

# Coping with English as Language of Instruction in Higher Education in Rwanda

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## Abstract

The present study examines strategies that multilingual university students in Rwanda use in order to successfully deal with complex academic material offered through the medium of English, a foreign language. The reported strategies emerged from group work discussions and interviews with students in the faculty of Economics and Management at a University in Rwanda. The data were analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that students have multiple coping strategies that enable them to complete academic tasks given through the medium of English. One of the prominent strategies and practices is the successful use of other languages at their disposal to mediate cognitively demanding academic tasks. Although other spoken languages are not officially recognised as media of instruction in higher education, they play a mediating role in content learning through responsible code switching and translanguaging.

**Keywords:** Higher education, Coping strategies, English medium of instruction, Language in education policy, Translanguaging

## 1. Introduction

A language of instruction is assumed to be an enabling tool which facilitates the learning of content subjects (Kyeyune 2010, Webb 2004). The current globalization phenomenon has pushed many nations to adopt English as the language of teaching and learning (Tamtam et al. 2010) even in contexts where English is a second or foreign language to learners. In principle, using English, when it is a second/ foreign language, as a language of teaching and learning might not be an obstacle to the full development of learners' conceptual abilities, provided they are fully conversant in the language of instruction (Webb 2004). However, with reference to the African context, extensive research shows that many African learners are not proficient enough in English to be able to use it appropriately as the language of instruction (Alidou and Brock-Utne 2011; Brock-Utne, Desai, and Qorro 2004; Kyeyune 2010; Mwinsheike 2002; Rubagumya 1997; Rugemalira 2005; Vavrus 2002; and Webb 2002, 2004). Although the choice of English is most of the time supported by political, social and economic arguments (Choi and Tam 2011, Trudell 2010), research has questioned the fairness and success of education conveyed through a language that is unfamiliar to both teachers and learners. Through various studies, researchers hold that the language used for learning and teaching is crucial for learners' acquisition of knowledge and understanding and the development of their skills, and for their ability to demonstrate their acquired knowledge effectively in assignments and examinations. If learners do not know the language used as the medium of instruction well enough, they will have problems to develop educationally (Brock Utne and Alidou 2011; Heugh 2000; Wolff 2011; Webb 2004).

Rwanda as one African country is not an exception to the above-mentioned scenario. Recent research have highlighted the mismatch between Rwandan learners' English language abilities and the cognitive academic requirements they meet in higher education (Andersson, Kagwesage and Rusanganwa 2012; Andersson and Rusanganwa 2011; Kagwesage 2012; NUR 2010; Parliament of Rwanda 2010). Logically, if language abilities do not match with the conceptual requirement, this would lead to frustration and a request to change the medium. However, English remains the preferred medium of instruction among the students mainly due to the instrumental motivation associated with the use of English as an international language (Kagwesage 2012; Samuelson and

Freedman 2010). In addition, university statistics do not highlight increased attrition or drop-out rates as a result of the language through which higher education instruction is conveyed. This intrigued the present paper and therefore, the overarching aim of the present study is to investigate strategies that higher education students use in order to cope with their academic requirements.

## **2. Context and rationale**

Language in education policy in Rwanda has dramatically changed over the last few years. Before 1994, the language of instruction in primary schools was Kinyarwanda (L1) and French (L2) in secondary and tertiary education. Since 1995 the Government of Rwanda decided to create a 'trilingual' society, introducing English (L3) as an official language and medium of instruction in addition to Kinyarwanda and French. Until 2008, both English and French were used as media of instruction in higher education depending on the lecturers' linguistic abilities. At the same time, students with language problems were given support courses either in English or French depending on where they had problems. However, starting from 2009, a new policy, introduced with immediate effect, required students to start all their academic subjects in English, regardless of whether they had been learning in French or in English in secondary school. The shift was mainly motivated by political, economic and social arguments (Mineduc 2008; NCHE 2008; Samuelson and Freedman 2010) to keep pace with the globalization trend.

