

Original Paper

Unraveling the Attitude—Acquisition Conundrum in Learning English as a Second Language (L2) in Cameroon

Vincent A. Tanda^{1*} & Joan Mapeh Eposi²

¹ Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Bamenda, Cameroon

² University of Buea, Cameroon

* Vincent A. Tanda, Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Bamenda, Bamenda Northwest Region, Cameroon

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Abstract

This study set out to unravel the attitude—acquisition conundrum exhibited by Francophone Cameroonians in the learning of English as a second language (L2). It submits that notwithstanding the widely negative attitude they hold of English and the Anglophone Cameroonians who speak the language, this negativism seems not, more recently, to blight their quest to learn and use the English language when necessary. The paper contends that albeit that Francophone Cameroonians overtly show a disdain for the English language, they at the same time recognize its role as a window to the global world.

They also recognize that even within Cameroon knowing English will give them a competitive edge into the professional schools in the country and also to the few jobs opportunities that exist.

Keywords

attitude, acquisition, unravel, conundrum, globalization

1. Introduction

This paper sets out to study the attitude—acquisition conundrum observed in the learning of English as a second (or foreign) language by Francophone Cameroonians. Baker (1992, p. 10) refers to attitude as a hypothetical construct used to explain the direction and persistence of human behavior. He notes that it encompasses internal thoughts, feelings, and tendencies in behaviors across a variety of contexts. The literature on attitude in language learning is not sparse, neither is it adequate. Investigations herein have tended to examine both native speaker attitudes to speech varieties or evaluations of non-native speakers' language attitudes. The important reason for which linguists have sought to establish the

above-mentioned is because attitude is considered “a crucial differential variable in second/foreign language learning”. Studies identify positive, negative or neutral attitudes, all of which are built up around factors such as the status raising potential, socioeconomic or instrumental value of the language to be learned.

According to Mckenzie (2008, p. 64), there is a relationship between attitude and L2 (or foreign) language learning. This relationship is seen to be a complex one, which complexity is thought of as being a consequence of the fact that built up attitudes encapsulate a set of convictions which have been evolved over and after various observations, at the end of which a stance is taken. Mckenzie also observes that attitude is conditioned by the social context in which the individual finds herself/himself. A positive attitude is presented as a crucial factor which militates in favor of the learning of a second (L2) or foreign language, while inherent in a negative one is the impediment to learning.

In a nutshell, the attitude—acquisition relationship is not a straightforward one. While some scholars have considered variables such as age, sex and social class as the determining variables, others place the premium on social context. The age, sex and social class variables in learning English as a second language in Cameroon were studied in Koenig et al. (1983). In that study it was submitted that French was overwhelmingly the preferred L2 Cameroonians were inclined to learn over English, and that this trend was bound to continue for the foreseeable future. Admittedly, these authors had every reason to come to this conclusion because of the following factors:

- a) Power was predominantly in the hands of Francophone Cameroonians;
- b) More than 90% of the high state functionaries of Cameroon were French speaking; and
- c) There was a lot of protectionism and the influence of France in the affairs of Cameroon was over-bearing (Povey, 1983, p. 14).

In fact, the picture painted by this survey was one of English steadily ebbing out of use in Cameroon. Against this backdrop and some thirty-three years down the lane, the question that prompts a reaction is why on the contrary the quest to learn English by Francophone Cameroonians has been seen to be growing albeit that almost all of the three factors mentioned above by Povey have stayed constant.

Of recent one observes that more and more Francophone Cameroonians prefer English as their L2 and consequently go in for the English speaking Cameroonian subsystem of education modeled after the British and American educational systems (see Mforteh, 2006; Atechi, 2015). This observation is pertinent because the medium of instruction at the schools and colleges in this subsystem is entirely English, and the selection criteria for students, especially at the English oriented universities of Buea and Bamenda, are more stringent. This leads one to think that the stakes must be high for any Francophone Cameroonian to make the decision not to study in the other five of the seven Cameroonian state universities where the language of instruction is French, but rather opt to go for the English oriented subsystem of education.

