

THE CHALLENGE OF SAVING TWO LANGUAGES IN CAMEROONIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe and challenge the ineffectiveness of using the two official languages in the Cameroonian higher educational system on the one hand; then to show the great need and importance of promoting both languages (English and French) on the other hand. This paper proposes some pragmatic remedial strategies and practical solutions to overcome the difficulties in implementing true individual and personal bilingualism in the Cameroonian higher educational system. Cameroon, as one of the few countries in the world where two languages are adopted as official languages- French and English are intimately related to the universities community's daily life. Even though according to the Cameroonian constitution, the public institutions are supposed to be bilingual, however with regards to its effectiveness in the Higher Education Institutions, the practice of these languages is limited and the dominance of the French language is very glaring. It has been researched and found out that personal bilingualism is ineffective because the majority of students and lecturers are officially monolingual and most of them have adopted the French language as their first language of communication. The creation of a language board and the institution of language competitions can serve as a means of enhancing personal bilingualism in students and lecturers in the higher educational institutions, hence, creating an impact in the entire country.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Higher Education, Languages Promotion, Society Development.

INTRODUCTION

Historical Overview and Background

Cameroon is officially a bilingual country even though most of the people are in fact monolingual. Cameroon's former and first President AHMADOU AHIDJO, stated that "By bilingualism we mean the practical usage of our two official languages, English and French, throughout the national territory." After 1918 (the First World War), Cameroon, as a German colony, was divided into two separate territories which were placed under the administration of the war victors which were France and Britain (Kouega, 2009). When Francophone and Anglophone Cameroon were united in October 1961, the new State adopted French and English as its two official languages and the government embarked on the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country (Kouega, 2008). Indeed, *Part One, section one (3) of the 18th January 1996 Constitution* makes mention of bilingualism in Cameroon by these expressions: "The official languages of the Republic of Cameroon shall be English and French, both languages having the same status. The State shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the Country. It shall endeavor to protect and promote national languages." (Cameroon 1996). Therefore, both official languages are to be promoted in all the various sectors of the state. In spite of the fact that English and French are considered de

jure as of equal status, de facto, French has a dominance over English in the areas of administration, education (In Francophone secondary schools, German and Spanish are taught as subjects, whereas in Anglophone secondary schools they are not) and the media (Echu G. , 2004). In education, Cameroon has adopted two systems: the Anglophone sub-system of education based on the Anglo-Saxon model and the Francophone sub-system of education based on the French model. We notice that the Anglophone sub-system is mostly applied in the two English-speaking regions (North-West and South-West regions) and the Francophone sub-system is mostly applied in the eight other regions of Cameroon which mainly uses French. The two sub-systems of education are operational from primary to higher education level. The University, as a Higher Educational Institution (Federal University of Cameroon) having as mission to contribute to the social development through the pursuit of education, learning and research came into existence in Cameroon on the 26th of July 1962 (MINESUP, 2014). In some public universities both English and French are applied in their educational system. In these universities, the lecturers use one of the official languages which they master best for communication with the students. Evaluations are generally set according to the language in which the courses are being taught, but students are free to choose one of the languages (either French or English) in answering questions during the examination, which is generally English for Anglophone students and French for Francophone students.

This practice has given rise to some problems because most of the lecturers are French-speaking and the English-speaking students are placed in a disadvantageous position because most often, the language of instruction in these institutions is French. In the Francophone regions, English is taught from the nursery and primary level till the tertiary level (University). English is a considerable and respected subject in these regions. These can be proven by the high credit points attributed to it (credit 3, or credit 5 in some classes) more than other subject's credit in the secondary schools and universities. English language is not only taught as a subject, but it is also compulsory for every student to take part in the English exams. In the English-speaking regions, French language teaching also starts from nursery and primary school and continues till the higher level. It is recommended that, every primary school teacher must teach all the subjects including the second official language. French is also compulsory for the English-speaking students. During official exams and competitive examinations, there is also a French language paper.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Some Cameroonian authors like (Enama, 2016), (Mosima, 2016), (Arjun Swami-Persaud & Jelte Verberne, 2015), (Joseph, 2015), (Soule, 2013), (Echu G., 2004), (Ayafor, 2001) etc. wrote articles concerning bilingualism in the area of education. Most of them did research on the practice of bilingualism in primary, secondary and even in the tertiary level of education but few of them did a specific research concerning the case of public universities in Cameroon. (Echu G. , 2004) in his work based on "The Language Question In Cameroon" mentioned that the language question is a problem in Cameroon because the policies of official bilingualism can lead to a potential conflict between French-speaking and English-speaking citizens of Cameroon. Despite the judicial and political control of the language policy, the practice and the implementation of official bilingualism encounters and faces some serious difficulties because the Cameroonian political authority seems to be satisfied with the status quo of the language policy which were adopted since the federation of Francophone and Anglophone Cameroon. (Echu, 2005) discussed the immersion experience in Anglophone primary schools and the academic performance of pupils. The author also

