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The Special Bilingual Education Programme in Cameroon: The Scientific and Technical Components in Question

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ABSTRACT

Any teaching programme intends to train a specific type of citizens who able to answer a specific need of a country. It is for that purpose that the Special Bilingual Education Programme (SBEP) was launched in some Cameroonian secondary schools. That programme aims to train perfect bilingual students, and this goes in line with the promotion of bilingualism established by the Cameroonian government. This paper questions the marginalization/ ignorance of scientific and technical education within that programme which normally is supposed to consider all the components of education. The data was collected through questionnaires administered to 100 science students and 20 teachers of five bilingual secondary schools that host the Special Bilingual Education Programme. Another questionnaire was administered to 100 technical students and 10 teachers of three technical schools, making a total of 230 informants. The results revealed that the marginalization/ ignorance of scientific and technical components in the Special Bilingual Education Programme is a serious problem. Students who enrol in that programme and who ambition to continue with scientific studies are forced to leave it after the BEPC (Brevet d'Etudes du Premier Cycle) and the GCE- Ordinary Level examinations. Technical education students who want to be bilingual cannot enrol in that programme. This paper recommends that the government include the scientific and technical components into the Special Bilingual Education Programme to enable science and technical students to benefit from it.

Keywords: bilingual education, SBEP, language learning, partial immersion, secondary school

INTRODUCTION

After obtaining its independence in 1960 and reunification in 1961, Cameroon opted for bilingualism (French/English) for fidelity to its colonial heritage. Given that at independence, there was no dominant home language that could be adopted as a national language for education and administration, the new Cameroonian authorities continued with the use of English and French languages. This means each of its citizen had to be able to express himself/ herself in French and in English. It should be noted that this was a socio-political choice that was meant to bring together the Anglophones and Francophone communities under the same umbrella for social cohesion and unity. The choice of the two foreign languages meant that the

country had to pursue the English and French lines of education. Thus, the country adopted two educational sub-systems. In 1962, the government decided to create bilingual secondary schools to train Cameroonians capable of expressing themselves in both languages. The first bilingual secondary school created at Man-O-War-Bay. After this experience, the acceptance of bilingual schools was biased because instead of having secondary schools which train youths in both languages, there was rather the development of two sub-systems inherited from the former colonizers which train students either in French or in English. The government through the Ministry of Secondary Education, having noted the failure of bilingual schools therefore thought of a Special Bilingual Education Programme (SBEP) in 2009. This modern version of the programme does not only teach Intensive English and French, but also puts learners in a situation of partial immersion whereby they learn Sports and Physical Education, Citizenship, and Arts and Craft in their second official language. Another innovation with this programme is the teaching and evaluation of oral communication, an aspect of language learning and assessment that has been neglected in the past. But the problem that remains unsolved is the place of the scientific and technical components within that programme. This paper therefore investigates why the ignorance/ marginalization of those two components in the innovative programme, and what would be its benefits to the learners of those sectors of education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bilingual education is quite popular in a number of countries of the world as it trains people who are capable to survive in many contexts.

An Overview of Some Bilingual Education Programme

Bilingual education is adopted in different ways in many countries around the world. The United States and Canada are the pioneers in bilingual education, and their models serve as the foundation for various forms of bilingual education in other countries (Qi Liu & Sin Wang Chong, 2023).

In Canada, immersion in bilingual education refers to the creation of a learning environment that is rich in the target language. Dicks & Genesee (2017) discussed three forms of bilingual immersion in Canada: French immersion, heritage language programme, and indigenous language programmes. French immersion is for both the majority of learners speaking English and learners with minority backgrounds (Dick & Genesee, 2017). French immersion is popular in Canada because French and English are the official languages and are protected in the educational system since the adoption of the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 (Dicks & Genesee, 2017 cited in Qi Liu & Sin Wang Chong, 2023).

Regarding bilingual education in the United States, dual language immersion programs are usually adopted to provide equitable education for ethnic minorities (Collier, 1995; Bybee et al., 2014). Osorio-O' Dea (2001) compared bilingual education programs in the United States including English as a second language immersion and transitional, and two-way bilingual education.

