



International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Volume 6 | Number 2

Article 18

7-2012

Higher Education Students' Reflections on Learning in Times of Academic Language Shift

Anne Marie Kagwesage

National University of Rwanda, amakagwe@yahoo.fr

Recommended Citation

Kagwesage, Anne Marie (2012) "Higher Education Students' Reflections on Learning in Times of Academic Language Shift," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 6: No. 2, Article 18.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2012.060218>

Higher Education Students' Reflections on Learning in Times of Academic Language Shift

Abstract

This article deals with the current debate on the use of English as the only medium of instruction in contexts where it is a second or foreign language. More specifically, it investigates Rwandan students' reflections on using English as the sole medium of instruction in their everyday higher education academic activities. The study is mainly based on individual interviews from students at a University in Rwanda, where the language in education policy has changed considerably over the last decade. The findings suggest that students face different challenges and difficulties in using the newly adopted language of learning and teaching. They are, however, aware of the globalisation process and dissolution of national boundaries and are willing to upgrade their English in order to cope with the new academic situation.

Keywords

Higher education, Reflections, Academic language shift, English medium of instruction, Academic literacy, Globalisation

Creative Commons License

Creative

Commons

Attribution-

Noncommercial-

No

Derivative

Works

4.0

License

Higher Education Students' Reflections on Learning in Times of Academic Language Shift

Anne Marie Kagwesage

National University of Rwanda

Huye, Rwanda

amakagwe@yahoo.fr

Abstract

This article deals with the current debate on the use of English as the only medium of instruction in contexts where it is a second or foreign language. More specifically, it investigates Rwandan students' reflections on using English as the sole medium of instruction in their everyday higher education academic activities. The study is mainly based on individual interviews from students at a University in Rwanda, where the language in education policy has changed considerably over the last decade. The findings suggest that students face different challenges and difficulties in using the newly adopted language of learning and teaching. They are, however, aware of the globalisation process and dissolution of national boundaries and are willing to upgrade their English in order to cope with the new academic situation.

Keywords: higher education, reflections, academic language shift, English medium of instruction, academic literacy, globalisation

Introduction

Rwanda is one of few countries in Africa where, in principle, all citizens have a common language, Kinyarwanda. However, for educational purposes, French was used as a medium of instruction from secondary school and all through university studies. In the 1960s English was introduced in secondary education as a foreign language but its status was low compared to French. After 1994, many Rwandans returned from Anglophone and Francophone countries. At the same time, a massive investment was made within higher education. Most teachers at the University were, from the beginning, French-speaking but after 1994 an increasing number of lecturers from English-speaking countries were employed. Besides, the university started to attract English-speaking students. Hence, university education had to become bilingual in French and English. The dual medium of instruction policy stressed that students must achieve an 'Advanced' standard of competence in both languages before being allowed to proceed to third year (National Higher Education Council (NHEC), 2007). The policy prevailed until 2008, when Rwanda's cabinet decided that all courses would be taught in English instead of French. Officially the Rwandan decision is a result of joining the English-speaking East African Community (Mineduc, 2008).

It is this sudden and fast changing language in education policy that necessitates the importance of investigating higher education students' reflections on learning all their subjects in English right from the start of their academic training- instead of mixing the two languages gradually until they become fully functional in both of them (French and English). The paper moves beyond policy document statements to investigate the policy

implementation in actual learning situations, the goal being to reveal yet unknown experiences and reflections of students regarding the new language in education policy as it is implemented in their everyday academic activities.

In recent years, a number of studies investigated the use of English second or foreign language as a medium of teaching and learning content subjects either at secondary or university level. For example, Airey and Linder (2006) investigated the use of English in teaching/learning physics at the university level in Sweden. Their findings revealed the existence of important differences in learning Physics when the lecturing language changes from Swedish to English. Such differences pertain to reduced classroom interaction to ask or respond to questions, reduced ability to follow the lecture and take notes at the same time. Evans and Morrisson (2011) explored how university students experience learning their subjects in the English medium of instruction in Hong Kong. Their findings highlighted the less interactive character of lectures in English as well as problems in listening to lectures in English as considerable challenges for students especially during the first term at the University. Miller (2009) looked at factors that facilitate students' listening comprehension in English medium engineering lessons in Hong Kong higher education and concluded that full and active involvement in the lecture for both teachers and students is likely to facilitate students' listening comprehension. Macaro and Lo (2012) investigated the medium of instruction and classroom interaction in Hong Kong secondary school. They found that opportunities for negotiation of meaning and scaffolding were reduced when English was used, and lessons became teacher centered. Zakaria and Abd Aziz (2011) examined the students' performance in Mathematics when English was used as a medium of instruction in higher education in Malaysia. Their findings revealed that students performed poorly when English was used. They however noted a positive perception of English as the language of teaching even among the less proficient students.

