

Teaching English
ELT Research Papers

**English Medium Education
in a multilingual
francophone context:
Primary school learning
in Cameroon**

Kuchah Kuchah, Lizzi O. Milligan and Valentine N. Ubanako

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English Medium Education in a multilingual francophone context: Primary school learning in Cameroon

Kuchah Kuchah, Lizzi O. Milligan and Valentine N. Ubanako

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Abstract

While there is a growing body of literature on the policy and practice implications of English Medium Education (EME) in multilingual Sub-Saharan Africa, there has been very little research on how primary school children in these contexts experience and navigate the curriculum in English. This study set out to document and understand the range of learning resources and strategies that multilingual Francophone children in Cameroon draw upon to access learning in the medium of English with a view to contributing to the discussions of good practice for young learner education in multilingual contexts where EME is promoted. To enable an in-depth exploration of children's experiences of EME, the study adopted an exploratory case study research design (Yin, 2014) in two English Medium state primary schools in Yaounde, the capital city of Cameroon. A total of 40 upper primary children were initially selected through a stratified purposive process guided by their responses to an initial questionnaire, but following parental consent, only 22 (58 per cent) of them participated in the study. Data was collected through semi-structured classroom observations, child-group and individual arts-based interviews as well as unsupervised tasks in maths and English. These were analysed and interpreted deductively. Findings reveal that children had access to a range of material, human and linguistic resources but they were not engaging critically with learning because the language of schooling was not their familiar language. As a result, learners tended to rely on strategies that just helped them get by and the teachers' approaches allowed learning content to be covered without real engagement with the cognitive and linguistic activities which help students co-construct and understand new knowledge.

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1

Introduction

There has been a significant growth in the use of English Medium Education (EME)¹ globally, particularly across the Global South, driven by an assumed relationship between proficiency in English, a ‘global’ language, and economic development (Casale and Posel, 2011; Dearden, 2014; Sahan et al. 2021). In many postcolonial Anglophone countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), English is both a subject in the curriculum and a medium of teaching and learning from primary school and this has become the case with (former) Francophone countries such as Rwanda and Cameroon. Present day Cameroon has colonial links with Britain and France, and this is represented in the macro identities – Anglophone and Francophone – which today define the country’s populations. While the English language has been both a subject in the primary curriculum and a medium of teaching and learning for children from the Anglophone parts of the country since independence in the early 1960s, interest in English Medium Education for children from the Francophone parts of the country only became significantly visible in the late 1990s following the explicit promotion of bilingualism (in English and French) in law No 98/004 of 14 April 1998 (Education Law) and the emergence of Bilingual Private Primary Schools particularly in the two largest cities of the country, Yaounde and Douala (Anchimbe, 2007).

Primary education in Cameroon is based on the Education Law which recognises the coexistence of two subsystems of education – Anglophone (English-medium) and Francophone (French-medium) – in the country. The law also makes bilingualism – that is, the teaching of English in French medium schools and French in English medium schools – mandatory. As a result, different types of bilingual schools have

developed over the years (see Kuchah, 2013; 2016). In the state school sector, the notion of a bilingual school has loosely been used to describe (a) a French medium school and an English medium school coexisting in the same campus, (b) a French medium school in an Anglophone part of the country and (c) an English medium school in a Francophone part of the country. This study is based in the third type of schools which, as studies (e.g., Anchimbe, 2005, 2007; Fonyuy, 2010; Kuchah, 2016; Nana, 2013) have shown, are recruiting large numbers of children from Francophone homes for a variety of reasons. Kouega (1999), for example, explains that parental dissatisfaction with the quality of English language provision in French medium state schools has forced parents to seek English Medium Education as the fastest means of achieving bilingualism and its perceived benefits for their children.

English medium schools in Francophone Cameroon recruit children from both Anglophone and Francophone homes. In fact, as previous studies (e.g., Anchimbe, 2007; Kuchah, 2013) have shown, more than 70 per cent of children in English medium schools in the capital city of Yaounde come from homes where French is the dominant language of interaction alongside their familiar/home language. In the two schools investigated in this study, 78 per cent of the children came from Francophone homes. The national curriculum for English medium primary schools in Cameroon assumes English language as the only medium of teaching and learning stating that ‘at the level of basic education ... the mastery of English by the pupil enables him or her to grasp with ease the other subjects of the curriculum’ (National Syllabuses 2000, p. 1). For this reason, English language is taught as a subject every day and covers

1. We follow the British Council in our use of English Medium Education, as compared with the more widely used English (as the) Medium (of) Instruction, because we agree that the term encompasses how learning in English permeates beyond just pedagogical instruction to include policy and curriculum design, learning in and out of school and assessment.