Concerning bilingualism in China, Gao & Wang (2017) discussed two types of bilingual education programs. They are the government- led bilingual education programs for ethnic minorities (Gao & Wang, 2017; Gao & Ren, 2019). However, the studies on bilingual education in China only mentioned little about the preferences for that education model, and are mostly

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focused on a specific region (Shangai). The way in which it is implemented in other regions remains unclear (Qi Liu & Sin Wang Chong, 2023).

Bilingualism and bilingual education are associated with positive language, literacy, and academic outcomes: children exposed to two languages at an early age, whether at home or at school, show better outcomes than their monolingual peers in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond (Buhmanm & Trudel, 2009; Jasinka et al., 2017; 2018; 2019; Takam & Fasse, 2020; Benson, 2020; Ball et al., 2022).

In Burkina Faso, the Ministry of Basic Education and Literacy and partners initiated in 1994 the "Programme d'Education Bilingue" (PEB) in public primary schools, with the goal of improving education quality and literacy results, and developing and promoting national languages (Hanemann, 2018). PEB schools provided instructions in Burkinabe languages: Dagara, Dioula, Fufulde, Lyele, etc (Korgho, 2001), and the instruction in these schools gradually uses fairly both languages- Burkinabe languages and French to teach students in grade three (Lavoie, 2008; Ilbougo, 2010). At different grades, there is a gradual shift towards French instruction, while the Burkinabe languages were used for explanation and teaching of new concepts (Lavoie, 2008).

Children attending PEB schools demonstrated higher pass rates at the primary school official examination, *Certificat d'Etude Primaire* (CEPE) compared to national average (Lavoie, 2009, Zoungrana, 2014; Hanemann, 2018). Moreover, PEB schools demonstrated better promotion, lower dropout, and repetition rates than traditional schools (Zoungrana, 2014, cited in Ball et al., 2023).

Bilingual Education in Cameroon

In Cameroon, Fossi (2013: 180-187) presents the new bilingual programme by focusing on its strengths and the challenges inherent to it and points out that "Ce programme établie un nouvel ordre d'enseignement bilingue au Cameroun, et se propose d'aider les jeunes Camerounais scolarises à communiquer indifféremment dans les deux langues officielles (Français et Anglais) de leur pays".

Esambe (2023) looked at bilingualism in Cameroon after sixty-one year of its implementation. It appears that despite all the decisions taken by the Cameroonian government to promote bilingualism, this still remains unclear. At the secondary level of education, he points out that the curricula of the two sub-systems - francophone and anglophone are designed to train monolingual students. He thus encourages the establishment of a quality curriculum to have effective bilingual students.

According to Nana (2013) bilingualism in Cameroon started off from a wrong premise. He argues that it is paradoxical that in Cameroon, the trust of bilingualism in the education system did not come through the doors of primary schools. He contended that, while the experiment in bilingual education named the Molyko model was viewed as successful in terms of training pupils to an equal proficiency in English and French, this was deemed to be "too expensive, not cost effective and unnecessary".

Ayafor (2005) perceives the Cameroonian bilingualism as a political fact rather than a language treatment programme. Just like Wolf (1997), Ayafor (2005) notes an inequality between French and English and remarks that English is in a weak position compared to French in almost all domains of life. This can be explained by the lack of interest that English-speaking Cameroonians themselves give to English. They have instead adopted Pidgin English as their lingua franca and use it massively even in official circles (Neba et al, 2006; Ayafor, 2006). Ayafor thinks that it is imperative for English-speaking Cameroonians not only to master English but also French because they are the ones who need more their second official language because of their minority position.

Since the launching of the SBEP, a number of studies have been carried out to investigate its effectiveness. From all the analyses, it emerges that this programme came at the right time, but there were some inconsistencies and inadequacies in it. Kouega & Dempowo (2022) evaluated the implementation of the Special Bilingual Education Programme in three secondary schools in Yaoundé. The results showed that the learners presented enthusiasm at the beginning of their training within the programme, but were discouraged along the way because of the difficulties faced during the training and of the abrupt exit of some students who continued with a scientific training after the *BEPC* (*Brevet d'Etudes du Premier Cycle*) examination. They concluded by proposing a bilingual programme to fill in the gaps in the current SBEP.

