

Original Paper

From Oracy to Literacy in the Classroom: Implications for Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education in Cameroon (Note 1)

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Abstract

Observation of early childhood education in Cameroon reveals that children on their first day at school have not acquired sufficient oral competence in their L1. They go to school at the age of two when the language acquisition phase is still in its initial stages. The result is systematic separation of the child from the family. Among educated and working families, this separation becomes almost total and communication significantly reduces between parents and their children who are either under the care of the school mistress or that of the caretaker. This has a serious effect on the development of oral communication competencies as an essential phase in language acquisition and learning. In this paper, I examine oral competence in the classroom as an important phase in the successful development of children's reading and writing skills. Based on the Cameroonian situation, I argue that efficient mother tongue-based bilingual education must consider oracy as a primary link in overall literacy achievement in the classroom. Oracy is presented to have significant cultural, cognitive and pedagogic implications. Accordingly, programmes for the training of trainers should systematically integrate oral mother tongue teaching at all levels for better and improved levels of sustained literacy skills.

Keywords

Communication, language acquisition, oracy, oral competence, mother tongue-based bilingual education

1. Introduction

One of the most outstanding features of the Cameroonian classroom today is the ages of the learners. Unlike in the past when children got to school as young adults, today, it is fashionable for parents to enrol their children in school at extremely tender ages, that is, two years old or less for children in urban centres and three to four years old for those in the rural areas. The result is that the demand for pre-school facilities is on a steady rise. In fact, it is becoming a highly lucrative business to invest in the promotion of pre-school classes in today's Cameroon. The reasons for this emerging phenomenon are many and varied. The commonest of these has to do with the rapid growth in school enrolment and then increasing shifts in the status of women from uneducated housewives responsible for child upbringing to that of educated, emancipated and working-class women. With the growing working-class status of parents coupled with increasing consciousness towards child education, a new range of family needs with respect to childcare and child upbringing have emerged. Most working families in the country today require the services of either caretakers or pre-school facilities or both. For a majority of these families, enrolling children in pre-school classes constitutes the best possible option.

Advocacy for mother tongue-based bilingual education presupposes that children have acquired sufficient levels of oracy in their mother tongues (L1) before being initiated into the process of reading and writing. This suggests the importance of oral language use in educational planning in general and in early child learning in particular. It is on this basis that mother tongue education is considered as an indispensable resource for effective overall learning and for the learning of a second language (L2) more particularly. In Cameroon, like in most countries in Africa, learning in early childhood years takes place in a foreign language which most children neither understand nor speak on their first arrival in school. Little or no attention is paid to planned use of the L1 in the teaching and learning process so that the second/foreign language is taught as if it were the first thus raising some critical theoretical questions such as: Is oracy a necessity in early childhood literacy development? Can children's learning of the basic skills of reading and writing be effective in the absence of oracy in the language of instruction? When does competency start and end in the reading and writing process? What implications does oracy have on the conception, planning and implementation of bi-multilingual education programmes? How does this affect teacher training programmes in multilingual settings?

In this paper I argue that effective development of oracy in children's L1 has important implications on their overall learning abilities with respect to both the mother tongue and the second/foreign language and, as such, has significant ramifications on curriculum development, pedagogy and teacher training as key ingredients in the teaching and learning process and that on this count, it should be systematically integrated into the conception, planning and implementation of mother tongue-based bilingual programmes.

2. Brief Background to the Study

Cameroon has a population of about 15.5 million inhabitants. According to government estimates, the illiteracy rates of people aged 15 and above is 30% with 44.3% of this found in rural areas as against 12.2% in urban areas. However, in reality though, these rates should be much higher. Cameroon is perhaps the most linguistically diverse country on the African continent. There are over 240 local languages spoken in the country alongside the colonial languages (English and French). In addition, there is a wide spread lingua Franca commonly referred to as Cameroon Pidgin English. A remarkable feature of this linguistic situation is the absence of a wide spread national language—a situation generally considered to justify government's unwillingness to assign official status to national languages. So, despite the country's rich multilingual background, learning still takes place largely in foreign languages unknown to most children.

Mother tongue-based bilingual education experimentation in this country dates as far back as 1981 when the first pilot experiments were conducted within the framework of the Operational Research Programme for Language Education in Cameroon (PROPELCA). Over the years, local languages have been developed, models established, didactic materials elaborated and teachers trained and experimental schools within both the public and private sectors set up in over 40 languages. However, this experiment has not received the expected endorsement from the government so that today, a great majority of the pilot schools particularly in the public sector has regressed to mainstream foreign language education. This can be explained by the fact that whereas foreign languages enjoy a high and prestigious status, the national languages have principally a low one. Despite recommendations of the 1995 General Forum on Education for the use of national languages in education, government attitude towards mother tongue-based bilingual education experiments remains largely neutral. At the same time, it is implicitly cautious to adopt a language policy based on mother tongues so that attempts at formulating a mother tongue-based bilingual policy have failed to produce the expected results.

Although research on oral Mother Tongue (MT) use is an issue of recent years, the actual use of oral L1 in education is as old as the country's educational system itself. Despite unsupportive official legislation against MT use in the classroom, teachers continue to employ it in varying pedagogic aid in different situations. Mba and Messina (2003, pp. 29-46) observe that oral MT use is a common practice in both rural and urban areas in Cameroon. And citing the example of Bulu, a dialect of the Beti-fang language, they observe that this medium is used in its oral form in rural, semi-urban and urban areas. According to them, although there is variation in the manner of application of oral MT usage, there is clear evidence that this is a permanent pedagogical tool. The authors present a percentage distribution of the oral use of Bulu in rural, semi-rural and urban areas that seems to illustrate the fact that the oral medium can no longer be taken for granted as can be observed from the table below.

