A Probe into the Effectiveness of English Teaching in Cameroon: Theoretical and Practical Considerations

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Abstract

Previous studies have attempted to account for CamE speakers' performance by such phenomena as Cameroon's very rich language ecology and nativisation regarded as a hallmark of New Englishes. This paper takes a rather different stance, though. It argues that CamE speakers' failure to measure up with other L2 English varieties and even some L3 speakers can best be explained by fashions in language teaching, the education system, learners' zeal as well as the learning milieu. The paper basically argues that CamE speakers have low language proficiency (compared to other like speakers) due to the ineffectiveness of English language teaching in Cameroon schools. The paper closes on appealing for a change in teaching practices. In that respect, it makes useful suggestions to ELT actors, which suggestions aim for changing the prevailing situation.

Introduction

Since it was introduced in Cameroon the English language has posed enormous problems to users. In a great many respects, the English spoken in Cameroon exhibits features of weak linguistic competence, though some have awkwardly tried to place these under the cover term New Englishes or the more specific collocation Cameroon English (CamE) which refers to the educated variety of English spoken in Cameroon. English is today spoken in virtually all corners of the world, including its traditional homelands like England, Australia, New Zealand, America; Outer Circle settings like Ghana, Singapore, India, Cameroon; and more and more Expanding circle settings like Rwanda, Japan, Iran, Hong Kong and some central and eastern European countries as Germany, Poland, Ukraine, to cite just a few. Taking a listen to varieties of English from the aforementioned Outer and Expanding circle settings makes it clear that CamE speakers seem conspicuously less proficient than speakers of English from, say, India, Singapore and some Expanding circle countries like Japan or, strangely enough, Iran or Rwanda. This disquieting situation has often found somehow shaky explanations in the highly multilingual nature of the Cameroon linguistic landscape. I, in this paper, seek to address English teaching-related issues. The question is simply that is Cameroon the sole English-speaking multilingual setting for speakers to lack proficiency? What do teaching practices tell us about CamE speakers' proficiency. Would there be any teaching method or approach capable of, if not fine-tuning but, improving CamE speakers' proficiency and placing it on an equal footing with other varieties of English? My ultimate goal in this paper is to examine practices in the Cameroon ELT industry that can account for speakers' weak proficiency, and propose changes in these practices with a view to upgrading teaching practices, which in turn, will bring about improvement in speakers' proficiency.

Background to the study

The advent of English in Cameroon was a rather haphazard event which has been described in the literature as a linguistic accident (Esambe 2008). The very first encounters of English with Cameroon's land dates back to the 16th century when the very first British trade stables were established alongside the coastal area. This, though, remained a somehow remote contact, for English was very sparingly used by local people in their interplay with British traders. British traders favoured the emergence of Pidgin English that made it possible for them to maintain the contact and social interaction needed for the purpose of trade with the locals (Mesthrie 2010).

A more direct contact between English and Cameroon came as the logical aftermath of the Germans' defeat in the first world's military confrontation back in 1916. Following this defeat, Cameroon was divided into two sociopolitical entities (Eastern and Western Cameroons) by the League of Nations trusteeship, each entity being part of the colonial empires of the mandatory powers: Britain and France. Each of these powers applied their own colonial policy, following the objective it was aiming for. France was known for its infamous assimilation policy and Britain for its indirect rule, known as a policy favoring the use of local languages and local ruling systems.

At independence in respectively 1960 –Eastern Cameroon, and 1961- Western Cameroon, the two entities formed a federal state whose hallmark was its dual political and linguistic practices; this state has often been termed in the literature *the Cameroons* (Mesthrie 2010; Essossomo 2013). In effect, owing to the different political dominations they had undergone, Eastern and Western Cameroon had inherited two quite remote languages, political systems and educational systems: Anglophone system British based, and Francophone system French based. However, the founding fathers of the unitary state aimed to do away with the antagonism

inherited from colonisation. Thus, though English had traditionally been the language of people from British Cameroon and French that of those from French Cameroon, they made English and French the official languages of the country with equal status. English therefore found its way through into both the Anglophone and the Francophone systems of education, where it has traditionally been taught as a second language (ESL) and a foreign language (EFL) respectively.

