



## Cameroon's Foreign Language Learning Culture and the Paradox of English as an Official Language

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**Abstract:** Substantial exposure to language is one of the most effectively proven approaches to language learning. In Cameroon, however, even with a fairly considerable exposure to the English Language, foreign language learners still lack very basic communicative competencies in it relative to other foreign languages. In this study, we sought to describe EFL learners' degree of exposure to different foreign languages in the Francophone system of education vis-à-vis their performances, explore some striking pedagogic differences in the teaching of English and other foreign languages and finally assess the extent to which learners' motivations affect their mastery of English and other foreign languages. Drawing from an analysis of a three-year statistics of final year EFL learners' performances in Lycee de Nkolbisson, an oral assessment, interviews on pedagogic approaches and the motivations of 60 EFL learners, we realized that though learners are more exposed to the English Language, they tend to lack very basic communicative skills in it compared to other foreign languages in the Francophone system of education. It was also realized that, besides poor motivation, there are also pedagogic lapses in the teaching of English to Francophones in the country. This led us to the conclusion that while, practically, pedagogic inconsistencies could account for the remarkable incompetence among EFL learners in Cameroon, it seems to be a micro reflection of a macro indifference towards the learning of English among Francophones in general.

**Keywords:** Cameroon; Culture; English; Foreign Language Learning; Paradox.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The English Language is the most widely spread language on planet earth. Crystal (2003) reports that there are 320 million native speakers, 420 million second language speakers and about 600 million foreign speakers dispersed in more than 40 countries in the world. Arguably, the unremitting global impact of the language in politics, economics, defense and entertainment, has surely boosted these figures over the years. This is perhaps why Wolf and Polzenhagen (2009:1) categorically conclude that English is the number one language on the planet.

Even with the growing relevance of the language in global politics, technology, military and economics across national and international boundaries, there seems to be a certain aversion or unwillingness, among Cameroonian EFL learners, to attain very basic communicative competency in the language. More and more EFL learners tend to prefer other international languages (German, Chinese, Spanish and Latin) to the English Language and this is observable in their success rates even without a fairly considerable exposure. Ironically, the official status of the English language in Cameroon and the power it emits on the global stage

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are seemingly not enough to convince the majority of EFL learners on the dire need to accord a certain level of interest in it and this desperately begs the question on the underlying status of English in the country.

English is one of the official languages in Cameroon. It is constitutionally designed to enjoy the same status as French in government, judiciary, military, education and other key sectors in the country. In education, while it is both a language of instruction and a compulsory subject in the English system of education, in the French educational system, it is only a compulsory subject. Even with this constitutional projection of the language, it has arguably remained only an optional second official language in the country. This droopy perception of the language seems to be at the foundation of the observably frippery indifference among EFL learners to crave for basic communicative competency in it. Even after “extensive” and fairly “engaging” studies, from elementary to tertiary levels, the lack of very basic speaking and writing skills in the language, relative to other international languages, could suggest a macro agenda to limit the spread and coziness of the language among the Francophone population of the country. Consequently, we seek to find out the co-variation between EFL learners’ exposure to different foreign languages in the Francophone system of education vis-à-vis their performances and to ascertain the extent to which their motivations inhibit their basic performances in the English language.

## 2. English as a Foreign Language in Cameroon

While there is a growing interest in foreign language learning, globally, there seems to be a relatively lesser research interest in the teaching and learning of Foreign Languages (Copland and Garton, 2014:223). This might, however, be the case with such international languages as French, German, Spanish and Latin but not with the English Language which has been “making ever deeper inroads into local communities” (Schneider, 2007). Indeed, the English Language continues to enjoy a privileged foreign status to people who originally did not speak it as a native or second language. In fact, Gardner *et al.*, (1997) argue that the integral status of the language in the learning process is generally accepted and this has inspired more and more non-English speaking communities to desire basic communicative competence in it. Most non-English speaking communities now believe that English is the language of global politics, diplomacy and technology and the only way to fully and actively enjoy global membership is through the adaptation of English as an official language or a necessary foreign language.