analyzed the fall of immersion in primary, secondary and tertiary level. (Kouega, 2008) carried out a socio-linguistic investigation in the practice of bilingualism at the tertiary level of education. The author tried to demonstrate the fact that the use of official bilingualism in the public universities seems to be superficial. The case study which was the University of Yaoundé II show that a greater number of lecturers use French for teaching and the communication on campus is mainly in French. To develop official and true bilingualism, the author emphasizes on the necessity for the Cameroonian government to set up a reward scheme and grant an allowance to workers who can attain a specific level of bilingual competence. According to(NFI, 2014), the predominance of French language over English language as the language of instruction is so glaring in the area of education in Cameroon, he also thinks that there is a phenomenon of “*new Anglophones*” who are Cameroonians of French Cameroon ancestry but who have decided to adopt the Anglophone ethnic culture and educational sub-system. The bilingual language policy encounters many difficulties and ascertains that the policy of effective French-English bilingualism is not so successful in Cameroonian public universities. The predominance of the French language and the speaking of Pidgin-English by some Cameroonians constitute a serious impediment (Abongdia, 2014).

The University has as mission and responsibility to promote bilingualism, Universities can equally play an important role in the promotion of equality in the usage of English and French throughout the country. The main purpose of this paper is to carry out the idea of maintaining the plurality languages system in the Cameroonian educational system especially in the Universities since universities are the right places to positively transform a society considering the fact that they have as fundamental missions to educate, make research for the purpose of innovating and promoting the social development.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based mainly on the literature review: books, journals articles, thesis and web documents which refer to languages problems, language policies in Cameroon in general and in higher education in particular. Besides the literature review, this research is also based on the personal experiences first as student in a Cameroonian University and also as a teacher. Our observations in daily life and participation in various activities are also related to the question of bilingualism in the area of education. The focus of this study is the public universities which officially apply English and French as their language of instruction. These universities are: the University of Yaoundé I, the University of Yaoundé II, the University of Douala, the University of Dschang and the University of Maroua. These public universities were created after the 1993 Cameroonian Higher Education Reform which introduced an important change in the tertiary sector of education and made universities more accessible to local, national, regional and even to international communities.

DISCUSSION

Official Bilingualism and Its Application in Public Universities

Etymologically derived from Latin, bilingualism means two plus tongue. For some people, bilingualism means “having two official languages”, for others; it means “equal ability to communicate in two languages”. (Joseph, 2015) defines bilingualism as the “ability of an individual or the citizens of a given nation to use two languages effectively”. According to this definition, almost all the Cameroonians are bilingual because from childhood most Cameroonians are able to speak at least one of the official languages and the mother tongue or local language. In my case for example, when I started going to school, I was able to speak

French and my mother tongue (Mafa). Even though at that time I could speak two or more languages, I couldn't be considered as a bilingual Cameroonian because when we talk of bilingualism in Cameroon, we mostly refer to "Official bilingualism" which implies a functional competence in the official languages which are French and English. Among the countries in the world, Canada, Rwanda, Seychelles, Vanuatu where bilingualism (French and English) is applied, the case of Cameroon can be described as one of the special cases because bilingual education started in Cameroon since its independence in 1961 with the objective of being implemented at the tertiary Level. During that period, the country had an Institute (which later became the Federal University of Cameroon) whose mission was to serve national unity and integration. After the higher educational reforms of 1993, the Cameroonian legislation instituted bilingualism in the higher educational system and the use of English and French in almost all the public universities.

Cameroon has adopted two types of public universities—the bilingual universities found in the French-speaking regions and the "Anglo-Saxon" universities—University of Bamenda and University of Buea found in the English-speaking regions which only use English as language of instruction. The Law N°005 of 16th April 2001 which defines the general orientations of the higher educational system in Cameroon highlights in its section five (5) the value that the State attributes to bilingualism as a factor of national unity and integration. Since the adoption of bilingualism in Cameroon, several policies have been elaborated to promote these languages. Several decisions were adopted in the form of ordinances, decrees, circulars, service notes by the State to ensure the spread of official bilingualism throughout the country. In spite of the political will to institute bilingualism in the Cameroonian higher educational system, we notice several difficulties in its implementation in these public universities. That is why some scholars consider bilingualism in Cameroonian public universities as a myth.