What is the matter?
Following Kachru's (1986) concentric circles through which he smartly captures the continuing spread of English around the world, Cameroon is an Outer circle English-speaking setting. It therefore has a historical connection with the Queen's language, compared to those Expanding circle set-ups like Iran, Singapore and Rwanda, to cite but a few. Given that this setting once had direct contact with native English (British English for that matter) and that English here assumes the function of official language, its speakers are expected –in principle- to exhibit a higher level of proficiency than speakers of Expanding Circle or at least equal speakers from other Outer circle settings. This seems not to be the case, though. Taking a listening to the English spoken by many Cameroonian speakers leaves much to be desired. Conspicuous features in their speech range from lexis, to syntax, to phonology, to discourse style. Of course, the emergence and prominence of the World English (WE) framework, pioneered by Kachru (1986) seems to have given legitimacy to the clumsy argument that these features are characteristics of CamE, resulting from a process of nativisation the language has witnessed here.
The WE paradigm has led some scholars to define CamE as English spoken in the Cameroonian way by Cameroonians (Sala 2006). More importantly, it seems to have given strength to dangerous statements like:

> Immediately a structure is used for communication in a community, it is intelligible and is a norm for interlocutors. If a group of people successfully communicate via an avowed error, the error becomes a norm. (Sala 2006:61)

The distinction between mistake, error and innovation is spelt out in Kachru (1992), where he points out that innovations are products of creativity in using the language. This might be done in a way slightly or noticeably different from what usually obtains in mother-tongue varieties. Yet it should not make room for outright distortions of the language's standards. Sala's point is in my view not valid, for he seems to lose sight of the fact that a scenario in which speakers of a variety interact with exclusively their countrymen is quasi null today. English is today a lingua franca, bridging communication gaps between speakers from all over the world, hence the worry for comprehensibility.
Very simple but clear instances of violations of standard[1] are found in Kouega (2005: 1202) wherein his shows deep-rooted tendencies in CamE speakers' lexicon. These range from distorted instances of English items- "dateline" for "deadline"- through French induced words or phrases like "disponibility" and "correct a script" for "availability" and "mark a script" respectively, to Pidgin-English induced words such as "egusi" (melon seed), "akara" (beans cake), "chinchin" (fried cakes) and "dodo" (fried plantain chips). Kouega also highlights the fact that CamE is replete with French words which would significantly hinder intelligibility if its speakers were to interact with other speakers of English. Other instances of deviant usage (syntactic) are those presented by Simo Bobda (2002). One is the systematic use of the modal 'would' in lieu of 'will' to express futurity. Another, very striking, example is the construction of "if-conditional sentence type 2" whose construction rule is "If+simple past tense = would+ base form of verb". Simo Bobda deplores the fact that most CamE speakers would apply the rule "If+simple past tense = would+have+past participle", leading to a structure not found in any form of Standard English. Other awkward constructions in CamE are dangling phrases, clauses and sentences; inappropriate use of the definite article "the"; and sometimes the conspicuous use of a finite form of a verb after "do" in interrogative and negative sentences as well as the omission of the third person singular "s" in verbs conjugated in the present simple tense. These features have occurred in many of my conversations with English-speaking Cameroonians both at university and at school. Simo Bobda's (2002) book *"Watch your English"* was even designed with the lofty ambition to weed such traits out of the English spoken by most Cameroonians. For pronunciation conspicuous features see (Simo Bobda 1994; Atechi 2006; Essomba 2014; Kouega 1999).
Various explanations have been advanced to account for this state of affairs, including the language ecology of the country and the nature of structures learnt by speakers. The point, however, is that Cameroon is not the sole multilingual English-using setting. Besides, English structures are not complex to speakers of English in Cameroon alone. Listening to Press TV (an Iranian English-broadcasting channel) and CRTV (the national broadcasting corporation in Cameroon) announcers makes the varying degrees of proficiency very clearly palpable. The scenario is no different when listening to CamE speakers and Hong Kong English or Swedish

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[1] I mean by standard here language use that respects syntax norms and usage instances not susceptible to cause intelligibility breakdown when Cameroonian speakers of English interact with speakers from different horizons. It should not be confused with standard with regard to such so-called prestigious accented as RP and GenAm regarded as elitist accents.

