



# Multilingualism as Curriculum Policy in Cameroon Education System

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## **Author's contribution**

*The author designed a critical methodology for this policy paper. She personally analyzed and interpreted issues and trends of multiculturalism as curriculum Policy in Cameroon's education system. She prepared the entire manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The concern on the effective inclusion of indigenous languages in the school curriculum has been central to educational discussions among scholars and stakeholders. It is true that language as a medium of communication is very vital for sustainable growth in any society. However, the level of implementation of the policy of multilingualism in classrooms in Cameroon poses so many pedagogical challenges. While the Government is collaborating with private agencies such as PROPELCA(Cameroon National Language Association) in introducing the teaching of national languages in primary schools, and though the Government through the Ministry of Basic Education has also created an inspectorate in charge of the introduction of indigenous languages in Primary schools, there still exist some resistance from stakeholders to introduce the teaching of native languages in the curriculum of schools despite recommendations made in the 1995 education forum and the provision in article 4 section 5 of the 1998 Education Law. The study argues that, since the introduction of multilingualism as curriculum policy in Cameroon, its implementation is still at the pilot stage. Using the Historical analytic approach, data was collected from primary and secondary sources in establishing the level of use of the curriculum policy of multilingualism as a guide to teaching and learning in schools in Cameroon.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Richards, J. Platt, and H. Platt [1] define multilingualism as “the use of three or more languages by an individual or by a group of speakers such as the inhabitants of a particular region or nation” (p. 238). Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the most multilingual areas of the world in terms of the ratio of population to languages. Although Cameroon has been loosely referred to as a bilingual country, the reality is that Cameroonian bilingualism refers only to the use of two official languages, French and English. As a nation, Cameroon, like several African countries is actually multilingual [2-5].

Cameroon is a multilingual and multicultural country with at least 250 ethnic groups and approximately 279 indigenous languages (Ethnologies, 2002). Though the number of languages spoken in Cameroon is not known for certain, several figures have been bandied about: Koenig, Chia, and Povey [6] suggested 123 mutually unintelligible languages. According to the linguistic atlas of Cameroon, there are 239 indigenous languages belonging to many totally different families [7]. Lewis [8] puts the number of indigenous languages for Cameroon at 286. Semengue and Sadembouo [9] admit that Cameroon counts 248 national languages. A conference of CERNOTOLA-ACALAN-UNION AFRICAINE held in Yaounde in 2007 claimed that Cameroon had 262 languages among which 239 are living while 23 are almost extinct. Kamwangamalu in Yiakoumetti [10] puts the number of languages spoken in Cameroon at 280. Djiafeua (2013) argued that the three language families that exists in Cameroon are; Nilo-Saharan; Afro-Asiatic; and Niger-Kordofan. He continued that though these languages exist in Cameroon, the only two official languages spoken in the territory are English and French [11-13]. However, German, Spanish, Arabic, are taught in schools as foreign languages, while Latin and Greek are taken as classical languages mostly in the French-speaking sub-system.

According to Breton and Fohung, [14], the Languages mostly used for communications are Fulfulde, Ewondo, Bassa, Douala, Hausa, Wandala, Kanuri, Arab Choa, and Cameroon Pidgin English. Echu [15] adds French to the list. When Cameroon became independent, French and English became the only official languages. Besides these two languages, many vernacular

languages exist. According to Tambo [16] these languages constitute the most authentic vehicles of Cameroon and African culture. He continued that although bilingualism in French and English was succeeding, the worry was the integration of Cameroonian languages in the educational process [17-19]. This means that a multilingual policy needed to be pursued, so that children, in addition to French and English would have at their disposal at least one Cameroonian language to cater for their needs.

## **2. CONTEXTUAL SYNOPSIS**

Multilingualism was considered as an option for Educational policy in Cameroon not only for cultural reasons that are described as the main vehicles of the culture of Cameroonians, but also for psycho-pedagogic reasons which states that the learner is likely to achieve better results if teaching and learning are carried out in the language the learner knows best, the language of his/her immediate environment [20-22]. Linguistics reasons favouring multilingualism confirms the likelihood of promoting the maintenance of Cameroon and African languages and ensuring their evolution or adaption to meet the needs of modern socio-economic and scientific technical discourse [23]. Multilingualism is a gift, a resource. The uses of one's own mother tongue are characterized by deep understanding, richness of speech forms and metaphor, familiar concepts. Uses of other languages permit communication with others, broadened access to knowledge outside one's own cultural milieu, and participation in civic entities beyond one's own community. Multilingualism contributes to the reinforcement of one's own, local identity in order to permit healthy engagement with the rest of the world, and that is its primary advantage relative to globalization [24].