The present study is located in a Rwandan context where the majority of the people have one language in common, Kinyarwanda. A disjunction exists between the language of instruction and the language of out-of-class communication, thus limiting the use of foreign languages to lecture rooms and other formal settings. Also, it is worth recalling that Rwanda has witnessed continuous change in the language in education policy over the last decade as detailed above. Furthermore, over the last decade, developments have included the establishment of new public and private institutions within higher education, and a massive enrollment through private, evening and weekend programmes in addition to the mainstream ones.

It is assumed that, by investigating students' strategies to cope with cognitively demanding academic content through the medium of English, this paper will contribute new knowledge to the existing and growing body of research on language of instruction, given the context in which it is carried out, and the aspect under investigation. Also, the gained knowledge could raise awareness on the existence of successful students' strategies to meet cognitively challenging content and increase conceptual attainment despite the problematic language of instruction. This knowledge may inform pedagogical practice and help newcomers to become integrated into the university community as successful students.

## **3. Previous studies on coping strategies in multilingual higher education**

According to Johnson, Scholes and Wittington (2008) strategy within a management context encompass a plan for both direction and scope of an organisation. It means that available resources are planned to be used efficiently, often within a challenging environment. Seen from the perspective of students in higher education, their scope could vary between trying to learn as much as possible using available resources to reach their goals, to spending a minimum of time on a task to pass an upcoming exam. Coping strategies become necessary if available resources are not felt to be enough to reach personal goals and satisfy assessment requirements. Here, I see them as a set of options which students may choose from in a more or less conscious way to overcome learning problems in a multilingual setting.

The medium of instruction in school dictates to a large extent the attainment of knowledge and skills at all levels of the education system. It can promote, stagnate or even stifle the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are pertinent to development (Brock-Utne et al. 2004; Brock-Utne and Alidou 2006; Webb 2004; Vavrus 2003; Kyeyune 2010). As a response to challenges posed by the use of the English medium in higher education, considerable research has been undertaken to investigate how students meet and adjust to such challenges (Andrada 2006; Evans and Morrison 2011, 2010; Praxton 2009; Ramsey 1999; Van der Walt and Dornbrack 2011). Although some of the studies investigate foreign students trying to adjust to the demands of English as a medium of instruction in main Anglophone countries such as the US and Australia (Andrada 2006, 2009; Jones and Baker 2007; Ramsey 1999; Ramsey, Raven and Hall 2005), their findings seem to be in line with those studies carried out in less English speaking contexts (Björkman 2011; Evans and Morrison 2010, 2011; Ljlsland 2010; Praxton 2009; Van der Walt and Dornbrack 2011).

When investigating how students respond to challenges caused by having English as a medium of instruction in Hong Kong, Evans and Morrison (2011) suggest that by combining practices such as hard work, strong motivation, effective learning strategies and peer networks, students manage to overcome academic problems such as understanding technical vocabulary, comprehending lectures, and meeting disciplinary requirements.

In a different geographical context but similar linguistic setting where English is second/ foreign language to students, Praxton (2009) identified translation to be an important learning practice that naturally and inevitably occurs in the South African context, in classroom or in peer learning groups since they switch from English to their local languages in order to better understand new concepts. The researcher believes that “unless students explored concepts through various languages, they would not really develop their own personal construction and an enriched understanding of them” (ibid: 351).

In a related context, Van der Walt and Dornbrack (2011) investigated ways of coping with higher education by bilingual students at Stellenbosch University where Afrikaans is used alongside English as language of teaching and learning. In their study, translation was generally found to be time consuming. Thus, their bilingual respondents preferred to explain subject content in their own mundane words rather than through translation. Their study further identified that the bilingual requirements and context in which it took place afford “translanguaging to construct meaning” (Garcia 2009:14) instead of forming barriers for learning. Furthermore, they mentioned relying upon friends and relatives as “funds of knowledge” (Moll 2007:274) as yet another successful strategy to deal with the challenges of higher education studies in a second or foreign language of instruction. Thus, according to Van der Walt and Dornbrack (2011), the use of more than one language in the researched higher education institution potentially assists rather than diminishes the development of academic discourse. From the reviewed studies, it is clear that the context has a bearing on which strategies learners adopt in order to facilitate learning.

