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Blasius A. Chiatoh & Pius W. Akumbu
Department of Linguistics/Centre for African Languages and Cultures
University of Buea, Cameroon

Enhancing English language studies in Cameroon: the mother tongue perspective

The intensification of reflections on ways and means to improve English Language studies in Cameroon reveals that there is a dire need to redress the falling standards observed in spite of modernization and increase in efforts of both the teachers and learners. In this paper we argue that sustainable English Language studies in Cameroon can better be achieved through the development and use of Cameroonian languages and methods that are culturally appropriate to the lifestyles and experiences of Cameroonians. The impact will be greater if pupils at the elementary level of (Pre)-Nursery and Primary education are allowed to study in their mother-tongues and in ways that are familiar to them.

1. Introduction

Since reunification in 1961, Cameroon has implemented an exoglossic language policy based on the exclusive use of English and French as the languages of teaching and learning (Chumbow, 1990; Chiatoh, 2012). In adopting this policy, politicians preoccupied with the desire to consolidate national unity, completely ignored the eventual consequences of such an educational option on the critical question of educational quality. Today, 50 years afterwards, these consequences are surfacing with concerns being intensified about the falling standards of English language in particular and the decline in academic performance across the curriculum in general. A closer look at the present situation reveals that even though concerns about quality decline are genuine, their causes have not been properly diagnosed. Arguments tend to centre almost exclusively on peripheral areas such as linguistic interference, the training of teachers (Fontem & Oyetade, 2005) choice of pedagogic materials and teaching methods. As yet, only very passive attention has been paid to the central

question of proper choice of language of instruction which research and classroom practice have revealed to be the most fundamental factor in establishing the quality of educational provision. As such, half a century since the adoption of this policy, its application has still not been adapted to the realities of the Cameroonian classroom. Similarly, despite more than thirty years of experimentation of mother tongue-based bilingual education as an alternative to educational innovation (Mba & Chiatoh, 2000), government is still lukewarm towards integrating mother tongues into the educational system particularly at the primary level. Perhaps, it is worth noting that mother tongue education remains an experimental program in Cameroon despite more than 30 years of experimentation because the mother tongue is not yet part of a comprehensive language policy in which the place of indigenous languages vis-à-vis English and French are well-defined (Mbuagbaw, 2000:141).

In this paper, we contend that the standards of English language proficiency (as a second language in Cameroon) as well as overall academic performance depends fundamentally on the appropriate choice of language of instruction since this greatly determines not only the type and quality of curriculum contents but also the degree of effectiveness and efficiency of teaching methods and actual learning in the classroom. By language of instruction, we understand the medium of communication in the transmission of knowledge as opposed to language teaching itself where grammar, vocabulary and the written and oral forms of a language constitute a specific curriculum for acquisition of a second language other than the first language (L1) (Ball, 2010:9). The language or medium of instruction is thus the language in which children acquire their basic literacy skills. It is the language in which they learn different content areas such as reading and writing, numeracy, natural and environmental science, etc. We argue that so long as educational reforms continue to

ignore the crucial question of language of instruction, concerns about standards of English and quality education will remain a permanent worry in the country. After reviewing some of the positions on the necessity for mother tongue education, we present the Operational Research Program for Language Education in Cameroon (PROPELCA) as the Cameroonian model for providing permanent solutions to the educational dilemmas in this country.

2. Legitimacy of the demand for quality education

The quest for standards and quality in educational provision is and will remain a permanent worry among nations concerned about development. However, the degree of genuineness of these concerns varies from one context to another. In third world countries in general and Africa in particular, these concerns take on even greater proportions. Education is not fully accessible to all and quality is more of a dream than a reality. The Dakar framework for education for all (EFA) captures these concerns about educational quality. As reported by UNESCO (2005:28), issues of quality are more specifically contained in 3 of EFA's 6 goals, namely goals 2, 3 and 6. As follows:

(1) Goal 2: Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities have access to complete and compulsory primary education;

(2) Goal 3: Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programs;