Since the second/ foreign language medium of instruction is discussed in many parts of the world as evidenced above, it is hoped that findings from the present study will be of interest to a wider community. In addition, since the study is based in a context where the language in education policy has changed considerably over the last decade, English being third language for many students, it is hoped that this study will shed further light on the problem of medium of instruction.

Medium of Instruction and Learning

Previous studies regarding the language of instruction revealed that in most African countries, instruction is conveyed through a language that is unfamiliar to both teachers and learners (Alidou, 1997; Heugh, 2000; Brock-Utne, Desai and Qorro, 2004; Bamgbose, 2005). However, since a language of instruction is an enabling tool which facilitates the learning of content subjects (Kyeyune 2003), it becomes effective when teachers and learners express their ideas in a language which they are conversant with (Alidou& Brock-Utne, 2011, Mwinsheike 2002). Thus, the medium of instruction has to be understandable to teachers and students. It should also enable them to attain comfort levels so that they can both deliver and receive messages using the chosen medium (Alidou& Brock-Utne, 2011; Gillani at al., 2010; Hayman, 2005; Zubair, 1993).

Although the political choice of medium of instruction in Rwanda favours English, Researchers advise that the medium of instruction is chosen based on the functions that the language fulfills (Trappes- Lomax, 1990). Since learning involves thinking and

learning to think logically, the medium of instruction needs to enable learners to conceptualise in that language and afford them the opportunity to receive and transmit information clearly (Rugemalira 2005, Trapez- Lomax 1990, Wolff 2011). This would give them the opportunity to examine critically what others say and enable them to express and elaborate their points of view. It would also allow the learners to relate effectively to their teachers as well as their peers (Brock-Utne & Alidou 2011). In their research on the language factor in teaching and learning in sub Saharan Africa, Alidou and Brock-Utne (2011) show that the use of languages familiar to teachers and students impact positively on teaching practices. Once the medium of instruction is familiar to both learners and teachers, they build mutual trust and confidence through verbal interaction, thus creating a secure learning environment.

While research advocates for a familiar language that facilitates learning, further practical evidence suggest that English as a second or foreign language is used as the language of instruction based on the instrumental value attached to it. For example, in Malawi parents are prepared to pay high school fees if the school teaches children in English throughout, arguing that the use of English rather than the local language increases their children's chances of going to secondary school and that it subsequently leads to getting a better job (Mchazime, 2001). In the Rwandan context, English medium of instruction was established in a bid to make Rwanda more competitive and fully functional in both the East African Community and the International Community at large where English is mainly used (Kimenyi 2008; Mineduc 2008, Lynd 2010). Also, empirical evidence from this study (as will be later on elaborated) suggest that the instrumental value of English is taken into consideration while arguing for the maintenance and sustainability of the rather problematic language of instruction for many participants in the study.

Based on the reviewed research, it is clear that the choice of medium of instruction is a complex and instrumentally motivated issue. The choice of the English medium of instruction in the above mentioned examples is based on the status of English described as a gate opener to international mobility and success (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988; Vavrus, 2002). Thus, Trappes- Lomax's (1990) suggestion that the motivation aspect has to be taken into account when choosing the medium of instruction is supported. For him, general acceptance by teachers, parents and other stakeholders is likely to create high levels of motivation. Against these ideas behind the use of English as a language of learning, it is worth investigating higher education students' reflections on the newly introduced policy of using English as the sole medium of instruction in higher education in Rwanda.

Purpose of the study

Teachers and students are normally among the main stakeholders in implementing the language in education policy. However, they are rarely if ever part of the policy making team. Thus, necessity to investigate higher education students' reflections on learning all their subjects in English arose in order to reveal yet unknown experiences of students regarding the use of the English medium of instruction in their daily academic activities, especially when their secondary school level was completed in French medium of instruction. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students experience/ reflect on learning all their academic subjects through the medium of English only?
2. What problems and challenges do they meet in their everyday academic tasks?

Method

This study investigates students' reflections in using English as the sole medium of instruction in their everyday higher education activities, especially in times of academic language shift. It is qualitative in nature since the researcher is concerned with an in-depth understanding of the respondents' reflections in using English medium of instruction in all their subjects.