Limitations in the Implementation of Bilingualism in Universities

Official bilingualism and personal bilingualism are two different concepts. In the case of Cameroon, the former means some policies, constitutional provisions and laws ensuring legal equality in the use of English and French in the parliaments and the courts in Cameroon protect the linguistic rights and provide services both in English and French. While the latter can be defined as the ability of an individual to speak, read and write both languages. A bilingual country is not only a country in which the public and private institutions provide services in two languages to the citizens who are mostly unilingual, but it is rather a country in which almost all the inhabitants can fluently speak, read and write these two languages. Cameroonians who are perfectly bilingual are few.

People from North West and South West regions, because of their historical attachment to Britain, can speak English fluently while those originating from the Center, Littoral, South, West, East, Adamawa, North and Far-North regions due to their historical attachment to France can speak French fluently. In order to explain the ineffectiveness of bilingualism in Cameroon, there is a common saying among French-speakers which goes as such; "C'est le Cameroun qui est bilingue, pas les Camerounais" which means "Cameroon is a bilingual Country but the Cameroonians are not". Therefore, we notice that the policy language of the Cameroonian government is not implemented in the public universities. Theoretically, Cameroon is perfectly bilingual and both languages have the same status but in practice, French emerges as a dominant language in all areas of public life (Arjun Swami-Persaud & Jelte Verberne, 2015). In the bilingual universities, lectures are supposed to be delivered in

two languages, but in practice they are delivered almost entirely in French. In 2005, a research show that in the University of Yaoundé I, out of a total of 980 courses, 90% of courses were taught in French and only 10% in English. This was due to the fact that, these students were taught by 696 permanent lecturers of whom a proportion of about 70% were French-speaking and the rest were English-speaking (ORACLE, n.d.). This practice was unfair to the minority of English-speaking students. It was also revealed that French is a predominant language of interaction in almost all the campuses. (Kouega, 2008) in his research, asked these questions to his respondents: “In what languages do you generally interact with the university staff?” and “In what language do university staff usually interact with students?” the respondents answered that their university officials, faculty staff use only French as language of interaction. Furthermore, (Kouega, 2008) mentioned that in the University of Yaoundé II, in the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences the language policy of bilingualism is completely ignored. In fact, all the courses from Level 1 to Level 3 are taught in French language (100%). In the Faculty of Law and political sciences, from Level 1 to level 2, only 33.33% of courses are taught in English.

Apart from the fact that the university Officials mainly use French to communicate with the students, the information on the notice board are also written in French except those concerning fees that are written in both languages. In addition to this, we also notice that the number of Anglophone lecturers in the universities is relatively small. The same phenomenon is seen in the University of Yaoundé I which is considered as the reference of bilingualism among Cameroonian public universities. The other public universities which apply the policy of bilingualism are not spared from this reality. That is why (Echu G., 2004) thinks that this can contribute in creating a frustrating atmosphere and marginalization in English-speaking students. It has been proven that when English-speaking students speak in English, their French-speaking classmates tend to say sometimes: “I don’t understand English, say it in French”. According to (Abongdia, 2014), the problem of unsuccessful bilingualism in Cameroon may lie also in “the very monolingual orientation of the policy, which sees these languages as distinct, separate entities and makes no room for blended varieties like CPE, Camfrancanglais or even indigenous languages”. For (Soule, 2013) “The constitution makes mention of the promotion of bilingualism, but it is silent on how it should be practiced and implemented. There is no single institution in charge of ensuring the implementation of bilingualism in Cameroon.”

In spite of the superficial existence of bilingualism in the Cameroonian Higher Educational structure, we notice that Cameroonians have many difficulties when it comes to the application of effective bilingualism (fluently and fully Speaking, writing and reading English and French), therefore it is necessary for each Cameroonian to maintain and promote bilingualism which has many important virtues and roles in the country, in the higher educational institutions in general and especially in every citizen’s daily life. Based on these arguments, personal experience and opinion, personal bilingualism is more powerful than a bilingual institution. For Cameroon to become a truly bilingual country, citizens have to practice personal bilingualism, government has to reinforce some legal framework aimed at promoting official bilingualism.

The Need of Promoting Bilingualism

One of the basic objectives of the higher education realm stipulated in section 6 of chapter I in the 1st PART approved by the present President of the Republic Paul BIYA on 16th April 2001 is that the higher educational institution has as fundamental mission: to promote

bilingualism. (Cameroon R. o., 2001) Nowadays, most of the technology, business, medicine, and education terminologies are in English. Universities are the best institutions that can bring change and development in a Country. It is therefore a great benefit and advantage to know how to use English and French not only in speaking but also in writing and reading. As such, if universities from French-speaking regions ignore English, they do so at their own disadvantage. Even though the learning and teaching of English in Cameroonian universities is very complicated due to the multilingual situation of the country, (Justine, 2016) mentions that whether we are Francophone or Anglophone, learning English is the newest and fastest way to change our world, especially in the areas of science and technology. Great efforts are being made by the government in the area of bilingual training, but it is still insufficient. As the Minister of Secondary Education Jean Ernest Massena Ngalle Bibehe said during the recent National Bilingualism Week, bilingualism in Cameroon is “the cement of national unity and national integration” (Mosima, 2016). The institution of the “National Bilingualism Day” and “National Bilingualism Week” which take place every year on the first Friday of February and organized by the Ministries of Basic Education and Secondary Education constitutes an important means of promoting bilingualism in primary and secondary schools.

