

Deaf education and Language-Based Curriculum: The case of the Buea School for the Deaf

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Abstract

The big deaf community at school age in Cameroon is accommodated by more than 30 schools for deaf. Deaf and hearing students follow a common language-based curriculum, which aims at developing the speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills of young Cameroonians in both official languages, English and French. Regrettably, the language-based curriculum of Cameroon gives no place to sign language, the tool of communication of deaf learners. Therefore, the exclusive nature of this curriculum is a serious disadvantage to deaf students. Evidence of this contention is found in their results. Statistics obtained from exams centres reveal that no schools for the deaf ever went beyond 20% of pass in official exams. This is not surprising as they are taught like hearing learners. Using the ethnographic approach, we observed class proceedings in the Buea school for the deaf (BSD) during three months. We focused on Form 3, 4, and 5 students who were getting prepared to write the Cameroon General Certificate of Education for Ordinary Level. Regardless of the efforts of teachers and school administrators, deaf students experience reading and writing difficulties in both official languages. The exclusive nature of the curriculum complicates learning because deaf students need an alternative curriculum to develop reading and writing skills through sign language. The concept of linguistic accessibility was also discussed, since Cameroon Sign Language (CSL) is not yet well developed and has no official status. Presently, there are more than three sign languages co-existing in Cameroon.

Keywords: Deaf learners, Language-Based Curriculum, Sign language, and Linguistic accessibility

1. Introduction

The international movement towards 'Inclusive Education' (IE) started in 1948 with Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stating that 'Everyone has the right to education' (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). Over the years, the UNESCO, a specialised agency of the UN, joined the movement. IE addresses and responds to the 'diversity of needs of all learners and reduces exclusion within and from education' (UNESCO, 2005). Disabled learners like the deaf have gone through several decades of oppression marked by the 1880 Milan Conference that banned the use of sign language in deaf schools and recommended the sole use of spoken language in those schools (Fisher & Lane, 1993; Gallaudet, 1881). Even though developed countries, through the recognition and standardisation of sign languages (SL), eradicated this school of thought, access to SL is still limited in developing countries. In Cameroon for instance, there is no standard SL, moreover, deaf and hearing students use a common language-based curriculum. Cameroon was one of the West African countries that was included in UNICEF's MICS studies rounds two (2000-2001) and three (2005-2008). MICS-2 data indicated that 23% of children between the ages of 2 and 9 in Cameroon live with at least one type of impairment with the most common being communicative and mental impairments (Loaiza & Cappa, 2005). Therefore, the population of deaf communities in Cameroon is quite important, and it is necessary to take into consideration their needs and rights.

Through an ethnographic approach, we spend three months in the Buea School for the Deaf (BSD) observing class proceedings of Form 3, 4, and 5, and conducting interviews. Our study aims at identifying the factors that contribute to the academic failure of deaf students in Cameroon. However, before we talk about those disruptive factors, we will

first evaluate the place of deaf education in Cameroon, and later on, we determine the status of SL and its level of accessibility in the country.

2. Deaf education in Cameroon

Cameroon is a multilingual nation with two official languages, English and French, as well as more than 250 national languages. The languages of instruction are English and French. The objective is to develop the language skills of young Cameroonians in both official languages. In other words, all those passing through the Cameroon educational system are to have knowledge of both English and French, and important administrative measures, as well as financial means are deployed to ensure the state policy of bilingualism. SL is neither recognised nor recommended. Efforts towards educating impaired learners like deaf children have been solely the concern of nongovernmental organisations. This is not strange when it is a fact that SL and deaf schools were introduced by missionaries with the very first centre being “Ecole Spécialisée pour Enfants Déficiants Auditifs – ESEDA” (special school for children with Hearing Impairments), opened in 1972 (Tani & Nformi, 2016).