22.7 per cent of the 30-hour weekly teaching and learning timetable. What is more, the syllabus for English language recommends that teachers should create avenues for maximum exposure of pupils to English and affirms that ‘this entails that English should be taught in English’ (ibid: p. 17). This English-only policy recommendation tends to reinforce the epistemic exclusion of local languages as not having educational value (Esch, 2010). A recent survey of Cameroonian teachers’ perspectives (Nkwetisama, 2017) found that many teachers still believe that English is best taught monolingually and that the use of languages other than English in the classroom affects students’ English language proficiency negatively. What this means, therefore, is that children from homes where languages other than English are predominantly spoken are obliged to navigate learning in English without sufficient exposure to the language beyond the classroom.

Aim and research questions of the study

The aim of the study reported here was to document and understand the range of learning resources and strategies that multilingual children in a predominantly French-speaking environment draw upon to access the EME curriculum with a view to contributing to the body of research on language policy and practice for young learners in multilingual contexts where EME is promoted. The study was guided by two research questions:

1. What classroom, school and home resources do multilingual Francophone children use to learn across the EME curriculum?
2. What strategies do learners use in EME classrooms to both develop their English and access subject content across the curriculum?



2

Literature review

2.1. Key issues in EME in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)

The literature on English Medium Education at primary level in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has pointed out a number of issues for both teachers and students. There is, for example, evidence that EME poses pedagogic challenges for teachers who themselves are not sufficiently proficient in the medium of teaching and learning (Akyeampong et al. 2013; Owu-Ewie and Eshun, 2015; Simpson, 2013). There is also a significant body of literature from across SSA which provides evidence that for many schoolchildren living in communities where English is not spoken outside of school, EME acts as a barrier to engagement with the curriculum (Alidou, 2003; Clegg and Simpson, 2016; Desai, 2016; Madonsela, 2015; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Probyn, 2006; Rea-Dickins and Yu, 2013; Ssentanda et al. 2019; Trudell, 2016). Some of these studies (e.g. Alidou, 2003; Probyn, 2006; Trudell, 2016) have shown how learners' limited English language proficiency has a negative impact on their English language development and their access to curriculum content in the medium of English. Sah and Li (2018, p. 118) describe this as the 'double disadvantage', further compounded by the high linguistic demands of curriculum and textbook content (see, for example, Probyn, 2006; Milligan, Clegg and Tikly, 2016).

This widely cited 'L2 proficiency gap' has been recently highlighted in the British Council position paper *English language and medium of instruction in basic education in low- and middle-income countries: A British Council perspective* (2019). In this paper, Simpson argues that the main challenge to effective EMI is learners' (and often teachers') proficiency in English. This is well-supported by literature in Sub-Saharan Africa which shows that low levels of English proficiency can lead to disengagement and low school achievement (Ampiah, 2008; Garrouste, 2011; Kuchah, 2016; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Pretorius and

Currin, 2010). In the majority of SSA countries with EME, learners switch to English at the end of year three. At this point of transition, there is wide-ranging evidence that many learners are unable to *write* about complex issues, *read* textbook content (which is rarely adapted to second language learners), *listen* and fully understand what the teacher is saying or *talk* in group discussions in English (Clegg and Simpson, 2016; Makalela, 2015). This is a significant equity issue as the learners that struggle are disproportionately those already at risk of marginalisation due to their location or socio-economic status. As pointed out in the introduction, schoolchildren in Cameroon learn in English- or French-medium schools from the first year of primary school and research has highlighted the additional challenges that these learners face (Kuchah, 2016; 2018).

Learners' limited English proficiency can be seen to have a significant impact on the pedagogic choices that teachers make in EME classrooms. For example, teachers observed in Rwanda spent significant time **copying from a textbook onto the board** which learners in turn copied into their exercise books or repeated back individually or in chorus (Milligan, Clegg and Tikly, 2016). Similarly, Kuchah (2013, p. 171) observed 60 English language lessons in Cameroon and reported that 'about a third of lesson time was spent copying exercises on the board and ... pupils generally copied exercises directly as the teacher wrote on the board or waited until the teacher had finished writing on the board before starting to write.' Teachers, similarly, may use *safe talk* (Rubagumya, 2003) where learners respond to scaffolded questions with one-word or short phrase responses, often in chorus with other learners. Through these pedagogic strategies, teachers and learners complete a class and cover the content required without having to engage with more cognitively and linguistically demanding exercises that would further understanding.

