



French Language and the Teaching of Cameroonian National Languages in Secondary Schools of the West Region: Asset or Obstacle?

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Abstract

The syllabus of Cameroonian national languages in secondary education provides for the teaching of basic notions in linguistic and the General Alphabet of Cameroonian Languages at the observation sub-cycle and the teaching of a specific language, that of the locality where the school is found, from the orientation sub-cycle, i.e. from the 4^c. This paper tries to answer the following question: What is the role of the French language in the teaching of Cameroonian national languages? The main objective of the study is to examine the role of the official language, more specifically French, and its impact on the acquisition of communicative skills in the national language. Based on Hymes' (1984) theory of Communicative Approach, we analysed data obtained from questionnaires administered to 42 teachers and 320 students, and from semi-structured interviews with Regional Pedagogic Inspectors. Conducted in 23 public secondary schools in the West Region that have teachers trained in National Languages and Cultures, the study found that the French language is very prominent in national language classes. This is due to the multilingual context of the classrooms, the sometimes approximate mastery of the national language by teachers, the inability of national languages to express all realities, among others. This strong presence of French does not favour communication in the national language.

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The reduction or even cancellation of French from national language classes would make it possible to stop teaching about national languages in order to truly develop the language skills of young Cameroonians in their mother tongues; this requires a certain number of measures on the part of all members of the education community.

Keywords: communicative competence; French; multilingualism; national language; official language.

1. Introduction

During the education forum in Cameroon held in May 1995, many reforms were proposed to enable the country to have an authentic education system.

In the said system, the teaching of national languages occupies an important place so that a Cameroonian citizen should be trilingual, mastering French and English which are the official languages, and at least one national language.

These reforms, which were thought up during that forum, were ratified both in the 1996 constitution [1] and in the 1998 law on the orientation of education [2], which calls for a country with citizens who are 'rooted in their culture but open to the world'.

However, it was only in 2008 that a concrete act of implementation of the said reforms in secondary education was taken, notably by the decree No 08/0223 MINESUP/DDES of September 3, 2008 on the creation of a Department of National Languages and Cultures at the Higher Teachers' Training College of the University of Yaoundé I to train teachers of this discipline for secondary and high schools. It is in the same vein that the official syllabuses (3, 4) designed for the first cycle were validated in 2014 by the Ministry of Secondary Education.

These reforms are undoubtedly in line with the spirit of UNESCO (5, 6) which states that the transmission and acquisition of knowledge in a learner's mother tongue has many advantages.

The long-term objective would therefore be to use these languages in the instruction of Cameroonian citizens. Since then, Cameroonian national languages are taught in secondary education. But what is the role of French, the official language and language of instruction of most Cameroonians, in the teaching of national languages? From this central question flow the following secondary questions: How are national languages taught? What is the percentage of other languages in Cameroonian national language classes and what is the level of competence of teachers in the languages taught? What is the role of the French language in the official national language syllabus? Based on the author's in [7] theory of communicative approach, this study attempts to answer these questions, thus examining the role of French in the acquisition of national language skills through the analysis of data collected from a number of actors in the educational community in the West Region. Before going into the analysis of the data collected, it is important, and indeed necessary, to review some of the works that have been done on the teaching of national languages in Cameroon, and to give a brief presentation of the methodology and theoretical framework of the study.

2. Literature Review

The teaching of national languages in Cameroon has caught the attention of researchers such as that of the author in [8] who thinks that Cameroon's national languages should first be taught as subjects in the education system and then be used as a means of transmitting knowledge. And since all these languages cannot be taught at once, a certain number will have to be selected. The selection criteria should include the number of speakers, the quantity and quality of the teaching material available in the language, and the teachers qualified to teach it. For this author, the teaching must start at the university and in the institutions of higher education and go down to the kindergarten level, passing through the secondary and primary levels; his reason being that it is at the university that teachers of the other levels of education must be trained.

Teaching French, English and a national language makes the Cameroonian education system trilingual. The author in [9] assesses the level of implementation of trilingualism by analysing its strengths and weaknesses based on data collected in nine secondary schools. The study shows that the lack of staff, the scarcity of teaching materials, the lack of motivation on the part of teachers and students, and inappropriate curricula are among the obstacles that prevent this model of education from flourishing. For this author, this model can only succeed if these problems are resolved, especially if the teaching syllabuses are reviewed.

