

Cameroonian ESL Teachers' Linguistic Perceptions and the Phonological Aspects of Their English

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Abstract

Despite the popular credence that the nature of English in Cameroon shifts significantly from Standard British English, ESL teachers seem to think differently about their competencies in the English language. This study investigated the correlation between Cameroonian ESL teachers' linguistic perceptions and the phonological aspects of their English. Three theoretical paradigms guided the study – Labov's (1966) correlation model, Kachru's (1985) World Englishes Paradigm and Corder's (1967) Error Analysis. A total of 75 Secondary School teachers of English, from five regions of the country, constituted the sampled population of the study. A questionnaire, with close and open-ended questions, was constructed to gain an understanding of their linguistic perceptions. A test of 10 sentences, with targeted phonological variables /dʒ, tʃ, ð, θ, ə, ɜ, əu, əʊə, and əʊə/, was conceived and the informants were asked to read them aloud while the investigators tap-recorded their phonological renditions. The data was then transcribed and compared to their linguistic perceptual claims. The results revealed a significant gap between the respondents' linguistic perceptions and the phonological aspects of their English. This led us to the conclusion that there is the dire need for the establishment of a feasible target variety that is attainable and does not pose any major problem of intelligibility to speakers of other varieties of English, especially the native varieties.

Keywords: Cameroonian, Linguistic perception, Phonological aspects, English

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1.0 Introduction

There have been considerable arguments to justify the fact that the English language in postcolonial multilingual Cameroon differs significantly from Standard British English (SBE, henceforth) at all linguistic levels (see, for example, Masanga, 1983; Mbangwana, 1987; SimoBobda, 1994; Anchimbe, 2006; Ngefac, 2008, 2010 and Atechi 2010). Even at that, users of English in the country, for the most part, often think highly of their English. It is not uncommon to observe educated Cameroonians overtly appreciate the variety of English they speak – arguing emphatically that, though Cameroon English (CamE, henceforth) is a reality in the country, they are speakers (users) of SBE or Standard American English (SAE, hereafter) as the case maybe. The feeling is such that accepting that one speaks CamE is almost as good as accepting that one is uneducated. This feeling seems to have characterised the mentality of most Cameroonian postgraduate scholars, whom after taking a few English language courses in the university, tend to feel as though the mastery of SBE phonology is as easy as passing a course on English phonology. Interestingly, the effects are often dramatic – they sometimes use hypercorrections to justify their claims or unconsciously use a combinatorial concoction of Cameroon, British, American and even Nigerian English features. This attitude of adhering to the almost unattainable Western standards, instead of going along with the realistic context-specific standard, projects them as victims of what Bokamba (2007) refers to as “ukolonia”. As a result of this unprecedented phenomenon, it is important to find out the extent to which ESL teachers' perceptual claims correlate with their phonological renditions, in a bid to further underscore the dire need for the identification, codification and standardisation of the educated variety of CamE.

1.1 Literature review

In this study, we use perception synonymously with attitude. Linguistic perception in this respect has, by large, received substantial attention across the globe, in the past three or four decades. One of the authorities in this domain is arguably Labov (1966). He reports that some of his informants who identified themselves with mainstream American English (AmE) actually produced non-features of mainstream AmE. His most outstanding finding was the rendition of the post-vocalic /r/ in such words as “car” and “floor”. He realised that the post-vocalic realization of /r/ was more frequent in the speech of the upper working class than in the speech of the middle class, and that the upper working class, in an effort to sound like the middle class, ended up realizing /r/ in almost every position; thus, confirming their statuses as victims of the hypercorrection syndrome. This inconsistency is also evident among Japanese learners of English. Strange (1982) reports that the perceptual mastery of /r/ and /l/ among Japanese learners of English does not necessarily reflect actual use and may even lag behind in acceptable production. These findings reflect the situation of TESOL in Korea. Borden et al, (1983) report that, though Korean learners of English believe in their appropriate use of /r/ and /l/, they use these sounds interchangeably. They observe that Korean learners of English have more native-like phonemic identification

and self-perception than production, and suggest that perceptual abilities might be a prerequisite for accurate production. It is, therefore, not surprising when Neufeld (1988) concludes that his learners often perceptually detect sounds better than they produce them. While scholars are of the opinion that learners who demonstrate well-established perceptual categories are likely to manifest accurate production (Barry 1989 and Grasseger1991), the extent to which this could be true of teachers of English as a Second Language (TESOL) in Cameroon is our major preoccupation in this investigation.

