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Pretence, Honesty or Reality; Exploring the Perplexity of English Language Teaching in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

The exodus of the English language from its aboriginal harbour to settler nations and to Kachru's expanding circle, has placed the language in an unprecedented position causing a plethora of linguistic phenomena in the 21st century. The Cameroonian maxim that the country is Africa in miniature is also justifiable from its linguistic landscape that was spiced by the settlement of English language in the territory in the 18th century. The country is now not only inundated by the more than 250 native languages but equally by a number of Englishes that find expression within the context. This has resulted in a fervent jostling for position amongst users of English in Cameroon. The pedagogues find themselves in a hotchpotch of confusion and miasma on the variety to use and to teach. This disarray is further compounded by the ferocious competition between varieties placing the pedagogue in a quandary



of three behaviours either as pretence, honesty or reality. In this linguistic quagmire, the centre seems not to hold again and pedagogues consciously or not resort to what I term 'linguistic hypocrisy'. This paper traces the dilemma of the English language teacher who pedagogically is living a double-edged life; one that is 'English English' and another that is 'Cameroonian English'. Data is collected through empirical review of secondary data as well as discussions with English Language teachers in secondary schools and further analysed using qualitative approaches. Findings reveal that English language teachers live a linguistic pretentious life with three behaviours which have compelling implications on their identity and on the English language teaching industry in Cameroon that is replete with perplexities ranging from intra to extra linguistic domains.

Key Words: *ELT, ESL, Indiginization, Englishes, codification,*

INTRODUCTION

Cameroon's complex linguistic environment with more than 250 local languages and more than 3 varieties of English places the English Language teacher in a daunting position. The evolution of English language teaching in the country has seen various challenging stages replete with complexities that the teacher has to manage. As this is not enough, the English language itself with a multiplicity of varieties that find expression in Cameroon can only make matters even worse. This paper reviews the complexities of teaching English as a second language within such a context and explores the inherent challenges and key considerations. It begins by presenting some background that traces the evolution of English in Cameroon with a key discussion on Cameroon English. Further discussions explore the evolution of the English Language teaching industry in Cameroon before discussing its complexities. One conclusion is that the ESL teacher in the ESL Cameroonian context portrays 3key linguistic tendencies, one is that of pretence, the other is that of the respect for norms/honesty and one that



compels the ESL teacher to face the reality. It is within this backdrop that the paper explores the intricacies surrounding English language teaching in Cameroon.

BACKGROUND

The spread of English across the globe was engendered by both socioeconomic and political imperatives. The imperial and trade ambitions of Britain, the economic might of the USA and the technological blossoming of the 21st century with English taking precedence as the language of modern technology have all contributed to the spread, implantation and indigenisation of the English language in both native and settler areas. It is thus no doubt again that the language has transcended the realm of ownership by one nation (Atechi 2008, Mbibeh 2021) and attained a global status as the world's lingua franca (Fonka 2011). The ensuing consequences both on the language and on the stakeholders have been noteworthy and have occasioned a macrocosm of wide-ranging phenomena. Such phenomena are both enriching and also somewhat detrimental to the language itself. Whatever the case maybe; it is worth noting that such evolution and consequent ramifications are uncontrollable and can only add to the splendour of the language that is global.

Historically speaking, the English language was transported to Cameroon through the British traders who carried out business activities along the coast of Cameroon between the 15th and 19th centuries (Mbassi Manga 1973). By this period, the language was used essentially by middlemen and traders. Even though the language that was spoken by middlemen at the time was not really the English spoken in Britain, it was at least some sort of a precursor to what we have in Cameroon today as English. Mbassi Manga (1976:49) traces the evolution of English language in Cameroon segmenting it into five major periods including;

1. The slave trade period.



2. The free trade period.
3. The German period.
4. The French and English period.
5. The post reunification period.

During the slave period, the language was transported to the territory alongside other European languages like Portuguese. The Portuguese slave traders preferred using British middlemen who spoke a kind of English to the slave lords. Kouega (2000:32) identifies a number of lexical items from this period that still find expression today especially in pidgin English including “sabi, kaka, pikin” and maintains that the English language at this period was more visible in the grammatical than at the lexical level.