The authors in [10] assess the contents of the National Languages and Cultures curriculum at the observation sub-cycle of secondary education and find that several concepts in the curriculum are inappropriate for young students in 6e and 5e while others are not clear nor precise. In addition to the imprecise and inappropriate nature of a number of elements of this syllabus, the authors found that the teaching of this discipline faces many other problems, namely the glaring lack of teachers, the failure to respect the number of hours and the coefficient in certain schools, and the lack of interest of school heads in the discipline. It appears that for the subject to survive, those problems have to be solved, especially the review of the syllabus.

On the subject of students' attitudes and perceptions of the introduction of National Languages and Cultures in the curriculum, the author in [11] finds that students in the observation sub-cycle are very interested in the subject, especially the culture component, although they feel that the content is not sufficient and that the method of teaching it needs to be improved. Having found that the current syllabuses were so vague that the contents differed from one teacher to another, the study proposes that they be restructured and that teachers be trained in the Competency-Based Approach, which has been shown to be the most effective method of facilitating the acquisition of knowledge in this area. Talking about the teaching and learning of Cameroonian national languages in the West region, the author in [12] analyses the pedagogical practices likely to favour the construction of communicative competence in these languages among learners at the orientation sub-cycle. Basing his analyses on the teaching/learning of three languages of the region, namely, Ghomala', Yemba and Ngiemboon, the researcher discovers that pedagogical practices related to the context, the management of the class by the teacher, the conduct of activities and the motivation of the learners facilitate the development of the communicative competence of those learners in national languages. The study reveals that the use of the national language in the community and the linguistic homogeneity of classes in rural areas are factors that favour the construction of learners' linguistic competence.

Contrary to those previous studies, the present study focuses on the place of the French language, the official language and the language of instruction of students, in the teaching of Cameroonian national languages. Whether positive or negative, the impact of French on the teaching of national languages deserves particular attention because their cohabitation is inevitable and indeed necessary in a world where multilingualism is the rule and monolingualism the exception [13]. Before proceeding to the analysis of the data, it is worth briefly presenting the methodology used in this work.

3. Methodology

The data for this study were collected through questionnaires sent to a sample of 42 teachers of National Languages and Cultures, 320 students of 4^e and 3^e in 23 secondary schools spread over the 08 Divisions of the West region, and semi-structured interviews with 02 Regional Pedagogic Inspectors of National Languages and Cultures in the region. While describing the facts as they appear, the data collected from these different actors were analysed according to the hypothetico-deductive approach which, in human sciences, allows better results to be obtained. In fact, it consists for a researcher confronted with a reality that he or she wishes to understand, to ask research questions and then proceed with deductions and/or inductions according to the premises and the empirical knowledge of the subject that he or she possesses [14].

The central question of this study allowed us to formulate the main hypothesis that French is so prevalent in the national language classroom that it would be difficult if not impossible for learners, especially non-native speakers to communicate in those national languages. It is from this hypothesis that deductions and inductions were made in order to arrive at some conclusions. The analyses were made within a theoretical framework which is presented in the following section.

4. Theoretical Framework

It is based on the communicative approach as presented by the author in [7] as a teaching method that the analyses of this study were done. The communicative approach gives priority to communicative competence consisting of grammatical norms (linguistic competence) and norms of usage (rules of usage). According to the author in [7: 57], "there are rules of usage without which the rules of grammar would be useless. Just as rules of syntax may condition aspects of phonology, and just as semantic rules may control aspects of syntax, so rules of speech acts also act as a controlling factor for linguistic form as a whole".

The meaning and context of the utterance in a communicative situation are therefore fundamental to the approach. This learner-centered approach gives priority to interactions in the target language in order to ensure learner empowerment.

Thus, knowing the language system is only a step towards using the language appropriately in the social context. This theory allows us to show that the strong presence of French in the national language classroom favours the mastery of the language system without the learner being able to communicate in the national language in question. The results obtained are presented, analysed and interpreted in the following sections.

5. Findings

The place of French in national language classes depends on the multilingual context of the classroom, the level of competence of the teachers in the languages taught, and the orientation given by the official syllabus. But first of all, how are national language classes run and what percentage of French is used in those classes?