Still on the educational uses of languages, researchers identified the importance of exploratory talk in the development of learners’ understanding of new concepts (Barnes 2008; Mercer and Dawes 2008). Exploratory talk promotes interaction and flourishes in mutually supportive groups. By exposing lack of knowledge and floating new and incomplete ideas, such talk presents scaffolding opportunities for a careful and knowledgeable facilitator and can culminate in knowledge sharing and development (Barnes 2008; Mercer 1995). Other studies also examined the contribution of peer network and collaboration as well as the ensuing talk as practices that are likely to mediate cognitively demanding academic concepts (Li et al. 2010; Mercer 2008).

The present study adds to the previous studies by investigating students’ coping strategies in the flux of change from learning in most students’ first foreign language, French, to learning in their second foreign language, English.

#### **4. Research questions**

Considering insights from the reviewed studies, the present study investigates whether students have different ways of handling cognitively demanding tasks when a foreign instructional language is used, and strategies students in higher education in Rwanda use in order to cope. It takes into account different aspects of multilingualism and assumes that all languages are resources for learning. It investigates the following research questions:

- 1) How do students handle learning tasks in a multilingual setting?
- 2) Which strategies do students use to cope with English as a medium of instruction?

#### **5. Method**

The findings presented below were derived from two sources: naturally occurring group work discussion and individual in-depth interviews. In 2008, first year students in the Faculty of Economics and Management at a university in Rwanda were given tasks to complete in their course entitled ‘Organisational Behaviour’. Two groups of five students each, ten students in total were recorded while completing the assigned task. These ten students were subject to deep interviews. However, only data from one discussion group are used in the present study. They were discussing “The impact of individuals’ personality in the management of an organisation”

The course was offered through the medium of English. The topics were given in English and the final paper had to be written in English or French. Each group met five times and came up with the final papers they had to hand in. Later on, recordings were transcribed verbatim and subsequently translated. The faculty of economics and management was chosen because it is among the faculties where much verbal language use is required. Both written and spoken English, the language of instruction, is required for the successful completion of courses. In the group discussions Kinyarwanda was the language most frequently used. It is translated into English using normal font whereas italics is used to show when students speak English.

After going through the transcribed and translated group discussions, I felt that in-depth views were needed to supplement the findings from the group discussions. Thus, I went back to the ten group members and asked if they would agree to be interviewed. After their informed consent, semi- structured individual interviews were conducted in order to allow respondents to express themselves as exhaustively as possible on questions related to how they

handle their learning tasks and strategies they use to increase subject matter understanding. Also, the interviews helped the researcher to follow-up some of the questions or issues that were raised during the interview. Each interview lasted 25 minutes on average. The researcher asked the respondents for permission to tape record them and they accepted. The questions were formulated both in English and Kinyarwanda and the respondents were allowed to respond in the language of their choice. All of them answered in English.

Ethical considerations such as informed consent and confidentiality were emphasized throughout the data collection process. To abide by the anonymity principle, respondents in the interview data set are identified as A1, A 2 etc. (A stands for Answer while the number designates the respondents as they were participating in the interviews). In the group work data set, respondents are referred to as student 1, student 2 etc depending on how they followed one another to take turns during the discussion. The data was analysed in detail to identify and classify recurring themes and sub-themes (Boyatzis 1998, Bryman 2012). The quotes for the present study are selected support the identified themes and sub-themes (Braun and Clarke 2006) and show variation in strategies employed. Actual interview quotes are used although they might not be grammatically correct.