2.2. Classroom strategies for EME

It is evident from research across SSA that despite monolingual policies where it is at least officially expected that all classroom interaction takes place in the medium of English, there is a wide range of multilingual pedagogic practices used by teachers to help learners to access the curriculum. Code-switching is a frequently cited pedagogic strategy used in EME classrooms, with examples of its practice found across the continent (Ferguson, 2003; Makgato, 2014; Ncoko et al. 2000). Gardner-Chloris (2009, p. 4) defines code-switching as ‘the use of several languages or dialects in the same conversation or sentence by bilingual people. It affects practically everyone who is in contact with more than one language or dialect, to a greater or lesser extent.’ This strategy, in its broadest sense, is one where a teacher switches between two languages to aid content delivery. In practice, it is often used by teachers to go fully into a language with which learners are more familiar for short periods before returning to the medium of instruction. Halai (2011) explains the two main functions of codeswitching in maths classrooms as seeking understanding of the task and its demands and explaining the maths itself. Halai and Karuku (2013) further argue for the importance of code-switching for increasing learner understanding and improving the quality of classroom interactions. Translation is also commonly used by teachers in multilingual classrooms whereby teachers repeat a word, phrase, sentence or short text in the learners’ home language (Hall and Cook, 2012; Erling et al., 2017). It is usually a word-for-word translation and Halai and Karuku (2013) highlight the fact that it tends to be used by teachers orally. While there is evidence that SSA teachers use these two strategies in their classroom, it is still difficult to find examples of good or accepted practice of the use of code-switching and translation that may support effective teaching and learning (see Clegg and Simpson, 2016). This is especially the case in a context such as Cameroon, where the promotion of an English-only policy means that teachers’ practices of these strategies are often covert.

More recently, there has been increased attention paid to the importance of *language-supportive and translanguaging pedagogic practices* that seek to draw on learners’ linguistic resources to develop English proficiency and deepen conceptual understanding across the curriculum. Language supportive pedagogic strategies are those that ‘recognise and compensate for learners’ lack of skills

in reading, speaking and writing’ by making space for language development and using accessible materials (Milligan, Clegg and Tikly, 2016, p. 331; Gabrieli, Sane and Alphonse, 2018). Milligan, Clegg and Tikly (2016) developed and piloted the use of language-supportive textbooks, where speaking, reading and writing activities in both L1 and English supported curriculum access and learners’ English development and the conclusions from this project suggested that language-supportive learning can lead to significant improvements in learning outcomes and more effective engagement with subjects across the curriculum. *Translanguaging strategies* have also been discussed in the EME literature, particularly in multilingual contexts. These strategies, it has been argued (e.g., by Bagwasi, 2017; Charamba, 2020; Makalela, 2015; Maseko and Mkhize, 2021), reinforce and deepen multilingual learners’ understanding of subject matter by helping them broaden pre-existing knowledge through the use of their different languages in classroom interaction.

It is clear from the literature cited here that the promotion of translanguaging and language-supportive strategies involves a significant policy shift which recognises schools as spaces where learners’ multilingual repertoires are recognised as resources for their cognitive development (Hélot and Young, 2006). However, the more reductive approaches to bi/multilingualism continue to underpin language-of-instruction policies across Sub-Saharan Africa (Erling et al., 2017; Makalela, 2015) including Cameroon (Alobwede, 1998). This supports the importance of continued research to highlight the potential for multilingual pedagogic strategies in order to inform key policy stakeholders of how these can be utilised within EME contexts. In providing evidence of how primary age children navigate learning through the use of their multilingual resources, this paper hopes to draw attention to the urgent need for local policy and practice in Cameroon to embrace multilingualism as a learning resource.

2.3. Learner perspectives

Despite evidence that EME serves as a significant barrier for multilingual learners for whom English is not a home language, there is limited research in SSA which examines young multilingual learners’ experiences of EME. Research that has examined learners’ perspectives (e.g., Charamba, 2020; Maseko and Mkhize, 2021) has mainly focused on how learners respond to teachers’ multilingual practices

rather than on how they navigate learning in contexts where teaching is conducted monolingually, as in Cameroon. In fact, most of the research looking at EME classrooms has focused on teaching practices and strategies, with little known of how learning happens in the classroom, at home and other non-formal settings. The dearth of learners' experiences and voices in EME research means that most studies tend to just focus on classroom teaching, ignoring the processes through which learners engage with their own learning as well as how their linguistic affordances and agency shape their learning. With the shift towards learning processes and outcomes in Sustainable Development Goal 4, understanding learning constitutes an important part of educational research and this can only be achieved through the involvement of learners in research.

Here, it is useful to look to the language learning literature, where there have been many studies that have explored the strategies that learners adopt to learn. Ortega (2009) conceptualises learning strategies in terms of the conscious mental and behavioural procedures that learners engage in, with the aim to gain control over their learning process. One study with students at a Turkish university identified 26 challenges that students face when learning in EMI classrooms and the strategies they

take up to overcome these challenges (Soruc and Griffiths, 2018). The strategies included guessing the content from the context, translating using a dictionary, catching keywords, trying to get the main idea and mixing information with real-life experiences, and their use suggests the importance of linking learning in the classroom to the wider context. Within the primary school EME contexts, these strategies may include the ways that learners draw on linguistic and non-linguistic resources to keep up with what is going on and perhaps facilitate both their language development and access to the EMI curriculum.