Fasse Mbouya & Takam (2022) examined the practices, difficulties and impacts of English as second official language teaching and learning in Cameroon's technical schools. They investigated the perceptions and attitudes of students, teachers and parents towards English. All groups involved in the study showed interest in the teaching and learning of English language because they are aware of the advantages it has in Cameroon and abroad. Despite their interest, it was observed that technical students are not bilingual at the end of their training. This is due to the lack of English teachers in technical schools and the focus of their programme mainly on their speciality subjects. This leads to a poor performance of technical students in English, and goes against the objective of the government which wants to produce bilingual students at the end of secondary education no matter their specialisation. Like Nforbi & Siewoue (2020), they concluded by encouraging the inclusion and development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the training of teachers as a solution to overcome all these problems.

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected through questionnaires administered to 100 science students of *Première* and *Terminale C* and *D*, and Lower Sixth and Upper Sixth science classes, and 20 teachers of five bilingual high schools hosting the SBEP, namely the Government Bilingual High Sschool Dschang, Government Bilingual High School Etoug-Ebe, Government Bilingual Practicing High School Yaounde, Government High School Ngoa- Ekelle and Government Bilingual High School Bertoua.

Another questionnaire was administered to 100 technical students of Second and Third years *(Electricité* and *Industrie de l'Habillement*), *Première* and *Terminale* (*Maçonnerie* and *Comptabilite*), and 10 of their teachers. The total number of subjects is 230 as distributed in the table below.

Table 1: Distribution of students and teachers per school

Schools	Students	Teachers	Total
GBHS Dschang	20	4	24
GBHS Etoug-Ebe	20	4	24
GBPHS Yaounde	20	4	24
GHS Ngoa-Ekelle	20	4	24
GBHS Bertoua	20	4	24
Lycee Technique de Dschang	40	4	44
Cetic d'Ebang	30	3	33
Cetic de Nkongoa	30	3	33
Total	200	30	230

The questionnaires were administered in English and French to enable their full understanding. The science students' questionnaire contained six questions focusing mainly on students' opinions on the SBEP, their attitudes to the bilingual programme and their performance. The Government Bilingual High School teachers' questionnaire contained five questions seeking to get their opinions on the programme and the marginalization of science students, and the general attitudes and performance of students enrolled in the SBEP. The technical school students' questionnaire aimed to know their opinions on bilingualism and SBEP in secondary schools. Their teachers were asked five questions which aimed to know their opinions on the SBEP and the attitudes of their students during English classes.

RESULTS

Students Enrolled in the SBEP's Opinions on the Programme

To the first question 'what they think about the SBEP', all the participants said that it is a good programme because it really promotes bilingualism through the learning of English and French and exposes the students involved to the language through various subjects such as Citizenship, Intensive English/French, manual labour, etc. This enables students to focus on the language and they benefit from it in other aspects of life.

Students Enrolled in the SBEP's Attitudes to the Programme

Students reported that when enrolling in *Sixième Bilingue*, they were highly motivated to learn English and French to be perfectly bilingual with the expectations to improve their performances in the two languages. unfortunately, along the way, the level of engagement and interest in the programme decrease for some and increased for others, meaning that the level of satisfaction with the bilingual programme for French-speaking and English-speaking students is not the same after obtaining the BEPC and GCE-OL certificates. The overall satisfaction of the learners with the programme was 46% for Anglophone and 28% for Francophone students. 18% of Anglophone and 14% of Francophone students were indifferent, meaning that the programme did not have a great impact on their academic performance. 2% of Anglophone and 10% of Francophone students were totally dissatisfied of the SBEP.

