

Multilingualism in Basic Education: A Vygotskian Analysis of 2018 Cameroon Primary School Curriculum

Brinda Chowdhari & Nsom Karlson Nsom

Abstract

Primary Education is the bedrock for sustainable learning. On this basis, multilingualism's input in the 2018 Reform Cameroon Primary School Curriculum is construed. The tenet is that an analysis of the curriculum can provide clear-cut insights into the distinct values Cameroon's Ministry of Basic Education gives to the English language, French language and national languages. Vygotsky's contribution informs the teaching-learning design analysis (Cong-Lem, 2022). Four instructional parameters: time allocation, objectives, content and expected outcomes determine the pragmatic implications of the curriculum. Results show a significant imbalance in languages meant for young learners' cognitive development. English has 56 per cent of the language instruction time, French 33 per cent, and national languages only have 11 per cent. The linguistic disproportion insinuates a prioritization of official languages at the expense of national languages. The paper establishes that a balanced approach incorporating more multilingual resources and tailored instructions can better prepare young learners for community involvement along with international engagement.

Keywords: Curriculum, diverse young learners, English subsystem, multilingualism

Introduction

Cameroon's linguistic landscape boosts two official languages, English and French with over 280 indigenous languages. In one multicultural study (Awah, 2022), these languages reflect the complexity that defines

Cameroon's historic and cultural landscape. This linguistic diversity though a resource, poses complex and multilingual challenges in educational policies and practices. The Ministry of Basic Education in Cameroon attempted to address this issue with the formulation and adoption of the 2018 Reform curriculum for the English Subsystem of Education. The curriculum seeks to align with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4) which aspires for an inclusive and equitable education by 2030. If priority is given to early childhood literacy sustainable learning is secured. Nonetheless, Knauer et al. (2019) note that the implementation of mother-tongue-based multilingual education faces challenges in early child development. As such, the research paper offers a critique of the 2018 Reform Cameroon Primary School curriculum's approach to multilingualism. This is to know the value given to the national languages and cultures compared to official languages. Such an inquisitive attempt can decipher the implicit and explicit pragmatic messages about multilingualism. Its potential impact on the cognitive, social, and linguistic development of Cameroonian primary school children can be pinpointed. To do so, four parameters are identified and analysed. These involve the number of annual and weekly hours allocated to learn subjects such as English language, French language and National languages, stated objective per subject, teaching content/materials and terminal expected outcomes. The research hinges on both qualitative and quantitative data to present a comprehensive evaluation of the curriculum's effectiveness in fostering multilingual proficiency among Cameroonian primary school children. The main purpose is to provide a broader discourse on multilingual education and insights that can add to inform policymaking and pedagogical strategies in Cameroon and other multilingual countries across the world.

Early Education

The importance of early childhood education cannot be overemphasized. McCoy et al. (2019) pinpointed that the need to support children's holistic development dates back to 1990 following the World Education Conference. In a study by Alemnge (2019), the importance of national integration into the curriculum of young learners is crucial. In his contribution, learner-centred and integrative approaches can underscore the development of competent skills and holistic development. So, using these approaches to teach children across the national territory promotes national unity. Similarly, Bayyurt et al. (2019) reinforce this claim with

the idea that the English language should be used as a Lingua Franca in the curriculum of multilingual and multicultural contexts. Responses from in-service teachers in Poland, Portugal, and Turkey support the claim. The responses indicate that the use of the English language as a lingua franca in language education goes beyond integration to the professional development of teachers. This triggers the curiosity to know whether using two or more languages as a medium of instruction can also be an alternative. Improving the teacher education model with practical insights for teacher training programmes in multicultural settings is pertinent.

English Influence

Apart from contributing to nation-building (Burns and Roberts 2010), the English language also impacts employment, technology, and productivity (Kirkpatrick & Bui 2016). Research in Asian nations has shown that English is now widely used as a primary foreign language, official language, and even as a medium of instruction for students from minority linguistic backgrounds. These nations include India (Agnihotri, 2007), Pakistan (Shamim, 2008), Cambodia (Clayton, 2006), Bangladesh (Islam, 2015) Nepal (Phyak, 2016), Japan (Silver and Steele, 2005), and African nations such as Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia (Aspinall & Chinouya, 2016). Past studies in language education policy in Asia have used parameters such as curriculum development, teacher training, and assessment to determine the status of English. Many Asian countries focus on incorporating English language education into their school curricula to improve language proficiency at levels while other countries only prioritize English language education from early school years, others lay more emphasis on higher education or professional training. Assessment methods vary from country to country depending on standardized tests while others use continuous assessment to evaluate language skills. Such observations show the diverse approaches taken by Asian countries in implementing English language education policies and practices.