Table 1. Percentage Distribution of Use of Bulu

	Rural	Semi-urban	Urban	Total
	area	area	area	
No. of teachers	12	11	17	40
Percentage of use of Bulu	70%	60%	37%	52.33%

Evidently, oral L1 use is highest in rural and semi-rural areas. What is even more interesting with this percentage distribution is that oral L1 use is not only limited to rural and semi-rural areas alone but it is also a common practice in urban areas.

Recent developments show a gradual shift in the attitude of government towards mother tongue recognition. The constitution and numerous decrees recognise national languages as an important aspect of national culture and heritage but at the practical level, very little has been achieved particularly at the primary level. For instance, there are no public primary schools permanently practising mother tongue-based bilingual education. At the secondary and tertiary levels, the situation is more promising. For instance, central and decentralised services have been put in place for mother tongue promotion in secondary schools. Today, we have a National Pedagogic Inspector (NPI) and Regional Pedagogic Inspectors (RPI) for MTs in all the 10 regions of the country. At the tertiary level, some selected MTs are taught in at least 3 of the 6 state universities with measures presently being taken to ensure that MTs education becomes a permanent component of training in all Departments of Linguistics in the 6 state universities and in teacher training schools.

3. Pre-literacy Skills Development in Children

Observing children in their pre-literacy years can be a really exotic experience. From their language acquisition activities, they reveal themselves as fantastic experimenters of language use. It is the results of these experiments that they bring along with them to the classroom. And so, on their first arrival at school children are not merely empty vessels ready to be filled but rather possessors of language knowledge and skills. Some of them already possess a growing vocabulary and knowledge base in their home languages. They have heard adults use language in meaningful ways and observed the outcomes and pleasure that meaningful communication brings. They have learnt practical skills by listening to and observing what others do (Errington, 2010, p. 1). In these early years, their parents are their most important teachers and the verbal environment they provide sets the stage for the children's learning (Peterson, 2006, p. 1). While in some children, these skills may be both oral and written, in others (especially in minority contexts), these skills are exclusively oral principally because either the home language is not written or it is written but not used in education and so there is no motivation for parents to encourage its written use by children at these early stages of their lives.

In these formative years, adult utterances and actions either consciously or unconsciously play vital

communicational functions in the children's language development. As they listen to and watch these utterances and actions, they interpret; form their own impressions of, attempt to decipher meaning from and to imitate these adult utterances and actions in a bid to respond meaningfully to them. These oral skills, like other language skills, do not constitute a simple activity but a whole process (of imitation and adjustments) that may take several years or even an entire lifetime since with ever-changing learning needs, it seems that we never ever really finish acquiring or learning any given language. This possibly explains why even among native speakers, some are looked at as better language users than others. If this is the case for adults, then how much more will it be for little children? However, quite often, educational planning for early acquirers and learners of language tends to take for granted the importance of these early experiences on classroom learning situations. Commenting on the role of oral language competency development in overall learning, Errington (2010, p. 1) observes:

What most educators have failed to take into account is that oral competency continues to develop in the home language until about age 12. Children need the time to increase their vocabulary (including technical terms) and to develop higher level cognitive skills such as abstract reasoning and discourse features. Language skills develop quite naturally in an environment where they are nurtured. So even when the school does not include "oral competency" as a subject, appropriate oral activities can support all their academic learning.

Errington's argument emphasises three points that I consider fundamental to the present discussion. First, oral competency development in the mother tongue or home language is crucial in written skills development and so should be duly nurtured and supported. Second, oral competency development takes time (at least a dozen years) to develop to significant levels of functional operability. Third, although oral competency skills develop naturally, they can and should be supported in the classroom. One could thus argue that children's pre-literacy experiences should serve as the basis of educational planning in early childhood and subsequent years. Clearly, the way language, whether oral or written, is used at home greatly differs from the way it is used in a classroom situation. In this light, Lightbown and Spada (2006, p. 8) advise that "Although pre-school children acquire complex skills for language and language use, the school setting will require new ways of using language and bring new opportunities for language development". Undoubtedly, oral L1 instruction is one of these new ways of using language. It is an organised and guided approach to using language orally. Besides reinforcing home-acquired skills, it provides new and stronger grounds for learning the skills of reading and writing by fostering the learners' ability to match words and symbols with meaning.

4. Why Oracy in MT-based (L1) Bilingual Instruction?

Context is an important variable in the promotion of languages in education. In this regard, we must recognise that the context in which education in Africa takes place today is in many ways different

from that in pre-independence and early post-independence years. The fact is that until about two to three decades ago, most learners went to as young adults, a suggestion that they had acquired enough oral mastery of their home languages to the extent that these languages were no longer at risk of displacement with prolonged foreign language drilling. Also, the home environment was almost entirely a traditional one and so was void of literacy supporting resources as is the case today in a good number of home situations. Books, radio, TV, literate family members, etc., were not common. In some cases, especially in former British colonies, African languages were tolerated, although not encouraged, in classroom instruction. Such toleration, gave the learners some recognition and pride in their languages and identities. But today, with globalisation, the situation is different. Foreign language hegemony is being reinforced in our classroom with the mad rush to send children to school at extremely tender ages. For this reason, concepts like pre-schools, nursery schools and kindergartens are increasingly gaining importance in our society.