This position starkly contrasts with what has been noted about the generally negative perception Francophone Cameroonians hold of English and the Anglophone Cameroonians who speak it (see

Ayafor, 2005; Mforteh, 2006; Achimbe, 2006; among others). In relation to the latter point of view, Tande (2006) notes that in Cameroon the French—speaking majority since reunification of the British and French Cameroons has sought to eliminate the British—inspired educational, legal, agricultural and administrative institutions which the Anglophones brought to the union.

The above discussion has been to demonstrate the potential value of conducting in-depth research on the attitude—acquisition paradox exhibited by Francophone Cameroonians towards the learning of English as an L2. It first of all looks, albeit cursorily, at the variety of English, be it British, American or Cameroonian English, that they are inclined to learn. Following this introduction, section two provides a background to the study and section three looks at the attitude-acquisition conundrum in the learning of English as an L2 in Cameroon, and unravels the reasons that underpin why many Francophone Cameroonians seek to learn and use English in spite of the negative attitudes they hold towards it. Section four concludes the study.

2. Background to the Study

Going by Kachru's (1985) categorization of countries wherein English is used, Anglophone Cameroon would squarely belong to the Outer or Extending circle, while the Francophone part of Cameroon falls in the Expanding circle. However, one must observe that such a dichotomization does not present itself so neatly when it comes to Cameroon. This is because, in addition to the fact that more recently English is being taught as a subject from the primary school level on a par with French in French speaking Cameroon, officially, it equally has an equal status with French in all administrative domains in that part of the country. Thus, be it in the Anglophone or Francophone part of the country, a majority of Cameroonians get a firsthand formal experience of English and French when they enrol into the primary school. The only difference is that out of the school and home milieu in the Anglophone part of the country, English, to a very limited extent, and Cameroon Pidgin English, largely, are commonly used, while in the Francophone part, French and Fulfulde in the northern part of Cameroon are generally used as the lingua francas. With an estimated population of 23 million, Cameroon is a multilingual country within whose borders are spoken 279 languages (Lewis et al., 2016).

An important characteristic of the language situation in Cameroon is its exoglossic language policy whereby English and French, which are the languages of former colonial masters, are used for official purposes of nation wide communication and as a medium of instruction at all levels of the formal education system.

At the end of World War II Cameroon took on the status of a United Nations Trust-Territory under British and French administrations. Britain administered the current English speaking North West and South West Regions (hence forth Anglophones/West Cameroon), while France administered the other eight regions of the country (hence forth Francophone/East Cameroon), about 3/5 of the surface area. The first independent Cameroonian government in the 1960s resolved to establish English as the official language of West Cameroon (the North West and South West Regions) and French, the official

language for the rest of the 3/5 of Cameroon (East Cameroon). It was anticipated that each Cameroonian of that generation should be able to speak either English or French, but that the next generations should be able and, given the means, to speak both English and French (Tchoungui, 1983, p. 93). As a consequence of this administrative setup, the educational system of Anglophone West Cameroon was modeled after the British educational system where English is the language of instruction in schools, and the Francophone section was oriented towards the French educational system.

3. The Attitude—Acquisition Conundrum

A study by Povey (1983) presents French as the dominant L2 in Cameroon, and the L2 Cameroonians would prefer to learn over English. On the basis of the findings of that study, an informed speculation that this trend will continue for the foreseeable future, with English ceding ground more and more to French was advanced. With reference to that situation and in comparison with French, Povey (1983, pp. 12-14) states that “by any statistical measure, English has lost the battle for the equality of usage”. Of course he had every reason to come to that conclusion. In Cameroon about 3/5 of the population speaks French, and being in the majority, it is to be expected that the onus was more that of Anglophones, who are in the minority, to learn French in order to attain any social mobility in the country.