The researcher hoped that both data sets could shed light on strategies and practices that higher education students in Rwanda use in order to cope with their academic subjects. The findings are presented and discussed in the following sections.

## 6. Findings

This section reports ways of handling learning tasks and strategies used to facilitate learning that emerged from group discussions and interviews. Selected interview responses and discussion sections are used to uncover, support and illustrate strategies used to mediate learning.

### 6.1 Using different languages to mediate domain specific content

The extracts below exemplify the students' strategy of using different languages at their disposal in order to mediate cognitively demanding tasks and eventually clear possible misunderstandings that are likely to originate from the limited command of the foreign language of instruction.

A 1: We are not perfect in languages and when we are here, there some students which are Anglo-phones and other ones Franco-phones and when about in forming groups, we do not pay attention to English or French, we join together like that. When you use, if you use French, Anglophone students are going to lost. When you use English, French students are going to lost. So that we try to use Kinyarwanda because francophone students understand Kinyarwanda and Anglophone students understand Kinyarwanda. To be understandable that is why we use Kinyarwanda very much.

From the quotation above from A1, it is clear that Kinyarwanda is used to make sense of the content subject, although it is not officially recognised as the medium of instruction in Rwandan higher education. Since it is a language that students are conversant with, they resort to using it, just as any other language they might be conversant with, in order to facilitate the understanding of the academic subjects.

A 4: Your classmate use a language which allow you together to understand, if they use Kinyarwanda because they know Kinyarwanda, you also you use Kinyarwanda and try to express the course in Kinyarwanda or French when you are a francophone.

Q: When they explain in different languages do you feel that you understand better?

A 4: Yes, you understand better in that case you understand better if you are using a language you understand better you both, you use same language.

Q: So, switching from one language to another one is a strategy you use in order to understand

A 4: Yes, we use that strategy to understand the course. If the course is in English, we use French, in that case you understand more.

The respondents pointed out that for the sake of reducing confusion, they use the languages they understand better. Languages are vehicles through which students grasp and make sense of the content in order to convert information into knowledge. The use of a language that learners are conversant with, in order to clear up any kind of misunderstanding is revealed to be a common practice in higher education in Rwanda. Evidence from the recorded group discussions also testifies to the dominant use of Kinyarwanda to complete a task in English. In fact, although the task to complete was in English, not much of the discussion was in English at all, probably because it is not easy for the learners to express themselves clearly in English.

Student 1: I would like to tell you that the lecturer gave us *the structure* of the work. He said that in the *introduction* there must be *the identification of the problem, facts, causes and consequences of the problem*. All that has to appear in the *introduction*. Then follows *literature review* of the subject, I think it is part of *the development*. After that there is the *analysis* of the problem followed by *the conclusion*, and lastly the *bibliography*. He recommended that references should consist of at least ten books.

From this example, it is clear that while discussing the structure of the work as suggested by the teacher, the discussion is mainly in Kinyarwanda except when they mention key words such as structure, introduction, problems, facts, etc. which remain in English.

The change of code for clarification and learning purposes does not only occur in group work or peer support settings. From the data, it also emerged that even in formal classroom situations, teachers sometimes code switch from the official language of teaching to a familiar language in order to facilitate understanding.

A 1: For example in the course which is in English, sometimes if the lecturer knows French, to reduce confusion because sometimes we arrive on a point and a student or me which I do not understand well and sometimes we ask the lecturer to use another language to reduce the confusion and it helps me to increase my understanding very much. ...but some lecturers, to support us they know we are not perfect in languages, they use to mix those languages so that we understand very well.

Some teachers seem to use Kinyarwanda to a large extent on specific occasions.

A 7: Especially in our discussions, but sometimes there are some lecturers who use Kinyarwanda maybe 50%.

Q: Sure?

A 7: Or, it is when they are explaining.