Those most concerned with this are undoubtedly the educated families both in rural and urban settings. In the cities, exhausted little children can be seen snoring on mats and mattresses on classroom floors. Due to work imperatives, parents are transferring part of the responsibility of child upbringing to schools, caretakers or nannies. Besides work imperatives, are other concerns related to the need to ensure that children succeed early in life and the desire to demonstrate wealth. These and many more concerns have led most families to opt for early enrolment of their children in schools. What this implies is that a majority of the children cannot, on their entering school, communicate effectively in their home languages. In fact, they have not even completed the initial phases of home language acquisition. It is, therefore, the case that official recognition and organised oral use of the home language both in situations where the language is used in teaching and in which it is not, becomes a pedagogically relevant practice. In this way, oral L1 use ceases to be the discretion of the teacher and actually becomes a legislated practice. Understandably, such official recognition, as an innovation in the educational system necessitates some philosophical and pedagogical justification. To do this means to establish a clear distinction between two related yet clearly distinguishable concepts, which are *oral L1 use* and *oral L1 instruction*. Oral L1 use here is understood to mean the occasional and discretionary recourse that teachers take in the L1 to respond to pedagogic needs in the classroom. This means that even as they follow official school policy, they can and often decide on their own on vital teaching issues such as what content to teach and which language to use in the classroom (Chatry-Komarek, 2003, p. 19). Such use is said to be periodic because it is neither systematic nor planned and discretionary because it depends entirely on the teacher's linguistic flexibility.

Ideally, every educational system represents a vision for the society. In modern society, the dreams and expectations of citizens are nurtured and so systemised within the educational system which defines the ideology not only through its choice of curriculum but also through the choice of pedagogy, choice of language of instruction and teacher training needs. The teacher training sub-system has the specificity

that it generates the required human resources for realising this vision. Training thus becomes a tool for building and nurturing the skills for teaching and learning with the school as the framework for formulating and transmitting knowledge and know-how in line with the national vision. Of course, transmission of knowledge and know-how takes place in an appropriate choice of language. The question as to whether or not oral L1 instruction is necessary in Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular relates closely with some realities observed at the level of the status of national languages. In Cameroon, for instance, the minority status of languages makes it quite unlikely that any of them be maintained throughout the school system. Also, besides the fact that increasingly, children enrol in school when they have not fully acquired oral mastery of their L1, there is the fact that there seems to be overgeneralization of what children in these very young ages know on their first arrival in school. For instance, Tadadjeu et al. (1991, p. 67) have this to say about L1 learners:

When they enter class 1, children have already mastered their language orally: they listen, understand and answer using their ears, their minds, their mouths. They know and can use the sounds of their language. They have to a large degree mastered the grammatical structure of that language. They rarely make mistakes even though there are many subjects that they do not yet understand and that they cannot handle yet.

Admittedly, when children have mastered their L1, they are more prepared for the reading and writing phases of learning. They listen, understand and so are better prepared to engage in reading and writing. But today, this situation constitutes the ideal for a decreasing number of children. In fact, even in typically rural settings it is becoming common practice for parents to enrol their children at ages 3 to 4. Certainly, at such ages, the children have not accumulated enough oral competence in their mother tongues. The question which arises is: What happens to the children's natural language acquisition process from now on particularly given that they learn in dominantly foreign language monolingual classrooms? Put differently, is the children's limited L1 oral competence capable of enabling them maintain a firm grip on these languages in later years? These, among other questions, need to be carefully examined in the planning and implementation of mother tongue-based bilingual education programmes for minority language children.

The situation described above is quite different from that witnessed some years ago when children got to school already as young adults. Even then, the immediate environment was still characterised by strong traditional and cultural beliefs and practices that provided the necessary input to the learners. Story-telling, traditional music and different forms of worship, just to name but these, enjoyed great prestige. Today, the landscape has changed drastically. Few parents are story-tellers, let alone good ones. Coupled with western religion and education parents are progressively losing their grip on traditional and cultural values. There is growing admiration among parents and children for western values represented by the colonial school system and the opportunities that it offers even if these only

benefit a small minority of the population. What the present landscape suggests is that the home is gradually losing its place as a stakeholder in children's oral L1 development and thus the need for planned support to their learning through classroom instruction. But once the need for oral L1 instruction is accepted, there remains the necessity to create a clear distinction between oral L1 use and oral L1 instruction. The former may be a result of the latter just as it may not. It is a result when it is the outcome of guided instruction in a learning situation. But it could also be independent in which case it is the result of natural and unconscious acquisition. On the contrary, oral L1 instruction calls for planned implementation in the form of organisation, delivery, follow up and evaluation. It is the basis for permanent cultivation of a culture of speaking, reading and writing among minority mother tongue speakers in mainstream foreign language classrooms. Establishing this distinction provides a greater sense of focus. Oral L1 instruction, unlike oral L1 use, becomes a legislated process and so ceases to be dependent on the personal discretion of the teacher.

Oral mother tongue instruction if well implemented, therefore, has the potential to contribute to academic and cultural development of the learner, thereby, preparing them for better participation in wider socio-cultural, economic and political networks. With respect to multilingual settings, and especially in Africa, the systematic use of oral mother tongues in education is not only desirable but sometimes indispensable. Tadadjeu and Mba (2000, p. 146) have this to say about oral mother tongue instruction:

In multilingual countries, such as most African countries, the systematic implementation of oral L1 instruction in the early years of schooling will greatly improve the academic achievement of children and also help develop appropriate and efficient multilingual education systems. This should be a first step leading to the minimal use of written L1s, each in its area of origin, at the same educational levels.

Besides, oral L1 instruction is crucially linked to the concepts of additive and subtractive bi-multilingual education. When we consider the four critical stages of language learning - listening, speaking, reading and writing, we realise that the first two presuppose considerable oral communication skills of listening and speaking as prerequisites for reading and writing (Note 2). In this light, Gleason (1993, p. 373) informs us that there is a link between oral discourse and reading. Drawing from American pre-schools and schools, Gleason notes:

There is growing evidence that for children who attend American pre-schools and schools, producing oral skills and understanding extended texts emerge in concert with print skills and may play an important role in later literacy skills.

