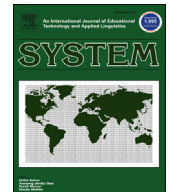




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Early English medium instruction in Francophone Cameroon: The injustice of equal opportunity

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1. Introduction & overview

The English language has fast become the language of the world and many countries, eager to train citizens to be competitive in the global market (Pinon & Haydon, 2010) are including English language in school curriculums (Graddol, 2006; Nunan, 2003; Vavrus, 2002). Dearden (2014, 2) reports that in many parts of the world, there has been a fast-moving shift from English as a foreign language (EFL) to English as medium of instruction (EMI) for academic subjects. In sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries the lowering age for exposure to English instruction (Cameron, 2003) means that more and more children are experiencing formal education in a language different from their home languages and in learning environments that may not meet the minimum conditions for effective language learning (Kuchah, 2016a). Studies that have examined the challenges to education in SSA (e.g., Muthwii, 2001; Nakabugo, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2006; Tembe, 2006) have revealed that the implementation of the Education for All (EFA) policy (UNESCO, 1990) through the provision of free and compulsory primary education in state schools has not been adequately matched with sufficient increase in infrastructural and resource provision and as a result, has further exacerbated existing challenges to education as a whole and to English language education in particular.

The list of challenges is long (see for example Ampiah, 2008; Shamim & Kuchah, 2016; UIS, 2016) and often confounded in a country like Cameroon where the language of instruction presents a barrier to parental involvement in education for children whose parents are not educated in the language of their schooling (Gfeller & Robinson, 1998; Tadadjeu, 1990). While in some SSA countries there has been, at least in principle, a shift to mother tongue instruction in the first few years of primary education with a transition to a foreign language at a later stage, Cameroon has maintained French and English as mediums of instruction in French-medium (Francophone) and English-medium (Anglophone) schools. In line with its adherence to commitments taken within the framework of different United Nations conventions (e.g., UNESCO, 1990; 2000), Cameroon also opted for free and compulsory basic education in 1998, entrusting parents with the 'prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children' (UN Declaration of Human Rights, 2015, Article 26). Within the framework of government's commitment to offering equal opportunities for children to pursue education in any state school of their choice and with only two options – French-Medium or English-medium education – available to parents, there has been a recent surge in the number of children from Francophone homes, irrespective of the family affordances, being enrolled into Anglophone schools (Anchimbe, 2007; Fonyuy, 2010; Kouega, 2003) despite the demographic and political dominance of French in the country.

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This paper examines the motives behind this surge in a country where socioeconomic status (SES) and in some cases, potential SES is often intertwined with political identities. Then it explores the educational experiences of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds to show how English-medium education might perpetrate socioeconomic divisions between children from rich and poor backgrounds. Larger scale quantitative studies have provided a panoramic picture of the relational impacts of socioeconomic status on learning achievement (e.g., [Cheng & Kaplowitz, 2016](#); [Sirin, 2005](#)) and EFL learning motivation (e.g., [Kormos & Kiddle, 2013](#); [Lamb, 2012](#)) but have not fully explained the day-to-day educational realities of young learners especially in underprivileged state school contexts. The study reported in this paper investigates the school and home learning affordances and experiences of francophone children who, because of their parents' decisions, attend English-medium primary schools. In particular, it explores the perspectives and learning experiences of two children from two different socioeconomic backgrounds, but with similar aspirations, in order to gain insights into how the opportunity for access to EMI may enhance or impede their chances of achieving quality and equitable basic education.

2. Background and review of literature

This section is divided into two main parts. In the first, I review the literature on language-in-education in Africa and examine how the historical and political developments in Cameroon have contributed to the rise in EMI. In the second part, I discuss literature in relation to the perceived benefits of EMI and the socioeconomic factors that might impact on the attainment of such benefits.