According to Atechi, [25] Language plays a vital role in the achievement of national unity, stability and development of a country. This explains why the decision as to what type of language policy to adopt is very crucial in every society. When a country makes choices regarding official languages, these choices affect every aspect of the country: local culture, economy, education and literature. Cameroon has been critical too about the choice of a language policy considering its bi-cultural colonial identity: English and French, inherited from the colonial

masters, Britain and France. This means that Cameroon operates under the framework of an official bilingualism language policy, which designates English and French as the official languages of government institutions (education, administration, parliament, mass media, etc), to the detriment of the other languages that are spoken in the country [26-28].

### **3. MULTILINGUALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF CAMEROON EDUCATION POLICY**

As far as language policy in Cameroon is concerned, Cameroon adopted English and French as official languages, when the Federal Republic came into existence in October 1961. Official documents regarding the status of these languages remained unchanged until in the 1996 constitution that various laws and decrees regulating the official languages were adopted. These laws that were approved by the National Assembly include;

- Law no. 96-06 of January 1996 constitution edited in February 1996.
- Decree no.98/003 of January 1998, Ministry of Culture
- Law no.98/004 of April 1998, Ministry of Education
- General instruction No. 2 Of 4 June 1998, Organization of the work of the Government
- Law no.005 of 16 April 2001 on Secondary Education.
- Decree no. 2002/004 of January 2002, Structure of Ministry of National Education.

So for the first time in Cameroon history, the national languages were accounted for in 1996 in the Constitution. The country's constitution states clearly that:

“The official languages of the Republic of Cameroon shall be English and French, both languages having the same status [29-31]. The state shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country. It shall endeavour to protect and promote national languages” [32].

This 1996 constitution stipulated that though French and English will remain the official languages in Cameroon, the state shall endeavour to protect and promote national languages. Earlier in 1995, the Cameroon Government had organized a national forum on

Education. The forum that held in Yaounde from May 22-27 was a consultative body aimed at making proposal for the formulation of a new educational policy for Cameroon so that it may evolve a new policy that should enable it meet today's challenges and those of the Twenty –first Century [33]. The Forum was expected to make concrete suggestions that, when implemented, would help in solving the major problems plaguing the Cameroonian society. One of the objectives outlined in the working document was for delegates to define a place of national languages and culture in the school curriculum.

### **4. PRACTICE OF MULTILINGUALISM IN CAMEROON CLASSROOMS**

Rosendale (2008) argues that since Cameroon adopted English and French as official languages in October 1961, no official document regarding the status of these languages was altered for nearly four decades. However, some changes were made to this conservative trend in the 1996 constitution in which various laws and decrees regulating the official language policy were adopted. Rosendale also contend that for the first time in Cameroonian history the national languages were accounted for in 1996 in the Constitution. The Constitution stipulates the official status of French and English in Cameroon, and “The state shall endeavour to protect and promote national languages” (République du Cameroun 1996: Part 1, art. 1, paragraph 3).

The Education law of April 1998 provides guidelines for education in Cameroon. This law states that the “general purpose of education shall be to train children for their intellectual, physical, civic and moral development and their smooth integration into society bearing in mind prevailing economic, socio-cultural, political and moral factors” (République du Cameroun 1998a: Part 1, section 4). It further stipulated in section 5, article 4 that one of the objectives of education is to “promote national languages”. The constitution of 1996 and the 1998 Education law were supplemented in January 2002, when a decree on the structure of the Ministry of Education was issued. This decree directs the provincial inspections (Inspections Pédagogiques Provinciales) to be responsible for the national languages. Other languages included in this decree include English, French, Latin, Greek, German, Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Italian and Portuguese.

Les Inspections Provinciales de Pédagogie sont réparties ainsi qu'il suit: - l'inspection Provinciale de Pédagogie chargée de l'enseignement des lettres et des arts, des langues: français, anglais, latin, grec, allemand, arabe, espagnol, chinois, japonais, italien, portugais, langues nationales (République du Cameroun 2002: Section II, article 107, 3).

This is apparently the only document to date which deals with the national languages of Cameroon where implementation is taken into account. The fourth decree listed above (No. 98/003) states that the Ministry of Culture is responsible for registration of organisations and institutions working with national languages. It also says that the Ministry of Culture is in charge of "l'étude des stratégies de promotion des langues nationales en milieux scolaires et universitaire, et à travers les média" (République du Cameroun 1998b: Part VI, chapter II, art.25). Thus this ministry, through the Service de langues nationales, should work with practical promotion and cooperation with other institutions [34-36].