The teaching of English as a foreign language, however, comes with major challenges that inhibit learners’ successes. Veenman (1984) observes that the integration of teachers from training colleges could be quite traumatizing since teachers gradually move from little guides to independent and sometimes unobserved efforts. This poses an even more serious problem in non-native contexts where teachers are first of all caught up in the challenge of attaining a fairly considerable level of competence in the language (Simo Bobda, 2002). In fact, researchers (Garton, *et al.*, 2011 and Emery, 2012) are quite unanimous that some teachers could be very uncertain about their competencies and this could affect their output. Senior (2006:51) remarks that a teacher might even think they are “fake, fraud [or] imposter, bluffing and blundering on.” Sometimes, circumstances such as differing, unfamiliarity, payment may clash with personal expectations (Veenman, 1984). Some scholars (Garton, *et al.*, 2011) agree that foreign language teaching and learning come with so many hurdles. In Cameroon, even with the official English and French bilingual status of the country, the teaching of English as a foreign language is not so different from what obtains in most EFL contexts of the world. In fact, Negfac (2010) has humourously described the situation as quite typical of “the blind leading the blind”. The non-native status of most teachers, in a way, constrains their effective mastery and onward transmission of native knowledge to foreign learners. Since the content is Received Pronunciation (RP), facilitators observably tend to use context-specific features to teach “standard British English” [1]. Paradoxically, they sometimes think highly of their language even when studies (Ngefacs, 2010 & Angwah, 2019) have revealed that they are fundamentally speakers of Cameroon English.

Besides teachers’ non-native status, post-colonial multilingual Cameroon still presents more threats in the Cameroon EFL industry. Fontem and Oyetade (2005) have cited inadequate motivation, teaching materials and classroom sizes as some of the deterrence to enhancing learners’ performances in the language. Additionally, teaching approaches and classroom management are also unavoidable in attaining remarkable success in the teaching and learning process everywhere (Ellis, 2005). The continuous modification of teaching approaches in Cameroon – from the traditional to the Competency Based Approach (CBA) has observably yielded very little outcome in the country. Recent studies

<sup>1</sup> Some contents are not totally SBE. Some authors confuse Standard American English (SAE) to SBE in lexical preferences and syntax. In some very interesting cases, they use them interchangeably.

(Diffang, 2019) have explored the difficulties implanting the CBA in some Cameroonian secondary schools and this could be at the nucleus of EFL learners' inabilities to attain basic communicative competencies in the language. Even though the teaching and learning of EFL stems from well thoughtful pedagogic premises, EFL learners still have difficulties using the language, relative to such international languages as German, Spanish and Chinese. Learners can hardly sustain basic conversations in English, but observably tend to do so in Chinese, German and Spanish which are only introduced to them at mid secondary school. This raises concerns on why the learners have difficulties in the English language which is introduced in primary school but not in other international languages that are only introduced in 4eme, mid

secondary school in the Francophone educational system.

### 3. THEORETICAL LANDSCAPE

This study is built on the Dijkian socio-cognitive logic. Van Dijk (2006) remarks that there is a slim line between societal constructs and cognitions. The belief is that the process of text production and consumption is related to the interpretation and understanding of a cognitive process. He argues that an analysis of the cognitive link between discourse and society not only offers methodological grounding for many discourse structures but also reveals how discourse is able to exercise power in society. Van Dijk (op sit.) visualizes a triangular framework which captures the discursive, cognitive and societal components as can be seen on Figure One below.

