

Teaching of Cameroonian languages: A questionable parental support

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Abstract

In a multilingual context with more than 250 languages, the Cameroonian Secondary Education Curriculum for National Languages has assigned parents a major responsibility. This pedagogic document was actually designed, considering parents as teachers' assistants and eventually as teachers of their various languages. The paper reviewed this official document in relation with parent's attitude towards mother tongues as directed by the competence based approach. It focused on a highly multilingual context, notably Yaoundé, to question the ability of parents to undertake a child's training. In terms of competence, most parents of this urban setting were not able to read or write their own languages and some could not speak. On the other hand, those who were competent were used to official languages, which constantly hindered them from playing their role of teachers' assistants, within the framework of homework. That is why it was argued here that, even if parents and the family are nuclear factors of communication and socialization, they may lack adequate qualification to render the services bestowed on them by the school. There is a need therefore to advocate for policies to train, assist and encourage parents, to raise their awareness so that they become actively engaged in their roles and become an integral part of languages improvement efforts.

Key words: Parents – Cameroonian languages – homework – multilingualism - Teachers' assistant

Introduction

Cameroonian languages were officially introduced to secondary schools in 2012 with the publishing of the Curriculum for the Observation Sub-cycle (Forms 1 and 2). The teaching is multilingual, with the aim to train learners capable of reading and writing their mother tongue and any other Cameroonian language (Tadadjeu, Sadembouo, & Mba (2004). Yet this is hardly achievable as an objective due to linguistic, sociolinguistic, pedagogic, institutional,

economic... difficulties. The focus of this paper is pedagogy and linguistic matters, notably language habits. The involvement of some stakeholders becomes a concern in urban settings where multilingualism renders linguistic problems more accurate (Mba, 2012). The Mother tongue teacher is monolingual (in terms of mother tongue) and responsible of the teaching in a multilingual class. In an effort to address the issue of learners with different language backgrounds, parents are involved.

"If the parents choose to raise their children bilingually, this implies a positive attitude towards bilingualism", says Lanza (2006:46). In the same way, if parents choose to raise their children multilingually, they will adopt a positive attitude towards multilingualism. However, would attitudes alone qualify a parent to undertake child's training in a highly multilingual context such as Cameroon towns (Mba, 2012) when mother tongues are involved? Urban settings where most parents do not master their own languages and some do not speak (Nseme, 2007; Biloa & Fonkoua, 2011). This issue of parents' involvement is addressed in this paper, precisely their preparedness through their language habits.

In this light, the methodology used is a critical review of the official curriculum from the Ministry of Secondary Education (MINESEC), in order to highlight the role of parents. In addition, data were collected, through a questionnaire directed to parents (157 of them) of a selected secondary school (Emana High school in Yaoundé) through their children (learners of Forms 1 and 2). This data has subsequently been submitted to quantitative analysis.

It appears that the curriculum from MINESEC places parents at the first position, at the level of human resources. Results from the questionnaire however show that language competence and habits do not always favor parents' involvement. Discussions permit to argue that, even if parents and the family are nuclear factors of communication and socialization, they may lack adequate qualification or preparation to render the services bestowed on them by the school.

Theories on Curriculum development and language teaching

MINESEC developed a curriculum for mother tongues in 2012. It is difficult to give a universal definition for curriculum development, because it will always be affected strongly by the context in which it takes place. We can think of curriculum development as a continuous process, which is relevant to the situation where it takes place, and flexible. This simply means that curriculum evolves with time to adapt to changing environment and suggesting new ways of realizing education policies.

Saylor and Alexander (1974) on their part define curriculum as a set of learning activities and experiences for children planned by the school to attain the aims of education.

Curriculum acts as a guide to the process of education. It gives lanes and boundaries to the process of education. Curriculum development is the process of creating curriculum materials for use by educators and children that are product of curriculum planning. In this way, the present society appears as a result of what was planned before, in the area of curriculum. As such, curriculum development describes all the ways in which a training or a teaching organization plans and guides learning. This learning, can take place in groups or with individual learners. It can take place inside a classroom or outside a classroom. It can

take place in an institutional setting like a school, college or training centre, or in a village or a field. It is central to the teaching and learning process (Rogers and Taylor, 1988).