(3) Goal 6: Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

Going by the first goal, a vast majority of children of school-going age in Cameroon can effectively be said to be learning in difficult conditions, because although they

speak and understand minority languages at the time they begin formal education, they are compelled to learn in foreign languages, which neither they nor their parents speak and understand. Concerning equitable access to learning, it is clear that the use of the learners' mother tongue greatly improves access to learning, retention and continuity in school. All of these would culminate in the provision of excellence in the teaching-learning process. Commenting on the different dimensions of educational quality and referring to UNICEF's (2000) quality approach, UNESCO (ibid, 31) notes:

> [...] UNICEF recognizes five fundamental dimensions of quality: learners, environments, content, processes and outcomes, founded on the rights of the whole child, and all children, to survival, protection, development and participation.

Admittedly, all other dimensions are founded on the rights of the learner as a whole being and the child's first language (mother tongue) is a fundamental aspect of the child's evolution as a whole and dignified being. At the practical provision level, educational quality "arises from the interaction between three interrelated environments: policy, the school, and the home community" and should be "inclusive, relevant and democratic" (EdQual, 2010:1).

Despite the foregoing, one observes that in Africa, where the need for quality is acknowledged; the redemptive measures taken, quite often ignore the language factor and so cannot produce the desired results. In most situations, there seems to be a lack of understanding that "low achievement in African schools is partly due to the languages of instruction. Consequently, although demands for standards and quality are real and legitimate, we usually turn to the wrong direction for solutions.

Since 1953, it has become clear within research and educational circles that quality education in Africa cannot be achieved through the maintenance of the status quo. In

fact, it has become axiomatic that mother tongue education is a necessary tool in the achievement of quality in our schools. UNESCO (1953) clearly outlines three levels at which the mother tongue is beneficial as a medium of instruction to the learner in the following words:

> "Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is the means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium".

In recent times, similar concerns have been widely articulated by researchers across the world. For instance, Commins (2001) argues that schools should build on the experience and knowledge that children bring to the classroom and that instruction should promote children's abilities and talents. Thompson (2003) concurs that children with more background knowledge and life experiences have more to draw on to help their learning whilst those with limited knowledge of their mother tongue and limited life experience and background have a very weak base for the development of the second language. Benson (2005) on her part, contends that pedagogically, the use of the mother tongue or a strong lingua franca provides the basis for comprehensible content area instruction and literacy skills upon which competence in a second or foreign language can be built. In sum, within research circles, the mother tongue is widely acknowledged as a classroom resource in overall learning in general and in the learning of a second or foreign language in particular.

Observably, the use of the mother tongue is an issue of great concern in Africa where most children learn in languages that they neither speak nor understand. The medium of instruction is always a foreign official language. This notwithstanding, mother tongue education remains a highly contentious and quite often contestable

subject of discourse within public and private spheres. In Cameroon, the situation has not been any different. We have two strong opposing currents that do not usually agree. On the one hand, we have proponents of official language use in education and on the other hand, we have supporters of mother tongue-based bilingual education. The former advance many arguments, considered within research circles as fallacious (Chumbow, 2005; Obanya, 2004) to demonstrate the relevance of maintaining official languages as media of instruction. Within this camp, mother tongue education remains a wild dream because it has no future in an age of rapid globalization where world languages have a clear advantage over minority mother tongues. In Cameroon, attitudes towards national languages have been shaped by similar opinions and which have given the false impression that national unity is only achievable through foreign languages. In this respect, Mono Ndjana (1981:184) submits:

> Les politiciens demandent le développement des langues nationales et l'alphabétisation dans ces langues ... Je pense dans l'intérêt de la nation, il faut mieux ne pas souligner ce problème de langue nationale. L'anglais et le français ne nous aident pas mal à nous entendre déjà. C'est essentiel. Il faut seulement créer d'autres centres d'intérêt pour l'idée nationale.

In Mono Ndjana's view, the protection of national interest is best guaranteed through the use of English and French. Admittedly, it is not beneficial to bother about national languages since English and French already help Cameroonians to understand one another. Here the insinuation is that while English and French are integrators or unifiers, national languages are rather disintegrators and so should be avoided. A similar opinion is expressed by Bouba (1995) as follows:

> Actuellement, que vous soyez Ewondo, Boulou, Bassa, Douala, Toupouri, Maka, etc..., vous pouvez vous déplacer n'importe où au Cameroun ; si vous parlez français, vous serez compris, même au

> fin fond de nos villages. Pourquoi alors revenir en arrière au moment où les Camerounais commencent déjà à s'entendre ?