Originally, a questionnaire was sent to one hundred and five students from the department of Economics, Accounting and Management which constitute the faculty of Economics and Management. Only ninety-two students returned the completed questionnaire. The questionnaire included both closed and open questions. It was meant to provide identification details of respondents as well as their general reflections on using English as the sole medium of instruction in their academic activities.

In addition to the questionnaire method, individual interviews were conducted in order to get rich details and deep answers - that the questionnaire had not yielded- required for an in-depth understanding of students' reflections. To participate in the individual interviews, students ought to have completed and returned the questionnaire. Also, they had to be available and willing to take part in the study (Bryman 2008). In total, twenty five first year students (ten females and fifteen males) accepted to participate in the study. They all had Kinyarwanda as their mother tongue and they had all performed well in their secondary school since they managed to obtain a place at a prestigious public University where best performers are admitted.

Guiding interview questions were selected from the open ended questions in the questionnaire. They mainly related to their reflection on understanding lessons through the medium of English, note taking, participation, reading and extracting information in English medium academic activities. The participants were allowed to answer in a language of their choice. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated from Kinyarwanda/ French into English whenever necessary. The answers were grouped under relevant themes and analysed thematically. Quotations were selected and numbered based on variations and relevance. For the scope of this study, only data from interviews were used since they provide the rich and detailed answers necessary to understand the topic under investigation (Bryman 2008).

The researcher had a written permission from the Academic Vice Rector before starting the study. Other ethical considerations such as informed consent and confidentiality were emphasized all along the data collection process. To abide by the anonymity principle, respondents whose quotations were selected and used in the present study are referred to as ASF1, ASM2 etc. ASF representing Answer Student Female; while ASM stands for Answer Student Male and the number indicates the interview number.

Findings

Findings are presented under different themes that emerged from the data after going through the interview transcripts. Actual quotes are used although they are not grammatically correct.

Understanding lessons through the medium of English

In this section, many participants in the study revealed that they have problems in understanding courses offered through the English medium of instruction when the teacher is teaching. Only two students acknowledged that they do not have problems when they study through the medium of English, simply because they grew up in English medium schools. One student states:

I have studied in an Anglophone system, to mean that I am familiar with English. I get no problem in understanding course material. I do not have any problem with vocabulary, I understand very well (ASF4).

However, the remaining students highlighted that they have problems in understanding course materials in English, especially due to some features of the English language. For example, ASM2 fails to understand course material due to limited technical vocabulary in English.

To be honest, I have problems in understanding course material in English. I can't follow very well the lecturer when he is explaining because of the lack of vocabulary. I do not really understand what he means (ASM2).

In addition to features of English language that at times prevent students from understanding their course material effectively; the teacher's characteristics also cause trouble sometimes. For example, the teacher's speed and pronunciation while teaching in English are some of the teacher characteristics that some students mentioned to be at the basis of their lack of understanding.

I have a big problem in understanding course material in English because I am poor in English... I want to mean that I have few vocabularies in English. Another problem, when lecturers explain, I do not get anything because they speak quickly. Others have a difficult accent and their ways of pronouncing English words is not familiar to me (ASM3)

This result echoes Evans & Morrisson's (2011) who found that following lectures in English medium of instruction only constituted a big challenge to respondents mainly because they failed to understand the technical vocabulary. The problem of speed also agrees with Miller's (2009), whose respondents preferred Hong Kong teachers because their accent was easier to follow as opposed to other English accents.

Ability to Take Own Lecture Notes

After noticing that many students have trouble in following what the lecturer says, I wanted to know if at least they manage to take notes of what the lecturer explains. The following are extracts from students' answers on the problems they face when it comes to taking own notes from lecturers' explanations.

It is a problem to understand course material in English and even to take lecture notes on our own because I have no sufficient capacity of understanding English as a medium in nowadays education system (ASF1).

I also have problems in taking lecture notes on my own because my grammar knowledge is poor (ASM2).

It is impossible to write what I do not understand, and when a lecturer speaks quickly, I can't get anything as lecture notes. The difficult pronunciation of some lecturers also makes it hard for me to take notes when they explain, because it is hard to catch what they say. Pronunciation, speed and limited vocabulary discourage me from taking my own notes during lecture time (ASM3)

Yes I have problems in taking lecture notes because I see the words which I do not know, words which I see for the first time. As I do not have many vocabularies, I try to use the dictionary in order to understand or to know what I read (ASF5).