Typically, curriculum development involves four main elements;

- Identify what learning is needed and decide on the type of training you need to provide to meet these learning needs.
- Plan the training carefully, so that learning is most likely to take place.
- Deliver the training so that learning does take place.
- Evaluate the training so that there is evidence that learning has taken place.

Curriculum Development involves all the processes which determine how curriculum construction proceeds, from the conceptualization stage to the evaluation stage. It involves creating materials for use by educators and children as product of curriculum planning. Apart from usual actors, the Cameroonian curriculum of secondary education seems to have included a main stakeholder at the level of mother tongue teaching, namely parents.

As concerns language teaching according to palmer (1974:23), "*the best method is that which adopts the best means to the required end*". In other words, theories are only applicable where they yield fruits; context is the key, when it comes to language learning. Belinga (2005) elaborated on didactics questioning to lead any language teaching process. However, among the various questions, none directly refers to parents as active stakeholder in the teaching process, thereby questioning the approach of the national curriculum.

Literature review

Main education stakeholders and their function

Learners and their present status

Learners have evolved from passive recipient of knowledge to constructor of knowledge in a context where learner centeredness is the watchword. Cameroonian language learning is no exception. (Mba, G and Chiatoh, B, 2000).The more learners participate, the more they are active and responsible for their learning (Riemer, 2015). They take initiatives to discuss issues of interest, negotiate meaning, construct knowledge, interact with each other and with the teacher, work collaboratively, think critically and solve problems. (Tha'er Issa Tawalbeh et al, 2015). This shift has manifested a noticeable move from teacher-centered instruction into learner-centered instruction which is supported by the communicative approach of language teaching. These calls have also entailed a move towards active learning where learners are actively involved in the learning process.

According to learner-centeredness, the teachers' role has evolved from mere delivery of content and control of the learning environment to actively involving learners in creating their own learning. In the learner-centered environment, teachers and learners work together in a stimulating and interactive environment (Riemer, 2015). Lee and Chen (2010) pointed out that learner-centered teaching and learning is believed to be further enhanced by positive classroom relationships and by ensuring that the learners' interests are considered.

As concerns language teaching, this shift has manifested a noticeable move from teacher-centered instruction into learner-centered instruction which is supported by the communicative approach. In order for learning to take place, learners are expected to work independently and they may work in pairs or groups to discuss issues of interest, participate in learning tasks, and negotiate meaning. They may also need an external support, that of parents for instance, especially when it comes to mother tongue learning. This is, when it is assumed that family and community is ideal environment for language acquisition.

Teachers and their function

Teachers' function is broadly elaborated by Belinga Bessala (2005) who identifies two major roles, namely didactic and pedagogic functions. According to him, the teaching and learning process, class management, assistance to learners, reinforcement (positive or negative) fall under didactic functions. Pedagogic functions of teachers include the training of learners on issues of moral upright, cultural values, so as to enable their successful integration in the society (Belinga Bessala, 2005: 147). Tsafak (1998) sees teachers' responsibility not just towards students, but also towards parents and family, the society and the entire humanity. He states,

"The teaching corps is accountable for the training of mankind, both in quality and in quantity today and tomorrow" (Tsafak, 1998: 50).

More practically and according to actual trends of learner-centeredness, the teacher's role has evolved from mere delivery of content and control of the learning environment to actively involving learners in creating their own learning. This tendency may lead to teachers shifting their own responsibilities towards learners or their parents, whom they rightly or wrongly refer to as resource persons. Riemer (2015: 175) put it clear that, learner centeredness can never mean replacement of teachers by learners. Teachers' role according to her is to be taken very seriously. Meirieu (2013) supports as he points out the important role which teachers play in defining task and objectives for their lessons. Teacher's role becomes even crucial in a multilingual context involving literacy. He is expected to rightly manage phonetics and didactics (Sauvage, 2019) in his language class with multiple identities (Assob Teki et al).