Like Mono Ndjana, Bouba is of the opinion that national languages are irrelevant in the Cameroonian context since even in the most remote corners of our villages, people speak and understand French and that advocating for national languages means taking the country backwards at a moment when Cameroonians are beginning to understand one another. Misleading as these views are, though, they have come to represent an ideal position within educated and non-educated circles. In fact, during a discussion with a colleague (linguist) not long ago on whether or not Cameroon Pidgin should be included into the educational system, he was emphatic in his dismissal of any such eventuality because according to him, Pidgin English is doing enormous disservice to the English language by negatively influencing the oral and written use of English. As can be seen from all these views, going straight for English or French seems to be the ideal for many Cameroonians.

Obanya (ibid, 16) finely encapsulates the quality insufficiencies inherent in an educational model that uses an unfamiliar language as medium of instruction as is the case in Cameroon today, in the following submission:

> …, the prevailing situation has resulted in a linguistic dilemma, a situation in which the learner (at least at the end of the basic education cycle) is proficient neither in the first language nor in the official language. The learner's linguistic failure has also given rise to academic failure. Even in cases in which official examinations have been passed, learning has been mainly by rote. Deep learning has not taken place, and consequently there can be no qualitative improvements in learner behaviour. Worse still, learning becomes not a pleasure but drudgery. The habit of learning how to learn that the knowledge economy demands thus becomes difficult to inculcate.

Admittedly, the general decline in English language proficiency and academic failure observed in Cameroon is only the resulting effect of a system that turns

learning into drudgery rather than a pleasure. In line with this, Heugh (2000:7) while deploring the lack of scientific validity of arguments in favour of the exclusive use of foreign languages; summarizes the benefits of mother tongue-based education over foreign language education in the following terms:

> In other words, the economic common sense notion that the earlier and greater the exposure to English coupled with a proportional decrease in the use of the mother tongue will result in better proficiency in English does not hold up to scientific scrutiny. Rather, the less use made of the mother tongue in education, the less likely the student is to perform well across the curriculum and in English. In a multilingual society where a language such as English is highly prized, there is only one viable option and this is bilingual education where adequate linguistic development is fore grounded in the mother tongue while the second is systematically added. If the mother tongue is replaced, the second language will not be adequately learnt and linguistic proficiency in both languages will be compromised.

In line with the above, it is clear that in a multilingual society such as Cameroon, an educational system that ignores the use of the learner's mother tongue in the teaching-learning process is inherently deficient and so is bound to be plagued by insufficiencies in standards. It means that the foundation on which the system is built is weak and that it cannot guarantee quality standards. In other words, such a system is fundamentally flawed because it is founded on a wrong premise. In this type of context, the teaching and learning of English as a second language is also bound to suffer. This is the type of system that has been promoted in Cameroon over the past five decades. Wolff (2000:23) warns us of the dangers of reliance on such a system when he writes:

> Any educational policy which in consequence deprives children of their mother tongue during education – in school and possibly even at home, for instance, by well-meaning parents making a fetish of English – and particularly in environments characterised by social marginalisation, cultural alienation and economic stress as is true for many communities in Africa will, most likely,

> produce an unnecessarily high rate of emotional and socio-cultural cripples who are retarded in their cognitive development and deficient in terms of psychological stability.

This view greatly contrasts with current practices in the country that seem to suggest that the quality of the English that children learn is determined principally by the number of contact hours and by the teacher's methods and strategies in the classroom. Contrary to popular opinion, therefore, the use of an unfamiliar language of instruction rather than enhance learning, instead hinders it as aptly articulated by Kioko et al (2008:18-19):

> On the other hand, learners who do not receive education in their mother tongue, but instead are instructed in a new language from the start of schooling, experience delayed or ineffective fluency especially in reading and spelling in the new language. They are also found to be slow in acquiring reading and speech accuracy, speed and comprehension in the second language. Their ability to demonstrate learning is inhibited by their initial difficulties in expressing themselves in the new language of the school.