Multilingualism in Basic Education

Long before now, Tadadjeu (1975) argued that introducing Cameroon's indigenous languages into the school system can lead to a trilingual education system. This can be of great importance for linguistic,

educational, anthropological, and religious purposes. Secondly, he claims that developing African language courses in higher institutions and cooperating with other African countries can enhance language education and promote Pan-Africanism. The idea is further developed by Ekembe (2021) with colonized countries using English to construct national unity and historical legacies both at home and abroad. This can significantly address linguistic problems and promote cultural pride and national unity across the continent. In the same way, May (2000) notes that an understanding of past mistakes and the examination of issues such as racism and culture can address the difficulties of multilingualism and multiculturalism in education. Even though a plausible approach it seems much is yet to be said about the practicality of critical multiculturalism. Also, while the authors here indicate insights related to themes like tolerance, patriotism, and communal life to share the message of unity among learners, they seem to pay less attention to the input of multilingualism in the curriculum. In the view of Kennedy (2011), linguistic diversity has a key role in sustainable development practices. This is achievable by advocating for inclusive language policies that consider local languages. It is imperative to bring diverse perspectives and experiences together to enrich the discourse on language policy and development. In short, the intricate relationship between language, policy, and development can better inform strategies to empower communities. Communities preserve their cultures and traditions when inclusive language policies are implemented. Through such collaborative efforts, the education sector works towards empowering communities through their languages, promoting equity and participation in development processes. It could be interesting to look at the potential limitations in implementing inclusive language policies in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Language Policies

The status of Western languages and national languages in Cameroon is a point of discussion. In a recent study, Eyoh (2021) finds that the English alphabet principle is sufficient in the teaching and learning settings in Cameroon. His principal argument is that there is a need to opt for a common Alphabet system for a Cameroonian national language like Ngwo. This showcases the importance of the General Alphabet of Cameroonian languages and demonstrates that it can be

used appropriately and in harmony with that of official languages. This opposes the standpoint that the sole use of the English alphabet is enough. Nonetheless, Ekembe (2021) argues that the adoption of English as the primary medium of instruction (EMI) in a multilingual context has positive and negative consequences. On a positive note, EMI can promote Indigenous languages and the diverse linguistic landscape of Cameroon. This means that language policies have a key role to play in inclusive education. Thus, a clarion call is to be given to all policymakers, teachers, students and parents to all participate in the pedagogical pursuit.

As such, it is worth investigating the development of language policies that consider the linguistic diversity of Cameroon and promote the use of Indigenous languages alongside English. The paper provides a pragmatic evaluation of the 2018 Cameroon Primary School Curriculum with a focus on its approach to promoting multilingualism among young learners. Such an attempt can show the value policymakers give to official languages and national languages.

Sociocultural Theory of Lev Vygotsky

Vygotsky is a Russian-born language scientist and psychologist. He is one among the likes of Jean Piaget who provided radical explanations for the processes of learning and cognitive development in children. According to an early study by Vygotsky and Cole (1978), a proper comprehension of language is ineffective when the mind is isolated from society. As such factors like perception, and memory are suitable for analysis in the education sector. His sociocultural theory (SCT) is essential for a social turn in education (Cong-Lem 2022). This is confirmed by Lantolf and Poehner (2023) who strictly advance that the theory's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) has and continues to inform teaching practices efficiently and effectively. In the same way, ZPD has been widely used in educational research Kostogritz and Veresov (2021). Through cultural and social approaches he uses the zone of proximal development to state what the child can learn on his own and what he needs to learn through assistance. These insights are used in this paper to understand the pragmatic insights into the curriculum for primary school children who are at the initial stage of learning. With the implementation of such an approach, the implicit and the explicit undertones of the curriculum have been revealed. These revelations are significant for the teachers in the primary sector and the parents or guardians of young learners.

The theory has been used to provide an indebt analysis of preschool curriculum in a multilingual nation like Cameroon.

Method and Material

The qualitative method is used to analyze the official 2018 Reform Primary School curriculum. The curriculum is an eighty-six-page document chosen for this paper for three reasons. First, it is an official document from Cameroon's Ministry of Basic Education. Second, it is a reference for primary school teachers as it offers supplementary materials and guidelines. Third, it is the last updated curriculum for levels 1, 2 and 3 learners in primary school. On top of that, the document is deemed useful for researchers (Cameroon Primary School Curriculum, 2018). The link address, <http://minedub.cm/> was accessed to download the curriculum on the official website of Cameroon's Ministry of Basic Education known in French as Ministère de l'Éducation de Base du Cameroun. It is the government department charged with developing, implementing, and evaluating educational policy.