Which role do educationists basically assign parents?

Parents are members of the educational community with whom teachers ought to collaborate. Tsafak (1998:96) says "l'enseignant a le devoir de collaboration avec les parents et la famille". He further argues that this collaboration is useful to keep the parent informed about his child's work, so that he is confident with the child's welfare and progress in school. Then, for a parent to entrust the life and future of a child in the hands of schools, they have to show concern in reporting regularly. "Les parents confient à l'enseignant le corps, l'intelligence, la volonté, le cœur et l'âme de leurs enfants" (ibid : p 48). In this light, the NEA¹ policy (2008) explains that parent and family involvement in education correlates with higher academic performance and school improvement. When schools, parents, families, and communities work together to support learning, students tend to earn higher grades, attend school more regularly, stay in school longer, and enroll in higher level programs. Furthermore, researchers cite parent-family community involvement as a key to addressing the school dropout crisis and note that strong school-family-community partnerships foster higher educational aspirations and more motivated students.

As concerns languages, family may be considered as a community of practice, a social unit that has its own norms for language use Lanza (2006). Here follows the case of some parents from Yaoundé city, whose children learn Cameroonian languages in secondary school.

Results

Parents as a human resource in Education

- **Figure 1** is an excerpt from the curriculum of Cameroonian Languages MINESEC (2012);
- **Table 1** is on parents' competences in mother tongues
- **Table 2** is on parents' language habits

Parents' status in the national curriculum

The figure below is an excerpt from the curriculum of Cameroonian Languages MINESEC (2012), followed by Table 1 on parents' competences

¹ "NEA" stands for National Education Association, with a Policy and Practice Department | Center for Great Public Schools, Washington, D.C.

CONTEXTUALI SATION		COMPETENT		RESSOURCES		
Life situatio n	Examp les of	Categories of actions	Examples of actions	Essential knowledg	Attitudes	Other resources
communicatio n in the classroom	Interactions between and among learners in class	Secondary Education curriculum for the Observation Sub-cycle	Secondary Education curriculum for the Observation Sub- cycle	Concepts: -language dialect national language official language foreign language	-creativity -interest in the national languages -open- mindedness	Human Resources -Parents ¹ -Teachers -Learners -Language community
		Secondary Education curriculum for the Observation Sub-cycle	Secondary Education curriculum for the Observation Sub-cycle	Major language e families in Camero on Linguistic ma p of Cameroon	-discovery	Learning /Teaching AID3 Linguistic atlas -Linguistic maps Ethnologue of Grimes (SIL)
	-Interaction between the teachers and students					

Figure 1: Summary of the content of Cameroonian Languages

Source: Secondary Education curriculum for the Observation Sub-cycle, MINESEC (2012: 8)

Legend: On the last column, *parent's* role was highlighted, as they represent a main resource, appearing even before teachers.

The figure above is part of the national curriculum and it better describes parents' assignment as viewed in the official document.

This figure, like the ten others summarizing the contents the national curriculum for Secondary Education, places the parent at the top position of "other resources". He is placed at this position, even before the teacher as main human resource in the teaching/learning process. Given the multilingual setting of the classroom where a teacher is definitely not able to communicate with students in their various languages, it is understandable, why parents

should be called at this level. As discussed above (2.3.), they are stakeholder of education and may therefore be solicited by the school at different levels. As for the teaching-learning of Cameroonian languages, they appear to be highly solicited. The next question that follows is what

policy makers or policy recipients do to assure the implementation of this aspect of the curriculum concerning parents.