This view very well captures the Cameroonian situation. At all levels of the educational system, children demonstrate very low levels of control of the medium of instruction (English) (Obanya, 2004:16) language particularly in the area of spelling, speech accuracy and comprehension. Chiatoh (2011) thinks that low academic and second language performances have their roots in the very early years of education. As an illustration, he presents some of the problems encountered by university students and concludes that with these low levels of mastery of the English languages, students tend to be more of listeners or consumers than active participants in the teaching-learning process and that this negatively affects their general academic performance. Among the very common mistakes noticed are the following:

Some university students' common mistakes

Students' version	Standard version	Problem level
donot*	do not	Word boundary
doesnot*	does not	=/=
can not*	cannot	=/=
interms*	in terms	=/=
sobobs*	suburbs	Spellings
inseperable*	inseparable	=/=
delibrate*	deliberate	=/=
sumary*	summary	=/=
to realised*	to realise	Use of infinitive/Grammar
to lost*	to lose	=/=
decisions that is*	decisions that are	Subject-verb agreement
policy that exist*	policy that exists	=/=

Source: Chiatoh (2011)

Students who face these problems unquestionably suffer from a general feeling of linguistic insecurity that makes them lose confidence in their learning abilities, thereby, making them passive rather than fully active participants in the teaching-learning process. The overall effect is, inevitably, high failure and dropout rates. Although school dropout rates generally go unnoticed, class repeating rates cannot escape the attention of both parents and educational authorities. In Cameroon, such rates are quite high as indicated in the table below.

Class repeating rate (%) by sub-system and by grade (2002-2003)

Cycle	Primary						
Level	SIL CL1	CP CL2	CE1 CL3	CE2 CL4	CMI CL5	CM2 CL6	- CL7
Francophone system	36,0	23,9	32,5	23,7	25,9	22,7	-
Anglophone System	21,2	22,5	29,8	22,1	25,3	22,0	8,2
Together	33,6	22,5	29,8	22,1	25,3	22,0	(8,2)

Source: MINEDUC (2003)

Although the frequency of class repeating is high in all the classes of the different cycles, it is particularly high in some of them – the first class of the primary cycle on the one hand (34%) and the last classes of the secondary (MINEDUC, 2003:113).

3. Misplaced concerns on quality in Cameroon's educational system

Although there is a general consensus on the fact that standards of the English language are falling and overall quality education is declining, there is yet no agreement on what exactly the fundamental cause(s) of this situation is. Rather, promoters of English language pay attention to peripheral causes such as issues of linguistic interference and accent while educational authorities concentrate more on questions related to teacher training, quality of teaching materials and teaching methods. For instance, Fontem and Oyetade (2005) report on the decline of English language proficiency among Anglophone Cameroonians. According to them, "… the English accent of most Anglophones is quite often faulty, and although they can handle elementary constructions, they do not have a thorough or confident control of grammar and vocabulary" (pp.67-68). With regard to performance across the curriculum, students generally lack the ability of critical analysis and flexibility. What makes this reality particularly disturbing is that educated Cameroonians are noted for near-zero intolerance towards non-standard use of language even if they do not end up speaking the desired standard themselves. They pay a lot of attention to differences in accents that reveal ethnic and cultural variations in the use of Cameroon English (CamE). Bobda & Mbangwana (1993:199-200) argue that CamE is meant to contrast with four kinds of speech, namely: Pidgin English widely used in Cameroon, the speech of uneducated users of English, the speech of Francophone Cameroonians and then the speech of some Cameroonians who have been influenced by other varieties (RP, American English, etc.).