Again, the question of English language characteristics and teacher's characteristics emerge as a stumbling bloc to students' ability to take notes on their own during lecture time. The English language characteristics refer mainly to limited English language ability, limited English grammar, vocabulary and subject specific terminology. The teacher's characteristics relate to speed and difficult pronunciation that discourage students from taking notes on their own. Given the existence of those problems, some students prefer not to take notes and wait until the lecturer writes something on the board.

When I try to write during the lecture, sometimes I get lost because the lecturer continues to speak and I forget what he/ she had said before (ASM7).

Ok, it is not easy but it depends on the manner that the lecturer is giving notes. For example, when he is speaking all the problems I told you above rise. I fail to understand and I do not know what to write. But when he writes on the board, I see everything as it is written and on my own I can write it in an easy way that can help me to study them (ASM9).

The two students quoted above seem to suggest that instead of attempting to take notes on their own and subsequently get lost in the teacher's explanation, they prefer to listen only and wait until the lecturer notes something on the board for them to copy. This result seems to be in line with Airey and Linder (2006) who note that students are likely to gain help from extensive writing on the board when the lecture is in second language medium of instruction. Otherwise they concentrate on the process of writing rather than understanding the content.

Participation in Class Discussions

As it appears from most of the responses, students' participation in English seems to be low. For some, their participation is limited to single syllable utterances.

I do not participate actively in class discussion because if I understand for me it is very hard to respond. I say only yes or no, that is the only way for me to participate actively (ASF1).

This answer seems to be in line with Mchazime (2001) findings in Malawian schools where he found that discussions in English classes were limited to one word answers despite the familiarity of the topic under discussion. He mentions that even when the teacher questioned their answers, they could not defend their views and he attributes this lack of a lively debate on a familiar issue to problems in using the English language. Similarly, Mwinsheike (2002) recalls a case in the Tanzanian context where they could not ask questions to their American chemistry teacher, not because they had understood everything, but because it was hard for them to understand his American English and

the content he was delivering through the unfamiliar accent. On top of that, they lacked appropriate English command to interrupt him so as to ask for clarification.

Language command and the nature of topics under discussion are equally important in motivating students to participate fully in discussions. Even ASF4 who said that the English language is not a stumbling bloc for her to fully participate in discussions acknowledges that an unfamiliar topic is likely to decrease the participation level.

I participate sometimes for some topics. I like to participate because it proves my knowledge in spoken English and I try to avoid fear, shyness and inferiority complex that would prevent me from participating.... You see, we are students and we do not have ideas on all topics we learn in class. If the topic is new or if I do not have any idea on the topic, I keep quiet because I do not have anything to say. I wait until the teacher finishes explaining and it is only then that I can ask questions and make comments. But when it is a topic I am familiar with, I have ideas and I freely express myself (ASF4).

Although ASF1 reveals that her active participation is through yes/ no answers, her classmates look at active participation as being fully involved in classroom discussion by asking questions and providing detailed answers or opinions. Hence, they suggest that it is not easy for them to participate actively because they are shy and afraid to make mistakes. However, they can only participate when the lecturer ask them to do so.

No, I do not really participate actively because I am shy to ask questions or respond because of my limited English. I have fear and suspect that when I try to discuss in class and say a false English word, the other students will laugh at me. I have studied mathematics in secondary school and it is a big problem for me to express myself (ASM3).

Of course no, because I am not confident enough and the number of students are the most problem in discussions of everybody. But I sometimes participate when the lecturer wants me to do it (ASM2)

The low participation in class discussions tend to relate to Peacock (1995) remark that when it comes to the quality of instructional delivery the language of instruction is instrumental in determining the level of performance.

Even though shyness and fear to make mistakes are mentioned to be at the basis of low active participation in classroom discussion for some students, other students look at active participation as a way to improve their language and content knowledge. Therefore, they have to participate actively regardless of the language mistakes they might make. For them, the knowledge they gain from the classroom exchange is more important than the accuracy with which they express their ideas.

Yes of course I participate in because I know that it helps me to improve the English and to know many vocabularies and I say many mistakes but others correct me and that is a good way of learning. In any case I am a student; I am not supposed to be perfect (ASF5).

Yes I do participate in class discussions because class discussions help me learn a lot of things from my classmates and things learned through discussions are easy to catch and to memorise at once (ASM6).

Even if English problems prevent us from understanding as well as we wish, our class is dynamic. I mean we try talking making mistakes; no one is there to laugh at you.