The present study builds on the existing research on the potential benefits of different strategies for English language development and subject learning in multilingual EME classroom contexts. It foregrounds learners' experiences to (a) explore the learning resources and strategies that learners use to navigate learning in a language that is not their familiar/home language and (b) consider how insights from learners can feed into policy and pedagogy to better reflect the learning processes of multilingual children.

3

Research design and procedures

To enable an in-depth exploration of children’s experiences of EME, the study adopted an exploratory case study research design (Yin, 2014) in two Anglophone state schools in Yaounde, the capital city of Cameroon, between October and November 2017. The research team initially selected 40 children through a stratified purposive process guided by their responses to an initial questionnaire. The questionnaire was informed by two standardised documents on pupil characteristics in Africa – *Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) Working Paper 1* (Hungu, 2011) and the 2014 education performance report for Francophone Africa published by PASEC (*Programme d’Analyse des Systèmes Educatifs de la CONFEMEN*) – and identified participants based on three main characteristics: (a) language background, (b) social determinants and (c) ownership of/access to learning resources. The data from the questionnaire was also used to analyse children’s learning resources (RQ 1). In order to be as transparent as possible, we sent individual consent letters together with each child’s questionnaire to 40 parents. Only 22 (58 per cent) of the 40 children from

Years Five and Six (10–12-year-olds) were eventually retained for this study, based on their parents’ consent. We did not follow up with those parents who did not want their children to participate to understand their reluctance. However, based on our knowledge of the context we would suggest that this may have been influenced by a range of reasons, including increasing social and political unrest which has been described as an ‘Anglophone Crisis’ (Bang and Balgah, 2022).

Data was collected through:

- Twelve semi-structured classroom observations: these were conducted by two members of the research team and supported by video recordings. The observation tool was informed by Creswell’s 2007 suggestion to incorporate both open-ended and more theoretically driven ideas in the observation of naturally occurring phenomena. We therefore designed an observation protocol in which we recorded descriptive notes of student linguistic behaviour in one column and reflective notes in the other.

Table 1: Overview of data collection methods

Data collection method:	School A		School B		Total
	Year 5	Year 6	Year 5	Year 6	
Classroom Observation	1 English 1 Maths 1 Home economics*	1 English 1 Maths 1 Citizenship education*	1 English 1 Maths 1 Citizenship education*	1 English 1 Maths 1 Art and culture *	12
English and maths unsupervised group tasks	1 English and 1 maths per year group				8
Child group interviews	1 group interview per year group				4
Arts-based individual interviews	1 child per year group				4

* One other subject selected by the class teacher for each class group

Classroom observation video data was watched and analysed in relation to participants' observable learning behaviour (e.g., the linguistic and non-linguistic resources which children use to negotiate meaning in a communicative episode as well as learning challenges in class) (Duff and Uchida, 1997; Kuchah, 2013b; O'Sullivan, 2004).

- English and maths unsupervised group tasks: together with classroom teachers, and with subsequent advice from schoolchildren (see Kuchah and Milligan, 2021 for children's input), we designed tasks in maths and English and participants from each of the four classrooms were asked to respond to the tasks as a group. Each group worked independently on each task and group interactions were recorded and later analysed with the aim of further identifying participants' strategy use (RQ 2).
- Four child-group interviews and arts-based individual interviews: children's learning resources (RQ1) and strategies (RQ2) were also explored through child-group and semi-structured arts-based individual interviews, (e.g., Kuchah, 2016; Kuchah and Pinter, 2012; Milligan, 2016). Group interviews were conducted with participants from each of the four classrooms separately and were also guided by our preliminary analysis of data from classroom observations and the unsupervised tasks. One student was then identified from each of

the four groups for a further interview to obtain deeper personalised information about their EME experiences. For example, children were asked to imagine themselves in the next 20–30 years as parents and to draw a picture of their child(ren)'s study space at home and this was used as a stimulus for exploring their perceptions and experiences of language of instruction and learning resources.

Classroom observation notes as well as recordings from unsupervised group tasks and interview data collected were transcribed, translated (where necessary), analysed and interpreted deductively based on the research questions via thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022).

4

Findings

In this section, we discuss the key findings in relation to the two research questions, and provide excerpts from the different data sources to illustrate our understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences of using resources and learning strategies to navigate the curriculum in an EME state school context.

at home that could support them in navigating the English medium curriculum (see Table 2). However, there was a wide variety in what was available to them and, as we shall show later, this influenced the strategies that children used to support their learning outside of school.