The analysis of this document aims to show how multilingualism is integrated into the Curriculum of the English Subsystem. In doing so, policies on languages taught in primary education are scrutinized according to three parameters. The parameters include the annual and weekly hours allocated for primary school pupils to learn the English language, French language and National languages, the didactic material and the terminal learning outcome. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory has been used to check the quality of these teaching-learning educational criteria.

Results and Discussions

Table 1: Annual Language Learning Time in Hours Per Level for Cameroon's Anglophone Subsystem of Education

<i>Subject Area</i>	<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Level 3</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
English Language and Literature	172.5	172.5	172.5	56%
Français	103.5	103.5	103.5	33%
National Languages and Cultures	34.5	34.5	34.5	11%
Total	310.5	310.5	310.5	100%

(Source: Cameroon Primary School Curriculum, 2018)

Table 2: Weekly Language Learning Time in Hours Per Level for Cameroon's Anglophone Subsystem of Education

<i>Subject Area</i>	<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Level 3</i>
English Language and Literature	7.5	7.5	7.5
Français	4.5	4.5	4.5
National Languages and Cultures	1.5	1.5	1.5
Total	13.5	13.5	13.5

(Source: Cameroon Primary School Curriculum, 2018)

Emphasis on the English Language and Literature

Tables 1 and 2 above indicate that a significant chunk of teaching-learning hours is allocated to English Language and Literature annually and weekly. 172.5 hours allocation and 7.5 hours allocation respectively constitute 56 per cent of the total teaching and learning hours of English. These figures indicate that the English language is highly prioritized in Cameroon's primary educational curriculum. This priority can be possibly credited to the importance of English as an international language and its role in higher education. Hence, there is the need to train young learners in English to be able to access the world of business, science, technology, global communication and more. While less emphasis on national languages and cultures may highlight a potential area of concern from Vygotsky's perspective, it is pertinent to address the potential inclusion of national languages to support the cultural identity and holistic development of children within their specific multilinguistic and multicultural contexts.

Moderate Importance of the French Language

The French language is allocated 103.5 hours, making up 33% of the total teaching-learning hours per annum. This implies that the French language is also important in the curriculum. This reflects Cameroon's bilingual nature where English and French are the official languages. The allocation suggests a significant, though secondary, emphasis on French compared to English in Cameroon's English Sub-system of Education. Given Vygotsky's postulation that language is a vital cultural tool that shapes thought and mediates learning, the curriculum's emphasis on English and French (89 per cent combined) implies that official languages are seen as critical tools for cognitive development and social interaction for young Cameroonian learners. The consistent teaching and learning

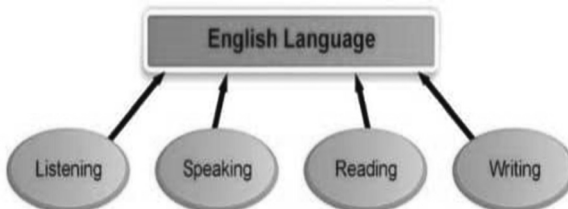
hours annually and weekly across different educational levels (1-3) indicate an effort to scaffold students' language learning within their ZPD. This approach ensures that young learners receive appropriate support to progress from their current level of understanding to higher competence in mainly English and French.

Lesser Focus on National Languages and Cultures

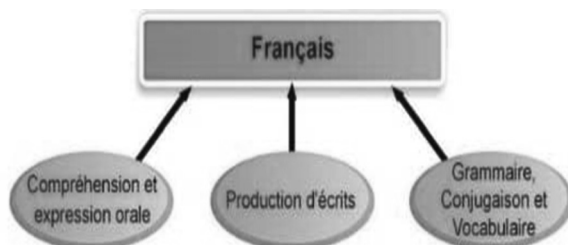
Only 34.5 hours are allocated to National Languages and Cultures annually. This is 11 per cent of the total teaching-learning language hours. This entails that while national languages and cultures are recognized in the curriculum, they are however given considerably less emphasis compared to English and French. This could be due to two practical reasons. The first reason could be the political need for a common language to maintain national unity and international engagement. The second consideration could be the challenges of incorporating multiple indigenous languages into the formal education system at once. Nonetheless, the data further highlights the multilingual context of Cameroon's education system, where multiple languages are part of the formal education curriculum. This reflects the linguistic diversity of the country and an imbalance in the attempt to cater to different linguistic communities.