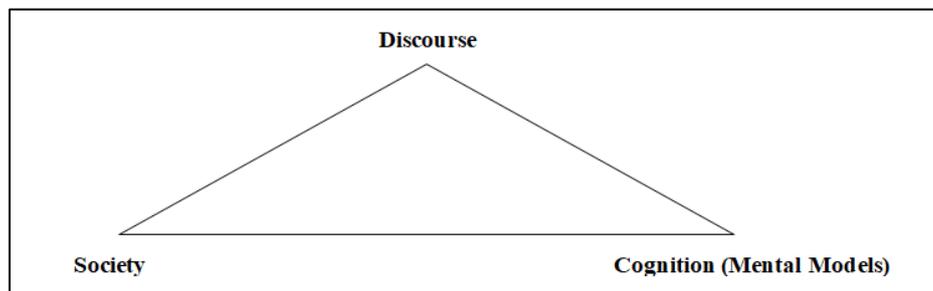


Figure 1: Van Dijk's (2006) Visualised Triangular Framework on Language Use

This triangular frame presents the discursive components and structures of a text which analyses the semantic, grammatical, and lexical choices; explores the different ways in which such discursive structures are interpreted in terms of underlying socially shared knowledge and ideologies and how they influence the mental models of language users in a bid to show how such discourses and their underlying cognitions are socially and politically functional in the reproduction of power relations and inequalities. This theory permits us to make logical micro and macro inferences on the underlying logic of EFL learners' inabilities to attain basic communicative skills in the English Language which cuts across the entire system of education, but enjoy a certain communicative competency in Chinese, German and Spanish which are only introduced at mid secondary education.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

The 2018-2021 statistics of Telminal [2] learners' performances in English, Chinese, German and Spanish in Lycee Classique de Nkolbisson, a strictly Francophone secondary school in the city of

Yaounde, constituted the first part of the data. This first part was complemented by an oral data in which 60 learners (20 per specialisation) were paired up in four groups to sustain very basic communication in the English Language and later in specialised foreign languages [3]. All the informants did their basic education in different Francophone private and public primary schools around Yaounde before getting admission to study in Lycee Classique de Nkolbisson, Yaounde. They were asked to simply create a two-minute basic communicative situation in English and their specialised foreign languages, guided by such clues as communities, favourite meals, holidays, background, family, ambitions and desires. For purposes of academic and pedagogic comparisons, eight teachers (two from each of the four specialisations) were interviewed. The final

<sup>3</sup> While all Francophone learners study English as a Foreign Language, not all of them study the other international languages (Latin, Chinese, German and Spanish). These languages are specialised programmes and learners cannot study any two at the same time, except in institutions where the vision and curriculum allow for it. While Spanish, German and Chinese are studied right up to Telminal, Latin ends at Seconde (two years to the final class)

<sup>2</sup> Final year secondary school class in the Francophone system of education in Cameroon

part of the data was based on the motivation of 60 current final year learners of Chinese, German and Spanish in the learning of English. A four likert scale questionnaire designed from Garder’s (1985) Attitude Motivation Testing Battery (AMTB) was used to illicit the learners’ motivation for learning the English Language. Since the learners were specializing in the different specialised languages and should clearly have great interests in the languages, the focus was largely on the English Language. For purposes of clarity, the questions were designed in English and later translated to French which is the second language of the

informants. This was to ensure that the informants understand and satisfactorily react to the questions.

### 5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

We were first concerned with an appraisal of EFL learners’ degree of exposure to the four foreign languages which we tested. French was not considered in this analysis since the learners only study it as a Second Language. The following statistics was guided by the time each international language was formally introduced to the learners. This was relevant for a proper assessment of the extent to which the learners’ exposures impact their performances in the different languages.

**Table 1: Class of language exposure**

English	Spanish	German	Chinese
Basic Education	4eme [4]		

The above figure shows that Cameroonian EFL learners get exposed to the English Language at their very first formal exposure to education in the country, unlike the other foreign languages that are only introduced in mid secondary education. Consequently, one would expect them to be more communicatively grounded in the English Language than in the other languages which only come up at the dusk of their critical period of language acquisition [5] (Birdsong, 1999). This is, however, not the case considering the following statistics of Lycee Classic de Nkolbisson Terminal students’ summative assessments over a period of three years.

