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PROMOTING MULTICULTURALISM IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' PERCEPTION ON PLURALISTIC TEACHING METHODS AND CROSS-LINGUISTIC AWARENESS IN CAMEROON

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Abstract

Cameroon, a multicultural and multilingual country, is the only African country where English and French as official languages, and a bilingual education system with distinctive curriculum. The aim of this study was to analyze and to evaluate Cameroon preservice teachers' cognition about multilingualism and their perception of pluralistic approaches to English language teaching alongside the evaluation of their cross-linguistic awareness. The quantitative and qualitative data were collected with a two-section questionnaire administered to 35 Cameroon preservice English teachers. The first part of the questionnaire comprised both open and close ended questions, and the second part comprised of Likert scale survey with the Framework of References for Pluralistic Approaches to Language and Culture (FREPA). The results revealed that Cameroon preservice teachers supported the promotion of multilingualism in Cameroon and encouraged cross-linguistic awareness through the teaching of intelligible languages that liable to ease learning through plurilingual approaches. In conclusion, Cameroon preservice teachers seem to be more liable to practice integrated didactic approach to language teaching and learning to exploit the linguistic cognates of romance languages, to the detriment of the students' native languages. Moreover, although Cameroon pre-service English teachers encouraged plurilingual teaching and learning, a limited cognition about its applicability was discovered. It was suggested that the Operational Research Programme for Language Education in Cameroon (PROPELCAM) encourages national languages' integration to ensure a complementary-type approach to teaching and learning. In addition, educational stakeholders could offer seminars and conferences to educate preservice teachers towards the implementation of plurilingual approaches.

Abstract: Cameroon, cross-linguistics, English as a foreign language, multiculturalism, pre-service teachers.

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INTRODUCTION

Africa is a rich linguistic continent with various linguistic constraints when compared to Europe, despite western languages adopted in most African states dominate native language. For instance, some foreign languages bare official status in most African states on the detriment of local languages. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo counts about 62 native languages. Besides, The Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon (1996) states that French and English are official languages of equal status, and the same article promotes them throughout the territory. The French educational system² in Cameroon promotes foreign languages like Spanish and German in secondary schools as the Anglophone system that emphasizes on French as the only compulsory course (Echu, 2004). The country comprises ten regions among which two are Anglophones, and eight francophone, with about 260 national languages. In primary schools, national language learning such as Ewondo³ is effective (Kindzeka, 2020). The pluralistic approach⁴ yields solid theoretical and practical methods to guarantee the establishment of plurilingualism. Figure 1 below portrays a clear distribution of Cameroon's official languages and its neighboring countries.



Figure 1. English and French partition in Cameroon territory (Awah, 2021)

International educational policymakers promote and take actions towards encouraging and fostering multilingualism. To the council of Europe, multilingualism is a crucial asset which implemented in education, could encourage students to exploit their mother tongues'

² Cameroon has a francophone academic system and an Anglophone academic system. A student is thus following either the French or the English academic system.

³ Ewondo is one of the Cameroon national languages spoken in Yaoundé – the capital. Spoken as a second language in southern Cameroon as a lingua franca. Ewondo language and alphabet (omniglot.com)

⁴ Pluralistic approach is the use of teaching and learning activities that involves varieties of languages (Candelier et al., 2012).

competences in the same vein (Beacco & Byram, 2007). Katsarova & Chahri (2022) define multilingualism as the abilities of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage with more than one language in their day-to-day lives – sometimes used fallaciously with plurilingualism interchangeably, while plurilingualism is having communicative abilities in more than one language (Barnett, 2023). Both Learners and teachers could develop an in-depth cognition of international relations and facilitate their integration in the interconnected-international arena with plurilingual skills. Möller-Omrani and Sivertsen (2022) highlight that the access to social cohesion and labor market is easy through plurilingualism, which is indispensable to achieve international objectives and respect international policies as established by the 1995 European Commission. Theoretically, every European citizen should be able to communicate in at least three community languages (the mother tongue, plus two foreign languages; this account for some European countries like Norway concurring with the idea that multilingualism (plurilingualism, consequently) is an asset for both the academic and the society (Lochtman, 2018; Norwegian Directorate, 2020).