5.1 National Language Classes

In the teaching and learning process, students are very important, if not the most important group, because it is for them that the actions are defined and it is only through them that the effectiveness and efficiency of these actions can be verified. They are able to give a faithful account of what happens in the classroom. When asked about how national language classes are run, they gave the answers shown in the table below.

Table 1: National Language Classes.

Answers	Number of students	Percentages %
Exclusively in National Language	00	00
The national language is used more than French	86	26.87
French is used more than the national language	66	20.62
The national language and French are equally used	168	52.5
Total	320	100

According to table 1 above, national language lessons are taught exclusively in the national language in none of the classes. For 26.87% of pupils surveyed, the national language is used more than French in their classes, while 20.62% feel that French dominates in their national language lessons. The majority, 52.5%, felt that French and the national language were used equally. French is used to describe the linguistic system of the national language, which encourages little or no communication in that language. French is therefore present and unavoidable in Cameroon's national language classes. What are the reasons for this presence of the official language in the national language classroom, from the point of view of teachers and pedagogic inspectors?

5.2 The Use of other Languages in a National Language Class

When asked whether they teach exclusively in the national language or use other languages, 42 of the 42 teachers who answered the questionnaire, i.e. 100%, said that they use other languages to teach Cameroon's national languages. Among these other languages, French is the most widely used because it is the language of instruction for most of these teachers and students, and it is also the first language of the majority because, as the authors in [15: 321] state, "it has been observed that young urban dwellers are gradually abandoning the use of their mother tongue(s) in favour of French, which ends up becoming their L1". The main reasons put forward by these teachers to justify the use of French in national language classes are, among others, the multilingual context of classrooms, the approximate mastery of the language taught, both by themselves and by their students, the fact that some of them want to make a comparative and contrastive analysis of the two languages (National Language and Official Language) and translation, the inability of the national language to explain certain concepts. French is used extensively in the national language classroom for the above-mentioned reasons. As one regional inspector said, it is possible to teach exclusively in the national language, but this is not

yet the case.

5.3 The Multilingual Nature of Classrooms

The classes visited for this study are multilingual; the students speak a variety of mother tongues. In our random sample of 320 students, we were able to count 17 mother tongues: Massa, Eton, Nda' nda', Fufuldé, Mengambo, Nguemba, Basaa, Ewondo, Shupamem, Medumba, Mbo, Fe'é fe'é, Ghomala', Ngombale, Ngomba, Ngiemboon, Yémba. There is therefore no class in which all learners have the same mother tongue, which can easily be explained by the multitude of languages in the country. That multilingualism leads most teachers to rely heavily on French, which is the language of instruction for all students in their classes. Even if the use of French facilitates the explanation of a certain number of concepts, as some teachers believe, it should be noted that it does not promote communication in the target language. The multilingual context appears to be one of the reasons for the strong presence of French in national language classes; what about teachers' degree of competence in these languages?

5.4 The Mastery of the National Languages by Teachers

A good mastery of the subject matter is a prerequisite to any successful teaching. In language teaching, it is difficult, if not impossible, to teach students to communicate in a language that you have not mastered yourself. The teacher remains the model for learners to emulate. To analyse the level of mastery of the language taught by teachers, we need to know whether the languages they teach are their mother tongues or whether they have been taught to read and write in these languages, given that they did not learn them formally when they were students. In addition, it will be important to look at their own self-evaluation, i.e. the level of competence they feel they have in the language taught, not forgetting their everyday use of the target language.

5.4.1 The Language Taught and the Teacher's Mother Tongue

When learning a language, the ideal situation is to reach the level of competence of native speakers. But how many national language teachers are native speakers of the language taught? The answer to this question can be found in the table below.

Table 2: The Language Taught and the Teacher's Mother Tongue.

Answers	Number of Students	Percentages %
The language taught is the teacher's mother tongue	31	73.90
The language taught is not the teacher's mother tongue	11	26.10
Total	42	100

Table 2 above shows that 73.90% of National Language teachers in the West region are native speakers of the national languages they teach, while 26.10% are not native speakers of the languages they teach. If competences are "the totality of knowledge, skills and attitudes which make it possible to act" [16: 15], it goes without saying that native speakers have more knowledge than non-native speakers. It should be noted, however, that 41/42, i.e. 97.61% of National Language teachers in the West are from the region. It is within the region that they are not

assigned so that everyone can teach their mother tongue. However, if each teacher were able to teach his or her mother tongue, his or her level of competence, even if only oral, would be an asset and therefore an advantage for his or her work. Although native speakers have certain oral skills, this is not always the case when it comes to written skills. Literacy programmes were created to enable Cameroonians to read and write both their mother tongues and other Cameroonian languages, before they were introduced into the education system. Have National Language teachers in the West been taught to read and write in their mother tongues?