Observably, it would seem the situation in Cameroon is even more uncertain with numerous varieties of English, including CamE, Cameroon Francophone English (CamFE), AmE, British English (BrE), and Nigerian English (NigE), co-existing in the country (Mbangwana, 1987; SimoBobda, 1994; Anchimbe, 2004; Ngefacs, 2008; Atechi and Angwah 2016). The coexistence of these numerous varieties, in Cameroon, has brought about serious controversies with regard to who speaks what and how well. Atechi (2006:28) contends that the multilingual status of postcolonial Africa, Cameroon in particular, gives room to certain attitudinal tendencies that shape peoples' ideologies, identities, cultures, and perceptions. Consequently, people resort to defining their identities, based on languages. Interestingly, the multilingual status of Cameroon has induced various attitudes or perceptions towards the varieties of English in the country. Mbangwana (1987:423) observes that the Cameroonian public fully accepts CamE and stigmatizes efforts to speak English with native accent. This finding is equally true of such ESL contexts as Ghana (Sey 1973:1), Nigeria (Bamgbose1998), and some parts of East Africa (Schmied 2006:191). Later studies, in Cameroon, have reported a gradual growth of CamE fans. Though Achimnbe (2004) reports that just 4% of his informants had a positive attitude towards CamE (the majority of whom favoured AmE and SBE), this statistics was, however, modified in Ngefacs' (2008) report that, up to 32% of his informants preferred CamE, and while 30% chose AmE, and 37% BrE, only 1% chose NigE. Most recently, Atechi and Angwah (2016) have reported that 84.58% educated Anglophone Cameroonians would prefer CamE as the model in the teaching and learning of English in Cameroon, considering the arguably impracticability of SBE or SAE in the country. From these reports, one can deduce two very important elements which are relevant to the current study. First, it demonstrates a steady growth of interest towards CamE. Second, it paints a dense multi linguistic diversity which is likely to lead to deviations in the variety of English spoken in the country. However, contrary to these studies, this paper explores the connection between Cameroonian ESL teachers' linguistic perceptions and the phonological aspects of their English, in a bid to further raise awareness on the state of English language in Cameroon, from an attitudinal perspective, and also to add a voice to the current call for the identification, codification and standardization process of Educated Cameroon English.

1.2 Methodology

75 trained ESL teachers were identified as informants for this study. All the informants had had a minimum of one year experience as professional ESL teachers in the country. A questionnaire and a short oral test constituted the main instruments of data collection. The questionnaire was made up of 10 questions – eight close-ended and two open-ended questions. While the principal question was meant to find out the variety of English the informants claim to speak, the other questions were meant to ascertain their consistencies to their claims. A short oral proficiency test which was made up of 10 short sentences, with targeted phonological variables /dʒ, tʃ, ð, θ, ʃ, ə, ɜ, əu, əʊə, and əʊə/ was administered to all the informants. The informants were simply required to feel in the questionnaire and read out the 10 sentences, while a tape recorder was used to record their speeches.

1.4. Teachers' linguistic perceptions

It would seem the prestige that is accorded to SBE in Cameroon has a significant influence on ESL teachers' perceptions of the variety of English they speak. This is so because a significant number of them identified more with SBE than with the other varieties, and though some identified with CamE, the percentage was not quite significant as could be seen on the following table.