According to Rosendale [37] national languages have been taught in Cameroon in some private primary and secondary schools for more than 30 years. Researchers hold that the teaching of national languages dates as far back as the German colonial era. After independence, the International Linguistic Institution (SIL) continued to carry out research in local languages aimed at establishing the writing conventions of most Cameroonian languages. This led to the creation of the *PROPELCA (Cameroon National Language Association)* in 1978. The objective of the programme is to promote selected national languages through their introduction at primary school level whereby children would learn to read and write in their MT (mother tongue) from grade one to three, with a progressive transition from oral practice and writing to mathematics and other subjects. A teaching programme including objectives for primary and secondary school levels has been worked out; didactic material has been elaborated. The experimentation phase is ongoing in some selected schools.

Djiafeua (2013) contended that the administration faces the challenge of selecting which languages to be taught in schools. How some will be selected without excluding others. He continued that some of the vernacular languages are perceived as not being worthwhile because they only meet the needs of the local

population and are not commercially viable. He further argues that the overall possibility of introducing national languages in the curriculum will depend on how well defined a given language can be, to what extent it is already being used and how many people are concerned. In a project for the introduction of the teaching of National languages and cultures in Secondary Schools, the following criteria for selecting languages to be taught were established;

- The language must have already been taught in the primary and secondary level.
- There must be the availability of necessary materials to start and experiment.
- The human resources allowing for the subsequent development of both the teaching material and the training of teachers exist.
- There should also be some degree of awareness and support from the community. This could be in the form of already functioning language committees or language academies with high percentages of local involvement.
- The language to be taught must be selected from all the administrative regions of the country to allow for a certain national representativeness and equity.

The first phase in the implementation of the introduction of national languages in school started with experimentation in seven pilot schools. These include:

- Lycee Classique et Moderne de Ngaoundere in the Adamawa Region.
- Lycee General Leclerc de Yaounde in the Centre Region.
- Lycee d'Akwa de Douala in the Littoral Region.
- Lycee Classique et Moderne de Garoua in the Northern Region.
- Government high school Njinikom in the North West Region.
- Lycee Classique d'Ebolowa in the South Region.
- Lycee Classique de Bafang in the West Region.

According to the proposed curriculum for the observation sub-cycle for teaching of National Languages, National Culture and Artistic Education, in Cameroon secondary schools, the teaching of national languages at the secondary school level comprises the study of applied

phonetics and the teaching of one national language during the first two years of school for forms one and two. It holds that the mother tongue shall be taught from form 3 in some schools, and some in form 4. Though the languages shall be taught in schools, they shall not be tested in the Cameroon Certificate of Education (G.C.E) or the Br vet d'Etudes du Premier Cycle (BEPC) which constitute the examination boards in the Anglophone and francophone sub systems in Cameroon. The applied phonetics course shall be based on the general alphabet designed for all Cameroonian languages. This alphabet harmonizes the writing conventions of all national languages following the principles of bi-vocal or one-on-one relationship between the sound and the grapheme. In other words, one grapheme represents one sound only. As for the language course, the target language is chosen by learner during the first year secondary school. This language shall be different from the mother tongue. The document also provided suggestions for the type of teaching strategies to be used in teaching National languages in school.

## **5. CHALLENGES IN THE PRACTICE OF MULTILINGUALISM**

Many countries worldwide have attested to the fact that linguistic diversity is a feature of every country. This is evident in the number of conferences held in various parts of the world to promote linguistic diversity [38-40]. Some of these include the 1996 Barcelona conference on Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights; the June 1996 Hong Kong conference on language rights and the 1995 Cameroon national education forum, which sought to establish the principle that mother tongue of students should have a place in the educational system. Robinson and Varley [41] however argue that until date, African countries are yet to come to terms with and promote diversity in their educational systems.

Tambo [42] argues that although the need to integrate Cameroon language into the educational System was expressed at high levels in government, they were no clear indications on how to go about it. He added that in the early years of independence, suggestions were made that for the purpose of national cultural identity one single Cameroon language should be chosen as an official language. This proposal was however rejected by the people. By the mid 1960's another proposal was made that the

country be divided into linguistics zones so that one language could be chosen from each zone and adopted as national language for that area, this too was not attractive to many people. The third proposal, the trilingual option argues that specific recognition ought to be given to different languages. It divides Cameroon languages into three groups: the official languages and the intra-group or non-common languages. However, after the education forum that took place in 1995, the law of education was adopted by the national assembly and promulgated into law by the president of the republic. Article 5 section 4 stated that one of the objectives of education in Cameroon is to promote the use of national languages.