Parents' competences in mother tongues

Table1: parents' competence in mother tongues

Category	speaking		Speaking and reading		Reading and writing		None		Total
	Number	percentage	Number	percentage	Number	percentage	Number	%	
Centre	57	96.6%	31	52.5%	16	27.1%	2	3.3%	59
East	4	100.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4
foreigner/CAR	1	100.0%	1	100.0%	1	100.0%	0	0.0%	1
Far-nord	10	100.0%	7	70.0%	6	60.0%	0	0.0%	10
Littoral	60	92.3%	15	23.1%	4	6.2%	5	7.8%	65
West	16	88.9%	12	66.7%	4	22.2%	2	11.1%	18
Grand Total	148	94.2%	66	42.0%	31	20.4%	9	5.7%	157

Table 1 summarizes parents' competences in mother tongues

Legend

- Parents (157) of learners of observation sub-cycle from the Bilingual high school Eman, in Yaoundé, were classified according to their geographical origin.
- All language groups were represented, because parents originated from all regions of Cameroon

From table 1, it appeared that parents can better speak (94.2%) their language than they can read (42%) or write (20.4%). 5.7% cannot speak, read nor write their mother tongue.

With this result, teaching of Cameroonian language or supporting the process might be easier for the group of parents who have all linguistic competences. However, 5% are completely ignorant of their mother tongue, making it impossible for them to participate in any way.

Apart from competence, language habits may also influence the ability of parents to assist their children.

Language habits and preferences

Table 2: Parents' language habits

Region of origin	Always		sometimes		Once in the while		Never		Grand Total
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	
Centre	7	10.0%	47	80.0%	1	2.5%	4	7.5%	59
East	0	0.0%	4	100.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4
Foreigner/CAR	1	100.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1
Far-nord	3	28.6%	6	57.1%	0	0.0%	1	14.3%	10
Littoral	4	6.8%	56	86.4%	1	0.0%	4	6.8%	65
West	1	8.3%	13	75.0%	1	8.3%	3	8.3%	18
Grand Total	16	10.3%	126	80.4%	3	1.9%	12	7.5%	157

Table 2 summarizes the results of the question “When do you usually speak your language at home?”

Legend

- Parents (157) of learners of observation sub-cycle from the Bilingual high school Emana, in Yaoundé, were classified according to their geographical origin.
- All language groups were represented, because parents originated from all regions of Cameroon.

From table 2, it appeared that few parents usually speak (10%) their language at home, whereas most of them (80%) speak sometimes. A few of them (2%) speak once in the while, as they address their kids in the mother tongue, in the presence of strangers and 7% never speak their mother tongue. This result, coupled with the previous, explains how difficult it may appear to these parents to teach their children when only 10% of them are mother tongue-oriented.

In conclusion, parents' language habits do not favor mother tongues at home; their involvement in the teaching of Cameroonian languages is thus questionable.

Discussions

Parents and the national curriculum

From the review of the national curriculum (MINESEC, 2012), parents appear to be a major stakeholder in the teaching of Cameroonian languages. Ngatcha (2012) labeled them “maîtres-assistants” or assistant instructors, thereby acknowledging their involvement in school

activities. With the above mentioned attitudes of parents as discussed with Tsafak (1998), Nseme (2007), whereby some turn not to privilege mother-tongue in their communication habit at home, it becomes imperative to ask how the national curriculum will rely so much on parents. According to the said curriculum, the teacher is seconded by parents or the family as assistant instructors. However, some parents are necessarily up to the task, but some are not.

Even as some parents are able, given their socio-professional and intellectual background, it is still not guaranteed that they will massively turn to support their children the way it is expected. For this first category, they usually claim they lack time, due to professional reasons (NEA², 2008; Ngatcha, 2012). On the one hand, they may find it difficult to support their children as they are ignorant of the status the curriculum attributes them. They may take their responsibility lightly and makes it difficult for their children to learn their mother-tongue. On the other hand, as discussed with Nseme (2007), some parents are most comfortable when they use official languages, whose status is higher in their perspective. They may find it less important to actually take time training their children using mother-tongue at home.