Table 1: Informants' perception of their English

Linguistic preferences	Freq	%
CamE	10	13.34%
SBE	64	85.33%
SAE	1	1.33%
NigE	0	0%
Total	75	100%

The informants were seemingly quite consistent with SBE usage in the classroom, but they also indicated their extensive preference of CamE especially in informal contexts. While the informants' preferences of SAE was not significant, they identified more with CamE. Consider, for instance, the following table which presents the informants' distribution of SBE, CamE and SAE usages.

Table 2: Informants' distribution of SBE, CamE and SAE according to contexts.

Contexts	SBE Usage/ Frq (%)	CamE Usage/ Frq (%)	SAE Usage/ Frq (%)	Total Frq (%)
Classroom	68 (90.67%)	06 (08%)	01 (1.33%)	75 (100%)
Colleagues	03 (4%)	72 (96%)	00 (00%)	75 (100%)
Home	00 (00%)	75 (100%)	00 (00%)	75 (100%)

From these contextual preferences, most Cameroonian ESL teachers seem to share the opinion that CamE is a disreputable variety which is only good enough for phatic communion and hardly for such formal contexts as the classroom, and this is why they distance themselves from it and identify more with the "reputable" SBE variety. We, however, noticed that those who sympathized with CamE have either done a Masters Degree program or are in the program or are simply informed by their long experiences in the teaching of English as a second language. While the Departments of English in the teacher training colleges offer courses on Sociolinguistics and World Englishes, in practical terms, ESL teachers' linguistic perceptions seem to be guided either by the ministerial stance on SBE as the model in the English Language teaching and learning in Cameroon or by the fear of being marked as incompetent.

1.4.1 The Phonological Aspects of ESL Teachers' Speech

While there are visible disparities between Inner Circle and Outer Circle Englishes, at all linguistic levels, there is an academic conclusion that such differences are markedly prominent at the phonological level (Wolf, Hans-Georg 1963). This leads us to the second part of this study which was meant to find out some phonological aspects of the informants' speech. Generally, the following sounds: /dʒ/, /ð/, /θ/, /tʃ/, /ə/, /ɜ/, /əu/, /əʊə/, and /aʊə/, were purposefully inserted in the following words: "Cabbage" "church", "village", "southern", "the", "about", "power", "thought", "goat" and "slower". The table below presents the sounds, the words and the sentences in which they were tested.

Table: 4 SBE Segments and Contexts

Sounds	Words	RP Transcription	Sentences
/dʒ/	<u>C</u> abbage	Kæbɪdʒ	John sent the <u>cabbage</u> from southern country to the village.
/ð/	<u>Sou</u> thern	sʌðən	John sent the cabbage from <u>southern</u> country to the village.
/θ/	<u>Th</u> ought	/θɔt/	I <u>thought</u> Paul was a good student.
/tʃ/	<u>Ch</u> urch	/tʃɜtʃ/	Lawyers don't go to <u>church</u> .
/ə/	<u>A</u> bout	/əbaʊt/	Paul spoke for <u>about</u> an hour.
/ɜ/	<u>Ch</u> urch	tʃɜtʃ	Lawyers don't go to <u>church</u> .
/əu/	<u>Go</u> at	/gəʊt/	James is inside, searching for the goats.
/əʊə/	<u>Sl</u> ower	/sləʊə/	Mother's car is <u>slower</u> than father's.
/aʊə/	<u>Ho</u> ur	/aʊə/	Paul spoke for about an <u>hour</u> .

This test was administered to all the 75 informants and their renditions of the targeted segments were transcribed and categorized as a unit. This was then closely followed by an analysis of the informants' realizations of these phonological segments, within the real contexts of their use. Regional differentiation of the informants' renditions of the sounds was insignificant. Consequently, the sample was considered as typical of a common population. As far as the informants' realizations of these sounds were concerned, the findings can be seen on table 5.