What applies in America should also apply in Africa more generally and in Cameroon in particular. With regard to our specific situation, we must acknowledge that the need for this vital connection between oral skills and reading and writing competencies is even greater. More specifically, oral L1

instruction appears indispensable in our context for a good number of reasons some of which are summarized on the table below.

Table 2. Relevance of Oral L1 Instruction in Multilingual Schools in Africa

Basic facts about L1 learning	Relevance of oral L1 instruction
Children go to school without sufficient oral competence in L1	The need for planned support to reinforce their skills through systematic instruction
Mode of expression of knowledge and know-how in Africa is elevated language such as in proverbs, which children on their first arrival in school do not yet master	Oral L1 instruction provides framework for planned transmission of this knowledge and know-how
Mother tongue education is systematically discarded in most countries in favour of foreign languages	Oral L1 instruction marks the beginning of planned cohabitation of mother tongues and foreign languages in the classroom
Contrary to popular opinion, oral L1 instruction requires adequate preparation in both early and later years of learning	The need for didactic material, pedagogic and organisational (administrative) preparation and planning
L1 instruction is a resource for second/foreign language learning	Oral L1 instruction provides a critical basis for written mastery of L1 and foreign/second languages

It stands thus that the absence of a culture of reading necessary in educational development lies primarily in the fact that the continent is built essentially on oral tradition. Effective development of a culture of written communication necessitates the transformation of the present situation through a blending of both the oral tradition and a written culture. What this suggests is that it will be gross pretentiousness to imagine that in typical African settings, we can cultivate and sustainably promote a strong reading and writing culture in foreign languages at the total exclusion of the first languages of the learners (Note 3). Recognising the importance of oral L1 instruction is certainly one of the fundamental steps in this direction. Only in this way can we be able to preserve and promote our values vital for cultural and educational promotion. In other words, priority needs to be given to planned and guided L1 instruction in both its oral and written forms.

5. Oral L1 Instruction as Input in Classroom Communication

Learning is a combination of various skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing. In Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular, the near total exclusion of mother tongues in education restricts them to oral use—they simply become the languages of the home, indeed, the languages of the kitchen for the most part. What this represents is a planned dislocation between the home and the classroom.

Oral L1 instruction derives from the fact that learning is essentially a communication process. Communication means attaching specific meanings to specific linguistic structures—words, phrases, sentences, etc. whether these are spoken or written. Oral teaching as educational communication, therefore, involves linking spoken language and meaning to enhance the teaching and learning process. And so, a child who communicates well orally is in a better position to formulate their ideas and eventually to construct correct and more meaningful sentences. An important aspect in the oral and written communication process is input. In ideal classroom learning, input is required from both the immediate environment of the learner and the school. With respect to oral L1 teaching, there is need to determine whether or not ample opportunity exists for learners to make use of these two levels of input. Brown (1987, p. 32) holds that input is crucial in children's acquisition of language and that their speech is drawn primarily from parents and siblings. He goes further to stress that adult input seems to shape the child's acquisition of language. Brown's opinion suggests that input can only be effective when the home and the school successfully play their complementary roles in the teaching/learning process. A sine qua non condition in this process is the fact that the home and the school must share a common language, at least in the very early stages of learning. In Cameroon, this connection based on language is practically non-existent.

Given thus the importance of oral input in children's acquisition of reading and writing skills, some fundamental questions appear inevitable: Do the children in our present school system have sufficient oral competence when they first get to school? In other words, is the learners' oral competence on arriving school sufficient enough to serve as an adequate resource for the reading and writing process? If not, what measures can be taken to increase the opportunities for strengthening the oral competencies of the learners? Can the classroom play the trick? How precisely can this be possibly done? An attempt to provide answers to the above questions reveals that the classroom appears to be the ideal framework for filling up the gaps created by children's early withdrawal from the home and their subsequent enrolment in school through organised and guided oral L1 teaching involving interaction among the children and the teacher on the one hand and then the children and their mates on the other. On the whole, therefore, oral use of a language either at home or in the classroom effectively serves as learning input. While home input contributes to the language acquisition process, classroom input enhances both the language acquisition and language learning processes. While the former takes place in the child's immediate environment characterised by natural and unconscious language use, the latter is a more conscious activity in a classroom situation where organisation, follow up and evaluation of language use and learning take place. It thus stands out that the more oral competence a child acquires from planned learning of oral L1, the greater the child's potential to acquire reading and writing skills in this L1 and so too the greater the opportunities the child has for building reading and writing skills on the one hand and critical mental development on the other. Put differently, a child who has acquired oral competence and critical expression of their mind does, by the same token, develop similar

competencies for written expression.

6. Oral L1 Instruction, Bilingual Education and Cognition

The core of the debate on oral L1 use lies in its direct connection with the concepts of bilingual education and cognition. The presence or absence of oral L1 in the classroom either helps promote bilingual education or discourages it altogether. But casual use or simple toleration of oral L1 use in the classroom is certainly not enough to guarantee successful mother tongue-based bilingual education. What appears to be most desirable is the measures put in place to encourage and ensure sustenance of both the oral and written use of the children's mother tongues in the classroom. Of course, systematic oral L1 instruction should set the stage for the reading and writing phases. But what is the connection between oral L1 instruction and mother tongue-based bilingual education on the one hand and cognition on the other? The role of bilingual education on cognition needs no further gainsaying. Researches and experiments around the globe have demonstrated this relationship. Perhaps, what may not be quite obvious is how oral instruction contributes to the theories of bilingual education and cognition. These concerns are particularly relevant in multilingual settings characterised by minority languages most of which do not yet enjoy written promotion. In the case of Cameroon, less than 100 of the about 250 languages have been reduced to writing. Of this number, just about 40 have been successfully experimented in mother tongue-based bilingual education.