Recommendations made by the forum formed the main concerns of education in Cameroon as stated in the 1998 education Law that stipulated guide lines for education in Cameroon. Section 5, article 4 of the general provision in outlined in part 1, of the policy document states that one major objective of education is to promote national languages. In 2002, a Ministerial decree was signed directing Provincial Pedagogic inspectors to be responsible for the national languages. Though the Minister of Education declared in his New Year speech of 10 February 2004 that he would issue a government declaration about national languages and their role in Education, no school has started any implementation of the policy of multilingualism. Attempts by government towards its implementation, are still at the pilot phases. Anchimbe [43] postulates, that over the last four decades, many researchers have paid attention to language issues in the Cameroonian educational system. He continues that in spite of the fact that the issue of how well native languages could be used in education has been central in educational policy discourse since independence to present, there is still no government approved scheme for the use of native Cameroonian languages in education. The study argues that the trend in the implementation of the policy of Multilingualism has for the most part being conservative for reasons mentioned below:

Despite the post-independence euphoria to adapt education to the needs of the population and to promote linguistic diversity in Cameroon, French and English media education remains the norm in Cameroon schools. One reason that accounts for this is because government officials and policymakers perceive linguistic diversity as

a problem and a curse or what Davies [44], following the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, describes as the 'fatality of Babel'. Muhlhausler [45] also adds that the notion of linguistic diversity as divine punishment dominated Western thinking for Centuries. Because of this very little is done to promote the use of these languages during the colonial period. After independence African state in order to solve the problem decided to hold onto the languages of the colonial masters. Blommaert [46] also explains that languages of colonial masters were retained by the Cameroon government because of the 'efficiency argument' which wrongly perceives multilingualism as a problem that must be avoided at all cost to ensure the smooth running of business of the state and promote national integration and economic development.

Kamwangamalu, in Yiakoumetti, A. [10], adds that one of the factors that have inhibited the implementation of Multilingualism in Cameroon is rooted in the language ideologies of the nation – state and of socio-economic development that Cameroon as a commonwealth nation, inherited from former colonial power, Britain. Kamwangamalu further argued that, based on the ideology of the nation-state, which advocated for unitary symbols among which among them are 'one nation', 'one language', 'one culture', 'one belief system', 'one religion', the colonial authorities designed the centralist language policies that embraced monolingualism in a European language as the norm, but treated the diversity of African languages as a problem and a treat to social order, and considered the African languages themselves as inadequate for advanced learning and socio-economic development.

Moreover, The lack of government support and the impracticability of some of the language teaching schemes proposed, as well as the fact that government has deliberately played down the issue due to fear of language conflict likely to threaten and disrupt national unity are the major reasons advanced for the difficulties of implementing the curriculum in multilingualism in Cameroon.

This study argues that the government's position is glaring in the provisions made concerning the place of indigenous language in Cameroon's education system in the 1998 Law of Education. Though this law underscores the promotion of indigenous language in Education, the clause is subsumed under the article on Bilingualism

giving the impression that teaching of national language in school is secondary to teaching of French and English. More over while the teaching of English and French begins from the very first year of primary school and appears every day on the timetable, the teaching of indigenous begins in form 3 in some schools and form 4 in others. The text of application for the introduction of Multilingualism holds that though the languages shall be taught in schools, they shall not be tested in the G.C.E or BEPC. The above contentions indicate that the teaching of Indigenous language in schools is viewed as secondary or less important to be taken seriously.

Furthermore Government's reluctance can also be attributed to the fact that the introduction of indigenous languages in school may not be economically realistic. Considering the fact that educational budget is very tight and does not permit schools to have the minimum educational need in terms of instructional materials, and other educational resources, and considering the fact that for some time government has been unable to recruit primary school teachers for a period of ten years, as well as its inability to sustain a school system that operates in one of the two official languages, the government does not consider investment in multilingualism as their primary preoccupation [47-49].

Moreover, because Cameroonians did not see any clear economic value, no international promise and no job opportunities, they have turned to the official languages for these advantages. Parents prefer to offer their children a broader horizon of international opportunities through Education in English and or French rather than limiting them within the local domains of indigenous language. Moreover, there was no prestige associated in including indigenous language in the curriculum of schools in Cameroon. Achimbe (2006) holds that Bakweri parents had earlier petitioned to the Basel mission in Switzerland that "it is quite against the reason that our children should be educated in a barbarous tongue (Duala language) instead of a civilized one either German or English" (p.68).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Though the take-off of Multilingualism has been comparatively slow, its implementation in schools is gradually evolving. Starting with private institutions, Multilingualism in schools is becoming the concern of government officials.