The Ministry of higher education should institute a similar program in the tertiary level of education. In order to become a true bilingual country, the Cameroonian government has to carry out some necessary measures. A Language board should to be created for the promotion of bilingualism in Cameroonian universities. Such board should be responsible for the development of bilingualism, the promotion of bilingual education and the evaluation of bilingual proficiency in the country. Cameroon has ten regions and we have to boost and give a greater priority to the territorial educational systems by boosting the creation of more bilingual universities. To solve the ineffectiveness of bilingualism in Cameroon, the Government should create some special institutions which are specialized in training students with the objective of producing purely bilingual Cameroonians. In universities, we should also create many bilingual clubs and organize bilingual competitions with the aim of rewarding outstanding bilingual students and lecturers. More so, in the recruitment process of lecturers and workers in the public universities and institutions, priority should be given to applicants who are bilingual. In some institutions in the French-speaking regions, English is still taught as a subject vice versa with those in the English-speaking regions. We need to create more English degree courses whereby English and French can be used as languages of interaction and instruction. There is a need to develop more bilingual degree courses in which the French component is taught in English and the English component is taught in French as well.

Didactic Materials

In the tertiary educational level, we need to close the void and gap left behind. Thus, in order to enable students in the Cameroon higher educational system rapidly acquire the appropriate patterns of interaction in their speech in the community, (Enama, 2016) suggested, there is a great need to expose learners to rich linguistic data as often as possible. These data can come from teaching materials and resources (Books, eBooks, novels etc.), internet, competitions, club activities etc. It is also important not only for the lecturers to have course book and pedagogic guide but it is also necessary for the students to get these materials. (Enongene, 2013) mentions the lack of appropriate learning and teaching materials and resources. Since students have to provide their own materials like textbooks, there is need to encourage them or their parents to buy those which are written in the two languages. As (Innocent, 2012) said, in second language teaching, if the best syllabuses and the best teaching methods are

available whereas there are no appropriate didactic materials, no teacher could go miles in achieving the pedagogic objectives. Teachers would be unable to achieve their teaching objectives and student too would be unable to attain their learning objectives without appropriate didactic materials.

Personal Official Bilingual Training

Bilingualism offers many advantages not only for individual interest but for the whole society. English is recognized and used as a Pan-African and international means of communication, and many lecturers and officials are often invited abroad for seminars, studies, researches, cooperation or visits. Thus, there is a great need to be able to communicate not only in French but also in English. The spread of the mastery of English by French-speakers is incontestable and unavoidable. Although the being proficient in English and French at the same time is something to be proud of, however due to some reasons such as low literacy level, the geographical position (Anglophone regions and Francophone regions), mental and financial poverty etc., people are unable and not stimulated to use these two languages. Instead of saying every time that Cameroon is a bilingual country, students in the higher educational institutions and lecturers have to know the importance of bilingualism which can serve as their main motivation of learning and they should also try to put it into practice. To tackle the problem of inability or ineffectiveness of using the two official languages by Cameroonian higher institutions lecturers, it is advisable that the various universities or the government should implement a kind of recycling in the form of training French-speaking lecturers using the English language and training English-Speaking lecturers using the French language. To solve the problem of marginalization of the minor English-speaking students, it is advisable that university's staff, officials and lecturers should take into account the linguistic problems that various students face.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, we must mention that in spite of the legal and political consecration of bilingualism in Cameroon since the unification of Anglophone and Francophone in October 1961, its practice at the higher educational level is limited. The government should focus on encouraging French-speaking students to learn English by taking courses in English language and vice-versa for English-speaking students. In order to make the practice of bilingualism more efficient, the policy of strengthening bilingualism has to be restructured and implemented starting from basic education (kindergarten or primary school), given that there are some recent researches showing that people who are bilingual especially children, are more flexible in cognition and working memories (Debra A. Giambo and Tunde Szecsi, 2015). As such, in the nearest future the struggle to produce and train bilingual Cameroonians with linguistic tools and the ability to communicate adequately in two languages (French and English) will be achieved.

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