Q: Do they give notes in English and then they explain in Kinyarwanda

A 7: They read their notes and they try to explain in Kinyarwanda. Because they think, there are people who do not understand the language of the course. So, they explain in Kinyarwanda so that the two people can understand.

From the above quotations, it is clear that code-switching occurs even in formal class room settings for clarification purposes. Indeed, if the aim of teaching is to facilitate knowledge acquisition, then it sounds legitimate to use any language that would be conducive to knowledge acquisition for as long as it is possible. Sticking to the use of a language that constitutes a barrier to knowledge acquisition would undermine the facilitating role of the teacher since the lesson would be less productive as far as knowledge acquisition is concerned. Thus, drawing upon languages used in the Rwandan society to facilitate knowledge acquisition is revealed to be one of the strategies that students believe leads to enhanced comprehension.

A 8: Mixing languages is an advantage because when we have teachers such as Indian people who do not know or who do not understand any other language such as French or Kinyarwanda, it is very difficult for them to explain to us. So, speaking more than one language at the university level is an advantage I think.

The practice of using the different languages at their disposal for clarification purposes seems to be one of the efficient strategies that students use, and request teachers to use when necessary, to successfully complete their academic work.

### 6.2 Using different languages to negotiate meaning and construct knowledge

The following extract from students' discussions exemplifies how they negotiate meaning and collaboratively construct meaning using more than one language.

Student 1: I understand the *subject* this way: there are different people in a *company* and the *manager* does not know them already. For me this diversity of *personalities* has an *impact* on the *management of a company*. It will give a *manager* an enormous task.

Student 4: Me too, I understand it that way. In a *company* there may be *innately lazy people, complicated ones*. Maybe we shall go into detail when we shall find books. You can see a person for the first time and *classify* him as *lazy, complicated, primary, "secondaire"* (people tending to hide their reactions).

Student 3: You can sometimes be *deceived by appearances*. I think you will get to know somebody as long as you work with him. Then you will know how to handle him.

Student 2: I wonder whether you remember that the lecturer told us about the *biased perception*. I can have a *bad temper* but have a good behaviour. And the *manager* can treat me unfairly. I think that to know people's behaviour,

the *manager* has to live with them first. The *perception* can be deceptive. As for me, I see that what we are going to do is to look for books talking about the *management of an organization, personality of individuals*.

Here, students are trying to construct the meaning of the main word: Personality. To do so, they negotiate the meaning of different key words related to personality such as lazy, complicated, primary, etc and how people with different personalities can fit different roles in a given company or organisation. In addition to their own complementary understanding of the subject (student 1, 4, 3), they also bring in meanings from the teacher with terms such as appearance, temper, perception etc (student 2) and eventually come up with a shared meaning that is collaboratively constructed through the students' interaction.

The following extract also shows how students use different languages they know to construct knowledge, learn from one another and come up with a shared understanding of the topic under discussion.

Student 1: Coming back to what was previously said "*character and temper*" are different in that the former is related to sociology while the latter is related to *physiological morphology*. It is the way an *individual appears*. You can have for instance a person who seems to be always *angry*, what we call *bad-tempered*, a person who is *always gloomy*.

Student 3: I don't see why. You are spending much time *on biology*.

Student 2: We must first understand the *concepts*. I told you that every one will identify himself. Can you tell me whether *those characters* are either *innate or acquired*?

Student 3: Here it is (reads the passage). *Character is partly innate and partly acquired*. Remember that *temper and personality* are found in the *character*. It means that some *aspects are acquired* and others are *innate*.

This extract suggests that students are in the process of constructing a common understanding of the concepts *character* and *temper*.

When student 1 explains the two concepts, student 3 seems to understand that they are being lost in biology rather than completing the task at hand, and her colleagues bring her back to the task to emphasise that they are rather trying to understand the concepts as a starting point (student 2). As a way to bring her on board, student 2 asks her a question that she answers successfully by reading a passage in the original book. Thus, by involving student 3 in the group discussion requiring her to tell aspects that are acquired or innate, the whole group ends up building a shared knowledge as far as *character* and *temper* are concerned.