Yet, Cameroon is signatory to various international conventions and has committed itself to ensure the right to education to all citizens/children, to promote Education for All (EFA), and to take the necessary actions to integrate learners with special needs. These international conventions include the UN convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Education for All (1990) and the Salamanca Conference (1994), where the Salamanca statement on principles, policy and practice in special needs education and a framework for action was adopted. This is the reason why the Law No 90/156 of 26th November 1990 chapters I and II focuses specifically on inclusive education (IE) in Cameroon. Parents are highly encouraged to send their disabled children to public schools and the authorities concerned have the obligation to accept these students in their schools. Yet, when children with special needs are enrolled in public schools, they are immediately put in the same class with the hearing children. Despite this good will and move toward integrating children with special needs by the government and its decentralised polities, there is, unfortunately, no special arrangements for them in those schools. Definitely, deaf students do not receive proper care in public schools. Class lessons are given orally as if all the pupils sitting in the classrooms are all hearing learners. The teachers in the public schools are all, without exception, hearing instructors who have not been trained to cater for learners with special needs. Likewise, they have absolutely no knowledge of SL. In fact, deaf children are never introduced to SL in those public schools. As rightly pointed out by DeafNET (2016), in Africa, inclusive education and the provision of knowledge for young deaf children encounters various challenges among which are:

- A lack of resources to properly train educators and interpreters in schools, as well as provide quality learning materials for Deaf children.
- Communication barriers between Deaf learners and their hearing teachers/fellow learners, and especially between hearing parents and their Deaf child.
- Inadequate support and limited awareness about the unique needs of Deaf children - often resulting in the child being neglected, discriminated against and/or marginalised in different environments.
- The shortage and inaccessibility of Deaf schools that provide basic skills to Deaf children from a young age in order to ensure the same cognitive development between these children and their hearing counterparts.

(DeafNET African Conference, 2016, p. 05)

The mixture of deaf and hearing children in the same classroom usually frustrates deaf students who eventually end up dropping out of school. Undeniably, deaf children are often excluded from learning due to the dominance of orality in schools and the lack of translated teaching materials. Even though, the Cameroon government does not deny education to deaf children, they lavish on them a poor quality teaching/education. Thus, the only alternative left for a deaf child's parents is the specialised schools. Indeed, to ensure good education and a promising future for their offspring, parents are forced to send their children to specialised school that uses SL as a medium of instruction. Fortunately, there are more than 30 schools for the deaf in Cameroon. For instance, our case study, the Buea School for the Deaf (BSD), is located in the South-West Region of the country. In the following section, we shall discuss the

data obtained from a three-month of research in BSD. Let us have in mind that even though the BSD have SL as a medium of instruction, they are compelled to follow the syllabuses designed by the educational authorities for hearing students.

3. The learners of the Buea school for the deaf

The BSD was created in September 2003 by a deaf couple, both graduates of the Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., US. Mr and Mrs Bibum, the founders of BSD, decided to come to Cameroon in order to give deaf children an opportunity, not only to be educated, but also to be empowered. From their personal experiences, they had witnessed the stigmatisation and marginalisation of the deaf by the hearing and they understood that if this situation was prevalent in the western world, it would/might be worse in the developing countries. Therefore, the BSD opened its doors with the following objectives:

- provide formal educational programmes that foster the moral, intellectual, physical and social development of deaf children and youths in Cameroon;
- promote the effective integration of deaf children and youth into the society;
- promote access to education at all levels for deaf children and adults.

To succeed in this venture, Mr and Mrs Bibum developed a sign language, the Cameroon Sign Language (CSL). CSL is the adaption of the American Sign Language (ASL) to the realities and culture of Cameroon.

In 2011, the BSD celebrated its tenth anniversary and its first batch of students sat in for the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE O Level). Between 2011 and 2014, no students of BSD passed the GCE O Level. According to Ruth Bakai, Dean of Studies of the BSD, the poor performance of the students could be explained by the fact that they were treated like hearing students. “How can deaf students participate in listening comprehension when they do not hear?” she lamented. In other words, Mrs Bakai admits that the Cameroon educational system does not take into consideration the condition of deaf learners. Unlike hearing students, deaf scholars have communicative impairments and, on that account, SL is the natural language of deaf learners (Martin, 2001).

Just like hearing children, deaf children must acquire their natural language at their early age. This quick acquisition facilitates the learning of other languages (spoken languages), in which they can develop reading and writing skills. In other words, the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) also prevailed in the education of the deaf (Quigley & Kretschmer, 1982). Unfortunately, factors like the age at which children became deaf, when they started school, the language repertoire of their parent, and the language policy of the country, etc. hinder the early language acquisition of deaf as well as their school performance.