4.1. Classroom, school and home learning resources

4.1.1. Material resources

The first key finding is that all 22 children in the sample had access to at least one material resource

Table 2: Ownership of and access to learning resources

Student ID	English textbook (Yes/No)	English workbook (Yes/No)	Access to Computer (Yes/No)	Ipad (Yes/No)	Mobile phone (Yes/No)	Story-books (Yes/No)	Educational games (Yes/No)	Mobile phone (Yes/No)
1	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
2	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
3	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y
4	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y
5	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N
6	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y
7	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N
8	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N
9	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N
10	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
11	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N
12	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
13	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
14	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
15	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	N
16	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
17	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
18	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y
19	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
20	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
21	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y
22	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N
Total Yes	22	14	10	7	13	16	12	13

As the table above shows, all 22 children had their own English language textbook and of this number, 14 had the accompanying workbook. When compared to figures from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS, 2016) which reveal a student-to-textbook ratio of 12:1 for reading in state sector primary schools in Cameroon, this finding was quite surprising. Nearly half of the participants (10) had access to a computer at home and seven had access to an iPad. The data also showed that 16 children had one or more storybooks in English at home, 12 had access to educational games and 13 had access to a mobile phone at home. Significant access to material resources suggests that this is a more affluent group than is representative of the average primary school child in the country.

Another determinant of their relative affluence comes from the group interviews, which revealed that 20 of our 22 participants had attended pre-school in English. This was an important indicator of both early contact with English and high socioeconomic status as pre-school in Cameroon is not free and does involve substantial financial commitment. However, it was also found that 12 of the 22 participants, including 10 who had attended pre-school, had repeated at least a year in primary school due to failing in the overall annual promotion exams, so in this situation, affluence cannot be said to be a direct determinant of successful English medium learning.

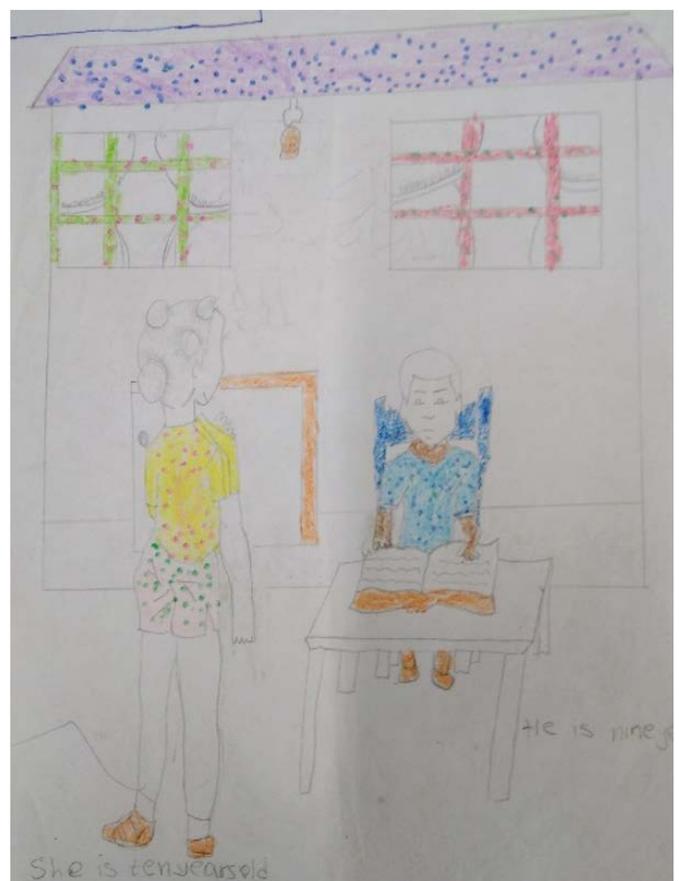
Classroom observations revealed that the 22 children had regular access to and use of their English language textbook in English lessons. For example, practice activities for grammar and vocabulary as well as reading texts and comprehension activities were drawn from the textbook and required students to read their textbooks to respond to teacher and textbook content questions. However, in the eight non-English lessons observed, students did not make use of either subject specific or English language textbooks. While there were some bilingual posters on the classroom walls, (e.g., pictures of parts of a human body, labelled in French and English) in the lessons we observed, these were not used. These children, therefore, were not using material resources in subject specific classrooms. Interview data revealed that home study mainly revolved around completing homework prescribed by the teacher, which did not often require the use of a textbook. Participants explained that teachers asked

them to copy maths exercises from the board as homework, for example, and this was common practice in other subject areas.

4.1.2. Human resources

In the questionnaire, the children were asked whether their parents helped them with their homework, if they had ever attended a holiday club and if they had a home teacher. Nine students had attended a holiday club; nine said that their parents helped with their homework (only one of these had also attended a holiday club) and three that they had a home teacher. Of the twenty-two students, only seven did not have access to at least one of these forms of human resource outside of the school. Two had access to all three. It is important to note that where it was noted that children had the benefit of parental or sibling support in their learning at home, this was always in the French language. The absence of appropriate parental support for EME constituted a significant barrier to learning since, as we shall show later, all participants primarily relied on **human resources**, especially the teacher and their peers, for learning in school and would have benefitted from such support at home as well.