Later on, they use the gained knowledge to discuss how people with different personalities can fit as staff in a company or organisation. One problem concerns the definition of *personality*. The students make sure that everyone participates and even appoints a fellow student to contribute, possibly because he has special authority in this situation.

Student 3: ... Vincent why don't you tell us something?

Student 1: I have found something very *important*. The *personality* of each *individual* is *characterized by*: his *singularity*, his *unity and his identity*. Concerning *singularity*, no one behaves exactly the same as someone else. That is clear.

Student 2: For instance you are always smiling but I appear lonely.

Student 1: Everyone behaves in a different way. As for *unity* (he reads a passage from the book).

Student 3: I do not understand *that passage*. Could you please explain it to me?

Student 1: Who understands this *passage* well? Or I will read it once again.

Student 3: Ok! Read it again.

Student 1: (he re-reads the passage).

From what has just been read, I see that *unity* refers to *coherence*. Man is first of all a *system*. It means that the *psychic system of an individual* is *composed of such components* as *intelligence, emotions, affectivity, motivation; morphology* etc. All this constitutes one thing.

Student 3: Are all those details referring to *personality*?

Student 1: Oh, Yes!

From the passage above, it is clear that members of the group keep on constructing meaning by using strategies as asking questions and providing answers, reading and re-reading in the book, explaining what they have read, and

applying the explained concepts to real life situations until everyone in the group is satisfied and they jointly decide to move to the next point. All along the process of knowledge construction, they use Kinyarwanda and English to help one another understand better. Mainly, English is used for scientific concepts only, probably because they learned them in English either from the teacher or from the books they are using.

### *6.3 Using mentoring and peer support systems*

In addition to drawing upon different languages used in the Rwandan society to clarify content and facilitate knowledge acquisition, students also revert to mentoring and peer support systems as another way of working towards enhanced understanding of the subject matter, although the official language of teaching and learning is problematic.

A 4: The strategy that we use for example in our classroom there is mentoring. The person who understands the course well, he explains in Kinyarwanda in front of the class in the absence of the lecturer and sometimes if it is the practical work you may go to the internet in the library to bring some dictionaries and so on but most of the time we are using the mentoring in Kinyarwanda or French in our class if the class is taught in English.

Q: So, this issue of mentors, is it common practice in your class?

A 4: Yes, it is common practice in our class because if there are no mentors, only some people, like five people, may understand the course but others may not understand.

The above quotes emphasise the importance of a student self-initiated mentorship system that has been developed over time to facilitate understanding of the courses. According to the students, it is common practice that they rely on a “more knowledgeable” peer who explains the content of the course to his colleagues in Kinyarwanda, a practice that participants in this study value and appreciate.

### *6.4 Peer support and extensive reading*

This section deals with how peer support coupled with extensive reading proves to be efficient in helping students to understand their courses.

A7: I try to understand because when we are in class, you do not see that the course is difficult. You start to see that it is difficult when you start revising. So, if you do not have someone to explain you, you try to do it yourself, you search probably on internet, on other notes from previous years or you leave it as it is.

Here, reliance on peer support, consulting the internet as well as other reading material seems to be rewarding strategies as far as understanding the subject matter is concerned. One student explains the whole coping process:

A 8: First, I try to meet my friends, my colleagues who know or who understand very well the language in which we are studying. After, I can consult the dictionary for words which are very difficult. Thirdly, I can ask the teacher to translate in other languages if she or he knows others. These are the three procedures to escape the problem of learning in a language I do not understand well.

Other strategies mentioned by one student include doing his best to upgrade his knowledge of English and to keep informed by listening to news and other broadcasts in English, as well as reading newspapers. He also read books related to his field of study.