Students Enrolled in the SBEP's Performance

The SBEP had a positive impact on the French and English language academic performance of some learners. 34 % of them reported that, in addition to having enabled them to better learn English and French, the SBEP has also helped them to integrate and take seriously the learning of other subjects. This good performance can be observed when, after their *BEPC and GCE-OL*

certificates, they are combined with the learners of traditional classes (i.e monolingual classes). They master and express themselves in English and French better than their classmates.

However, 14 % of Anglophone students and 16 % of Francophone ones reported that the SBEP did not have any impact on their academic performance. They complained that the bilingual programme instead of training them to be perfectly bilingual rather confused them as it was not designed on a 50-50 % basis. Once combined with their classmates of traditional classes, they reported that there was no difference at the level of the mastery French and English languages. They clearly regretted having been enrolled in that programme.

Government Bilingual High School Teachers' Opinions on the Programme

The Government Bilingual High School teachers perceived the SBEP as a good bilingual programme which effectively promotes bilingualism in secondary schools and enables students to learn the second language, but remarked that the programme is not well implemented. They reported that the programme helps students who are really motivated and engaged to be fluent in both languages and can later help them to easily find a place in the job market. Nevertheless, that programme has some limitations. It is not well implemented in schools since the teachers involved in it do not always take it seriously; they complain that they were not trained to teach special bilingual classes. The SBEP leads into a vacuum for students who want to continue with scientific studies. They are therefore obliged to abandon the programme after the *BEPC* and *GCE-OL* certificates. This situation weakens the importance of the SBEP because the learners who leave it are generally the best ones.

Government Bilingual High School Teachers' Report on Students' Attitudes and Performance

The teachers reported that students of special bilingual classes generally have positive attitudes during classes, as they take the learning of the second language seriously. In *Sixième/ Form 1* and *Cinquième / Form 2,* they are generally highly enthusiastic, curious, and attentive to learn. This makes the classes interactive. It is later that they become bored as the familiarise themselves with the general content of the programme. As to their general performance, they are above that of those of traditional classes. This is justified by the fact that they make more efforts in their second official language and their ability to understand and use it is better because the training is intensive and has more speaking activities.

Government Technical High School Teachers' and Students' Opinions on the SBEP

Most students and teachers of technical schools in Cameroon are not aware of the existence of the SBEP in secondary schools. Just a marginal number of teachers are aware of its existence and appreciate the fact that it focuses on the learning of the learners' second official language and helps them to be bilingual. But they expressed their dissatisfaction as technical students are not concerned with it and cannot benefit from it. When explained what it is all about and how it can help them, technical students think it will be profitable to them as it will enable them to master the two official languages. In addition, they mentioned that it would be more interesting if focused on their various specialisation's registers.

Some Suggestions for the Improvement the Programme

Students enrolled in the programme suggested the creation of special bilingual science classes and the amelioration of teaching methods. They also suggested a well-balanced number of

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subjects in the programme, i.e. 55 % of the subjects should be taught in English and 50 % in French and emphasis should mostly be on language.

Their teachers suggested a good implementation of the SBEP and its spread to all secondary schools nationwide; an in-service training for teachers of involved in the programme; the creation of special bilingual science classes and the involvement of the maximum of trained bilingual teachers in the programme. The technical education teachers and students suggested the implementation of the SBEP in technical schools.

CONCLUSION

In order to promote effective bilingualism, the Cameroonian government has put in place a set of measures to facilitate the training of the population in the use of the two official languages. Among these measures was the launching of bilingual classes through the Special Bilingual Education Programme has been be on in secondary schools since 2009. Unfortunately, 15 years later that programme is still limited to a few secondary schools nationwide where its efficiency is still to be evaluated. The scientific and technical components are still ignored in it, a situation that leads to its premature abandonment by some brilliant learners who have scientific ambitions. It can therefore be concluded that the marginalization of science students and exclusion of technical ones of the SBEP does not go in line with the policy of bilingualism that the government has bee promoting since 1961. As suggested by the teachers and learners involved in this study, the inclusion of the scientific and technical components in the SBEP is an imperative if the Cameroonian government wants its future certificates and degree holders to be bilingual and competitive on the job market.

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