English speakers supposed to have the same level of instruction. It is true that some language structures can prove difficult to a certain set of speakers and not to others, depending on their language learning abilities, or the resemblance between their L1 and L2. Yet the reason for this state of affairs must be looked for elsewhere: the teaching of English might doubtlessly be of interest in this regard.

Fashions in ELT in Cameroon school systems
A cursory look at the training of ESL and ELF teachers in Teacher college Yaounde (the main institution training Teachers in Cameroon) would reveal that their training program aims for a somehow comprehensive training. This seeks to offer them insights into various theories of language acquisition and different methods of and approaches to language teaching which ultimately aim at making learners apt language users. They are, therefore, in principle, equipped with a multifarious language teaching tool kit allowing them to face on-the-field challenges with confidence.

Yet effective language teaching and learning is not dependent on solely the theories an exercising teachers knows off-hands. It mediates so much with social, personal, economical and even political factors. The nature of the classroom also proves to be a significant determiner of the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

An in-depth analysis of how the teaching of English goes on in the Anglophone system of education in Cameroon indicates that it leans almost invariably on the communicative approach to language teaching which is premised on the assumption that:

> Participation in communicative interaction is one way in which a second language (L2) is acquired by learners. Activities that occur during interaction (e.g., the provision of corrective feedback, noticing, the production of modified output, the negotiation of meaning) are considered to play an integral role in the learning processes (Swain and Suzuki 2010: 557)

This approach to language teaching owes very much to Krashen's (1985) view that comprehensible input is an essential and sufficient or adequate condition for L2 acquisition to occur. As Long (1996) claims, interaction facilitates L2 acquisition because it connects input, attention, and output in productive ways which seem not to be very likely to occur in other methods.

Teachers relying on these tenets logically seek their full implementation in the language class. Apparently this is overdone, though. In their attempt to achieve communication, most ELT practitioners in the Anglophone system of education seemingly overlook other valuable techniques and approaches that could make teaching and learning more effective, and render speakers more proficient. Instead of bringing about proficiency, they instead produce fluent (but not proficient!) speakers. Most language classes consist of interpretations and analyses or even discussions based on texts. Teachers look for every opportunity that offers learners oral practice[2].

Conversely, in the Francophone system of education most teachers relentlessly stick to the obsolete mechanic approach to language teaching known as the Grammar Translation Method. This is a method that lies much in the internalisation of grammar rules, parsing of language items, and targets very little oral communication. Most lessons in class are grammar, vocabulary (consisting mostly of word-matching activities with, most often, no room for contextual use of the formed expressions or phrases) or reading lessons. Speaking lessons sparingly take place, for teachers find them strenuous as very few speakers find interest in them to participate effectively. Besides, most school authorities and consequently teachers are chiefly concerned about program coverage than effective learning. As a result of this, most secondary school leavers possess very little communicative skills, and although they can write or understand English stretches, they can hardly sustain oral communication with minimum proficiency.

Other factors?
The blame could all the same not be put on teachers and their techniques or approaches only. A look at the instructional material and the educational system itself would not be useless. In effect, the low proficiency of CamE speakers has found a plausible explanation in the decried policy of linguistic Apartheid applied by the British colonial administrator. This, as Simo Bobda (2004) explains, favoured the use of local languages in British colonies and kept English as the preserve of native Britons indigenous populations should not intrude into. This was materialized by the fact that the teaching of English Language- a subject- stopped at the GCE/OL, a practice still in place till date, he decries. Obviously, English is too broad a language to be comprehensibly taught to Form V students for them to attain an acceptable level of proficiency.

In the Francophone section, the teaching of English is more sophisticated in terms of grammar rules than it is in the Anglophone section. Yet this seems limited to internalizing rules and working out vocabulary lists. Very little room is made for learner initiative in using these structures. Learners know the rules of the language but are not trained into exploiting these for producing utterances.

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[2] These statements are made from my own personal observation of many classes and my experience as an actor in the ELT industry in Cameroon.