Table 5: The Phonological Aspects of Eng Lang¹ Teachers' Language

Words /words	SBE	CamE	NW T renditions		freq	%
Cabbage /dʒ/	/dʒ/: /Kæbɪdʒ/	/ʃ/ /Kabeʃ/	/dʒ/	Kæbɪdʒ	9	12%
			/ʃ/	/Kabeʃ/	55	73.34%
			/tʃ/	/Kabetʃ/	11	14.66%
			Total	75	100%	
Southern /ð/	/ð/: /sʌðən/	/d/: /sauden/	/ð/	/sʌðən/	7	9.33%
			/d/	/sauden/	68	90.67%
			Total	75	100%	
thought /θ/	/θ/: /θɒt /	/t/: /tot/	/θ/	/θɒt /	13	17.33%
			/t/	/tot/	62	82.67%
			Total	75	100%	
/tʃ/ church	/tʃ/ /tʃɜ:tʃ/	/tʃ/ /tʃɔ:tʃ/	/tʃ/	/tʃɜ:tʃ/	7	9.33%
			/tʃ/	/tʃɔ:tʃ/	60	80%
			/ʃ/	/ʃɔ:tʃ/	4	5.34%
			/dʒ/	dʒɔ:tʃ/	3	4%
			/dʒ/ WFP	dʒɔ:dʒ	1	1.33%
			Total	75	100%	
/ə/ about	/ə/ /əbaʊt/	/a/ /abaʊt/	/ə/	/əbaʊt/	12	16%
			/a/	/abaʊt/	43	57.33%
			/e/	/ebaʊt/	20	26.67%
			Total	75	100%	
/ɜ/ church	/ɜ/ /tʃɜ:tʃ/	/ə/ /tʃɔ:tʃ/	/ɜ/	/tʃɜ:tʃ/	4	5.34%
			/ə/	/tʃɔ:tʃ/	71	94.66%
			Total	75	100%	
/əʊ/ goat	/əʊ/ /gəʊt/	/o/ /got/	/əʊ/	/gəʊt/	6	8%
			/o/	/got/	65	86.66%
			/u/	/gut/	4	5.34%
			Total	75	100%	
/əʊə/ slower	/əʊə/ /sləʊə/	/oʊə/ /sləʊə/	/əʊə/	/sləʊə/	9	12%
			/oʊə/	/sləʊə/	62	82.66%
			/oʊe/	/sləʊe/	4	5.34%
			Total	75	100%	
/aʊə/ power	/paʊə/	/awa/	/aʊə/	/paʊə/	4	5.34%
			/awa/	/pawa/	11	14.66%
			/a:/	/pa:/	60	80%
			Total	75	100%	

As illustrated in table 5, the informants realized the tested linguistic features in different interesting ways. Though some of their renditions were typical of SBE, the most were undoubtedly CamE. Interestingly, there were some peculiar features that were recorded in their speech such as /tʃ/ in “cabbage” /Kabetʃ/, /dʒ/ in the word initial and final positions of “church” dʒɔ:dʒ, or /dʒ/ at the initial and SBE /tʃ/ at word final positions /dʒɔ:tʃ/, /e/ in “about” /ebaʊt/, and /a:/ in “power” /pa:/, in an effort to realize the SBE options: “cabbage” /Kæbɪdʒ/, “church” /tʃɜ:tʃ/, “about” /əbaʊt/ and power /paʊə/ respectively. The following table shows the distribution of SBE, CamE, and new specific features in the informants' speech.