Variations observed in CamE strongly suggest the rarity, if not impossibility, of near-native-like RP proficiency among Cameroonians. Besides, increasingly, both teachers and students no longer distinguish between the dominant varieties (RP and

American English), a situation that further renders issues of accent particularly weak in our context. Yet among the educated elite, there is a general discomfort with ethnic variations in English speech. For instance, speakers are easily identified and stigmatised on grounds that they have a Lamnso, Kom or Aghem accent. Opinions and reactions like these suggest that variations do not only reveal the ethnic identity of speakers but also of their inferiority. In the urban areas, this feeling of inferiority has led many young people to develop hatred for their mother tongues. In the South West region, for instance, local languages and everything that goes with them is viewed as primitive and so not fit for the public arena. In fact, speaking the mother tongue is equated with causing rain to fall (Chia, 2006: 120). In this part of the country, it is a common practice for parents and children to rely entirely on English or Pidgin for communication at home. Attitudes of this nature are illustrative of the generalised inclination to use standard forms of English and to perpetuate English as the sole medium of instruction in schools.

From this behaviour, one or two trends seem to emerge. Either this educated class of Cameroonians lacks full understanding of the fact that variation is a natural linguistic phenomenon and a marker of language viability or their behaviour simply results from sheer pride or better still a perfect mix of the two. Either way, what the behaviour represents is that concerns about standards and quality of the English language in Cameroon do not focus primarily on what really matters, that is, the mastery and proper use of grammar but rather on issues of accent that are typically stylistic in nature. In fact, there is in such behaviour, a clearly expressed desire for a single form of accent, which on sociolinguistic grounds is more wishful than realistic since the uniformity so desired is to be expected more from the written than the oral modes of usage. To insist on the need for uniformity in accent, therefore, would mean

dismissing an important consideration in the teaching and learning of English language in this country. In fact, in a majority of cases, this language is neither the first nor the second language of the learners and it is not only taught in a non-native environment but also by non-native speakers of the language. With these two considerations, it appears unrealistic to imagine teachers and learners acquiring near-native-like proficiency particularly with regard to pronunciation. Benson (2008:16-17) carefully captures this unrealism as follows:

> Native-like competence is rarely acquired by anyone who is not surrounded by native speakers. To achieve high-level competence in a second or foreign language, learners require input from highly competent speakers of that language along with regular and sustained practice through communicative interaction in different domains, usually in an environment where that language is used regularly, in addition to study of grammatical, phonetic and other linguistic features. Since none of these conditions is readily available to speakers of African languages in African contexts trying to learn international standard languages, the goal is completely unrealistic, except for the few who have a native speaker in the home or who can be sent abroad.

However, we cannot also attempt to overlook the legitimacy and relevance of concerns about quality and standards in our educational system. At a more intricate level, this problem lies with the question of linguistic interference. Accordingly, if there is any quarrel with the English accent and grammaticality of oral and written use of the English language among Anglophone Cameroonians, this owes mainly to the interference of local languages and Pidgin in the teaching and learning process. Of course, this in itself is neither entirely new nor fully condemnable since as non-native teachers and learners, we should recognise the unavoidability of negative transfer of accent and grammatical structures from our first and/or second languages into the English language, which in most cases is actually a third or fourth language especially as these languages are not studied and used on equal terms in learning. Transfer is

positive (facilitating) when the same structure in L1 and L2 is appropriate in both languages and negative (interference) when the L1 structure is used inappropriately in the L2 (Saville-Troike, 2006: 45). On these grounds, it is obvious that when children do not have oral and written mastery of their first language (L1) as a system in its own right before going on to learn a second (L2), there is bound to be negative transfer from this first language to the target language in question. In other words, to facilitate proper learning of a second or third language, the first language of the learner, instead of being discarded, should be integrated into the learning process. Admittedly, the more properly a first language is learnt, the more facilitated the learning of the second or third language becomes. It is precisely this link that policy-makers and educational practitioners have failed to establish in Cameroon and which accounts fundamentally for quality insufficiencies in our educational system and not any local languages as such. Simply put, measures to promote the quality of English in Cameroon must as a matter of necessity, consider the place of national languages as resources or facilitators not barriers in the classroom.