The free trade period witnessed the establishment of plantations and trade firms in the interior of Cameroon. Given the necessity for labourers in these plantations, natives migrated from the hinterlands to these plantations and the resultant effect was the spread of English to these areas since they had to learn the language so as to communicate with their masters. It is equally during this period that missionaries, especially the English Baptist Missionaries arrived the coastal areas and started setting mission centres where English was the main language of communication. It is through these missionaries that the formal learning of English started when formal schools were set up with English being the language of education. Hence, the introduction of the written medium and a kind of formal variety of English came with the establishment of these missionary centres.

The failure of Hewett to annex Cameroon in 1884 and the consequent annexation of the territory by the Germans in the Germano Douala Treaty marked a serious retreat in the spread of English. The rapid spread of the language in the country was received by the new colonial masters with a lot of disdain. That is why it was declared illegal and banned from use by the Germans. However, given the necessity for communication in order to rapidly and as fast as possible occupy the



territory; the language was still used by German administrators, Cameroonian labourers and middlemen pending the establishment of German schools and the consequent acquisition of the German language.

The defeat of the Germans during the First World War (1916) and the consequent division of the territory between Britain and France under the League of Nations mandate and subsequently the UN trusteeship in 1945 gave more hope to the English language. Though many speakers were lost in the French administered territory, the language at least found expression and expansion in the strip of land given the British. However, as Kouega (2000:33) puts it, the situation of English was not the best given that Cameroonians who used to model their speech on a British standard now had to approximate a Nigerian model since they were taught by Nigerian teachers who were not properly trained. Even the Cameroonian pupil teachers (those who simply completed primary school and became teachers) were not any better. This is why in a rather pessimistic note; he believes that the standard of English in Cameroon “had been established on uncertain ground”.

After the independence of British Cameroon in 1961, a federal state was created with French Cameroon. To solve the problem of the varied languages that existed, English and French were adopted as official languages in the two states respectively. Equally, the United Republic of Cameroon in 1972 and subsequently, The Republic of Cameroon created in 1984, all maintained and gave the two foreigner languages, English and French, official status. These languages had equal status and a lot of effort has been made since then to promote French/English bilingualism. In spite of this official and equal status, it has been observed since independence that French is often domineering especially in public administration (Atechi 2006). This has been observed in such domains as the military where English is scarcely used. The situation can be explained by the fact that English-speaking Cameroonians (Anglophones) make up only two of the ten regions. English-speaking Cameroonians in the French regions, who may not



want to waste time expressing themselves to French speakers in English, produce any kind of French simply to let go their message and meet their daily needs, rather than engage in a battle of languages.

Given the constitutional basis of the language, English is used in the Anglophone sub- system of education as a major language of instruction and French just as a mere school subject while French is used as a language of instruction in the francophone sub-system of education with English a mere subject. It should equally be observed that apart from hosting two colonial languages as official languages, there is also Pidgin English that serves as a lingua franca in the country. This language has spread so widely even amongst the French speaking Cameroonians and Mbangwana (1983:87) is quick to observe that a good number of children are acquiring the lingua franca as their “only first language”.

The spread of English to other nations did not go without inherent intricacies. In retrospect, historical perspectives reveal that Britain and its policy of indirect rule did not consider African colonised territories as part of Britain unlike other colonial powers like France. As such, they did not find it necessary to teach natives the English language given that they did not want Africans to assume the ‘civilised’ level as they claimed was a preserve of the high race. Little did the colonialist politicians know that this wanton inequity was going to have a boomerang effect. In fact, to a greater extent, the linguistic tolerance led to the development of an African, West African and Cameroonian variety of English with impeccable lexico syntactic, phonological and discursive peculiarities. (see Melchers and Shaw 2003).