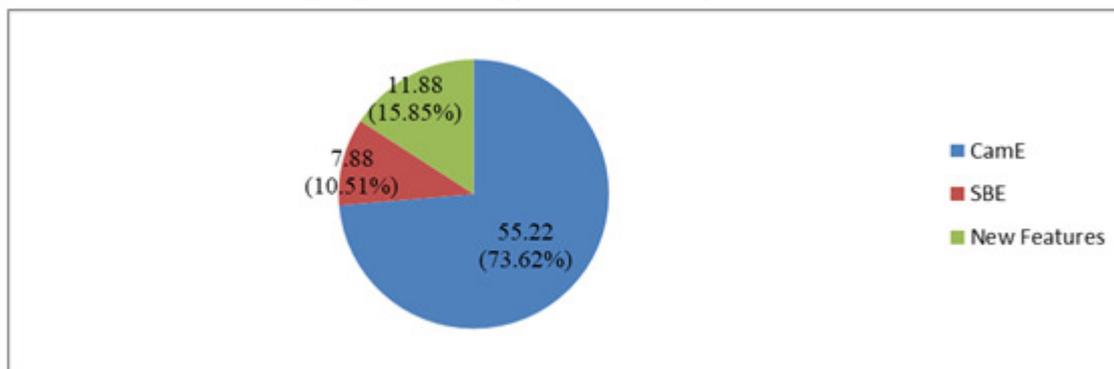
Table 6: Distribution of Englang teachers' approximation of specific phonological variables

Varieties	CamE	SBE	New Features
Freq. / %	55 (73.34%)	9 (12%)	11 (14.66%)
	68 (90.67%)	7 (9.33%)	00 (00%)
	62 (82.67%)	13 (17.33%)	00 (00%)
	60 (80%)	7 (9.33%)	8 (10.67%)
	43 (57.33%)	12 (16%)	20 (26.67%)
	71 (94.66%)	4 (5.34%)	00 (00%)
	65 (86.66%)	6 (8%)	4 (5.34%)
	62 (82.66%)	9 (12%)	4 (5.34%)
	11 (14.66%)	4 (5.34%)	60 (80%)
	Total	497 (662.65)	71 (94.67)
Mean Value	55.22 (73.62%)	7.88 (10.51%)	11.88 (15.85%)

¹English Language

From the statistic on table 6, we readily observe that the frequency, of all the occurrences, was multiplied by 9 (the number of occurrences) to obtain the Mean values. The statistics suggests that teachers of English in Cameroon are more likely to use features of CamE, than features of SBE. What is perhaps striking about these findings are some of the new features (see table 5) which have not been reported in previous studies. Surprisingly, these features are even more frequent in the speech of informants, relative to Cam and SBE features. The following chart presents a clearer distribution of these features in the informants' speech.

Chart 2: Distribution of Englang teachers' approximation of specific varieties



Though from the discussion above, we could superficially relate the informants' perceptions to their phonological renditions, it was necessary to bring both variables together in order to show the extent to which they relate.

1.4.2 Cameroonian English language teachers' linguistic perceptions and phonological some aspects of their speech

It was the principal focus of this study to find out the correlation between the informants' linguistic perceptions and the phonological aspects of their English. In this section, therefore, we compare the two results in order to see the gap between the two variables.