The majority of the worldwide institutions foster pro-multilingualism for a variety of reasons. Bilingualism does not match the current societal challenges that require a multilingual labor force. Upon the premise that most pre-service teachers lack the required training as far as plurilingual approach is concerned (Llompарт & Birello, 2020), this study investigates two problematics: First, Cameroon's pre-service teachers' conceptualization of multilingualism; second, Cameroon pre-service teachers' cognition about using pluralistic approach in their future EFL teaching, and the significance of promoting cross-linguistic awareness in the EFL classroom.

Teaching methods are dynamic, and evolve through numerous studies. The Plurilingual approach is a hybrid method since it englobes both the traditional and the modern methods. Recent methods are activity-based and learner-centered with the aim of motivating the learners (EduTinker, 2023). Likewise, peer collaboration is favored to foster interactive session; thus, enhancing integration. Transylvania College (2022) argues that there is an isolation from rote memorization toward experimental courses, which are necessary for innovation and cognitive skills development.

A keen observation of this method unveils Piaget's cognitive constructivism and Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism. Both theories support that learners possess a schema, which Piaget (as cited in Lefa, 2014) defines as "the different sensory motor map that the learner constructs about their world on their knowledge development" (p. 1). The schema develops when the learner attains "equilibration" (Powell & Kalina, 2009) passing through the process of assimilation and accommodation prior to a "cognitive conflict". Vygotsky's Zone of proximal development (ZPD) explains learners' independent capabilities and those necessitating a More Knowledgeable One (MKO), making pluralistic approach to language teaching and learning a socio-constructed approach. Akpan et al (2020) acknowledges that since knowledge is acquired through language interpretation and understanding where it is co-constructed among the learners – thus, minimizing rote memorization. In order to guarantee an efficient cross-linguistic learning environment, Watters (2019) posits that plurilingual principles are primordial because it encourages the acceptance of cultural diversity and respect of another belief and opinion through verbalization. To Watters, a plurilingual classroom enhances skill developments for inclusive discourse where the teacher is just a facilitator to the learners.

Galante et al. (2020) aimed at measuring the efficiency of the plurilingual instruction in an English language class of a Canadian university. Seven teachers instructed two student groups. The plurilingual approaches for Group 1, while Group 2 students were taught with English only. An interview was made, followed by a deductive analysis. An inductive

analysis was made during the classrooms' observations. The teachers expressed their preference on behalf of the plurilingual instruction although they did not receive prior plurilingual training. Moreover, the students who were subjected to plurilingual approaches showed that "several affordances to plurilingual instruction, such as engaging students in language learning, advancing agentive power, and developing a safe space" (p. 1). Although the teachers did not receive prior plurilingual training, they reported a preference on its behalf.

Furthermore, Möller-Omrani & Sivertsen (2022) investigated and evaluated the readiness of the Norwegian pre-service teachers to promote multilingualism and cross-linguistic awareness with the implementation of plurilingual approaches. Fifty-four (54) Norwegian preservice teachers, who were following a teacher education program in an urban university in Norway for Grades 1 to Grade 7, took part in this study. An open and close-ended question with a short Likert Scale questions built made of the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Culture (FREPA) was responded by the participants. The results revealed most of the participants had a good impression vis-à-vis laying down solid foundations for a cross-linguistic awareness towards encouraging and promoting long-life language learning.