Evidently, there is a serious misreading of the whole question of quality and standards, which although real and legitimate, is not at all synonymous to standard pronunciation. Our opinion is that concerns about quality and standards should centre primarily on ways and means of rendering teaching and learning more efficient and effective by focusing on the one most single factor capable, in many more ways than one, of enhancing the learning of language not only as a subject but more importantly as a medium of instruction. This one most single vital factor is the proper choice of the language(s) of instruction and in Africa in general, this choice ideally implies the indigenous mother tongues in learning, at least in the initial phases of schooling. In the sense that this choice enhances not only the learning of English in a non-native

environment but also improvement in overall academic performance, it appears the best possible alternative to addressing quality and standard issues in our educational system. Perhaps, we should emphasise that it serves no productive purpose to start demonstrating that the use of the mother tongue medium facilitates rather than deters learning since this would seem like attempting to reinvent the wheel. If quality is really the issue in our educational system, then we need to refocus the debate such that it centres more on the improvement of academic performance and enhancement of the competency levels of learners of English as a second or foreign language rather than purely on stylistic issues such as accent. Proper choice of the language of instruction substantially resolves other classroom-related problems such as the choice of curriculum, teaching methods and strategies since communication between the teacher and the learner is greatly enhanced, thereby, providing a highly enabling environment for learning the second or third language as the case may be.

In a nutshell, any reading of the problem of educational quality and standards in Cameroon that fails to consider the question of the proper choice of language(s) of instruction is fundamentally flawed. This, in effect, explains why despite the numerous and consistent efforts made by the Ministries of Basic Education (MINEDUB) and Secondary Education (MINESEC) to arrest the situation, falling standards continue to stubbornly stare at us on the face. The benefit of the mother tongue option is that thanks to its structuring nature, it has the capacity to help overhaul the entire system through greater effectiveness and efficiency at several levels particularly those of teacher training, teaching materials development and teaching methods and techniques. It is an option that is politically and educationally sound.

4. Focus on teaching methods and curriculum contents

To acknowledge the legitimacy of concerns about standards and quality also calls for recognition of the problem of teaching methods and curriculum content in our educational system. Gardner (2012: 2) has observed that many African countries have educational systems based on the colonial French or British systems or the American (8-4-4) model, from which a relatively small percentage of students successfully graduate. In each system there are many crucial factors involved, including, among others, the language(s) of instruction, teacher training, economic challenges, war and drought. However, in many cases the Western structures of formal education have been maintained but not always their intended functions. In Cameroon this has influenced both the contents and methods of teaching across the curriculum. English language studies have equally been affected negatively and the following proposals for improvement have not yielded any fruit:

(1) To sensitize Cameroonians on the importance of pronunciation by those who have learned the RP accent (Bobda, 1993),

(2) A shift in the approach to teaching, namely, that emphasis should be laid on the acquisition of grammar first before introducing communicative skills (Mbufong & Tanda, 2003)

(3) To teach English pronunciation at all levels of education (Njonyui, 2004)

(4) Classrooms should be decongested and more teachers trained to improve the student-teacher ratio (Fontem & Oyetade, 2005).

(5) Teacher-training institutions should place sufficient focus on content and not just pedagogic methodology (Mangoh, 2009).

(6) Cameroon Pidgin should be used as a medium of instruction and English taught as a school subject (Akumbu, 2011).

What is remarkably absent on the above list of proposals is the role of mother tongue education in the achievement of better proficiency levels for learners. Of all the proposals, only the last (6) has a relationship with our main concern in that it

highlights the importance of a strong lingua franca (Cameroon Pidgin) as a medium of learning.

As revealed by the above proposals, continuous decline in the standards of English can be attributed primarily to the insufficiencies of teaching methodologies and curricula adopted over the years. These insufficiencies are seen through their inability to meet the environmental realities in which the teaching and learning of English takes place in Cameroon. As a highly multilingual country where a vast majority of the children on their first day in school speak only a local mother tongue, there is a strong need to render the teaching and learning of English socio-culturally and linguistically relevant. Careful liaising of the language factor with the other complementary factors cited above will most likely yield the best dividends.

Effective English language in Cameroon must take into consideration the socio-cultural realities of the country. According to Gardner (2012: 4), methods of training in Africa, especially formal training, are often not culturally appropriate, but instead are usually based on Western-style training programs, and thus are less effective than they could be. Generally, learners are taught English in Cameroon in ways that are not familiar to them and which do not take into account their mother tongues and cultures. The teachers themselves use materials that are conceived and presented in unusual ways. We find Ward's (1973: 5) six levels for adapting instructional material a particularly useful way to improve on the teaching and learning of the English language in Cameroon. We present each one of them in turn.