The role of the instructional material is also worth questioning in this matter. To this effect, it is important pointing out that most text books are sketchy in the way they lay grammatical points, vocabulary activities are schematic, not varied and lack interest for most. Very few speaking activities seem to be of interest to learners, and are not introduced in a way conducive to effective oral communication. Very often, they are not easy to make out, even for the teacher. Very few transformational and fluency targeting activities are available for grammar practice. Activities virtually all amount to slot-filling, thus missing out the concept of variation in type of interest-arousing activities Ur (1982) advocates.

Besides, most ELT practitioners in Cameroon are faced with miserable working conditions. Most schools are poorly resourced, and lack basic supplies starting from the lack of basic instructional material, to additional teaching aids. Most classes are also extremely overcrowded, making the implementation of teaching approaches or methods tremendously difficult, if not impossible. All these factors put together constitute a serious impediment to effective language teaching and learning essential for the attainment of an acceptable level of proficiency.

How do we improve CamE speakers' proficiency?

Various solutions can be proposed to the aforementioned impediments to effective English language learning by Cameroonian speakers. These are made with regard to three dimensions: the learning conditions (involving teachers, learners and teaching material), fashions implemented in the ELT industry on the field and finally speakers' zeal to attain and possess workable competence in English.

So far as learning conditions are concerned, it is clear that the English Language class should be well-resourced with appropriate material that offers plenty of opportunities to both teachers and learners to exercise their full potential. I mean by this that classes must be made conducive. Provisions should be made to make sure that classes are not oversized. Teachers should be given classes with acceptable sizes, where they have effective control on learners and closely monitor their learning. The teaching material must be made more composite. That is, text books must comprise a variety of fluency- and accuracy-targeting (proficiency) activities. Unlike what is the case with most English text books used in our schools today, ready made activities must be well elaborated, offering learners plenty of oral and written practice in the language. These, of course, must most often seek learner initiative under teacher control. These activities must be sequenced following the sequencing of teaching of language structures in class. They should seek the reinforcement of these structures.

As for fashions in teaching, teachers, be they in the Anglophone or Francophone section, must avoid falling in the trap of routine teaching. Thus instead of leaning too much toward a given approach or method as those out lined above, they must opt for eclecticism. That is, they must combine a variety of techniques that make their classes more appealing, offering learners opportunities for rules internalization and also oral and written practice of these rules in class. One way of doing this is organising group work for presentations on a variety of selected topic within their curriculum. Another way would be asking learners, after teaching, say, the present simple and paragraph development or even an entire essay, to come up with a procedural essay whose topic was carefully chosen in advance. This would not only fix present simple tense rules in their minds, but also give them time for practice where initiative is theirs. It would at once work for fluency and accuracy, as it would favor contextual use of a structure they have learnt. A similar activity on story telling could work for the reinforcement of the simple past. Teachers could imagine a million of other activities that put together rule internalization and language use in context, bearing in mind the notion of learner initiative.

Finally, speakers themselves need to be aware that they are an important component in the learning process. They must also know that speaking language that people regard as below standard does not benefit them, rather it earns them belittling at international level, the notion of World Englishes notwithstanding (Simo Bobda 2009). Thus, showing concern for good English would, I believe, help remedy the bitter remark made at the outset of this paper. This is so because no matter how fashionable teachers' classroom practices may be and how well-resourced classes learners may find themselves in, if they lack the zeal to reach a certain benchmark in using the language, their production will remain low.

Conclusion

This paper was concerned about the unsettling remark made on the proficiency level of Cameroonian speakers of English. This was believed to be due to a couple of factors, including notably the teaching of English in Cameroon schools. Insights were taken into trends in ELT in Cameroon and above in an attempt to explain why other Outer Circle speakers and even some Expanding Circle speakers of English, surprisingly, seem to outperform CamE speakers. It follows from the above discussion that instructional material needs adaptations, teachers must move toward a more eclectic approach to ELT, and opt for variation in the type of reinforcement activities they propose their learners. These must be fluency- and accuracy-targeting and context-based. Finally, speakers' concern about good English could also help change the situation.

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