What is Cameroon English?

Prior to this decade, the term Cameroon English could only be found in linguistic discourse. Now, even general search engines (Google, Wikipedia) show that Cameroon English is a dialect spoken predominantly in Cameroon, mostly learned as a second language. I add that it has a people, a culture, geographical context, is written and



spoken all characteristics of a language rather than a dialect. As seen in the proceeding paragraphs, Cameroon English has been described within the framework of all levels of linguistic analysis.

Kouega (2006) from a lexical perspective, presents twelve semantic domains in which lexical items are created as well as a number of word formation processes including borrowing, compounding, affixation, coinage etc. (*fon*, *cutting grass*, *co-wife*, *fondom* are some examples). In terms of syntactic features, Sala (2003) gives a succinct description of the Cameroon English sentence with peculiarities on simplification of transformations, overt and covert variance. From a phonological dimension Simo Bobda and Mbangwana (2004) present variations in both the segmental and suprasegmental features of Cameroon English. With regard to discourse strategies such as leave taking, greetings and sympathizing that portray a people's identity, there is a marked difference in Cameroon English as expatiated by Quafeu (2006), Nkemleke (2007), Mforteh (2009). Such descriptive analysis portray Cameroon English as a distinct variety on its own with inherent and very glaring specificities.

EVOLUTION OF THE ELT TEACHING INDUSTRY IN CAMEROON

The advent of English to Cameroon came alongside its teaching given that it was a strange language. Consequently, slave traders, colonialists and at present the Cameroon government have each at one moment or the other used the most appropriate method possible to enable business partners, the colonized, and fellow citizens respectively acquire and use the English language.

During the slave trade period the teaching of English was not very much the traders' major preoccupation. This is why it is difficult to talk of a language teaching mechanism established to this effect. For the most part, British middlemen had in one way or the other introduced the language to a few talented natives who now stood as translators or better still interpreters whenever there was a business transaction



between a native and a white or in situations of conflict and conflict resolution. Such translators were models and well respected in the community and at one moment or the other they served as 'teachers' to mostly their offspring to enable them continue the enviable job (of understanding and speaking the white man's language).

The white traders on the other hand were more interested in the accomplishment of their business transactions than in the language used. That is why this language for the most part was replete with gestures. There are many local stories in Cameroonian villages today on squabbles that ensued from the misinterpretations rendered by these poor interpreters. (for the most part called teachers especially in churches). It is evident from this discussion that we may not really talk of English language teaching during this period. We can equally conclude that the seeds of what is Cameroon English today were nursed during this period through the interpreters' gabble that was a mixture of local signs and a few English words.

However, the arrival of British missionaries in the later part of the 17th century marked a turning point in the teaching of English to Cameroonians. The need to spread the gospel to all nations as recommended by Mathew 28:19-20 pushed these missionaries to go right into the hinterlands for this purpose. The necessity for a medium of transmitting the good news became eminent as native interpreters were becoming more and more a disappointment. This is why missionary schools were established where ever a church centre was created with the aim of educating the natives in a bid to convert them from their 'barbaric' cultures to Christians. As such, English language was one of the major subjects taught in these schools. The creation of schools saw the influx of white teachers to teach in these schools. This was the beginning of the English language teaching enterprise. Public opinion in Cameroon today reveals that natives that were taught by these missionaries and foreign teachers speak an impeccable variety of English owing perhaps to the method used in teaching as well as to the teaching learning material.



The English language teaching enterprise established by the missionaries could have expanded and developed had the British not relented in their endeavour to colonize Cameroon. The late arrival of the British emissary Hewett and the consequent annexation of Cameroon by the Germans in 1884 completely crushed the young English language teaching enterprise that was being set up as English language was abolished and replaced by German. One thing to note here is the evolution of the complex linguistic situation in Cameroon. Even if the Germans abolished the use of English, it goes without saying that they could not eradicate the language from the speakers' minds. At the early stages of German administration, English language had even been used hence the teaching of the German language even had a bearing on English. In addition to their local languages, natives were now speaking two European languages (German and English). It is not until the defeat of the Germans during the First World War and the consequent positioning of the territory under the League of Nations Mandate that the teaching and learning of English resurfaced.