**Table 2: Three-year statistics of students’ Performances in English and other foreign languages**

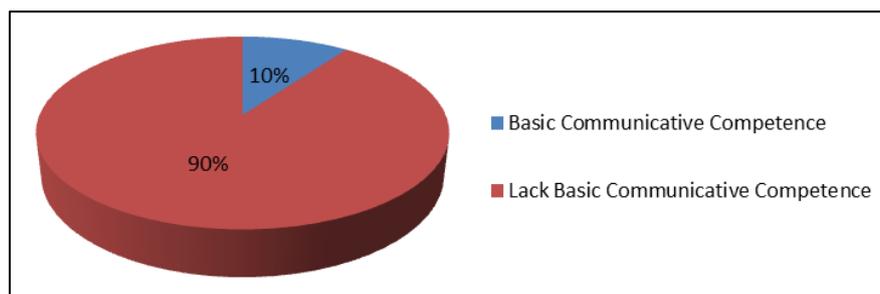
Year	Terminal Series					
	Chinese		German		Spanish	
	Chinese	ENG [6]	German	ENG	Spanish	ENG
2018/19	78.13%	46.12%	51.22%	41.32%	44.13%	22.34%
2019/20	69.67%	28.03%	48.89%	37.03%	48.71%	27.47%
2020/21	76.10%	51.67%	52.31%	33.57%	39.11%	28.37%

Table 2 shows the learners’ poor performances in the English Language relative to other specialised foreign languages over a three-year period. This is very disturbing considering that the English Language is introduced quite earlier than the other foreign languages. However, from 2018 to 2021, the students’ performances were consistent and spanned across the respective specialisations. In none of the academic years or specialisations were their performances in English better than in the other foreign languages. It was, therefore, necessary to further ascertain these findings through an assessment of current learners’ oral performances in these languages. Consequently, from the learners’ creative communicative situations, we focused more on their confidence and fluency in the English and specialised languages. The result shows that a significant percentage of the students are more fluent and confident in their specialised foreign languages than in the English Language. While it was not part of this study to check their competencies in the three specialised languages, we observed visibly minor difficulties such as wincing, hesitations and repetitions in the communication process, which, however, did not stop them as it was the case during the English Language free communicative moments. The following figure shows that while the learners lack very basic communicative competency (LBCC) in the English Language, they tend to enjoy a certain fairly significant basic communicative competency (BCC) in their specialised foreign languages.

<sup>4</sup> Mid secondary education

<sup>5</sup> This hypothesis holds that the first few years of life is the crucial time in which an individual can acquire a first language if presented with adequate stimuli.

<sup>6</sup> English Language



**Figure 2: EFL students' basic communicative competencies in English and other Foreign Languages**

While 10% (6) of the informants sustained very basic communication in the English Language, 85% (54) could barely do so. The six learners who sustained the discussions in English had a fairly considerable English language background which permitted them to perform better. Some studied in Bamenda, a largely English speaking city, and others grew up with siblings who studied in the English system of education and spoke English quite often at home. For the 54 others, while some could barely begin basic sentences in the English Language, others began nicely but could not get through even with motivations [7]. The 54 learners, however, sustained similar discussions in their specialised foreign languages to the admiration of their peers. This clearly suggests two major implications – the language is either designed to fail in the Francophone system of education or EFL learners are not motivated to learn it at all. These results necessitated the need to explore the policies, approaches and contents that guide the teaching of the respective languages.

Language policy is an important blueprint in the teaching and learning of any language. The importance of a language to the development of a nation is often elucidated in the policy and consequently this guides the teaching and learning process. The syllabuses are also designed to reflect the policy in order to develop the nation towards a particular agenda. While there are no clear policy statements on the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Cameroon, from the interviews of teachers of the respective languages, it was realised that while specialised foreign languages are designed to ensure learners' mastery of the language, the English language is designed to give learners basic communicative abilities. This perhaps explains the shift from the traditional approach in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language to other communicative approaches such as the Communicative Language Teaching Approach and the Competency-Based Approach.