This study is important for Cameroon for two reasons: The country's educational system is bilingual with French and English as official languages as stipulated in the 1996 constitution. The relinquished local languages seem to lose grounds in the territory, making communication flow difficult whereas there are more than 280 languages spoken within the borders (Akumbu & Di Carlo, 2022, p. 1). Consequently, according to Akumbu & Di Carlo (ibid) the illiterates are stranded, due to the government incapacity to promote a plurilingual educational approach to promote an efficient usage of local languages. For this reason, Cameroon linguists should maintain a follow up to stay informed about national language changes, and provide scrupulous and varied studies of minor languages (Minlo, 2024).

In Cameroon, Chiatoh & Akumbu (2014) supported that the exploitation of national languages as well as the development cultural-oriented techniques would be required to suit the lifestyles and experiences of the learners (Cameroonians). Likewise, Coulombe & Marquez (2020) contended that pupils' use of their native language in classrooms should be encouraged. Unfortunately, Cameroon education system promotes western languages at the expense of national languages – for instance, English and French rooted in the territory breaking the expansion of multilingualism (Atindogbe & Dissake, 2019).

Research problem:

1. How do Cameroon English pre-service teachers conceptualize multilingualism?
2. What are preservice teachers' perceptions of the importance of cross-linguistic metalinguistic awareness⁵

METHOD

Thirty-five participants from the Higher Teachers' Training Colleges of both the English and the French regions of Cameroon – comprising French speaking preservice teachers (FPSTs⁶)

⁵ Metalinguistic awareness is the knowledge about a language that makes use of existing competences to learn subsequent languages.

⁶ FPSTs stands for French preservice teachers.

and English-speaking preservice teachers (EPSTs⁷) – voluntarily engaged in this study, among which 57% (f = 20) females and 43% (f = 15) males. Since the study focused on Cameroon population, French speaking preservice teachers (32%; f = 11) and English speaking preservice teachers (67%; f = 23) were surveyed, although it was not a determinant factor in this study. Besides, a participant (02%; f = 01) omitted to indicate the region (see Table 1). To sum up, the majority 80% (f = 28) were English teachers while 20% (f = 7) were French teachers.

Table 1. The Participants

Variable	f	%
Gender		
Males	15	43
Females	20	57
Total	35	100
Language Background		
English	23	66
French	11	32
No answer	01	02
Total	35	100
Language Taught		
English	28	80
French	07	20
Total	35	100

In Table 2 below, among the 35 participants, 71% (f = 25) were bilingual with (English and French), with a meagre 10 monolinguals – 20% (f = 07) for French and 9% (f = 03) for English language. Surprisingly, none of them was trilingual or more.

Table 2. Participants' Spoken Languages

Languages	f	%
English	03	09
French	07	20
English and French	25	71
Total	35	100

Instruments

For the purpose of this study, a two-section Google Form questionnaire retrieved from Möller-Omrani and Sivertsen (2022) was administered to the participants through various channels such as WhatsApp particularly, although Messenger was used too due to issue distance. In Section 1, the participants started with the definition of the term *multilingualism* and gave their opinion about the pluralistic approach to teaching as EFL teachers.

⁷ EPSTs stands for English preservice teachers.

Moreover, section 2 comprised a six items a Likert scale that ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The Likert scale was retrieved from Möller Omrani & Sivertsen (ibid), who retrieved it from the Frame of References of Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Culture (FREPA). Since this is a replication of Omrani & Sivertsen's study, for the ethical concerns, the questionnaire employment was approved by both Omrani and Sivertsen (ibid) and an ethical committee. Moreover, the Likert scale was indispensable for this study as it aimed at determining the participants' cognition of cross-linguistic knowledge and their skills in EFL classrooms, and to gauge their attitudes regarding this approach. Six descriptors from knowledge and skills section of FREPA – all related to language and metalinguistic awareness particularly (Candelier et al, 2012). The FREPA Likert-scale statements included:

Item 1: It is important that pupils know that certain loan words have spread across a number of languages.

Item 2: It is important that pupils know that one can build on similarities between languages in order to learn languages.