The British mandate that extended from 1922 to the UN trusteeship in 1961 witnessed an expansion of English language teaching all over the territory. A good number of Anglo-Saxon primary and secondary schools were created first of all in the major towns and later on in the interiors. With these schools, British teachers especially in the primary schools were gradually being replaced by Cameroonian teachers who had just completed standard six. Students who excelled were sent to neighbouring Nigeria (a British colony) for further studies when secondary schools were not yet established and at times eventually to Britain for university studies. The teaching of English in these schools during the British mandate and later the UN trusteeship was primordial since the language served as a medium of transmission of knowledge in general. Most of the top ranking Cameroonian politicians at the time like John Ngu Foncha, N N Mbile, Endely and a couple of others were fruits of English education in Cameroon. The remarkable and impeccable English they spoke despite their level of



education (grade two teachers) is testimony of the learning environment in which they studied. If the standards of English are said to be falling today in Cameroon, it is in comparison to this period. That is why Cameroonians who studied in this period are often at loggerheads with the young learners of today with the pretext that even at the university level their English is below standard and of course they may not be wrong.

THE STATE OF THE LANGUAGE AT PRESENT

At independence and later on many more secondary mission and government schools were created. Expatriate teachers still remained but many more local teachers had acquired education and were taking over the baton. The creation of the university of Cameroon and later 8 universities and Schools of education with departments of English have enhanced training of teachers of English.

Pretence, Honesty or Reality?

From the complex and composite linguistic situation discussed previously and the irregularity reminiscent in the evolution of the English language teaching enterprise, it will not be an overstatement to think that English language teaching in Cameroon today is a very daunting task. The language policy, the language itself, the classroom situation and the teachers all leave much to be desired leading to the various dilemmas and explaining the pretence, honesty and realities that we have in this context. The forgoing discussion focuses on this perspective drawing inferences from previous research and from the current context.

If English language teaching today is problematic, the language policy of Cameroon contributes to this difficulty. Most developing nations adopted the colonial languages as official languages without reflecting on a clear language policy and planning imperatives. This is observable to a greater extent in Cameroon where the mere specification in the constitutional provisions that English and French are official



languages of the country seems to be sufficient. This constitutional stipulation is inadequate on account of the fact that it does not specify policy and planning mechanisms to ensure the acquisition and teaching of these languages. It is evident that the young postcolonial nations were mostly constrained to adopt these languages but years later, there is need for some policy and planning mechanisms to be effected to ensure that the basic requirements related to linguistic tenets are considered.

The English language itself plunges the Cameroonian L2 teacher into serious difficulties. The multiplicity of varieties, (both native and non-native) and the prestige enjoyed by certain varieties like American English puts the L2 English language teacher and subsequently the learner into a dilemma (Atechi 2008). The growth and expansion of American English forms in non- native settings formerly the preserve of British English is threatening the long-standing hegemony of British English. Atechi (2010:1) gives empirical evidence that this situation is gaining ground even in Cameroon English and further states that such "...jostling for position (between the varieties) places the teacher and the learner of English in a difficult situation". The movie industry in neighbouring Nigeria has for the past decade had considerable social and above all linguistic impacts in the Cameroonian society. The admiration of Nigerian heroes is a result of the seemingly ignorant adoption of their way of life and especially their speech. The situation has led to the spread of the Nigerian variety of English so much such that the English language teacher at times has no option than to accept such a trend in the English language classroom in Cameroon today. This leaves the teaching with the confusion of which standard to adopt.