This makes me proud of what I am saying. We discuss and we correct one another in English. This habit gives me the ability to speak proudly (ASM9).

The above mentioned quotations testify that at times some students volunteer to share their ideas despite their problems with the English language. However, it can be inferred from their answers that the meaning they assign to classroom discussion (which would refer to individual contributions to the whole class discussion with the presence of the teacher) is the same as group discussions (which refers to students discussing in groups on their own with the possibility of presenting results of their discussion to the whole class). Thus, taken as such, classroom discussions take place in a relaxed atmosphere where students do not panic to use poor English and they do not feel the controlling eye of the teacher, hence leading to maximum participation.

Reading, Extracting, Organising and Presenting Required Information from Books

In this study, the majority of students acknowledged to have problems in reading material in English, since they already have problems in the English language. However the problematic aspect and level vary from student to student. For example, some students relate their problems to lack of previous use of the language in their secondary school.

No, I do not manage to read and extract the required information from prescribed books because for me it is very difficult to read and extract information from books without basing on only French we have followed as medium of instruction in high school (ASF1)

While ASF1 locates her present problems in using English as a medium of instruction to language shift at the university level, ASM3 seems to be mainly pointing to teaching practices. Since she was used to an expert teacher who would dispense knowledge at secondary school level, it is not easy for her to adjust to a new system where a university lecturer facilitates her to acquire knowledge on her own by prescribing a number of books to read and extract knowledge from. Hence, she is discouraged and blames the problem on English language challenges.

Impossible for me to read any book in English because I am poor in English. It discourages me even to try in order to get more vocabularies. In secondary school, we were not used to read books, because we got everything from the teachers. Even now at the university, I am discouraged and do not like to read books (ASM3).

Although many students experience topic related or language related problems in their university studies, it is interesting to note that some of their classmates are able to fully function in an academic environment which requests the ability to read, extract, organise and present the required information and subsequently share it with their classmates.

I read some prescribed books in English; I organise the main ideas, in order to present the information to my classmates. I also summarise the information I extract from books and discuss with my classmates (ASF4).

Since students with problems cannot go away without completing the above mentioned academic activities successfully, they most often rely on their resourceful classmates such as ASF4 for explanation and academic support as mentioned below.

I do not read English books and when it is an assignment, most of the time it is groups and my group mates read, organize and present the information. We meet as a group and they explain to me and to others like me what the task is all about, what we will be presenting, and the one who knows English well presents on behalf of the whole group (ASM3).

Me as a student and others in my department, when we read a book related to our course, we try to catch some information on our own but not. But when we read in groups we catch something because we use French or Kinyarwanda to explain to one another. You see there are many terms in English which are very difficult to know the meaning but when the lecturer translates in French we see that we are familiar with the terms... (ASM8)

From the above mentioned quotations, group work seems to be most appropriate for academic support among students not only because there are individuals with varying content knowledge in the groups, but also because they can use the languages they are familiar with. For them, the use of Kinyarwanda and French during group work upgrades their understanding of the topic under discussion, which aligns with Rubagumya (1997) who found that code switching in the Tanzanian context was mostly used as a means to clarify difficult vocabulary or key concepts in an activity. Even though students code switch in their group work to help one another, I also examined what happens when it comes to presentations and the teacher calls upon anybody in the group other than the designated group leader to present. The following is one of the responses

Most of the time we have written work, I take the written work and read it. If he does not want me to read, I say in few words what I remember from explanation and ask my colleagues to continue. Otherwise I keep quiet or ask him if I can express myself in French or Kinyarwanda (ASM3)

The response from ASM3 is not surprising especially if we recall that classroom participation was limited to one word or less detailed answers, the reason being mainly limited linguistic abilities to participate. If the teacher requests any student to be the presenter, chances of providing a complete and detailed answer remain slim, unless the teacher allows the use of Kinyarwanda or French. In such circumstances, it goes without saying that the limited language abilities have a bearing on the way students in one group challenge or comment on reports from other groups as well. Such a situation seems to relate to what Osaki (1991) observed in science teaching in Tanzania when he concluded that students talked very little in class and attempted to discuss using a mixture of English and Kiswahili and copied the notes on the board in English. Teachers who insisted on using English only ended up talking to themselves with little students input. Similarly, with reference to the Hong Kong context, Macaro & Lo (2012) highlighted that the use of English only medium inhibited students' participation and lessons became more teacher-centered, thus reducing possibilities to negotiate meaning and scaffolding opportunities.

