficult for me to write well. It was not easy for me to learn to write well in English.

STD2: I have difficulty with spelling some words. This made writing a problem for me when I am writing at lecture, or examination.

STD12: I was able to express myself in writing. My challenge was the choice of appropriate words to express myself.

STD5: I had a little problem with tenses. That has been my challenge with writing.

STD: I write well, but I doubt the spellings and meanings of some words. After class, I check the meanings and spellings of the words.

Some of the students however indicated that they did not have problems with writing in English:

STD6: I am able to write well. Sometimes, I labour over the choice of vocabulary.

STD12: I do not have problem with spelling, pronunciation.

STD 13: I could write well.

Coping strategies

The research also sought to unravel the strategies that the students who had challenges with the four language skills employed to overcome their difficulty. Thus, as the students pointed out that they had challenges with English in the university, the researchers deemed it expedient to uncover what they did to ameliorate the challenges. It emerged from the interviews that in order to fare well in the university system, the students took a wide range of steps to improve their competence in English. The students made efforts to shore up their proficiency in English at the initial stages of their study in the university.

Listening

The students devised various strategies to improve their listening skills in order to hear their lecturers well and understand lectures. The strategies were adopted to enable them have meaningful conversation with lecturers, administrators and colleagues as their education demands frequent interaction with them. Group work and presentations require students to work together and there was the need for them to hear what their colleagues say. They said:

STD1: I do listen to news in English and listening to preaching in English also helped.

STD5: I had difficulty with the understanding of some words. To improve on it, I used to listen to news.

STD10: Virtually, I wrote my notes in French and later translated them into English. It took me some time to muster confidence to start writing the notes in English

STD14: Due to my difficulties, I had to see my colleague students to explain everything after the lecture.

Speaking

To improve on their speaking proficiency to enable them pursue their university education, the students used some strategies. The students indicated that:

STD1: It was very difficult for me to speak English so I did listen to news in English; watched films and listened to preaching in English.

STD3: Some of my colleagues encouraged me and shared their experiences with me. I also downloaded films in English onto my phone, started watching and listening to the language and that did the trick.

Reading

To improve on their reading ability, the students took several steps such as asking colleague students for help and used the dictionary. They indicated that:

STD5: I listened to BBC broadcasts and they helped me. A colleague helped me in reading.

STD8: I got encouragement from fellow students, listened to BBC news, watched films. I also read books including prayer books. Finally, I recorded lectures for play time for better understanding of issues.

STD9: I read with my dictionary by my side; that was what helped me to understand.

STD1: As I could barely understand what I read, I used to go to the library and consulted dictionaries to understand what I read.

Writing

The students also put in place some scheme to improve on their writing proficiency. Some of them declared:

STD3: I would write what I heard and later compared with

the notes of friends, consulted the dictionary and got on with my studies.

STD5, STD, 12 and STD 14: My friends and lecturers coached me on writing in English, even with the letters of the English alphabets.

The University's assistance to the students

The researchers desired to ascertain the assistance that the university offers students with Francophone background to enhance their studies. All the students claimed that no special assistance is offered by the institution to help improve their English Language proficiency. The university did not have preparatory proficiency classes; neither was remedial classes in English for the students were organized while they pursued the bachelor programmes.

Lecturers' responses

Five lecturers in the university who handled general courses (Academic Writing, Information Technology, Social Ethics and Science and Technology of our Lives) that all students take also participated in the study. By virtue of their job, they were privy to the challenges the Francophone students faced in the institution. The lecturers' responses corroborated the students' responses in respect of the challenges that the students faced in the language skills.

LR1 indicated, in class, I see them make mistakes, basically pronunciation. Most of the students are unable to pronounce some English words, which affect their reading.

LR3 and LR4 also concurred that the students encountered challenges. LR4 added that pronunciation and concord are a major hindrance for the students' flow in English.

LR2: At lecture, those students are not fluent in the language. Their accent is also a big issue to them.

LR4: I always observe them commit errors such as articles, conjunctions and prepositions.

LR5: In their assignments and examinations, the students commit spelling errors and incorrect usage of tenses.

The students have difficulty with pronunciation and tense.

LR2: Most of the students from Francophone countries always demonstrate difficulty with tenses. They tend to mix them.

LR5: Those students have challenge with appropriate use of words and pronunciation.

LR4: Most of those students are unable to express themselves in English and they are quite fluent.

The knowledge of lecturers on the strategies that the university has to help Francophone students to improve on their English competence was sought. Their responses pointed out that the university does not have any such assistance for the students, also corroborating the students' response.

LR3 and LR4: The university has not instituted any such mechanism to help the Francophone students. There is no proficiency course in English to help the students improve their knowledge and skills in the English language.