Even though British English is the standard expected to be taught in Cameroon, it is quite questionable whether a quarter of Cameroonian English language teachers can approximate this variety to a plausible degree. It is definitely no news that Cameroonians speak Cameroon English and whether one likes it or not, the variety is deeply implanted in Cameroonians and personal observation reveals that



insistence on a particular variety is doomed to fail (Mbibeh 2013). What therefore should be taught in the Cameroonian classroom? Even though many researchers believe that non-native varieties should gain legitimacy in the second language classroom, Simo Bobda (2000:66) still maintains that the inadequacy of professional and educational opportunities and challenges of codification still represent hurdles for the drawing up of didactic materials. The debate on the standard for the non native classroom goes on and is not a peculiarity for Cameroon. Atechi (2006:196) on this issue concludes that:

[...]dust is still to settle on this debate on a model of English that is suitable for the non-native English setting. We all agree that the native model is not suitable for the non-native environment because it violates the socio-linguistic realities of the speaker and more importantly deprives the speaker of an important marker of identity.

Furthermore, the second language classroom in Cameroon today leaves much to be desired. The plethoric enrolments with averagely more than 70 students per class, has been decried over the years as a major impediment to the effective teaching and consequent learning of English. Coupled with the deteriorating economic situation of the parents, learners barely have simple exercise books not to mention textbooks or reference books. Even if the textbooks in themselves are criticized for the bias on local colour and standards, it does not forbid the learners from using them as the disadvantage is just to a limited extent. At a time when the teaching of English is being associated with modern communication facilities, it is a pity that this is still a nightmare for most Cameroonian classrooms where energy is unavailable not to talk of the necessary didactic equipment.

Needless to mention the difficulty that arises from the insufficient number of teachers not leaving out the training these teachers receive. Because of the shortage of teachers, it is very common



to find a classroom of more than a hundred students in both the primary and secondary schools. This of course poses serious pedagogic problems. It is within this backdrop that Fasse (2007:62) comments that it is common ground to hear teachers say "In my classes, I merely take care of the first five rows of students" and similar other statements. The question to be raised here is; what happens to the learners who sit farther away? A good number of English language teachers in Cameroonian secondary schools are degree holders from various state universities with little or no pedagogic knowledge that is needed in the teaching of this language. English language teaching in the primary section is done mostly by secondary school leavers with either the G. C. E ordinary or advanced level in either 4 or 2 subjects respectively. No precaution is taken to select those who succeeded in English language. Even those who are supposed to have received training in the schools of education are no better given the fraudulent means most of them use to get in and out of the training school.

The situation is further darkened by the complex linguistic situation of Cameroon. The multiplicity of local languages that are widespread and spoken all over the territory does not really facilitate issues for the language teachers and learners. Like in any second language situation, it is a general belief (though a debatable one) that the first language for the most part negatively influences the acquisition of the second. Even if this were not true as a number of linguists will argue, the situation in Cameroon is demanding since the learners use many of these languages. The teacher is found in a situation of having to manage second language learners with a repertoire of many local languages. It becomes difficult to trace the source of interference errors. Pidgin English further complicates the situation for the teacher and no matter the efforts made by school administrations to band the language from school (Fonka 2014); learners still feel more comfortable using this language amongst themselves to the detriment of the queen's language that the teacher is struggling to inculcate in them.



The anthropological implication of English in the outer circle is the inability to imbibe the cultural component of the non-native speaker. That is why the need for a way of expressing belief systems, traditional practices, food and all socio cultural realities cannot be directly transcribed by British English. As such, Kachru (1986) talks of the nativization of English in the outer circle referring to linguistic and cultural adaptations to reflect the sociolinguistic background of the second language speakers. If we do agree that language is the expression of the culture and identity of a people then we have no choice than to adopt New Englishes and use them in any context (Mbibeh 2021). Of what significance is it to compel a Cameroonian to say *seitan* when in the next minute he will come back to *satán*. Even if you do so, will he refer to the *fon* as the monarch? Even if he does so, what will he call his *achu* or *mbongo chobi* etc. From a paralinguistic perspective, a Cameroonian of the Northwest Region will not greet the *fon* by shaking hands with him as a kind of greeting nor nod his head as an Indian will do. The constant effort by purists to reinforce inner circle norms in the outer circle especially in the pedagogic world is definitely a David Goliath fight that may not be resolved given that issues of a people's identity are innate and very sensitive (Mbibeh 2021).