A 3: Other strategies that I use, even if I am Rwandese, I am not supposed to live here in Rwanda. I try to understand some media, some information broadcasting on radio such as BBC, focus on Africa programme or VOA, day break to Africa every morning and then I used to have a bit of a look in some journals or newspapers and as a student I try to read books about my subjects or courses I study here at the university.

This student seems to be aware of globalisation and the dissolution of national boundaries, especially now that Rwanda is part of the East African Community. He is motivated to learn a language that will help him to move freely throughout the world.

Considering the academic benefits of extensive reading, some students acknowledged the importance of having access to the internet where they get additional material as exemplified in the following extract.

A 7: Any other strategy? Except reading books, trying to inform, I do not know if I can say to inform myself, to get informed, to read books, to go in the library, sometimes on the net, because now I have access on the internet for some hours. I try to do it. I think that is my strategy for the moment.

Peer support coupled with checking in the reference material are also mentioned as frequent practices when students persistently try and maximize their efforts so as to make meaning of their subjects

Q: If you meet problems, how do you try to solve them?

A 3: So, sometimes I check in a dictionary or consult other students who are more able to understand than me and sometimes even though I am not able to understand very well, I try to, try to do understand deeply as the rules of academic regulation states.

A 3: Yes, I read and I read until I understand.

According to the participants, extensive reading and supportive peers make studying at higher education through the medium of English less problematic. Also, motivation to upgrade their English and hard work generally prove to be efficient coping strategies.

#### *6.5 Lecture attendance, completing assigned work and memorization*

Further coping strategies that emerged from the interview data related to maximum attendance at lectures, completion of assigned work in due time and memorisation as exemplified in the following extracts:

A 2: Strategy? For example the courses that I learnt the first time here, the first thing I do is to attend the lecture when he comes. And when he leaves an exercise, I try to do and to consult others who are practicing them better than me and I get knowledge.

A 6: For example when the course contains mathematics, I can forget the text and follow how to calculate and so on but when the course needs to understand very carefully the text, sometimes I can I can, that course can be difficult for me forever. Because I can try to memorise all words without knowing the meaning.

The above mentioned responses show that lecture attendance and timely completion of assigned tasks are successful strategies. Also, it is worth noting the difference between strategies used depending on whether the course is theoretical or practical. When the course is practical, that is, involves calculations or other types of problem-solving, A6 does not worry too much about theories as long as he understands the practical aspect of it. However, theoretical courses are complicated for him because the only strategy he can use is to memorise, and at times he does not understand what he memorises, which is likely to be problematic.

### **7. Discussion**

The present study investigated coping strategies that facilitate students learning in higher education in Rwanda to successfully complete their academic tasks given through the medium of English. Overall, group discussions and interview data sets show that students employ a number of strategies to mediate cognitively demanding academic tasks. The most common strategies relate to the use of different languages at their disposal to negotiate meaning and construct knowledge, peer support systems, extensive reading, lecture attendance, completing assigned work and memorization. Findings in this study corroborate earlier findings as regards meeting and adjusting to challenges posed by English as the language of instruction, especially in contexts where it is used as a foreign language (Björkman 2011; Evans and Morrisson 2010, 2011; Ljlsland 2010; Praxton 2009; Van der Walt and Dornbrack 2011). However, the informal, but well structured, student initiated peer mentoring system seems to be a Rwandan construct probably developed to overcome learning problems emanating from the persistent request to learn in foreign languages.

I would like to focus this discussion on the potential mediating role that a common language among learners is likely to play to facilitate learning; and the importance of collaboration in learning. Evidence from the group discussions and the interview data demonstrated that Kinyarwanda was almost exclusively used in supportive peer groups and even in formal classroom lectures to clarify concepts and clear up confusion. Failure to explain in Kinyarwanda (for example with some expatriate lecturers who do not know Kinyarwanda) resulted in less understanding of the subject matter during lecture time and required extra practice and mentorship sessions where students would repeat the same course among themselves in Kinyarwanda during their private study time.