Debates on mother tongue-based bilingual education inform us that ideal practices are those that enhance and guarantee sustained written use of the mother tongue alongside the second/foreign language in the teaching-learning process. This sustained written use of the MT for at least 6 to 8 years has been referred to as additive bilingual education because learning in one's mother tongue particularly in the early stages significantly fosters and reinforces the learning process. This is opposed to the transitional or subtractive model experimented in Cameroon that consists in mother tongue instruction in the early years of the primary. This has been referred to as the early exit model given that although it starts with learning in the mother tongue, it soon transitions into the foreign language. On this basis, and given the new breed of children who get to school without sufficient oral mastery of their mother tongues, one can establish a clear connection between oral L1 instruction and bilingual education. If children have not acquired appropriate levels of oral competencies in their mother tongues on arriving school, it means that these mother tongues cannot adequately enhance the bilingual education process. In this case oral L1 instruction means establishing the grounds for effective implementation of bilingual education.

In typically Cameroonian rural settings, there is great linguistic homogeneity and so children are generally monolingual on their first arrival at school. However, as we move gradually away into semi-urban and urban areas, the linguistic situation of children becomes highly diversified so that the average child exhibits varying levels of multilingualism. One can thus say that most Cameroonian

children on completion of the primary cycle, speak with varying levels of competence at least two languages, one of which is a mother tongue and the other a foreign language (Note 4). But as the children advance in the educational system, their locality notwithstanding, and their mother tongues become increasingly endangered as they are exposed to other preferred mediums of communication. The table below presents the basic multilingual situation of Cameroonian children.

Table 3. Child Multilingualism in Cameroon

Nature of locality	Home language	Language of immediate environment	School language
Rural	L1	L1	OL1
Semi-urban	L1	L1 and L2	OL1
Urban	L1	L2	OL1 and OL2

L1 = First language/Mother tongue; L2 = Second Cameroonian language; OL1 = First foreign/official language; OL2 Second foreign/official language

The above table does not, however, include children in urban areas whose parents come from diverse linguistic backgrounds and most of whom do not have a local Cameroonian mother tongue. In most educated homes belonging to this category, a foreign language has been adopted as the home language. It is important also to note that the acquisition of the L2 depends on the linguistic composition of the locality in question. In a great majority of cases, the language most in use in rural and semi-urban areas is the L1. But in localities where there exists a vehicular language such as Pidgin English and Fulfulde, this certainly becomes the children's L2.

Given the minority status of our languages and the fact that minority languages have very limited chances of surviving in the school system, their use at least in the early stages of learning is of utmost importance. In this respect, oral instruction of the mother tongue becomes really indispensable. The question is thus when oral L1 instruction systematically becomes an instrument of learning and when it ceases to be one. If the goal is bilingual education promotion, then planned oral communication in the classroom becomes an absolute necessity from the very early stages. In this case, the earlier sustained oral L1 is introduced into the classroom; the better the reading and writing outcomes among the learners. Decisions about when oral L1 instruction should start and end equally influence the entire educational planning and implementation process. One of the areas directly linked to such decisions is that of teacher training. The scope of oral L1 instruction in particular and mother tongue-based bilingual education in general, determines the type of training that teachers undergo since the quality of teaching largely conditions learning success. And so, the presence of oral instruction in the early stages of learning does not only reinforce children's learning abilities but also contributes generally to educational planning and management particularly within the framework of mother tongue-based

bilingual education.

7. Towards a Pedagogy of Oral L1 Instruction

Teacher training as a component of education planning and implementation has to do with the need to foster educational communication in the classroom as part of the global goal of teaching and learning, thereby, enhancing learning success. So far, concerns about oral L1 instruction in Cameroon have been expressed exclusively within non-governmental circles with individual researchers and civil society organisations particularly the National Association of Cameroonian Language Committees (NACALCO) taking the lead in the debate. NACALCO's input has been part of the Operational Research Programme for Language Education in Cameroon (PROPELCA), the scientific framework within which mother tongue education in the country has been experimented for almost four decades. On the other hand, government silence on the issue stems from the lack of political will to implement mother tongue education. However, although NACALCO through PROPELCA, advocates for oral L1 instruction, its promoters still do not seem to really recognise the need for systematic training of teachers in oral L1 instruction as indicated by the following observation by Tadadjeu, Sadembouo and Mba (2004, p. 57):

Une formation spéciale ne semble pas s'imposer pour l'enseignement oral des langues, sauf quand il s'agit de l'art oratoire où la langue devient elle-même l'objet de créativité artistique et où le locuteur natif est le premier concerné.

What the above view seems to suggest is that except for training in oratory, there is no special need for teacher training in matters of oral L1 instruction. This by no means implies that oral L1 instruction is a haphazard activity. They recognise this worry when they caution that "Toutefois, ce démarrage doit être suivi et évalué afin d'éviter le simplisme et le désordre qui peut en découler". This later position suggests after all that some kind of training is necessary even if this is only limited to issues of follow up and evaluation. But besides follow up and evaluation, there are concerns about the collection and organisation of teaching materials and the appropriate exploitation of these where they exist. Suffice it to say that the position held by the above researchers considers that children are sufficiently versed with their L1 on enrolment in school. It also seems to be limited to oral use in the early years of schooling. But legislated use of the L1 in our context characterised by language endangerment must consider possibilities for extended use in later years of learning particularly at the primary level. On these grounds, some kind of pedagogy is necessary, the relevance of which is based on the fact that:

- 1) Evaluation exists on different modes and at different levels so that training on these is vital. Different interveners in the process such as teachers, head teachers and school inspectors must be trained on methods and techniques of follow up and evaluation.
- 2) The need for precision and efficiency suggests the need for training.
- 3) Where oral L1 instruction is part of a planned process of L1 education within a mother

tongue-based programme, training is inevitable. It is part of the overall training of MT education teachers.