<sup>7</sup> Learners were motivated with extra marks to sustain the discussion on any subject of their choice

Teachers of the specialised foreign languages tend to use an eclectic approach which cuts across the traditional and communicative approaches. They use French, the learners' second language, to teach the target language. They argued that it is practically impossible to teach a foreign language without adequately exploring the learners' second or first languages as the case may be. This is, however, not the case in the teaching of English in Cameroon where teachers are required to use the target language in the process. The advantages and disadvantages of both approaches may not be apparent in this study, but are worth investigating at least within the pedagogic landscape of the country.

It was also realised that foreign language teaching in Cameroon seeks to improve learners' language learning skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), but while in specialised foreign languages the teachers project relatively less content, in every instance, but focus more on drills, the English Language programme is choked with so many language points but less drilling opportunities. Additionally, translation from French to specialised languages and vice versa is an important component in the teaching of specialised languages. The English Language programme rather focused more on such free exercises as essay writing, letter writing and picture compositions which, though interesting, do not adequately permit the learners to know where the French Language ends and the English Language continues. While the contents and approaches in the teaching of foreign languages in the country may vary accordingly, there are also personal cognitive processes such as motivation and attitudes which are quite crucial in the learning of a foreign language.

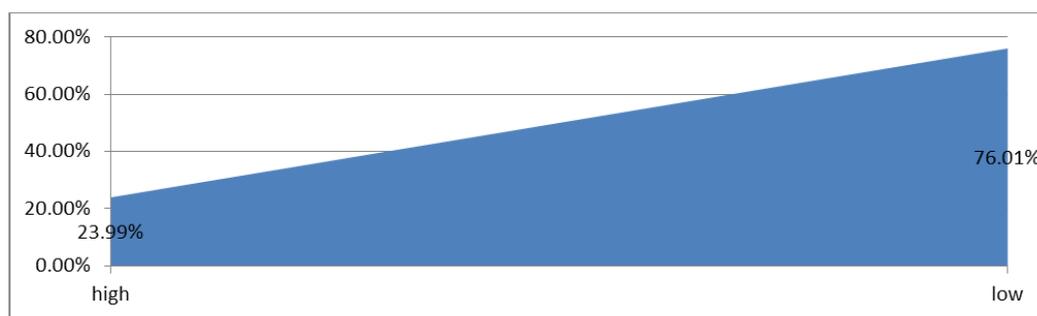
It was, therefore, necessary to find out the learners' motivation for learning the English Language since motivation determines biological, emotional, cognitive and/or social forces that activate and direct behaviours. Motivation does not only encourage or discourage achievements in foreign language learning but is extremely important in determining success rates in foreign language learning in particular. Learners' motivation in the learning of a foreign language could be elicited from

well thoughtful questions. The following table shows learners' motivations in the learning of English through their responses to pre-conceived questions.

**Table 3: Learners' motivation in the learning of English as a Foreign Language**

No	Content of item	SA	A	D	SD
		[ <sup>8</sup> ]			
		(%)			
1	The English culture is very beautiful	3.33	1.66	21.66	73.35
2	To survive in today's world, we need English	1.66	1.66	38.33	58.35
3	English is the most important language on the planet	-	-	3.33	96.67
4	A good command of the English Language can give me better opportunities	18.33	5	23.33	53.34
5	I study English because I need it in the future	1.66	45	31.66	21.68
6	English should not be a compulsory subject in school	65	23.33	11.67	
7	English helps you to become very knowledgeable			6.66	93.34
8	English is very important in my career plans.	11.67	38.33	40	10
9	Speakers of English have more opportunities than those of other international languages	-	-	6.66	93.34
10	I love the Anglophone culture in Cameroon and that's why I study English.	-	10	18.33	71.67