Figure 1: Child participant's imagined children's study space



In the art-based individual interviews where children were asked to imagine themselves in the next 20–30 years as parents and to draw a picture of their child(ren)'s study space at home, two of the four children drew pictures including a child and an older sibling while the other two had pictures including a child and an adult. Individual interviews around these pictures revealed children either relied on someone, or wished to have someone they could rely on, at home to help them develop learning.

The picture in Figure 1 above shows the child's future home with her imaginary children. In the interview, she explained that it is helpful if there is an older sibling in the same EME context who can help at home. This was consistent with group and other individual interviews which revealed different sources and forms of home and school human support which child participants relied upon. We return to these in relation to their learning strategies later in this report.

4.1.3. Linguistic resources for learning across the EME curriculum

Data from the initial selection questionnaire and group interviews showed that all 22 participants did not have English as a **linguistic resource** outside of the classroom; they chose to use French on their way to and from school and in the playground with their friends. In the public spaces where participants had access – such as churches, mosques, and markets – French was the dominant language used. The 22 child participants in this study came from homes, where nine different mother tongues – Bafia, Bamun, Bulu, Duala, Eton, Ewondo, Fulfulde, Hausa and Makaa – were spoken, in addition to French. In fact, 13 participants communicated only in French at home while five communicated only in their local language at home and four used their local language and French at home. The children also interacted with people from their hometowns in their local language as well as in French or, in one case, in Arabic in different social settings such as in the church, the mosque and in marketplaces. When asked to rank languages according to their preference outside of school, only two of the 22 participants identified English language as their first choice while six chose their local language as first choice and the other 14 participants preferred French. Many more participants ranked English language as their second choice (9) and third choice (9) while one participant who had ranked French as first choice did not include a second or third choice. In individual interviews, one of the two participants

who ranked English as their first preferred language found it difficult to sustain a conversation with one of the researchers in English:

Interviewer: Ok. Do you want us to converse in English or in French?

Learner 14: [silence]

Interviewer: Tu veux qu'on parle en anglais ou en français ... English ... en français ?

Learner 14: Oui ... français (Yes ... French.)

Interviewer: Pourquoi ? (Why?)

Learner 14: Parce que je comprends plus le français. (Because I understand French more.)

Further probing revealed that for this child, the choice of English was aspirational, rather than a true reflection of their proficiency in the language. In fact, she explained that her parents called her an 'Anglophone' because of her being in an English medium school and this meant that she identified herself more with English. This is consistent with findings from a previous study (Kuchah, 2016) which showed evidence that parents saw EME schools as a pathway to helping their children adopt the political identity of an Anglophone in order to share the sociocultural and socioeconomic benefits ascribed to the Anglophone minority in the country.

As the data presented so far suggests, the child-participants in this study lived in multilingual homes with access to a wider range of languages beyond that used in the classroom and even those they chose to primarily use. These languages could serve as rich linguistic resources that could be drawn upon to generate learning across the EME curriculum, but they were not formally allowed to draw on these languages to develop their English and to engage fully in classroom learning.

4.2. Strategies used in EME classrooms to both develop learners' English and access subject content across the curriculum

Child-participants' learning strategies were identified through classroom observations, unsupervised tasks and interviews. The first two data collection methods helped us identify strategies used in the classroom while interviews

provided more insights into what children did when studying in class and at home. We have already stated above that all 22 participants had access to at least one language, other than English which they could draw on to access learning both in school and at home and that they indeed made use of these different languages, especially French, in their interactions with their peers during playtime and on their way to school. Below, we present findings on how these languages were used in their actual learning practices.

4.2.1. Language choices for interaction with human resources

Through exploring the diverse ways in which children made use of existing resources to develop understanding in the classroom, we found that when children did not understand something in class, there was a split between those who used the teacher as their main resource and those who used their peers, e.g., through asking questions. The data suggests that those who were more confident about their English language drew on the teacher as their main resource but those who were less confident about their English proficiency drew on their peers. In both cases, children's interactions mostly focused on decoding basic information such as the meanings of words and the explanation or definitions of concepts, sentence completion and comprehension checks with no evidence of real engagement in knowledge processing which made use of higher-order thinking skills. In the example below, the child explains that he relies on the teacher for basic meaning decoding:

Interviewer: If you have a word in English that you don't understand what will you do to understand it?

L4: I will tell to the madam to explain to me.

In this next excerpt, two key findings emerge: the children's reliance on their peers and their specific preference for explanations in French language when they did not understand something and were not confident enough about their English language proficiency to ask the teacher.