Documentary analysis

The research also examined documentary sources for secondary data. This was done by analyzing the errors committed by the students. The lecture notes and exercise books of the students (both those who had preparatory studies in English and those who did not have) were scrutinised to unveil the writing errors that they committed. The analysis revealed that all those who did not have the preparatory classes in English mostly had spelling errors and concord or incorrect usage of tenses. The students were found to have also used prepositions and conjunctions incorrectly. Conversely, the students who had preparatory classes scarcely committed some of such errors in their lecture notes and exercise books.

DISCUSSION

The data sourced from the students, lecturers and documents disclosed that the Francophone students in the institution had some challenges in all four language skills. The interviews unveiled that they had issues with grammar, tenses, prepositions, expressions and fluency. Inspection of the students' lecture notes and exercise books corroborated the challenges pointed out by the students and lecturers. The results of this study are consistent with that of Tabiri (2016), Kuo (2011) and Tshfish et al. (2015) that Francophone students have all sorts of challenges with the aspects of English. The challenges experienced by the students can affect their academic performance (Pinetheh, 2014). Pilote (2007) also found that the language challenges that international students encounter affect their academic performance. The problems may have stemmed from the fact that they did not have enough preparatory or remedial classes in the English language during the initial stages of their studies in the institution. This is because those who had proficiency in English did not seem to have those challenges. The few students who had the proficiency training in English did not have a lot of errors as those who did not have. Both verbal and written works proved that they were on top of their game.

The students adopted various coping strategies to navigate the challenges to have smooth education at the institution as they use the dictionary, sought assistance from friends, watched videos, listened to news and recorded lectures. These coping strategies confirm what Tshfish et al. (2015) discovered in their study that participants did not deal effectively with the challenges they experienced in a university in South Africa.

It also emerged from the interviews that the university did not have mechanisms specifically designed for such students to enhance their English competency. Instead, the students resorted to a wide range of activities to improve themselves in the English language. Knowing their challenges, the students devised various techniques to manage the situation.

Conclusions

The challenges that Francophone students have with English language are overwhelming. The non-English speakers have challenges in all four skills in the language and such problems require the attention of stakeholders in education. As there are no institutionally fashioned programmes to enhance the English competency of such students, they resort to a variety of techniques to improve themselves. Whether or not their self-initiated strategies to improve their English language efficiency is efficacious is another issue.

The foregoing observation brings into sharp focus that in spite of the steady growth in non-English speakers in the institution, nothing is being done to help such students to improve on their English proficiency. As universities internationalise their programmes to attract both students with and without English speaking background, they have to fashion out programmes as support systems to help the non-English speaking students to fare well in their studies. English Language supports are useful in aiding and retaining international students (Briguglio and Watson, 2014).

Some special English courses could be designed to help such foreign students to succeed academically. The support could be delivered one-on-one or in groups for such students to improve their proficiency in the English language. Besides, such support programmes should be both oral and written as the students had problems in both skills.

The institution and other universities without such mechanisms ought to consider this proposal to help such students to succeed academically. These attempts have the potency to contribute to increasing such students' numbers for the institutions' good.

Such preparatory studies help to improve academic preparedness to start university education in such institutions. There is the need for preparation in English prior to the commencement of their academic work in the university. A few weeks of studies in listening, reading, speaking and writing will help them do well. English

preparatory programmes will aid such students to become ready for academic work in the university.

Contributions of the study

The study makes contribution to knowledge, policy and practice. The findings on the language challenges that Francophone students encounter in the university, their coping strategies and support system(s) add to literature. The study, therefore, extends knowledge on the subject.

The study also provides a clue on what could be done by way of policy that higher educational institutions can enunciate to help foreign students to be competitive in their academic pursuits in their settings. The outcome of the study provides an idea on the need to come out with support programmes to address the challenges that those students encounter.

Exploring and addressing challenges that non-English speaking students encounter in their studies at the university may contribute to improving such students' academic achievement. It is very essential to unearth the challenges for the university to find measures to help the students to perform well. The study also helps to raise the image of the university and to attract more foreign students. Finding solutions to the problems could help increase the foreign student enrollment especially those from non-English background to meet its internationalisation agenda.

Limitations and direction for future research

The small sample of the research participants affects the generalizability of the findings on the students from Francophone countries in the university. The small sample limits the potentiality of generalization of the findings. Besides, the study did not do classroom observation to authenticate some of the data provided by the participants.

In view of the limitations of the study, the following have been proffered to be done as future research. Future research needs to gather classroom observational data to corroborate or otherwise the data provided by participants. Besides, future research needs to broaden the scope of the study by involving more private and public universities in the jurisdiction. This attempts to help provide a broad view of the study. Future research should also be directed at ascertaining lecturers' consciousness of the Francophone students in their classes and how they present their lessons and manage their classes to benefit such students.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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