Wolf (1997, p. 421) buttresses the point when he notes that French dominates in Cameroon and that this is due to the demographic factor that Francophone Cameroonians have continued to occupy top ranking positions in government and the civil service. Atechi (2015) also notes that the attitude of some top ranking French-speaking Cameroonian officials and ordinary citizens towards English is that of disdain.

Yet, in spite of all the manifest disdain for English, of recent it has been noted that the deliberate endeavor by Francophone Cameroonians to learn and use English has been on a constant rise: Many more of these Francophone Cameroonians enroll in Anglophone schools and others go for English language courses either in the British or American cultural centers or any of the linguistic centers established at the regional capitals of Cameroon by government (see Mforteh, 2006).

In a bid to unravel this conundrum, a questionnaire was administered to Francophone Cameroonians studying at the English oriented universities of Bamenda and Buea, seeking first of all to establish whether it was British, American or even Cameroon English that Francophone Cameroonians had preference for, and then the reasons why they now want to learn and use English. We present below the informants, the procedure for data collection, the results and discussion.

3.1 The Informants

The population selected for the study consisted principally of Francophone Cameroonians who studied English either as a major subject or they pursued studies in one of the universities where English is the language of instruction. Francophone Cameroonians who from the primary school level opted for the Anglophone subsystem of education and were at the time at the university were specially targeted.

Those who went through the Francophone subsystem but then decided to change over after high school to do their university studies in the English oriented universities were also targeted. The total number of informants was 450-375 undergraduates and 75 postgraduates. The age range of the sample was between 22 and 34 with the majority aged between 22 and 26.

3.2 Procedure

The data collection was undertaken in Cameroon for over a period of two years, 2012-2014. To ensure uniformity of measurement, the procedures involved in each class visit were standardized.

4. Results and Discussion

In the first stage of the analysis of the data collected, informants were asked to give their preference of which of the varieties of English spoken in Cameroon—British, American or Cameroonian English—they would like to be encouraged to be taught in Cameroonian schools by indicating either encouraged, strongly encouraged, discouraged or strongly discouraged. The varieties were labeled A, B and C, respectively. The following results show the responses of the 450 informants.

Table 1. Indications of Preferences to British, American and Cameroon English

Responses	British English	American English	Cameroon English
Encouraged	300	50	100
Strongly encouraged	275	125	50
Discouraged	50	175	225
Strongly discouraged	25	125	300

The above data shows that most of the respondents, 300 out of 450, were of the opinion that British English should be encouraged and taught in the school system. These results may be a reflection of the learner's familiarity with British English as the language of the former colonial masters of the country, and to a lesser extent, American English, and then Cameroon English.

4.1 Gender, Age, Regional Provenance and Language Choice

Analysis was also conducted to investigate the potential influence of the socio-cultural variables on the social attractiveness ratings. The thinking that underpins this is the point that background information shapes and conditions the vision of individuals towards language learning. We consider one after the other.

4.1.1 Gender

Previous studies on social evaluations of attitude have indicated that the sex variable is an important factor in language study. The correlation between language variation and a social variable such as sex has been extensively studied. The male sex have been observed in the attitude-acquisition literature to be vulgar and insulting in their use of language, while women are less so, and show more emotions in their languages (See Precht, 2008, p. 92). The analysis of this study revealed that there were no

significant differences on gender basis. Out of the 450 informants who completed the questionnaire 250 were female and 200 male. The percentage of females with an inclination to British English was 55.5 while that of men was 44.4.

Table 2. Gender of Respondents

Gender	Number of responses in favor of British	Percentage
Female 250	250	55.5%
Female 200	200	44.4%
Total	450	100%

4.1.2 Age

Age is an important factor in sound decision making and especially if that has do with choosing to learn a language as an L2. The ages of the informants fall between 18 to 32. No significant overall effect was demonstrated for age. This is shown in the Table 3.

Table 3. Age Range of Respondents

Age range	Number of students in favor of British English	Percentage
18-24	100	22.2%
24-28	125	27.8%
28-32	125	27.8%
32 and above	100	22.2%
Total	450	100%

4.1.3 Region of Origin

Information regarding the regional provenance of the informants was viewed to be important because of the understanding that this variable is a potential predictor. It has been said that Cameroonians from particular regions are more predisposed to learn English than others. However, differences in the informants' regional provenance do not appear to have significant overall effects on the choice whether or not to learn English.