4) Where oral L1 instruction goes beyond the early years of education, the need for appropriate terminology in the teaching of specific subjects such as Mathematics becomes clearly evident.

All in all, oral L1 instruction pedagogy implies paying attention to some key concerns such as specification of levels of instruction, content of oral instruction and time distribution. As can be observed, these are very closely interrelated. Let us now examine each of these in some detail.

7.1 Specification of Levels of Oral L1 Instruction

Given the implications of oral L1 instruction on curriculum and teacher training, its planning requires specification on the levels of application based on the objectives to be achieved at each level. Theoretically, different levels may be identified as follows.

Table 4. Levels of Oral L1 Use

Level	Target	Objectives
Basic Level	Kindergartens	0. Completes the language acquisition phase 1. Reinforces understanding and spoken competencies 2. Prepares learner for coordinated oral communication
Intermediary Level	Junior Primary	3. Prepares the learner for reading and writing as a continuation of speech 4. Prepares the learner for oral communication in a second language 5. Enables the learner to acquire values embedded in oral communication
Senior Level	Senior Primary	6. Enables the learner to develop critical thinking and reporting techniques 7. Provides link between critical thinking, oral communication and writing

This specification considers that oral L1 instruction is a permanent process that runs from the very early years of schooling to the end of the primary cycle at varying degrees of importance. Breaking up the process into specific levels helps ensure that there is systematic and organised delivery in which learning in one level logically leads to that of the other(s).

7.2 Content of Oral L1 Instruction

Closely related to the specification of levels of oral instruction is the question of learning content. Such a specification is necessary in addressing issues of pedagogy, choice of curriculum for teacher training and for didactic materials development. Tadadjeu & Mba (2000, p. 147) hold that the content of oral

MT instruction is easily available because it has to do with community life, the environment, music, dances, theatre, public rhetoric, arts etc. as indicated below.

Table 5. Contents of Oral L1 Instruction

Content	Pedagogic Objective
Drawing and painting	Uncover and develop children's talents through common practices in the society such as dyeing and pottery.
Dances	Explain the movements and execution of dances. Combine language of instruments with speech
Songs	Uncover different semantic contents and related activities. Organise into specific themes for various pedagogic goals and objectives.
Poems and recitations	Develop the minds and character of learners. Can be grouped into different categories according to different themes.
Scientific subjects	Include notions of calculation such as addition, subtraction, and measurements.

While this content may be of great relevance to children who have a good mastery of the oral L1 on their first arrival in school, it may not be the same for those who lack such mastery. In addition, if oral L1 instruction must go beyond the basic level, then the need to consider other content areas becomes crucial. For this reason, the following additional areas appear pertinent:

Table 6. Suggested Additional Contents of Oral L1 Instruction

Content	Pedagogic Objective
Greetings	Learn different kinds of greetings involving different categories of people in society.
Stories	Acquire moral lessons from stories according to different themes and cultivate story telling techniques.
Riddles and jokes	Uncover hidden meaning and provide entertainment. Depends on levels of learners and themes chosen.
Proverbs	Develop skills in the use of elevated language. Uncover hidden meaning in the use of language. The level of learners determines the choice of content.
Commentaries	Develop descriptive skills in oral and written expression. Learners comment on pictures and objectives from available sources such as the Big Book.

As can be observed, some of these may not be very appropriate in some of the levels. Similarly, some content areas may cover more than one level. This means that careful selection based on the level of learners as well as lesson objectives may be vital in the choice of material for each level. Below is an

illustration of how the content areas of oral L1 instruction for the proposed three levels may be:

Table 7. Oral L1 Content per Level

Level	Proposed content
Basic	Greetings, songs and recitations.
Intermediary	Songs, recitations, poems, riddles and jokes.
Senior Level	Poems, riddles and jokes, stories and proverbs.

It is worthy to note that in Africa the different proposed content areas are context-specific and so carry with them paralinguistic meaning. For instance, riddles, jokes and proverbs are directly connected with social behaviour as dictated by the cultural psychology of each group of people so that people's characters are judged based on how well they use language in line with varying categories of participants and the situations in which these are used. Their use helps reveal the degree of communicative competence that participants possess in their language. This is particularly crucial to the African child who must grow up deeply rooted in his/her environment through profound mastery and use of the language in all situations of social interaction.

A keener look at stories also appears necessary here. Story-telling is a regular feature of African society. Besides its cultural value, it has important pedagogic benefits. According to Gleason (1993, p. 372), the language strategies associated with written language become evident in the emerging narrative abilities of children. Quoting from Rubin and Wolf (1979), Gleason says that during the pre-school years, children begin to create make-believe tales that include literary devices and techniques such as narrators and distinct voices for characters. Two lessons can be drawn from these views. The first is that stories have important pedagogic benefits as they help shape the children's narrative abilities. The second is a supposition of the existence of a kind of linguistic situation of continuity whereby the language of the home is at the same time the language of the classroom. It is this linguistic continuity that guarantees the effective building of narrative abilities. In Africa, the linguistic situation is certainly not the same and this explains the numerous problems faced by young learners. In line with the above, it must also be noted that even in communities characterised by strong oral traditions, oral L1 content areas like poems and recitations are highly specialised ones with a lot of personal expertise required for their performance. In other words, not everybody can be a performer of poems and recitations. In addition to individual talents, performers have accumulated many years of practice. This means that effective and efficient oral L1 instruction with respect to poems and recitations cannot be taken for granted; it needs some kind of training and initiation. Such training tallies with modern approaches of knowledge and know-how transfer and preservation based on planned instruction. Approaches of this nature guarantee greater learning outputs and productivity.