Item 3: It is important that pupils can use knowledge and skills acquired in one language to learn another.

Item 4: It is important that pupils know each languages has its own sound system.

Item 5: It is important that pupils can identify their own reading strategies in the first language (L1) and apply them to the second language (L2).

Item 6: It is important that pupils can compare sentence structures in different languages.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a procedure of scrutinizing and evaluating the data collected (Miles & Huberman, 1994 as cited in Yigit, 2021). Due to the qualitative nature of the data, the findings obtained from Section 1 were analyzed thematically, whereas the data in Section 2 (from the Likert scale) were analyzed using descriptive statistics. This differs from Möller Omrani & Sivertsen method of qualitative data analysis, carried out with NVivo Pro 12 software.

RESULTS

It was requested from the participants to provide their definition of multilingualism. Furthermore, they replied to the question to know whether including languages other than English during their English lessons. Based on these problematics, the following result was obtained.

What is Multilingualism?

All the participants had answered this question. Consequently, varieties of definitions were raised, each with its particularity although several similitudes were perceivable. While some participants provided short answers, others did provide more elaborated ones.

Participant One defined it as *"Speaking more than two languages"* while another stated, *"Knowing different languages"* (P23⁸). Other than that, P26 raised that *"The tendency of people of different cultures who speak English or French but equally have different behaviors due to cultural differences"* or that of P28 *"Multilingualism (...) knowledge of more languages than a native language. It is a language term that moves from monolinguals (Knowing one*

⁸ Where P refers to Participants

language), beyond bilingualism (Knowing two languages) into the realm of knowing many, or multiple languages”.

On the other hand, two participants perceived multilingualism as “the study of multiple languages” and “l’apprentissage et l’utilisation de plusieurs langues” [the study and usage of several languages], i.e. P24 and P27 respectively. According to the statistics, 77% (f = 27) believed that multilingualism comprises more than two languages, many or several languages. However, only 14% (f = 05) defined it as involving more than one language. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics according to their dimensions: the number of languages, the language competences and individual vs. societal (as presented in Möller and Sivertsen (ibid.).

Table 3. Dimensions and Sub-dimensions of Participants’ Perception of Multilingualism

Dimension	f	%	Subdimension	f	%
Number of languages	32	91	More than two or several languages	27	77
Language competence	34	97	More than one language	05	14

Note: Active command comprises all four languages skills (Listening, writing, speaking, and reading).

Based on the data above the majority of the participants support that one’s competence determines whether they are multilingual or not – that is, knowing and using language is enough. To say that the number of languages is not an indicator according. This outcome differs from Möller-Omrani and Sivertsen (ibid.) where the participants (Norwegian pre-service teachers) were in favor of the ability to speak more than two languages. This is important because Cameroon is a multicultural country, and until date, there is a definite number of local languages in the territory. Kum Awah (2021) estimates 280 languages, slightly higher than Echu’s (2003) result of 274 (p. 34). Thus, challenging to any auto-claimed multilingual to use the four skills in more than two languages since the number of languages is just secondary.

Pre-service Teachers’ Perception of the Importance of Cross-linguistic and Meta-linguistic Awareness.

A six-item Likert scale was administered in the second section of the questionnaire to assess the level of importance of cross-linguistic metalinguistic knowledge and skills to Cameroon PSTs. The items were retrieved from the Framework of References for Pluralistic Approaches to Language and Culture (FREPA), and was employed in Möller-Omrani and Sivertsen (2022). Similarly, responses were categorized from *strongly agreed* to *strongly disagree*, and arranged in descending order with the following Items:

Item 1: It is important that pupils know certain loan words have spread across a number of languages.

Item 2: It is important that pupils know that one can build similarities between languages in order to learn languages.

Item 3: It is important that pupil can use knowledge and skills acquired in one language to learn another.

Item 4: It is important that pupils know that each language has its own sound system.