The above table reveals a remarkably low level of motivation among the informants. First, with regards to culture which is one of the push factors in the learning of every language, the majority of informants (73.35%) indicated that they do not like the English culture. Even those (21.66%) who simply disagreed outnumbered those (3.33%) who strongly agreed and those (1.66%) who agreed that the English culture is beautiful. The informants' stance aligns with their position in the last question where a significant number (71.67%) of them also indicated that they do not love the Anglophone culture in the country. Arguably, language is culture, and if learners hate the culture of those who speak a particular language, it follows that they also hate the language and this could make the learning process quite knotty. Second, from the informants' reactions to questions 2, 3, 4, and 9, which hint on the global relevance of the English Language as a motivation for language learning, it is most likely that they do not see any importance in the study of English even with the official status of the language in the country. Though some (45%) think they may need English at some point in the future, others (DA: 31.66% and SD: 21.68%) do not think it will be necessary. Consequently, while only 11.67% of the informants think that English should not be compulsory in Francophone curricula in the country, it may actually be the intuitive conclusion of the majority of informants who already indicated that they do not like a language they are forced to study. Arguably, such an attitude towards a foreign language could justify their lack of very basic communicative competency in it. The following figure shows the informants' very low interest in learning the English language.

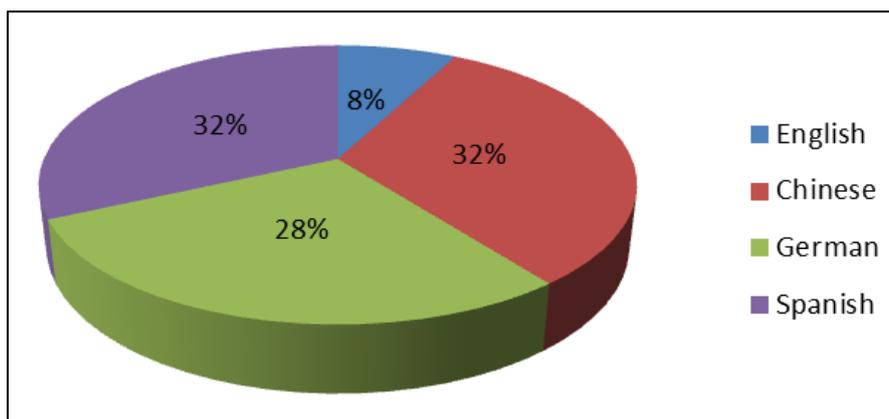


**Figure 3: A scale of EFL Learners' motivation in the learning of English**

A culmination of the mean value of the negative and positive reactions to the questions suggests a scale of EFL learners' motivation in the learning of English as a foreign language. For comparative purposes, the high motivation of the learners in the learning of English was compared to their motivation in learning their specialised languages [<sup>9</sup>] and the figure shows the informants' high motivations in the learning of the four respective languages we explored in this study.

<sup>8</sup> SA: Strongly Agree, A: Agree, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly Disagree

<sup>9</sup> This is originally not part of the study but only incorporated for comparative purposes and for clarity.



**Figure 4: EFL Learners' high motivations in learning foreign languages**

While the global importance of the English Language as a language of international diplomacy, politics, science, and entertainment and the official status it enjoys in Cameroon do not convince EFL learners of its importance, they paradoxically seem more convinced about the importance of other foreign languages (Chinese, German and Spanish). Either this may demand for more awareness on the global relevance of foreign languages or inspire more policy-oriented investigations into the rationale for English as a foreign language in the country.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The informants' low motivation leaves us wondering why they express such high level of insouciance towards a language which, besides French, serves an official function in the country. The informants' reactions to the questions clearly unveil their beliefs about the language and those who speak it. Since the learners do not argue in the blue but from the backdrop of the sociolinguistic realities of their contexts, it logically follows that their beliefs could be a micro reflection of a macro perception of the language in Cameroon. This questions the rationale for incorporating the language at all levels of studies in the country if it is technically designed for the learners not to totally grasp it. However, that EFL learners, who are exposed to foreign languages with relatively lesser global impact at mid-secondary school stages, tend to attain basic communicative competency in the language comparatively to the English Language which is introduced to them on their first exposure to education, only leaves us with the suspicion that English as a foreign language in Cameroon is designed to fail.

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