7.3 Time Distribution

The context of oral L1 instruction may be one characterised either by linguistic homogeneity as is the case in typically rural settings or of linguistic diversity as obtains in semi-urban and urban areas. Given that such an instruction has as basis the promotion of mother tongue-based bilingual education, it will be important for time distribution to take into account the necessity for linguistic cohabitation involving the mother tongue and another or other languages. The choice of the number of languages will depend on the ideological concerns of each country. Here, a choice should be made between second language and foreign language. In the specific case of Cameroon, the choice certainly involves the English and French languages given the country's bi-cultural colonial heritage. However, a third choice may equally be possible in which case; a national vehicular language such as Cameroon Pidgin English may have to be considered. While the third choice will be a second language based on the fact that it is a language of the learners' immediate environment, the other two (English and French) would have the status of foreign languages on the grounds that they do not constitute mediums of day-to-day communication of a majority of people in the learners' wider community. The table below proposes the time distribution for oral and written L1 instruction.

Table 8. Tentative Distribution of Oral and Written L1 Communication

Level	Oral L1	Written L1	Oral OL	Written OL
Basic Level	75%	25%	0%	0%
Intermediary Level (1-3)	20%	60%	10%	10%
Senior Level	10%	10%	40%	40%

The different percentage distributions demonstrate the determination to ensure that henceforth, the L1 both in its oral and written forms ceases to be a taboo at home and in the classroom and so an accepted and legislated practice. Like the official language, the L1 must be given some organised promotion throughout the primary cycle.

8. Implications for Teacher Training

I have highlighted earlier that oral L1 instruction has implications for pedagogy and curriculum development as well as for teacher training. Perhaps, here, it is necessary to look at what specifically these implications are and how they are connected to the overall of planning and implementation of mother tongue-based bilingual education. For purposes of convenience, these are summarised into four interrelated levels, namely: the policy level, the pedagogy level, the institutional level and the community level.

8.1 The Policy Level

This is perhaps the most crucial level of educational planning and implementation given the central role it plays in the success of pedagogic and institutional levels. Proper educational planning and management is primarily the issue of an appropriate policy that defines among other things, the choice of language of instruction and the model of bilingual instruction (early-exit or late-exit) for the country. Adopting oral L1 instruction as an official classroom practice implies recognising the connection between oral L1 instruction and the choice of language-in-education policy. For oral L1 instruction to be effective, MT-based bilingual education should become an official practice thus encouraging language cohabitation in the classroom. In Cameroon, the adoption of oral L1 instruction implies recognising the existence of other languages both in the classroom and in the wider society. For instance, it means accepting the co-existence of the L1 and the official language and possibly a Cameroonian language of wider communication such as Cameroonian Pidgin.

Appropriate legislation helps create new programme spaces for linguistic practices hitherto considered practically impossible such as L1 instruction. But language policy must be accompanied by political will—a real commitment to see it fully implemented. In Cameroon, we lack not only an appropriate language policy but also the political will to apply existing legislation. This in a sense explains the inability of educational authorities to officially recognise and adopt mother tongue-based bilingual education. Such a step would imply a drastic change in mindsets that enables educational authorities, teachers as well as the communities to realise that education is mainly an issue of alternatives and that education based on L1 instruction constitutes the best of alternatives in a multilingual setting.

8.2 The Pedagogy Level

Systematic application of oral L1 instruction has direct implications for mother tongue-based bilingual education promotion in general and the training of teachers in particular. Generally, it is assumed, albeit erroneously that all teachers are versed with the teaching material required – songs, recitations, poems, stories, etc. Regrettably, different people have different levels of competence in these areas. Besides, mastery of any or all of these depends not only on the individual talents of each teacher but also by the exposure that they enjoy. Moreover, the performance of content areas in the society is situation-specific so that even within the same community or age group, people manifest varying degrees of mastery of these content areas. And so, if the teaching of all these must be entrusted into the hands of a single teacher, then some kind of training in material collection and organisation into teachable units becomes crucial especially given that in the initial stages of programme introduction, there are no ready-made materials for classroom instruction. It is vital to note that training is also of great value when it comes to integrating the community into the educational promotion process. A culture-oriented educational system has language as its base; but beyond language, there are other values to be promoted. Such is the case with the transmission of knowledge and know-how through highly professional and technical skills such as wood carving, sculpture, weaving and embroidery. In Africa, these are areas reserved for

highly talented people who have undergone many years of informal home training. When community specialised input in such areas is required in the classroom, training needs become clearly evident. For instance, training is necessary in the choice and use of technical terminology particularly for young teachers who, together with their learners, must learn specific words related to the different professional fields.

Closely related to training in data collection and organisation is the need for follow up and evaluation of the oral L1 instruction process. For teaching to be complete, it must be accompanied by proper follow up and evaluation. But the processes of follow up and evaluation are not haphazard practices but rather a set of well-organised routines. Like every teaching process that is geared towards the achievement of specific goals and objectives, teachers need training in follow up and evaluation. Training in the domain also helps guard against different teachers adopting parallel or opposing approaches and techniques to evaluate learners. The more effective the training in follow up and evaluation, the more productive the entire delivery process becomes. When such training is absent, simplification sets in and could have serious repercussions on the instruction and learning processes. Also, where oral L1 instruction is not limited to the initial years of learning but also extends to the senior levels of the primary, the need for curriculum design and didactic materials production becomes evident. Here, the role of the teacher becomes indispensable particularly when the teacher and learners share a common language. The Cameroonian experience reveals that teachers are an important asset in the elaboration of mother tongue-based bilingual education materials. Here too, there is a great need for training of teachers as partners in the realisation of teaching materials.