Interviewer: Si vous avez un problème ou bien si vous ne comprenez pas quelque chose en classe, vous préféreriez demander à qui? La maitresse ou bien vos camarades? Your teacher or your friends? *(If you had a problem or something you do not understand in class, who would you prefer to ask? Your teacher or your friends?)*

L5: Mes camarades *(My friends)*

Interviewer: Pourquoi pas la maitresse? *(Why not your teacher?)*

L5: Parfois la maitresse mais si je ne peux pas bien dire en anglais je vais demander à mes camarades. *(Sometimes, the teacher but if I cannot say it well in English, I will ask my friends) [...]*

Interviewer: Tu te rappelles une fois que tu avais demandé quelque chose à tes camarades? *(Can you remember any time when you asked something from your peers?)*

L5: Oui, j'avais demandé à X *[name of peer]*. *(Yes, I asked X.)*

Interviewer: Qu'est-ce que tu lui avais demandé? *(What did you ask her?)*

L5: Comment on fait ça. Si elle avait compris quand on avait fait ça en classe. *(How we do this. If she had understood when this was done in class.)*

Interviewer: Ça c'est quoi? *(What is 'this'?)*

L5: [pointing at the instructions on a maths exercise] C'est fraction. Decimal. *(It's fraction. Decimal.)*

Interviewer: D'accord. Quand vous aviez fait decimal, tu as demandé et elle t'avait expliqué? *(Okay. When you did decimals and you asked her, did she explain to you?)*

L5: Oui. *(Yes.)*

Interviewer: Elle t'a expliqué en quelle langue? En Bulu? *(In which language did she explain this to you? In Bulu?)*

L5: En Français. *(In French.)*

Interviewer: En Français?

L5: [Nods]

In the rest of this segment of the interview, all group participants were asked what language they prefer their peers to explain content they did not understand to them, and the unanimous response was French with children justifying their preference with reasons such as:

Parceque c'est plus facile. (*Because it is easier.*)

Pour moi c'est parce que je ne comprends pas encore bien l'anglais. (*For me it is because I don't yet understand English well.*)

Moi je ne comprends pas bien l'anglais. (*I don't understand English well myself.*)

The perspectives expressed here were consistent with data from classroom observations in which we noted that while the teacher focused on developing subject content knowledge in English, children interacted with each other in French. Such interactions happened covertly at the same time the teacher was teaching and most often when s/he was writing on the board. For example, in one of the maths lessons, we noted interactions such as the following:

L12: LCM c'est quoi? (*What is LCM?*)

L13: C'est lowest common multiple, non? (*It's Lowest common multiple, isn't it?*)

L12: aaahhh je vois (*oh I see*)

In an English language lesson focusing on writing a formal letter, the following interaction was noted:

L7: PO box c'est quoi d'abord? (*What is P.O box in the first place?*)

L9: Je ne sais pas ... je pense que c'est post office. (*I don't know ... I think it is post office.*)

The excerpts above show children's reliance on human resources to decode meaning in their learning, and also point to evidence from classroom observation which revealed that those children who were frequently asking a classmate for help in decoding particular words were not observed to be asking questions to the teacher, and only spoke in response to whole class repetition of single words. This suggests that who children rely on for help in navigating the language of the curriculum may be related to their self-perception of their proficiency in that language, although this could be explained by other factors which we were unable to identify in the data. While there were also instances where children used expressions from local languages, what emerges from the data overall is the predominant use of French language in helping them navigate curriculum content in an EME context. They used French in a variety of ways which are presented below.

4.2.2. Use of linguistic resources as mediational strategy

French was clearly the dominant language through which children negotiated meaning in order to navigate learning across the EME curriculum, and although interview data shows that they all preferred to be in an English medium school, this was more because of their existing friendships, their affective orientation towards their teachers and the perceived advantages of being bilingual. In terms of the language of learning, children generally preferred explanations and translations in French as a way of

helping them understand learning content better. This was consistent across all interviews and visible in their own use of language when responding to the unsupervised task. In the following example, one of the researchers co-constructed the first sentence of a story with the children and they were then asked

to complete a story in their group unsupervised. Below is an excerpt of a five-minute text co-construction interaction (presented as continuous text) with the excerpts that were included in the final draft (see Appendix) highlighted in bold.