Item 5: It is important that pupils can identify their own reading strategies in the first language (L1) and apply them to the second language (L2).

Item 6: It is important that pupils can compare sentence structures in different languages.

As given in Table 4, Items 1 and 4 recorded the highest agreement rates (97% each). Moreover, 91% (f = 31) support the importance of building similarities in language learning (Item 2). Some participants (f = 31) acknowledged the use knowledge and skills in a given language to learn another; whereas, only two (06%) were neutral and disagreed (Item 3). Using reading strategies of the L1 was raised by a few participants (66%; f = 23), 20% (f = 07) neutral and 14% (f = 05) disagreed (Item 5).

Table 4. Importance of Developing Cross-linguistic Knowledge and Skills: Arranged in Agreement Rates.

Item	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6
Strongly agree	11%	50%	43%	46%	15%	29%
Agree	86%	41%	45%	51%	51%	48%
Neutral	03%	09%	06%	03%	20%	14%
Disagree	00%	00%	06%	00%	14%	09%
Strongly disagree	00%	00%	00%	00%	00%	00%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

DISCUSSION

This study reveals that Cameroon preservice teachers are disconnected from the plurilingual approach; although its utility in EFL was acknowledged by the participants. Cameroon is a multilingual country with hundreds of national languages – English and French aside. So, CPSTs are accustomed to the concept of multilingualism both at the linguistic and cultural level of their society. It is no surprise that the great majority of the participants believed that one's languages competence (See Table 4 above) determine their multilingual state. This deviates from the traditional perception of multilingualism, and shifts from Möller-Omrani and Sivertsen's finding. In their study, the Norwegian's preservice teachers relate multilingualism to the ability to speak more than two languages. However, the participant's term "competence" relates to Cenoz and Genesee's (as cited in Kang, 2013, p. 1) definition of multilingual competence where an individual both speaks and writes a language efficiently. The question of proficiency remains. Most Cameroonians are multilinguals due to inter-tribal marriages, plus English and French as official languages, although each language is used in a specific context resulting to an unbalance proficiency (Cenoz, 2013, p. 6). With 79% (f = 31) proportion of the participants validating *Active command* over the number of languages, it is difficult for a self-proclaimed multilingual to prove their native-like proficiency.

In order to collect Cameroon preservice teachers (CPSTs) perceptions of cross-linguistic metalinguistic awareness, the FREPA items were utilized. The dominant perspectives (97%, f = 34) believed that learners' awareness of loan words between the target language and their L1 is the most important (Item 1), and the languages' sound systems awareness be emphasized on (Item 4). These were followed by Item 2 (learners' building similarities between languages) thereby showing that learners' linguistic repertoires are crucial in an L2 learning process.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed at assessing Cameroon preservice teachers' cognition about laying the foundations for multilingualism in elementary school EFL teaching, with references to pluralistic approaches and cross-linguistic awareness. The results revealed that CPSTs encourage multilingualism in Cameroon and encourage cross-linguistic awareness through the application of didactic approach to language teaching and learning than Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) to use learners' linguistic repertoire. On the other hand, the negligence towards mother tongues languages demonstrated the limits of CPSTs in the domain of plurilingual approaches. In other words, although teachers have the will to employ plurilingual approaches, the means and expertise are lacking to meet this expectation.

The study faced various predicaments. A major constraint was the distance. Therefore, the data was collected from Cameroon preservice teachers in Cameroon through an online link, with no direct contact with the participants. Consequently, a limited amount (35) of participants was registered, compared to the 54 in Möller and Sivertsen's study to which this research is a replication.

A few suggestion and recommendations are important to encourage the development of the movement. The Operational Research Programme for Language Education in Cameroon (PROPELCAM) encourages national languages' integration to ensure a complementary-type approach to teaching and learning. Therefore, educational stakeholders may offer seminars and conferences to educate preservice teachers in plurilingual approaches, and raise a wide range of awareness.

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