8.3 The Institutional Level

Effective application of mother tongue-based bilingual education in general and oral L1 instruction in particular calls for the need to create and or adapt existing institutional frameworks to the new exigencies of learning (orally and in writing) involving languages other than the mainstream foreign languages. In Cameroon, public institutional frameworks are still largely adapted to foreign language education particularly at the primary level. Teacher training institutions, supervisory bodies and teachers are all trained in foreign language pedagogy. In the private sector, the situation is slightly different. A good number of mission schools, in partnership with NACALCO, have trained their personnel in mother tongue education, supervision and evaluation. What the above suggests is that mother tongue-based bilingual education is a structuring process that requires a new kind of institutional spaces and a breed of teachers for its effective implementation. We have observed at the level of local communities that once teachers and educational authorities are convinced of the necessity for promoting the mother tongue in education, they can always find ways of ensuring some kind of application. With this breed of personnel, it is much easier to ensure generalised oral L1 instruction at all the levels of the primary cycle. Komarek-Chatry (2003, p. 25) corroborates this point in the following submission:

What has to be stressed from the beginning, though, is that educational change is difficult to achieve at classroom level only. However committed they are, teachers are usually unable to introduce significant pedagogical changes successfully if they remain isolated. School innovation needs to be broad based if it is to succeed. If teachers are successfully introduced to pedagogical changes related to the language of instruction, they need to be empowered through appropriate training and strong support from the head teacher and from the parents.

Granted the role that training has in empowering teachers for successful pedagogical innovation, it is clear that there is need for teacher training in oral L1 instruction since L1 teaching requires its own pedagogy.

8.4 Community Level

Here, we must acknowledge the fact that in this country, self-esteem based on indigenous cultural identity has suffered devastating erosion over the decades. Successive governments have demonstrated very little commitment towards the construction of an indigenous national cultural identity. Rather, what we have observed are deliberate efforts to further entrench citizens through show-casing of foreign values represented by foreign languages. The consequence is that Cameroonians are today, extraverted to the core. In fact, attachment to indigenous cultural values is so low and that sometimes one is tempted to think that citizens are only Cameroonians in name. This ambivalent situation manifests itself in many different ways. For instance, when they use the foreign language, they endeavour not to be identified through their speech, as stemming from this or that cultural background. This demonstration of low cultural identity and self-esteem reveals dismal failure at national level to cultivate national pride around an authentic national identity. Benson (2008, p. 16) clearly articulates the role of the language of instruction in the generation of these attitudes when she observes:

Whether the schooling system begins with the mother tongue or goes straight for the exogenous language, the aspiration of everyone from policymaker to parents is that learners will acquire native-like competence in the European standard of the language.

What this means is that government attitude has generated a national identity crisis in the country. While the school promotes an exogenous national identity, there is a genuine cry for salvation at the base for an authentic identity based on indigenous languages. Given the failure of government to cultivate a national cultural identity, the logical question that follows is: Where else can the solution to this identity crisis come from. Put differently, does the absence of a national identity imply the need for no identity at all?

From the above, it is obvious that since it is at the level of the local community that the relevance of local languages in the daily lives of citizens is most felt, it means that it is also only at this level that the

basis for authentic solutions to identity problems can be found. Most community interactions take place in the local language and even when the community does not encourage its written use it recognises the important identity functions that the language plays in the lives of the people. But it must be emphasised that whether or not the language (oral and written) is present in the classroom, real local impact can only be felt when adequate attention is paid to the creation of a literate environment in the language. When the language is visible in the physical environment such as on bill boards, signposts, churches, and especially in schools, it becomes almost certain that children as well as youths and adults will feel freer to use the language in all its forms for different purposes of social interaction and for cultural identification.

9. Conclusion

Oral L1 instruction and use constitutes a strong basis for all forms of learning. Besides cultural implication, this instruction also has benefits for cognition. And so in a situation where mother tongue-based bilingual education is not yet a nation-wide reality, oral L1 instruction is not only desirable but also appears indispensable. For close to three decades, Cameroon has experimented and advocated for mother tongue-based bilingual education. Although some policy and practical promotion achievements have been made, there is still the lack of political will to endorse and enforce effective application. In this kind of context, legislated use of oral L1 instruction provides a minimal framework for ensuring the presence of local languages in the educational system while waiting for a more favourable policy. With recent developments within the ministries of Secondary and Higher Education aimed at promoting the teaching of Cameroonian languages in secondary schools and in state universities, we hope that similar progress will be made at the level of the primary school system. It is particularly at this level that oral L1 instruction is most likely to yield the best fruits. As we prepare to adopt bi-multilingual education in Cameroon, the need for more reflection on the legislated instruction and use of national languages both in their oral and written forms thus becomes crucially important.

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Notes

Note 1. This paper is a revised version of an earlier French version that appears as a chapter in Marie Chatry-Komarek (2010) under the title "De l'Oral à l'Écrit en Langue Maternelle à l'École: Implications pour Préparer un Enseignement Bilingue/Multilingue au Cameroun"

Note 2. Ellen Errington (2010:1) holds that even as the child has learnt in the home by listening, observing and approximating behaviours, these same techniques are transferrable to the classroom as children develop reading and writing skills. She argues that children with weak listening and speaking skills will struggle to read and write meaningfully, regardless of the language issue.

Note 3. Cameroon is a country where very little attention has been paid to cultivating a national cultural identity. In this country, it is not only common to find literate people strenuously struggling to speak foreign languages with a foreign accent but also a great number of them making a mockery of others when they speak a foreign language with a local accent.

Note 4. By the time most of them complete the primary cycle, the osmotic effect of foreign languages is already visible in their speech habits. Most of them are already beginning to lose a non-negligible amount of their home language vocabulary. As they advance in education, this increases almost steadily until a point where some important ideas can only be comfortably expressed in the foreign language. This is a clear sign of significant L1 loss.