Students' Suggestions Regarding Medium of Instruction

From the study, the majority of the respondents maintain that English as the sole medium of instruction limits their subject matter understanding but they are ready to work hard in order to fully cope with it. For some, reading material in English requires much time but they are determined to find time to develop their reading skills and eventually cope with the English medium.

Most of the time I read, but I have to spend too much time to understand what I read, especially when I have an assignment to complete. But I am planning to find time to read a lot in order to develop my reading skills (ASM2)

Because English is a new language to me, when I try to read books written in English, I fail to understand some new vocabularies and concepts but I am doing my best in order to improve my English. By the end of this semester, I want to become familiar English (ASM6)

We have to do our best in order to improve our English language (ASM7)

For others, even though it is hard to perform some academic activities such as understanding information from books, extracting, organising and presenting the information to other members of the class, they are determined to use dictionaries and seek for peer support in order to fully function in academic environment.

... I have problems to understand the information in English and to express myself, but I use a dictionary in order to catch the information and I try to converse with others in order to be familiar with English and to overcome fear and shyness (ASF5)

You know some students don't feel at ease to express themselves in English, even when they know the material. But I think they can overcome the problem by practicing all the time. Our teachers used to tell us that practice makes perfect (ASF4)

Taking into account the students expressed academic problems linked to using the English medium of instruction and the way they resolve to overcome them, it goes without saying that they are driven by the instrumental motivation associated with using English in the global world (Zakaria and Abd Aziz, 2011). The instrumental motivation becomes even clearer in the following ideas:

We are making our effort in order to learn English so that we can participate fully in our academic activities. You see, English is used in many countries, and if we finish here and we want to apply for a job in Rwanda or in East Africa or even in the whole world, we will have to know English. English is a key to all opportunities; that is why we are doing our effort in order to upgrade our knowledge. (ASM3)

Even if using English in all courses was a political decision, it is very helpful in our life because our country is joining many Anglophone organisations such as the East African Community and the Common Wealth in which we have to compete and gain from them. Then we have to first of all break the language barriers (ASM9).

From the above mentioned ideas, it is clear that these students have a positive attitude towards using English as a medium of instruction. Some scholars argue that when learners lack competence in the language of learning, they go through a mental struggle searching for the correct words or sentences to accomplish a task before them. When the words and sentences are not readily available in their English language repertoire, this situation is likely to frustrate learners instead of leading them to enjoy learning and reflecting upon what they learn (Mchazime, 2001). In the Rwandan context, students' responses show that they have problems in the language of learning, but they are motivated by the instrumental value associated to using English for their future life. They like being taught in English because they foresee the advantages linked to using English in the current global world. This result is similar to the one of Evans & Morrisson (2011) who found that in Hong Kong, students preferred English Medium of instruction mainly because of its importance in research, publication, business and professional

worlds. In my study, the motivation to use English is so high that some even suggest avoiding using mother tongue in order to maximise the use of English.

In order to let the courses be understandable, students must be careful and motivated to use English. It is necessary to avoid mother tongue in order to let English take a great place (ASM10)

Indeed if students are determined to make efforts in order to fully function in the English medium of instruction, they need plenty of opportunities where they would use English. They need environments where they can be expected to use English and feel comfortable in doing so (Littlewood & Liu, 1996).

Discussion

This study investigated students' reflections in using English as the medium of instruction in Rwandan higher education in times of language shift. Based on answers from respondents, it was generally revealed that several students experience problems in understanding the courses offered through medium of English, due to the English language and lecturer's characteristics such as limited general vocabulary and subject specific terminologies, different lecturers' accents, lecturers' speed in speaking etc. Those language and lecturers' characteristics make it hard for most students to perform academic activities that students are required to perform on a daily basis.

I would like to discuss the meanings and pedagogical implications of the above mentioned findings. Considering students' limited English language command as the results in the study suggest, it is possible to question how fair and successful the policy is likely to be. As such, the choice of medium of instruction goes against Gillani et al (2010) and Trappes- Lomax (1990), Alidou and Brock Utne (2011) suggestion that both teachers and learners need to be fully conversant with the medium of instruction. Also, limited ability to take own lecture notes during lecture time coupled with classroom participation that is limited to brief answers that do not lead to lively debates and discussions is, as Sulemani (2010) notes, an indication that students' language command does not match the communication requirements of higher education. In addition, keeping quiet for fear of making mistakes might prevent students from acquiring help from teachers, peers and the community at large (Evans and Stevenson 2009, Macaro & Lo 2012).