Many conferences and meetings are discussing ways of teaching indigenous languages in schools. An inspectorate of Multilingualism has been created in both Ministries of Education to cater for this reform.

As far as the implementation of the policy of Multilingualism is concerned, it can be that since the inclusion of national language in the 1998 law guiding education in Cameroon, there have not yet been changes in the educational system with regard to national language. The policy is conservative and non –committal when it comes to the use of national languages as the medium of instruction in schools. Although the British and French colonial rule in Cameroon ended more than fifty years ago, Cameroon continue to put the former colonial languages of English and French on the pedestal especially in education. This assertion is in line with Fishman's [50] comment that 'although the lowering of one flag and the raising of another may indicate the end of colonial status, these acts do not necessarily indicate the end of imperialist privilege in neo-colonial disguise'. This is very evident in the privileged status and role of English and French vis-à-vis indigenous languages in the Cameroonian educational system. The languages of instruction are still the official language English and French.

This assertion is in support of Anchimbe's [43] argument that the work with national languages which has been carried out throughout the last thirty years is still based on initiatives of non-governmental organization in spite of the fact that the National forum on Education in 1995 decided to adopt the PROPELCA programme. The implementation of Cameroonian languages in the school curriculum has only been a lip service. The study therefore concludes that indigenous languages if properly planned and implemented can be most appropriate for use as language of instruction for early literacy in schools. It also acknowledges that the multiplicity of these languages in Cameroon, the lack of teaching materials, and the need to train teachers to use these languages as media of instruction in schools are challenges that need to be overcome.

Although the Cameroon political system since independence has been relatively stable to permit the implementation of a constructive language policy, this seems not to have been a major preoccupation of the government. The reason for this may be attributed principally to the fact that in Cameroon like in many other Sub-

Saharan African countries, language questions are viewed as secondary or less important to be taken rather seriously. So long as the system appears to be working, so long as there is no major crisis, no one cares. In spite of the rambling of linguists and other interested scholars, Cameroonian political authorities seem to be satisfied with the status quo. Thus language policy is, to say the least, a reflection of the State where issues relating to policy and planning are not handled with any long-term perspectives.

Thus a balanced language policy will become effective when mother tongue education is introduced in the early years of primary education, the official languages being introduced later on. Such a policy will only be realistically implemented gradually where possible, especially in the rural areas. The indigenous language(s) of a particular region will thus be used in teaching and promoted at different levels. And, where applicable, one or more indigenous languages could be promoted at the sub-divisional, divisional or provincial levels. Once more, through government endeavour, local councils, language committees and individual initiative, the teaching of English and French on the one hand and indigenous languages on the other should be encouraged nation-wide.

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Education in Cameroonian indigenous languages is the way forward if knowledge and skills are to be effectively disseminated to the wider public. In addressing the problem of language economics in the implementation of multilingualism in Cameroon, the study proposes that Cameroon indigenous languages should be assigned market value to make them instrumentally competitive with English. This is in line with Kamwangamalu's [10] argument that, until African languages are associated with a market value English will continue to dominate the educational systems of African Commonwealth countries. He therefore proposed prestige planning for African Languages. According to Haarmann [51], Prestige planning is concerned with raising the status of language vis-à-vis other languages in the society so that members of the targeted speech community must have a positive attitude towards it.

However, the 280 languages in Cameroon cannot be given the same prestige in general

environment but can be given in areas where they are used. They can be used for Adult education in the villages. By integrating local languages in adult education programme, the language will be given its prestige.

One of the problems of using indigenous languages in school in Cameroon is the fact that the languages are too many and so the choice of what language to use in school becomes a major concern. The study recommends that instead of asking which language should be used in school a balanced language policy will become effective when mother tongue education is introduced in the early years of primary education. Such a policy will only be realistically implemented gradually where possible, especially in the rural areas. The indigenous language(s) of a particular region will thus be used in teaching and promoted at different levels. And, where applicable, one or more indigenous languages could be promoted at the sub-divisional, divisional or provincial levels. For example, the government could establish one experimental school in each of the 360 subdivision in Cameroon because in each subdivision there is a dominant native language and besides one native language can be spoken in more than two subdivisions. The teaching of native languages in schools will serve two functions; (1) it will be use as a language of instruction to facilitate the transition of native language to language of instruction and (2) as a subject for those who don't know the language. The local community would be expected therefore to be involved in the planning of the school curriculum in native language. Based on this the Cameroonian languages will have prestige.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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