Our research incursion into the education milieu of the BSD enabled us to work with a total of 32 deaf students with ages ranging from 16 to 24 as seen on the table below:

Ages	Frequency	Percentage
16-18	11	34.4
19-24	21	65.6
Total	32	100.0

The Dean of Studies of the BSD made us understand that only 9 of those 32 students were born deaf, the majority of them, that is, 23 students, had the ability to hear at birth. Those 23 students became deaf between the ages of 5 and 6. Nga (2015) stipulated that the age at which a child become deaf can influence its language acquisition. The later you become deaf, the more difficult will be your learning of SL. Indeed, it becomes difficult to learn a language when we have already reached a certain age (cf. the CPH), and this is true for both hearing and deaf students.

Moreover, our interviews made us understand that a high majority of the students observed have hearing parents:

Parents	Frequency	Percentage
Not determined	1	3.1
Deaf parents	4	12.5
Hearing parents	27	84.4
Total	32	100.0

Actually, 84% of the participants had hearing parents and only 12% had deaf parents through which they could acquire CSL. Children acquire the languages of their parents, but when parents and children do not share a common linguistics inclination, school becomes the only place where children can learn and acquire languages. Unfortunately, many deaf start school at about 10 years old and this is quite late to acquire a first language (L1). The Cameroon government is somehow responsible for the late acquisition of SL. As Ball (2011) wrote, “sign language, the most appropriate first language for the deaf, is an obstacle to accessibility due to the failure of many countries to officially recognize it as a language or national language” (p. 760). SL has never received the status of official language in the language policy of Cameroon. Consequently, no didactic material is designed to facilitate the acquisition of SL.

The late acquisition of SL affects the learning of spoken languages (reading and writing) by deaf students. Literature reveals that early learning of SL benefits cognitive and memory development, overall socio-educational performance, and reading and writing by providing a complete language base (Johnson, Scott, & Carol, 1989). Following the principle of Universal Grammar, the knowledge of an L1 facilitates the learning of a second and even a third language (L2 and L3 respectively) (Wilbur, 2008). Unfortunately, the BSD students were exposed to SL very late (at the age of 10). Thus, many did not have the opportunity to acquire the language at home through their parents. Consequently, their knowledge of SL is limited and this affects their acquisition L2 and L3 negatively. This is the reason why during the ethnographic research, few students demonstrated a good language competence in the two official languages of Cameroon.

Languages	Frequency	Percentage
Not determined	3	9.4
Sign language	26	81.3
French	1	3.1
English	2	6.3
Total	32	100.0

We observed that 81% of Form 3, 4, and 5 students had a relatively good language competency in SL, but a poor competency in English and French, the official languages of Cameroon. Regrettably, due to the introvert personality of three students, we could not evaluate their language competency. However, the language that recorded the lowest percentage is French, and this was well reflected in a test given by the French teacher at the end of the third term. Out of the 32 participants, only five passed the test. According to the French teacher, the poor performance of the students was because French is the last language to which they were exposed to. In addition, the French syllabus is not adapted to deaf learners.

When we asked to Form 3, 4, and 5 students which language they acquired first, this is what we recorded:

Languages	Frequency	Percentage
Not determined	2	6.3
Sign language	14	43.8
French	4	12.5
English	12	37.5
Total	32	100.0

Out of the 32 participants, only four recognised French as their L1, the majority accepted SL as their L1. Therefore, it is true that the BSD students came into contact with the French language a little late.

Regarding the French language syllabus, this is what is written in its introduction: “The aim of this syllabus is to evaluate the acquisition of such receptive and productive language skills as: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing” (Cameroon General Certificate of Education, 2011, p. 1). Obviously, the syllabus does not consider the disabilities of deaf students. Indeed, it is impossible to evaluate the listening and speaking skills of deaf students. Actually, deaf students were not the target of this syllabus. The educational system of Cameroon follows a strict language-based curriculum. This, thus, explains why deaf students are not able to earn good results in official exams.