For the second category made of less educated parents, they are mostly not concerned with school issues. In their own perspective, their experience hinders them from helping their children. They therefore become frustrated when asked for support by the children (Ngatcha, 2012). In fact, a parent that has not been used to

²“NEA” stands for National Education Association, with a Policy and Practice Department | Center for Great Public Schools, Washington, D.C.

helping his/her children from primary school, where the level is relatively low, will hardly be enthusiastic to start when the child reaches secondary school unless something is done in that direction to motivate him do so. In Cameroon context, the observation-cycle (form1 and form 2) marks the introduction into the learning of mother-tongues. This means, it is a new subject for a child coming from primary level, a subject that can possibly involve parents who have not been used to involvement; not being used to similarly means being ignorant of the school demands.

Parents' language attitudes and involvement challenges

Most parents are faced with competence challenges; only 20% of the sample population can read and write, (Tadadjeu, Sadembouo & Mba, 2004). Others have different language preferences (9%) never choose to speak their own language at home as mentioned by Nseme (2007) and Mba (2012). This language attitude can actually explain what Ngatcha (2012:119) says. "Other parents are so disinterested that they do not condescend to take a look in their children's notebooks, thus refusing any cooperation with the school." Their language habits hinder them from getting involved in the activity of mother tongue literacy. This reveals how uncomfortable parents may feel when trying to handle homework, whether due to language differences. They eventually lack the know-how and resources to help their child. And since there is usually no communication between school and home, they express frustration with school policies they find impossible to understand. Ngatcha (2012: 119) continues:

Parents are so anxious when their children start to do their homework: they are afraid of not being up to the demands of the children, and deep down, they curse the teachers who advise their students to be followed by their parents, making them 'teachers' assistants' of the nation.

Another burden, as stated earlier, is the question about parents' literacy in mother-tongue. What is the sociolinguistic environment of the family or, simply put, do parents speak their own languages at home? The present study answers 10% yes, while Nseme (2007) says "no". In fact, some parents believe it is a privilege to speak English or French, or even both within the family. They use *highly respectable and respected languages* at home (Biloua & Fonkoua, 2011). Some studies (Crisfield, 2019) also argue that if children are unable to answer questions or respond in the school language, they should be encouraged to use their own language, with the assumption that they have parents support at home.

In conclusion, the implementation of the present curriculum faces challenges due to parents' language habits and preferences, thus opening two perspectives: a review of syllabus to handle Cameroonian languages learners exclusively in school or the development of strategies to get parents' effective involvement. Ngatcha (2012) for instance, suggests private classes when faced with difficulties. As for Cameroonian languages, there is need for information and sensitization. The learner alone remains the link between family and school. As of now, there is no forum or communication means to inquire about the family and its language attitudes, competence or performance, before assigning responsibilities. NEA (2008) shares this view as it declares that "*some families criticize school personnel for not understanding the plight of single parents, grandparents, foster parents, or other caregivers.*" In Cameroon as elsewhere, pedagogy is not interested in home related challenges, but expects positive outcome from home.

What does it take for parents to be more involved?

Of the specific ways suggested by Policy brief (2008) to enhance the collaboration between home and schools; some are useful to the Cameroonian education which needs to successfully partner with parents for the teaching and learning of mother tongues.

- Survey educators and families to determine needs, interests, and ideas about partnering.
- Provide professional development on family and community engagement for school faculties.
- Offer training for parents and community stakeholders on effective communications and Partnering skills.
- Provide better information on school and activities involving parents.
- Ensure timely access to information, using effective communications tools that address various family structures and are translated into languages that parents/families understand.
- Hire and train school-community liaisons who know the communities' history, language, and cultural background to contact parents and coordinate activities.
- Collaborate with higher education institutions to infuse parent, family, and community involvement in education into teacher and administrator preparation programs.
- Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of parents' involvement activities.

In conclusion, the review of the national curriculum shows that significantly more emphasis is placed on the important roles that parents are to play in the learning process of Cameroonian languages. They were presented as

“resource persons”, thereby expected to contribute to raise student performance in this area. There is a need therefore to advocate for policies to train, assist and encourage parents, families, and communities, to raise their awareness. This way, they may be actively engaged in their roles and become an integral part of languages improvement efforts. As their status is clearly stated, there is also need to investigating ‘parental input’ through homework for instance.

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