Table 4. Region of Origin

Region	Number of students	Percentage
Center	110	24.4%
Littoral	100	22.2%
West	110	24.4%
North	130	28.8%
Total	450	100%

4.2 The Conundrum

In response to the two questions why Francophone Cameroonians chose to learn English or follow the English oriented system of education and the language they would prefer their offspring learn, they responded as follows:

Table 5. Reasons for Learning English or Choosing the English System of Education

Responses	Number of respondents	Percentage
English is an outlet to the world	270	60%
Knowing English will facilitate my success in the exam to enter the school of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI)	130	28.8%
My parents want me to learn English	50	11.11%
Total	450	100

From the responses, two points could be established, which are (1) the impact of globalization, and (2) English instrumentalism.

4.3 Globalization

The most substantial impact of the bilingual policy in Cameroon is being evidently experienced with the advent of globalization and especially by this present generation of Cameroonians. In considering the importance of communication in the global dispensation and the necessity for a common language of interaction, the English language finds itself favorably positioned as a lingua franca of the world. This is a major reason why the younger generation of Cameroonians in general and Francophone Cameroonians in particular would want to exploit their vantage position, given that they have the structures already in place in Cameroon to learn English, to plug into the world economy. From a pragmatic perspective they will use English:

- a) When applying to work in the international corporations, most of which use English, based in Cameroon or abroad;
- b) Seek for emigration to the USA, Australia, or UK to seek for greener pasture; and
- c) Of course interact and share their experiences with the rest of the global world.

4.4 English Instrumentalism

The second point, which is very much like a corollary to the first in the analysis of the responses, is the thinking that by learning English it will facilitate their entry into the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI). This is one of the most prestigious professional schools in Cameroon and the Central, if not the whole of the West African sub regions, because of the job opportunities it offers after graduation. Upon graduation from ASTI the chances are quite high for a graduate to find employment in Cameroon or abroad, as in the African Court on Human and People's Rights at Arusha, Tanzania, as a translator or interpreter. Again here we see an instrumentalist reason to learn English, which I what they stand to gain in knowing and speaking English.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to unravel the attitude—acquisition conundrum exhibited by Francophone Cameroonians in the learning of English as a second language. It has been established that in an officially bilingual English-French Cameroon, albeit that French speaking Cameroonians make up 3/5 of the population and head most of the public and private establishments in the country, of recent more and more Francophone Cameroonians are advertently seeking to learn and use English, and this is seen to go against the expectation. The issue here is why would the majority French speaking Cameroonians want to bother to do this, especially when one considers the disdain they hold the language in. In this study, through the use of a questionnaire and against the backdrop that motivation is an important factor in language learning, we have established that Francophone Cameroonians are driven by the fact that English as a global language will provide them an outlet to the world on the one hand, and that by knowing English it will give them the needed advantage of succeeding in the selection examination into the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters Buea, Cameroon, as well as other job offerings by the multinational companies based in Cameroon.

A point which a good number of Anglophone Cameroonians who detest the Francophone hegemony in the country will insist on making is that the deliberate endeavor to learn English is a ploy by Francophone Cameroonians who head many of the public establishments in the English part of the country to sugar-coat the bitter pill of their domination over Anglophones by speaking to them in English, and in some cases seize from Anglophone Cameroonians any quota in appointments to government positions that might have been reserved for the minority English speaking Cameroonians. Finally, it is absolutely important that those concerned with language policy and pedagogy in Cameroon should be conversant with the general complexity of learners' attitudes towards the varieties of English in Cameroon and that these attitudes are taken into account. This may be particularly the case for language planners and educators in Cameroon with respect to curriculum design, teacher recruitment and the specific choice of linguistic model(s) employed in English language classrooms.

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