The implication for learning is that in response to the problematic medium of instruction, students are likely to adopt surface level learning strategies such as memorisation or copying from classmates or teachers without deep understanding (Adamson, 1990, Macaro & Lo, 2012). Surface level learning strategies meet immediate needs but do not foster the understanding of concepts (Alidou & Brock-Utne 2011, Mwinsheike 2002, and Wolff 2011). They tend to emphasise the lower order thinking skills which are characterised by rote learning and memorisation (Wang and Farmer, 2008), yet university students are expected to think critically and be responsible of their own learning through negotiation, decision making and justification of their choices in order to prepare for an unknown future career (Bowden and Marton, 1998).

Evidence from the present study shows that the instrumental motivation that students attach to using English as a language of instruction pushes them to like and opt for the maintenance of English as the language of teaching and learning despite the problematic aspects highlighted throughout the study. For them, they are part of a globalised world

and want to make all possible efforts in order to be its fully fledged members. This finding is in line with Zacharia & Abd Aziz (2011) who found that in the Malaysian context, students have a positive perception towards the use of English as a medium of instruction in Mathematics despite their poor performance in solving Math problems when English is used. Also, Evans & Morrisson's (2011) respondents argued for the maintenance of English medium of instruction based on the current global driving forces associated to the English language. Their stand echoes Trappes-Lomax's (1990) who stresses that motivation is a key aspect in choosing, using and keeping the medium of instruction in use. While recognizing the importance of foreign languages such as English to open up students' opportunities and exchange views with the world, efforts to upgrade the students' abilities to successfully use the English language for educational purposes and to bring about effective learning need to be considered.

Conclusion

This study investigated students' reflections on the current use of English as the sole medium of instruction in Rwandan higher education. The study revealed that many participants in this study face different challenges and difficulties in using the newly adopted language of instruction in their everyday academic activities. However, it was noticed that the current instrumental motivation attached to English pushes students to argue in favour of the English medium of instruction despite the overtly voiced problems related to implementing the policy in the classroom. Since students are instrumentally motivated to be instructed in English medium while their English command does not match with the communicative demands of their academic work, responsible code switching and translanguaging (Garcia, 2009) could be allowed as one of the possible ways to negotiate and make sense of the content subjects, to promote critical thinking skills and academic output expected from university students. Also, collaboration and peer support could be encouraged in order to enhance deeper processes of learning at higher education level.

Although the scope of this study was limited to students' reflections on using English as the medium of instruction in higher education in Rwanda, it would be equally interesting to investigate teachers' reflections in order to fully understand the implementation of the newly introduced language in education policy in Rwanda.

References

- Adamson, H.D., (1990). ESL students' use of academic skills in content courses. *English for Specific Purposes Journal* 9 (1), 67–87.
- Airey, J. & Linder, C. (2006). Language and the experience of learning physics in Sweden. *European Journal of Physics* 27, 553-560.
- Alidou, H. (1997). Education language policy and bilingual education: The impact of French language policy in primary education in Niger. *PhD Thesis*. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.
- Alidou, H. & Brock-Utne, B. (2011). Teaching practices - teaching in a familiar language. In Ouane, A. & Glanz, C. (Eds.) *Optimising learning, education and publish in Africa: the language factor. A review and analysis of theory and practice in mother tongue and bilingual education in sub-Saharan Africa*. 159-186. UIL/ADEA.