The use of a familiar language to clear up confusion and enhance learning is not specific to Rwanda only. Existing studies support the use of a familiar language as a potentially relevant strategy to cope with the challenges posed by English as a medium of instruction. In their investigation into how students meet the demands of English in the Hong Kong context, Evans and Morrisson (2011), noted that peer collaboration and support was most relevant when mediated in Cantonese. Still in the Hong Kong context but with high school learners, Tam (2011) emphasizes the richness and relevance of instruction when both teachers and learners are conversant with the language of instruction. According to her, teachers give more examples and generate a rich discourse when they use a familiar language. Similarly, learners engage in collaborative construction of knowledge through more animated classroom interactions. In his earlier research about classroom language use in Hong Kong's reformed English medium streams, Evans



(2008) observes that the use of students' mother tongue to explain lesson content was a necessary, inevitable and understandable strategy in order to ensure complete understanding. On the African continent, Setati, Adler, Reed and Bapoo (2002) note that switching to a language that learners and teachers understand better assists them in the understanding of concepts and communication of ideas. As such, they maintain that such a strategy could support classroom communication and exploratory talk, a particular type of learner talk, meant to understand the subject matter. Drawing on her extensive research in Africa in the framework of Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa, Brock- Utne (2007) maintains that through the use of a familiar language, students engage in meaningful conversations and build on previous knowledge.

Considering the Rwandan context where a disjunction exists between the language of instruction and the language of out of class communication (Kinyarwanda) that all the students have in common; and recognizing that English as the only medium of instruction impedes effective learning and interaction, using Kinyarwanda to clear misunderstanding, reduce confusion and thus facilitate learning could be regarded as a valuable communicative and pedagogic strategy.

Coupled with the use of a familiar language to clear misunderstanding and enhance learning, collaboration through peer supportive networks also proves to be of high value in mediating cognitively demanding academic content. The present study shows ample examples of how students refer to informal groups and even classes where a peer mentor acts as a teacher for those in need of extra support. Although research evidence support collaboration in peer groups as a valuable academic practice (Banda 2007, Li et al. 2010), issues pertaining to common goals, group composition and the interaction that takes place have to be attended to in order to maximize the mediating role of the collaboration activity. If groups comprising individuals with varying degrees of content and language mastering, share the common goal of completing an assignment or helping one another to grasp the course content, this promotes constructive interaction and eventually facilitates subject matter understanding. While mentorship systems revealed to contribute to enhanced subject matter understanding, they unfortunately tend to make some students dependent on peers good will to spend their time on supportive activities. In this case, it is worth wondering what would happen if society becomes more competitive and individualistic.

## 8. Conclusion

The present study has investigated coping strategies that higher education students in Rwanda use to handle the difficulties of having English as the medium of instruction. Since the study took place in a Rwandan context where students share the same mother tongue, it came as no surprise that the use of Kinyarwanda to mediate cognitively demanding content was one of the prominent strategies. Key concepts were however kept in the foreign language (English) probably for lack of equivalent words in Kinyarwanda. The findings, and the context in which the study took place, suggest that it could inform pedagogical practices and support mechanisms meant to help newcomers to fully integrate into the academic community. For example, continuous provision of academic literacy and study skills unlike general conversational English skills should be ongoing (Muhirwe 2012). Also, although Kinyarwanda is not officially recognised as the medium of instruction, its mediating role and potential to facilitate learning needs to be given due attention through permitting responsible code switching and translanguaging (Garcia 2009) either during lecture time or in supportive peer groups.

The present study has mainly investigated a students' perspective with regard to the strategies they use to facilitate learning. It could equally be of interest to further investigate teachers' support strategies in helping students to build up knowledge and understanding of their domain specific content learnt through the medium of English in the Rwandan context.

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