(i) Students' (and teachers') fluency and ability in the language of instruction (whether Cameroon Pidgin or another national language) will improve on their comprehension and overall performance.

(ii) Many new concepts are difficult to understand and internalize, especially when presented in a foreign language. Simplifying and limiting technical

terminology will help students to quickly understand more crucial concepts.

(iii) Relevant examples and exercises should be from the local Cameroonian context so as to convey a sense of relevance to the learners.

(iv) Pedagogical methods should be more practical and interactive - class discussions and asking questions (by teachers and students) - is more effective than just lecturing. The production and use of audiovisual aids, such as videos in the language of instruction will greatly supplement lectures.

(v) The course contents should connect with and be relevant to local Cameroonian cultures and worldviews. Students want to see the connection between what they are studying in the classroom and its application to the real world.

(vi) Cameroonian students' learning styles are generally more global and holistic, and students learn more aurally than by reading. Note should be taken to assist students listen and watch more than cause them to read.

5. A Cameroonian solution to a Cameroonian problem

Even if concerns about educational quality and standards have only surfaced in recent times, efforts to construct a strong, quality and accessible educational system have been in place for over three decades. As early as 1978, researchers from the University of Yaounde established the Operational Research Program for Language Education in Cameroon (PROPELCA) that has today become the reference for mother tongue promotion in the country. The results of PROPELCA which formally went operational in 1981 were officially presented to government during the 1995 General Forum on Education. Although the Forum recognised PROPELCA as a major innovation, very little has been done to ensure its official application. The PROPELCA model, as the program has come to be called, is an experiment that seeks to improve on educational quality through harmonious management of the country's rich linguistic diversity. First, it advocates for the use in initial education of the respective mother tongues of learners within a bilingual perspective. In this way, any Cameroonian has the possibility to start learning in their mother tongue and then later

to learn both in this mother tongue and in their first official language. Second, the program addresses the serious problem of resistance from both public and private circles (Chia, 2006: 122; Chiatoh, 2006: 111) to learning in the mother tongues by ensuring that both these mother tongues and official languages coexist in the classroom. So far, the program has been experimented in 38 of the country's major languages (Tadadjeu, Mba & Chiatoh, 2001).

By offering to bridge the gap between academic and political concerns, the program has settled for an early exit transitional model (Heugh, 2000; Baker, 2000). According to this approach, children start their initial learning in indigenous mother tongues (MT/L1) and then make a gradual transition into the first official language (OL1) as from the third grade. Within this time, the OL1 is taught as a subject (first orally and then in writing). The time distribution as provided by the model is as follows:

Experimented and proposed time percentages

Level	**MT/L1**	**OL1**
Class One	75%	25%
Class Two	60%	40%
Class Three	40%	60%
Classes Four to Six	15%	85%

The justification for using two languages right from the beginning of the learning process is that this tallies with the reality of Cameroon's linguistic situation characterised by the co-existence of the mother tongues and the official languages. As can be seen, the mother tongue occupies the most important place in the children's learning within the first three years. With the mother tongue, the children are able to assimilate new concepts (writing, arithmetic and learning of another language) which are clearly more difficult to grasp through the use of a foreign language as medium of instruction.

PROPELCA is variously applied today in experimental classes across the country with researchers more and more concerned about the need to increase the use of the mother tongue. For, instance, Assoumou (2007) thinks that it is imperative to revise the time distribution so that it becomes fairly balanced. According to him, the new distribution should look something like:

Proposed changes in time distribution

Level	MT/OL1	OL1
Class One	75%	25%
Class Two	60%	40%
Class Three	40%	60%
Class Four to Six	25%	75%

From the original time distribution and Assoumou's proposal, we realize a deliberate effort by researchers to bridge the gap between political concerns of promoting foreign languages and sound pedagogic demand for starting initial learning in languages familiar to the learners. Such a choice illustrates the fact that, like elsewhere, political pressures are real in matters of language program design and that quite often, these pressures compel researchers to sacrifice idealism (such as the adoption of strong models of bilingual education) for realism (such as the choice of transitional models) in their design of language in education programs. Such is the case with PROPELCA. Despite its early exit nature, the program has the advantage that it pays due attention to the need for quality learning based on mother tongues as mediums of instruction. In more general terms, it offers the possibility for every Cameroonian language to be used in the classroom while maintaining the use of the official language in line with government position.