In a nutshell, our research excursion in the BSD enabled us to observe class lessons, teachers’ method of teaching, and deaf students’ attitude in class. Although most teachers of the BSD are hearing people, they conduct their lessons in CSL. In fact, all explanations and interactions are done in CSL. Spoken language comes into the picture only in its writing form. For example, in order for the pupils to take notes for further revisions at home, the teachers summarise the lessons in the English language on the board for student to copy. During the interviews, teachers admitted that the writing skill of deaf student was poor, and that their responses are more accurate when they signed. They added that once deaf students put down those responses in a piece of paper, in English, the essence vanishes. However, this shortcoming never curbs the enthusiasm of the students. Indeed, we observed much interaction during the lessons, and students were always very active. When they were asked the reason of their enthusiasm, they made us understand that ‘they did not want to fail the GCE O Level, that they have heard it is a very difficult exam, and that is the reason why the students ahead of them failed it’.

The last step of our investigation was the interview of school authorities, teachers, and students. This instrument enabled us to know more about the BSD student’s background and needs. Moreover, school authorities exposed the difficulties they encounter using syllabuses meant for hearing students. Actually, the government does not only refuse to recognize the needs of deaf learners, but also, they impose spoken language on them. The authorities of the school equally mentioned the lack of support from the government. Thus, the school operates only through the gifts/donations of people of good will. With this condition, we are afraid that Cameroon may not join the international movement towards IE.

4. Sign language and linguistics accessibility

Three SL co-exist in Cameroon. Cameroon Sign Language (CSL), American Sign Language (ASL), and French Sign Language (FSL). The later, FSL, is used in the French-speaking Regions of the country. ASL is used in the English-speaking Regions, and CSL in various regions of the country (Central, Littoral, North-West, South-West, and West regions). CSL has a regional variation, a rural sign language refers to as the Maroua Sign Language (MSL), mostly used in the town of Maroua in the Extreme North of Cameroon. In every instance of multilingualism, language planning becomes necessary, but it is difficult to plan languages in a context of language variation within a relatively small population. As far as SL planning in Cameroon is concerned, policy makers are supposed to decide which variety should be recognised and standardised.

After the recognition and standardisation of SL, policy makers have to develop materials in that standard variety in order to render the language accessible to the population. Deaf learners will need basic literature and educational videos introducing them to SL. This type of initiative is essential for Cameroonian deaf having hearing parents. Through those linguistics or didactic materials, they will have access to their natural languages at their young age. Unfortunately, there exist no SL materials, TV programs, and public centres for the deaf in Cameroon. The only centres for the deaf are private centres own by individuals or religious bodies.

Apart of selecting and standardising SL, Ball (2011) also argued that those languages should be given official status. Standard SL should either be recognised as a national or official language. This official recognition facilitates its accessibility and the development of linguistics and didactic materials. Moreover, CRPD (2006) explains how classifying deaf as a disabled community, though controversial, would be a positive step for the deaf community. CRPD also claimed that a shift from the concept of minority group to that of disabled community, may provide greater opportunities for the linguistic accessibility of SL and the protection of the deaf.

5. Conclusion

During our research excursion in the BSD, we used the observation and interview instruments in order to understand why deaf students perform poorly in Cameroon official exams. Regardless of the intelligence of the students, the conducive environment of the school, and the efforts of teachers and school's authorities, deaf student's performance in official exams is rarely good. Obviously, part of the problems comes from the language-based curriculum of the Cameroon educational system. In Cameroon, the focus is on the development of the speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills of young learners in both official languages, English and French. No consideration is given to disabled students like deaf scholars.

Apart from the language-based curriculum, deaf students are also confronted with the lack of linguistics accessibility to SL. There are multiple SL in Cameroon and none has been given official recognition. Even though, Cameroon is signatory to various international conventions, no concrete effort has been made to assist disabled people, no materials have been designed to render SL accessible to deaf people, and deaf children having hearing parents are exposed to SL only in school. Moreover, deaf acquisition of spoken languages is disturbed by their late acquisition of SL. Thus, it is understood that the Cameroon educational system deserves to be revised in order to promote inclusive education.

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