2.1. Language-in-education in Cameroon: a historical background

The literature on language-in-education in developing world contexts (e.g., [Brock-Utne, 2010](#); [Mulumba & Masaazi, 2012](#)) has shown the potential role of language of instruction in promoting, stagnating or stifling quality learning especially in the early years of schooling. Research evidence on medium of instruction in sub-Saharan Africa, (e.g. [Afolayan, 1976](#); [Bunyi, 1997](#); [Kamwendo, Hlongwa & Mkhize, 2014](#); [Tadadjeu, 1990](#)), unequivocally highlights the cognitive, cultural and developmental values of mother tongue instruction over the often estranging foreign languages currently in use in educational systems. No doubt therefore, international organisations [African Union \(2006\)](#), [UNESCO \(2003; 2005; 2013\)](#) and [UNICEF \(2007\)](#) have recognised the value of multilingualism and multilingual education in promoting quality and equitable basic education (See for example [African Union, 2006](#); [UNESCO, 2003; 2005; 2013](#); [UNICEF, 2007](#)). Despite this, some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, such as Cameroon, still continue to promote educational policies based on foreign languages.

In its present configuration, Cameroon is a result of two colonial entities – French administered 'Republique du Cameroun' and British administered 'Southern Cameroons' – agreeing to unite under a federal system of government at the dawn of independence in 1961 ([Fonlon, 1969](#)). Political mutations over the years resulted in a country with 10 regions, two of which are Anglophone and 8, Francophone and an official language policy which places English and French above its 286 local languages ([Ethnologue, 2009](#)). The decision to adopt these foreign languages as official languages of the country was based on the assumption that nationhood would better be achieved through linguistic homogeneity in these two 'neutral' languages. However, political tensions over the last three decades have shown that, far from being neutral languages, English and French have been instrumental in developing new ethno-political identities which threaten the very unity they were meant to preserve ([Ayafor, 2005](#); [Wolf, 2001](#)). Recent protests in the Anglophone regions have exposed deep divisions and suspicions between Anglophones and Francophones with the former feeling undermined by a heavily centralised bureaucracy dominated by a Francophone political elite accused of using political powers to marginalise the English language and Anglophones ([Dicklitch, 2011](#); [Konings & Nyamnjoh, 1997](#); [Ngwana, 2009](#)). In an attempt to resolve this political crisis, the government undertook a broad-based reform in 1996, revising the constitution and giving English and French equal status, as opposed to previous constitutions which placed French above English, and guaranteeing the promotion of bilingualism in both languages. A subsequent Education law (No 98/004 of 14 April 1998) recognised two coexisting sub-systems of education – English-medium and French-medium - each with its own organisational and assessment specificities. The law also reaffirmed the commitment of the State to 'institute bilingualism at all levels of education as a factor of national unity and integration (my emphasis). To enforce bilingualism in the school system a number of other official policy documents were enacted including (i) ministerial order No. 21/E/59 of 15 May 1996 mandating 'every primary school teacher [to] henceforth teach every subject on the school syllabus including the second official language subject' (i.e., French to Anglophones and English to Francophones); (ii) Order No. 62/C/13/MINEDUC/CAB of 16 February 2001 introducing English language as a compulsory subject from the first year of francophone primary schools and French as a subject in Anglophone schools and (iii) a presidential decree No. 2002/004 of 4 January 2002, organizing the MoE created a General Inspectorate for the promotion of Bilingualism to oversee the teaching of the second official language (i.e., French to Anglophones and English to Francophones) in both the Anglophone and francophone sub-systems of education.

The politically motivated commitment to promoting bilingualism resulted in a language education policy with no clear-cut linguistic objectives and orientations ([Echu, 2004](#)), giving rise to a variety of bilingualism models particularly in Francophone Cameroon, the focus of this paper (see [Kuchah, 2013](#)). In Francophone state schools, teachers, who themselves were not proficient in English, were required to teach English in addition to teaching all other subjects of the curriculum in the medium of French. [Kouega \(1999\)](#) explains that parental dissatisfaction with the quality of English language provision in French-medium state schools and awareness of the international spread and importance of English language have pushed parents

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