6. Prerequisites for the application of the Cameroonian solution

Given the generalised prejudice that characterises mother tongue medium instruction particularly among the political and educated elite, effective implementation of this model of education requires, à priori, that certain conditions be carefully put in place. Among these conditions are the following:

(1) An inclusive and operational language policy: Although the presence of language policy is not any guarantee for the implementation of mother tongue education, it is undoubtedly an essential part of the overall process of educational innovation. Given that Cameroon does not have a language policy worthy of the name (Chiatoh, 2013), it would be vital that the country adopts a workable policy. Such a policy should be inclusive by recognising and protecting the use of national languages alongside official language in school.

(2) Institution of a national sensitisation campaign for mother tongue education: Given the long decades of exclusive promotion of official languages and the deep-rooted attitudes that have developed over the years, the implementation of mother tongue-based schooling even if its positive influence on the promotion of English is clearly obvious. The challenge here is that the public is generally resistant to education based on the mother tongues. Overcoming this challenge is certainly not going to be an easy task. Among other strategies, there is need for a vast public campaign with the goal of bringing about a shift in the linguistic attitudes of Cameroonians. The primary goal of the campaign will be to sensitise and educate the public as well as specialised professional groups on the utility of mother tongue education in national development. Once they are convinced of the utility of this alternative approach to learning, they will themselves become agents of sensitisation.

(3) Compulsory mother tongue training for educators and educational officials: The success of mother tongue education depends substantially on competencies and abilities of those responsible for promoting the program at local and national levels. If they do not master the program, they will not be able to ensure its effective and efficient implementation in schools. It will, therefore, be of great importance that they are properly trained on the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of mother tongue education particularly at the primary level. Two actions are crucial here. In the first place, mother tongue education should be integrated into the curriculum of teacher training institutions in the country. In the second instance, seminars and refresher courses should be instituted at all levels to cater for those already active on the field.

(4) Mother tongue in official examinations: One of the reasons that account for the negative attitudes and consequently low adherence to mother tongue education is the perceived low prestige of national languages vis-à-vis the

> official languages. Experience from the PROPELCA experiment reveals that pupils and parents value only those languages that are included in official examinations. Including languages in official examinations represents their official recognition and symbolises the socio-political and economic importance of these languages in the nation. For Cameroonian national languages to acquire prestige, they should be integrated into the official examination programs and as a result, benefit from all the advantages that accrue from such integration.

The foregoing among other related measures have the potential to turn things around and to reverse current attitudes towards national languages. But above all, they have the ability to contribute to efforts geared towards the quality promotion of English in Cameroon.

7. Conclusion

So far, we have attempted to situate the problem of falling English standards and declining quality of learning in Cameroon. From the ensuing discussions, it has become clear that although the problem raised is real and legitimate, its interpretation is rather limited. A holistic interpretation of the problem requires that we acknowledge the teaching of English as a second language in Cameroon as fundamentally flawed due to the exclusion of Cameroonian mother tongues as vital linguistic input into the process. In addition, the problem should be perceived within its broad perspective to include the effects of the non-inclusion of Cameroonian indigenous mother tongues in the attainment of quality (overall academic performance) in schooling. Our conclusion is that so long as the problem of proper choice of language of instruction remains unresolved, concerns about falling standards of English language and poor educational quality in general will continue to persist in our educational system. Education planners and practitioners are called upon to give this issue the serious attention it deserves.

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Corresponding address:

Pius W. Akumbu, PhD
Department of Linguistics/Centre for African Languages and Cultures
University of Buea
P.O Box 63, Buea, Cameroon

Email: akumbu.pius@ubuea.cm