5.4.2 National Language Teachers and Literacy Programmes

Literacy programmes in the various language committees have enabled many Cameroonians to develop their skills in writing their mother tongues. When asked whether the teachers interviewed had been taught to read and write in the national languages they teach, the following table presents the answers obtained.

Table 3: National Language Teachers and Literacy Programmes.

Did you follow literacy programmes in the national language that you teach?	Number of teachers	Percentages %
Yes	33	78.57
No	09	21.42
Total	42	100

According to table 3 above, 78.57% of teachers have been formally taught to read and write in the languages they teach, while 21.42% have not. Literacy programmes undoubtedly have a positive impact on teachers' skills. Unfortunately, those programmes do not exist in all the communities. But before examining their level of competence in writing, it useful to know whether or not they are fluent in these languages.

5.4.3 Teachers' Ability to Speak the Language Fluently

The level of oral proficiency of a speaker of a language can be assessed by their ability to express themselves fluently in that language. In a teaching/learning situation, the teacher must be able to speak fluently, not only to serve as a model for learners, but also to facilitate communication in the target language. The teachers questioned gave their views on their ability to speak the languages they teach fluently, and the results are shown in the table below.

Table 4: Teachers' ability to speak the language fluently.

Do you speak the language you teach fluently?	Number of teachers	Percentage %
Yes	24	57.14
No	08	19.04
More or less	10	23.08
Total	42	100

As represented in table 4 above, 57.14% of teachers are fluent in the languages they teach, 19.04% are not fluent and 23.08% are more or less fluent. If we add the percentage of those who are not fluent to that of those who are more or less fluent, we find that over 42% of teachers who teach the national languages in the west are not

fluent. Although 78.57% of these teachers stated that they had attended literacy programmes, only 57.14% were able to express themselves fluently. The 19.04% who are not fluent are either non-native speakers or native speakers who have developed more skills in other languages (official language(s), for example) to the detriment of their mother tongues. These are the results for oral skills, but what about written skills?

5.4.4 Teachers' Writing Skills

When asked to self-evaluate their level of mastery of the national languages in reading comprehension and writing, the teachers in our sample provided the data in the table below.

Table 5: The level of teachers in writing.

Answers	Number of teachers	Percentages %
Average	10	23.80
Fairly Good	18	42.85
Very Good	14	33.33
Total	42	100

According to table 5 above, the majority of teachers surveyed (42.85%) have a fairly good level in the national languages they teach as far as writing is concerned; 33.33% consider themselves to have a very good level, while 23.80% admit to having an average level in written comprehension and writing.

If only 33.33% of teachers read and write the languages taught very well, this means that there is still much to be done in this area to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of the teaching/learning of national languages in the region, at least where they are taught.

The above percentages show that the level of competence of teachers in writing is 76.18%, compared with 57.14% of teachers who are fluent in the languages taught.

A speaker's proficiency in a language also depends on how he or she uses it on a daily basis. Whether written or spoken, a teacher's level of proficiency can rise or fall depending on how he or she uses it outside the classroom, particularly within the family in the case of national languages.

5.4.5 The Daily Use of the National Language taught

The policy of teaching the language of the locality in each school is based on the fact that in each locality a specific mother tongue is spoken, whether in a rural, urban or semi-urban environment. One of the aims of this policy is to enable native speakers to strengthen and intensify the use of their mother tongue, while helping non-native speakers to better integrate into the community through the language.

We thought it useful to find out whether teachers make use of the national language taught outside the classroom, particularly within the family. When asked about their use of the national language at home, they provided the answers found in the table below.

Table 6: The daily use of the national language taught.