The unequal distribution of teaching-learning hours could inform policymakers about the current priorities and areas that might need more attention. For example, there may be discussions on whether time allocation to national languages and cultures should be increased to better preserve and promote Indigenous languages and cultural heritage. Such an attempt can help to better integrate both the official languages (English and French) and the indigenous languages within the educational framework. In doing so, there can be a balance of global and native linguistic needs that effectively prepare diverse young learners for both international opportunities and national community engagement.

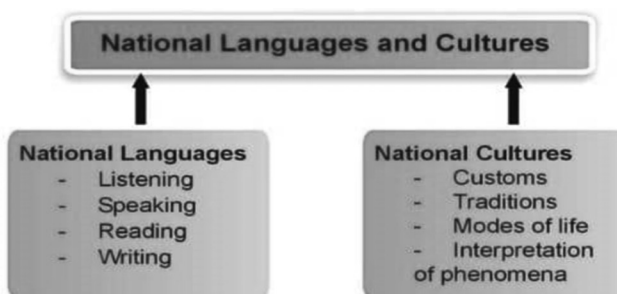
Figure 1: Components and Expected Skills in the English Language



(Source: Cameroon Primary School Curriculum, 2018)

Figure 2: Components and Expected Skills in the French Language

(Source: Cameroon Primary School Curriculum, 2018)

Figure 3: Components and Expected Skills National Languages and Cultures

(Source: Cameroon Primary School Curriculum, 2018)

Figure 1 shows that the curriculum is bent on developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English. This shows that English is the main language used in the primary English Subsystem of Education in Cameroon. The emphasis on building good competence level in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation aims to transmit the foundational skills necessary for effective communication to the learners. These qualities are in line with Vygotsky's viewpoint that language is crucial for mental development. Also, the addition of a literature component in level two and level three aligns with Vygotsky's idea that exposure to culturally rich texts can introduce learners to complex narratives and diverse perspectives about cultural horizons. The structured progression from basic language skills to more complex literature studies suggests an approach that supports learners within their ZPD. Scaffolding at various educational levels in the curriculum helps learners move from their current abilities to higher levels of competence.

Figure 2 indicates the need for young learners to be taught oral and written communication skills. In the case of French language acquisition in the English Subsystem of Education, sub-disciplines such as comprehension, oral and written expression, grammar, vocabulary, conjugation, and spelling scaffold learning. Teachers prospectively provide structured activities and feedback to guide the learners through increasingly complex language tasks and gradually withdraw support as learners advance with time.

Figure 3 reveals how learners are equipped with the ability to speak their national language and engage with their cultural heritage. For instance, the curriculum outlines specific terminal learning objectives such as singing traditional songs, communicating appropriately in various contexts and performing cultural activities. These objectives act as milestones within the learners' ZPD, a technique which prepares young learners from guided practice to independent competence. The inclusion of at least one national language alongside English and French can foster a multilingual environment that promotes cultural diversity.

Conclusion

Using a Vygotskian lens, the paper offers an integrative view of the existing literature in multilingual and curriculum studies. The input of multilingualism in the 2018 Reform Cameroon Primary School curriculum has been studied. This involved highlighting key parameters such as the allocation of instructional time to teach-learn languages, stated objectives, material/content taught and terminal expected outcomes. Such an account shows how Cameroon's Ministry of Basic Education prioritises young learners' acquisition of official languages and national languages. Results show that there is huge value discrepancy in the weekly and annual language learning hours in the curriculum, for instance, English occupies 56 per cent, French occupies 33 per cent and National languages only occupy 11 per cent. This suggests that official languages are used as active linguistic mechanisms for cognitive development and social interaction. While this effort can train young learners to travel the world void of language barriers, the paper suggests that there is a need for educational policymakers to balance the inclusion of official languages and national languages in the curriculum. Such balance can help to better prepare young learners for both international opportunities and national/community engagement.

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Nsom Karlson Nsom is a PhD scholar and Teaching Associate in the Department of English, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Sharda University. He is interested in Language Teaching, Pragmatics and Critical Discourse Studies.

nsompro@gmail.com

Brinda Chowdhari is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sharda University. Her areas of interest include Applied Linguistics, Language Acquisition and Ancient India.

brinda.chowdhari@sharda.ac.in