Purists' attempts to get rid of the African Englishes can no longer yield any fruit given that it had been transmitted from generation to generation and has become an expression of the culture and identity of a people. This explains why the rise of prescriptivism as a means of "polishing and refining" the language to use Jonathan swifts' (1907) words only end up in unremitting pedagogic conflicts that are difficult to resolve within such spheres. We see a lot of 'pretence' when teachers enforce non native varieties which they themselves do not use a few minutes out of the classroom.

The prescriptive approach to language learning has been criticised over the years especially with regard to English. Penalosa (1981:145) regrets that prescriptivism, unfortunately based on Latin grammar, for instance and transferred to English language teaching



rather than on a strictly independent analysis of the language itself is bound to fail. Kachru (ibid: 142) believes prescriptivism is a dilemma for English while Mbangwana and Sala (2009: 46) recognise the complexity of this dimension to English today because "...English has many native speakers and also non-native speakers who use it as an L1, second language or a first language. The result is that while English is evolving in time and space among various native speakers, it is also taking many twists and turns in communities that have adopted it as second language or a first language". Still in this line, Ngefac (2011) compares the practicability of imposing standards of a particular grammar (of British English to Cameroonians) to a blind man leading another blind. He thus maintains that given the sociolinguistic realities of Cameroon, imposing standard British pronunciation (which of course is done using the prescriptive approach) is tantamount to a great fallacy. This raises the question of whether the ESL teacher is just pretending, is confused or just following the norm despite its visible consequences. Language is meant to be used in society for communicative purposes. What will be the essence of imposing native norms in a context we are very aware will yield no fruit? In effect, it has been proven that context has impending consequences on second language acquisition (see Mbibeh 2021). There is need for the ESL teacher to review these theories and come out from either the pretence.

The diversity of language contexts and situations as exemplified by English (ESL, EFL etc) was a motivating factor leading to a branch of linguistics that considers influences from the context to language called sociolinguistics. This branch of linguistics was to take care of language evolution within space and time using empirical research with enormous data. As a consequence, there is need for a drift from what people ought to say to what they are actually doing with the language. (Yule 2004). It is based on this perspective that this paper proposes the paramount role of context to be considered by the ESL teacher within the English language teaching context in Cameroon.



CONCLUSION

This paper has so far explored the complexities that surround English Language teaching in Cameroon. It begins by establishing the context and tracing the evolution of English language in Cameroon as well as English language teaching. The more than 3 varieties of English that coexist in Cameroon leave the teacher in a position of choosing which variety to use. While British English is supposed to be the norm, the socio-cultural realities that cannot be expressed in British English leave the teacher in a position of insisting on British English norms and later after the class in normal conversation coming back to Cameroon English norms which are more or less natural. As this is not enough the English language itself with a multiplicity of varieties that find expression in Cameroon can only make matters even worse. The paper has reviewed the complexities of teaching English as a second language within such a context, the inherent challenges and key considerations. One conclusion from the study is that the ESL teacher in the ESL Cameroonian context portrays 3key linguistic tendencies, one is that of pretence, the other is that of the respect for norms/honesty and one that compels the ESL teacher to face the reality. These discussions point clearly to the fact that the language teacher within a prescriptive realm will only have no choice than to demonstrate pretence or hypocrisy vis a vis the use of British English norms. Should we continue to live with this pretence? No, It is high time we review the pedagogy of English in Cameroon. It is high time teachers of English use Cameroon English with unbridled pride because it is imbedded with beauty and magnificence in the expression of national realities as well as the sociocultural heritage of a nation and should be valorised. We cannot continue to pretend. Failing to do so is leading us to a linguistic hell fire.



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