Do you speak the national language taught in your family environment?	Number of teachers	Percentages %
Yes	30	71.42
No	12	28.57
Total	42	100

Table 6 above shows that 71.42% of teachers speak the languages they teach in their families, while 28.57% do not. The majority of these teachers who use the language taught in their family environment say that these are their mother tongues and that they must preserve them and pass them on from generation to generation. As for the 28.57%, they do not use them because they are not their mother tongues and they have no one to talk to. It is quite curious and surprising to realise that 71.42% of teachers use the national languages they teach in their family environment, when we know that only 57.14% speak them fluently. This raises the question of the extent to which these languages are used in families; they may well be used alongside other languages to the point that the mother tongue is neglected. Sometimes, in such code switching and code mixing, French occupies such an important place that the national language is used very little. This means that the speaker does not have the opportunity to strengthen his or her skills in everyday use of the national language. What is the place of French in the syllabus designed by the Ministry of Secondary Education for the teaching and learning of national languages in secondary schools? A tentative answer to this question is found in the following section.

5.5 French and the Official Syllabus of National Languages

The syllabus designed for the teaching and learning of national languages at the orientation sub-cycle, like that of the observation sub-cycle, are drawn up in French, within the framework of the Competency-Based Approach which has been adopted in the Cameroonian education system. In the said syllabus, there are actions, also known as skills, and essential knowledge or language tools.

The essential knowledge, which is in fact the linguistic content, enables communication skills to be achieved. In these syllabuses, while on the one hand there are actions as vague as "speaking, reading, writing or understanding something in the national language in relation to the family, the economy, the environment, etc.", on the other hand there are essential skills such as "the nominal phrase", "the verbal phrase", "direct object", "indirect object", etc., which, not only are not always in congruence with the actions defined, but appear to be abstract grammatical notions likely to make teachers describe the language, talk about the language instead of developing the learners' communicative competences.

One teacher even said that those syllabuses give the impression that we are in an applied linguistics class where there is a lot of interest in understanding how language works than in using it for real communication needs. Through those syllabuses teachers use the French language to describe the linguistic phenomena of the target language without worrying much about developing the communicative skills of the learners. Teachers and pedagogic inspectors suggest that these curricula should be reviewed to ensure that the content is at the service of effective communication.

6. Discussion of Findings

Cameroonian national languages have been introduced in the education system and they are taught as subjects. From the third year in secondary school, each school has to teach the language of the locality. That provision is contrary to the author's in [8] proposal that languages to be taught should be selected according to the number of speakers, the quantity and quality of the teaching material available in the languages, and the teachers qualified to teach them. The objective of the government is to see all the languages taught but means are not provided for that policy to be effectively and efficiently implemented.

The present research has proven that in the implementation of the trilingualism assessed by the author in [9], there is a risk for French in francophone classes to dominate and become an obstacle to the use of national languages. That is also favoured by the multilingual nature of nearly all the classes, since the linguistic homogeneity of classes in rural areas (see the author in [12]) is fast becoming something of the past. Another means to limit the use of official languages in the classes of national languages is to restructure the syllabus and make it more communicative than descriptive. This issue of restructuring the syllabuses has also already been proposed by a number of researchers, including the author in [9], the author in [11], and even those of the observation sub-cycle (the authors in [10]).

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that the French language still occupies a predominant place in the Cameroonian national language classroom, particularly in the French-speaking West region.

This strong presence of French is due to the multilingual context of classrooms, to the inability of national languages to explain certain concepts, but above all to the approximate mastery of these languages by teachers and their students. It is important to note that, although the use of French provides an insight into the linguistic system of the national language, it does not encourage communication in that language. While working on national languages so that they are able to express all realities, it is necessary to find strategies to ensure that teachers demonstrate certain skills in the languages they are called upon to teach.

One of the measures to be taken in this direction could be to require future teachers of national languages to have from level B2 upward of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [16] (According to that framework, in general oral production, a Level B2 speaker is an independent user who "can methodically develop a presentation or description, emphasising the main points and relevant details.

He/she can give a detailed description and presentation on a wide range of subjects related to his/her field of interest, developing and justifying ideas with secondary points and relevant examples" [16: 49]), at least in oral production, when they enter Higher Teachers' Training Colleges in the Department of National Languages and Cultures, given that in those schools they are taught more about pedagogy and didactics than the national language to be taught; moreover, the schools cannot teach all the national languages to future teachers. In addition, when revising the official curricula, clear and precise skills should be defined, as well as linguistic content in line with those skills, to facilitate communication in the target languages.

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