Chart 3: Perception of came features and level of phonological mastery

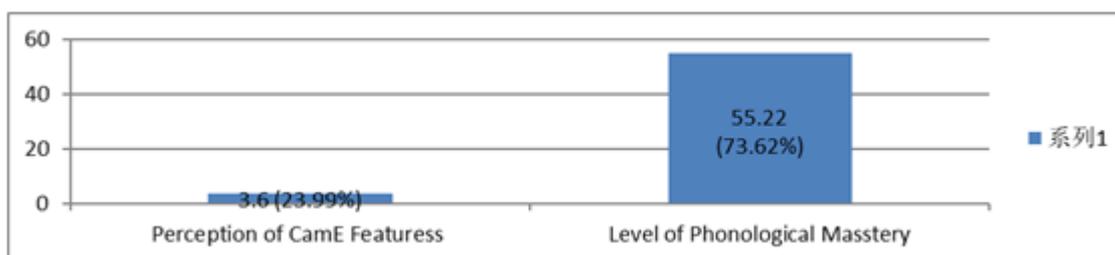
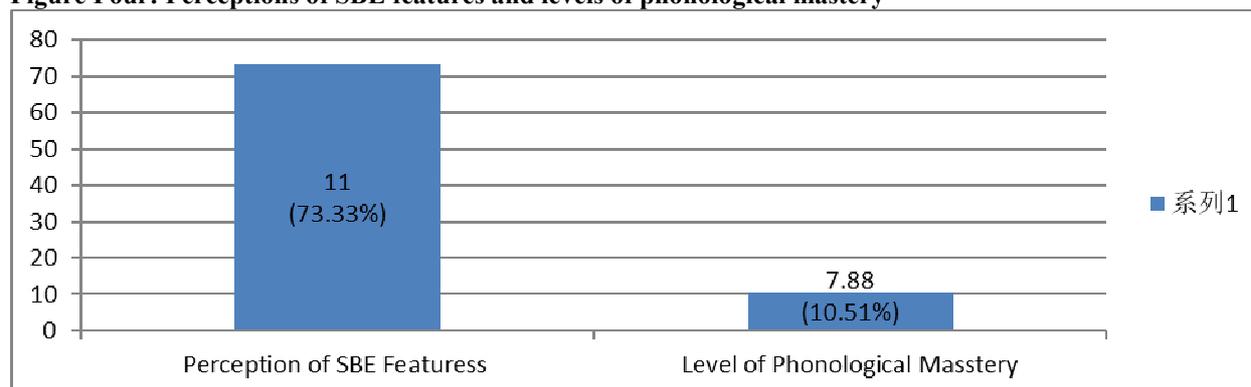


Chart 3 clearly presents the variation in the perception and mastery of CamE features. While the informants' impression about their usage of CamE features is relatively low 3.6 (23.99%), CamE features occur significantly 55.22 (73.62%) in their speech. This result seems to suggest that the informants did not really want to be identified with CamE. Perhaps, they felt it that it doesn't speak well of them as teachers of English in a setting where SBE is still very much acclaimed. Contrary to the correlation between the informants' perception of CamE features and their phonological mastery, their perceptions of SBE is significantly higher than the frequency of SBE features in their speech. Figure Four shows that while the informants think highly of their English and identify with SBE, SBE features occur less frequently in their speech.

Figure Four: Perceptions of SBE features and levels of phonological mastery



1.5 Discussion and conclusion

The findings revealed very serious pedagogic and sociolinguistic implications in the teaching and using of English in Cameroon. Pedagogically, it suggests that while the contents of English language teaching in the country is SBE, the language of instruction is CamE. The extent to which SBE is attained in our classrooms, therefore, is highly questionable, even when lesson objectives are attained. The reason is basically because language is meant to be used and not just known. Continuous emphasis on SBE features in typical non-native contexts, therefore, only ridicules efforts to effectively communicate in English which is the motive, sine qua non for language use. Generally, the findings cut across the basic, secondary and tertiary sectors of education in Cameroon, given that, renowned professors of English, who are observably educated speakers of CamE, train teachers of English in the teacher training colleges. The teachers are then posted to teach English in different secondary schools and Grade One colleges, where they teach potential primary school teachers. We cannot fairly claim that if CamE is used in the training of secondary and Grade 1 teachers, the teachers may in turn use SBE in their own classrooms. Even if this were to be the case, the learners would still face a lot of difficulties with the macro sociolinguistic context which is unequivocally and unapologetically non-native. Importing native teachers in order to give Cameroonians a near-native competence is not even an option, since, besides the multiple pedagogic intricacies, including inadequate personnel, lack of didactic materials as well as classroom sizes, recent studies have shown that educated Anglophone Cameroonians are less motivated to have SBE as the target in the country (Atechi and Angwah 2016). Effective language learning requires that the target variety of a language is used to teach various aspects of the language, without which the variety, used in teaching, is what the learners are likely to arrogate. Interestingly, since CamE is what the teachers use, it is only right to conclude that the variety is engrained in the society at large and so should necessarily gain its rightful place in the Cameroonian English Language teaching and learning industry. In fact, the identification, codification and standardisation of the educated variety of CamE can effectively promote the wealth of Cameroonian cultures, significantly embedded in this variety.

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