- Bamgbose, A. (2005). Mother-tongue education. Lessons from the Yoruba experience. In Brock- Utne, B. & Kofi Hopson, R. (Eds.) *Languages of instruction for African emancipation: Focus on postcolonial contexts and considerations*. 210- 234. Cape Town: CASAS.
- Brock-Utne, B. & Alidou, H. (2011). Active students-learning through a language they master. In Ouane, A. & Glanz, C. (Eds.) *Optimising learning, education and publishing in Africa: the language factor. A review and analysis of theory and practice in mother tongue and bilingual education in sub- Saharan Africa*. 187- 216. UIL/ADEA.
- Brock-Utne, B., Desai, Z. and Qorro, M. (eds.). 2004. *Researching the Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa*. Vlaeberg: African Minds.
- Bryman, A. (2008). *Social Research Methods (3rd ed)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bowden, J. & Marton, F. (1998). *The university of learning: Beyond quality and competence*. London: Kogan page.
- NCHE (2007). *National policy on language teaching in higher education*. Kigali: National Council for Higher Education.
- Evans, C., Stevenson, K. (2010). The learning experiences of international doctoral students with particular reference to nursing students: a literature review. *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 47 (2), 239-250.
- Evans, S. & Morrisson, B. (2011). The student experience of English medium higher education in Hong Kong. *Language and Education* 25 (2). 147-162.
- Garcia, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gillani. I.G., Khurshid, K., Jumani, N. B., Rahman, F. (2010). A comparison of students' achievement in the subject of English: A Pakistani context. *Language in India: Strength for today and Bright hope for tomorrow* vol.10: 146-152.
- Hayman, R. (2005) 'The contribution of the Post-Basic Education and Training (PBET) to poverty reduction in Rwanda: balancing short-term goals and long-term visions in the face of capacity constraints. Post-Basic Education and Training. *Working Paper Series* No. 3, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh.
- Heugh, K. (2000). The case against bilingual and multilingual education in South Africa. *PRAESA Occasional Paper* No. 6. Cape Town: PRAESA.
- Kimenyi, F. (2008). Kagame reiterates the use of English as education medium. In *The Newtimes*, October 15th 2008.
- Kyenyune, R. (2003). Challenges of Using English as a medium of instruction in multilingual contexts: A view from Ugandan classrooms. *Language, culture and curriculum* 16(2) :173-183.
- Littlewood, W.T. & Liu, N.F. (1996). *Hong Kong students and their English*. Hong Kong: Macmillan.
- Lynd, M. (2010). *Assessment report and proposal for an education strategy*. USAID: Rwanda.
- Macaro, E. & Lo, Y.Y. (2012). The medium of instruction and classroom interaction: Evidence from Hong Kong secondary schools. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 15 (1): 27-52.

- Mchazime, H.S. (2001). Effects of English as a medium of instruction on pupils' academic achievement in social studies in primary schools in Malawi. *PhD Thesis*. University of South Africa.
- MINEDUC. (2008). *Education sector strategic plan 2008-2012*. Kigali: Ministry of Education.
- Miller, L. (2009). Engineering lectures in a second language: What factors facilitate students' listening comprehension? *Asian EFL Journal* 11(2): 8-30.
- Mwinesheike, H., M. (2002). *Science and the Language Barrier: Using Kiswahili as a Medium of Instruction in Tanzania Secondary Schools as a Strategy of Improving Student Participation and Performance in Science*. Oslo: Institute for Educational Research.
- Osaki, K.M. (1991). Factors influencing the use of the environment in Science Teaching. *PhD Thesis*. University of Alberta.
- Peacock, A. (1995). An agenda for research on text material in primary science for Second language learners of English in developing countries. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural development*, Vol. 16: 5, 389-401.
- Rugemalira, J., M. (2005). Theoretical and practical challenges in a Tanzanian English medium primary school. *Africa & Asia*, Vol. 5: 66-84.
- Rubagumya, C. (1997). Disconnecting Education: Language as a determinant of the quality of education in Tanzania. *Journal of Linguistics and Language in Education*, Vol.3:81-93.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1988). *Minority education: From shame to struggle*. England: Multilingual Matters.
- Suliman, W.A., Tadros, A. (2010). Nursing students coping with English as a foreign language medium of instruction. *Nurse Education Today*. doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2010.07.014.
- Trappes-Lomax, (1990). Can a foreign language be a national medium? In Rubagumya C.M. (ed.). *Language in Education in Africa*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matter. 94-104.
- Vavrus, F. (2002). Post coloniality and English Exploring language policy and the politics of development in Tanzania. *TESOL Quarterly* 36 (3):373-397
- Wang, V., Farmer, L., 2008. Adult teaching methods in China and Bloom's Taxonomy. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 2 (2): 1-15.
- Wolff, E. 2011. Language politics and planning. In Ouane, A. & Glanz, C. (Eds.) *Optimising learning, education and publishing in Africa: the language factor. A review and analysis of theory and practice in mother tongue and bilingual education in sub-Saharan Africa*. 49-104. IUL/ADEA.
- Zakaria, Z. & Abd Aziz, M., S. (2011). Assessing students performance. The second language (English) factor. *The International Journal of Educational and Psychological assessment* 6 (2): 42-62.
- Zubair, S. (1993). The sociolinguistics of English in Pakistan. *In Journal of Research (Humanities)*, Vol. 13, Multan: Bahauddin Zakariya University.