The Magic Forest

Once upon a time there was an old woman who lived in a forest. She was called Mrs ... Mrs Mary. And her daughter was ... Um um, elle n'avait pas a daughter. She was not having a daughter [Noise and random talking] She was called ... Aka, continue non! Donc tu ... Toi tu veux que j'écrive quoi? [...] **She was called Mary**, simple as that. Alors. C'est vrai Mary. Dit, ce que je vais écrit. Non, dit ce que on va écrit. She was called Mary. He was living ... Eeehhh! [exclamation of disapproval] She was living on trees. Pour quoi vous criez? She was living on trees ... on trees in the forest. [More shouts of disapproval] In the hut. The hurt is a hurt. C'est h-u-r-t living in a hurt. **She was living in a hurt.** Hurt. oualla! **One day ...** Ahaaa! Attend one day again. On an ecrit one day ici quand ici là? [...] A man came with a catapillar. [general laughter] One day she left his ... Her! Her house, her ... hut ... Her hurt, akah! She left her ... her hurt. And saw ... Left hurt ... Tu écris left hurt? [...] **She left her hurt.** Efface bien ton hurt là. Left. She left her ... hurt, hurt. J'ai compris noh! And heard ... And saw! **And saw a snake.** A long and large tree. On peut toujours dit ça non ? On peut dire à dangerous snake. Snake est toujours dangereux non? On a dit foret magique non, ouais qu'est-ce que vous faites comme ça là? Tu voulais dire que quoi? A long and large tree. Very surprise ... Very surprised! The snake was talking to her. Attend d'abord. Tu as vu that story? Ecrit seulement. [...] Je demande de dit qu'il me spell surprise toi tu te fâche? Epelle sprite. Surprise! Surprise ouala! Very ... surprise. Ça a /p/, surprise à deux /p/. [Exclamation of disapproval] Oui ca à deux /p/, surprprised a deux /p/. Regardez ce que Sombo a parlé enh ! Surprise. Un surprrise, deux ... Mary was talking to her. Tu n'as jamais vue? J'ai déjà vue ce que je veux te raconter la. [noisy and inaudible interaction] Very surprised Mary was talking to her. The snake was talking to her ... Attends d'abord! Say it again. [inaudible interactions] **Very surprise, the snake was talking to her** The snake told ... [inaudible interactions] No no no. The snake was talking to her. The snake told her to climb on this tree. [inaudible interaction] Donc tu attends que j'écrive eunh? 'told her'. Non laisse ca. The snake said, climb in this tree. **The snake said** to her ... The snake said to her. [...] Après ça c'est la fin noh? The snake said comma, to her ... to her. To her deux fois? To her, it is okay, talking to her. [...] Enlever 'to her'. [...] Continue. On lit un peu tout on voire c'est que ça donne! [...] Laisse, ça va. An old woman in the forest. She was called **Mary, she was living in a hurt. One day, she left her hurt and saw a snake, very surprised, the snake was talking to her, the snake said ...** the snake said that ... The snake said to her. Hi hi hi hi! The snake said to her. Elle rire. Toi tu fais les mêmes erreurs. Next. Snake, she ... she ... eunh! Efface un peu err. If you want to be a magis ... Go out of this ... Dangerous. If you want to go, **if you want to** go out of this forest, climb in a tree. Je ne sais même pas ce que sa veut dit. Go out of this forest because we should do what? Toi tu parles vite tu veux que j'écris comment? **Go out of this dangerous forest.** Of this dangerous forest. Forest! Forest! From this ... Of this dangerous forest! Je ne voulais même que noh! Quand elle écrit « A » ça prend tout la page si la. **Climb on this tree.** Attendez un peu. Je ne peux pas faire comme ça. Comment ça on peut di que if you want to. Entend ça, go out from this dangerous forest. Climb? Climb. On n'a dit que c'est le magic forest noh? Ne me grondez pas. [...] C'est quoi ca. **Climb on this tree and take one of his fruit.** If it is green tu dis good. Voilà c'est vrais merci, c'est vrai. Dit, dit encore ce que tu disais. If you climb on this tree ... Weeeh! Si j'écris je vais écrit, je vais écrit gros eunh. Regardes comment tu ecrit 'climb'. Climb, on this forest? Heheh! C'est quoi? On this tree. And take one of his fruits. And take one fruit ... one of his fruits. **If the fruit is green,** leave it ... like that but if the fruit is red, take it and eat the fruit.

The excerpt above reveals that children consistently shifted between French and English, with French being used as the main language of mediation together with some local language as they co-constructed the narrative and recorded it in English. It is clear from this excerpt that these multilingual Francophone children use French as a mediating tool for developing learning in the medium of English. Although the final product was in English, the process of co-constructing the text was predominantly in French with local languages used mainly for exclamations of approval or disapproval. French served a variety of purposes, including for explanation, clarification and correction. More importantly, children's interactions in the construction of the final draft reveal further linguistic strategies used in accessing learning across the EME curriculum as discussed below.

Translation

Translation appeared to be the most widely used learning strategy observed or reported amongst all children both in class and at home. In the classroom, they primarily asked their peers to translate or explain what the teacher is saying. During classroom observations, we picked up requests such as 'disappointment veut dire quoi?' (*What does disappointment mean?*); 'available c'est quoi?' (*What is 'available'?*) and many other single word translation requests between participants. Interview data revealed that this was common practice even at home amongst children:

Interviewer: Donc quand vous ne comprenez pas vous demandez à quelqu'un de vous traduire ça en français? (*So when you do not understand something you ask someone to translate into French, right?*)

L8: Oui. (Yes)

Interviewer: Et vous pensez que cette traduction en français vous aide à mieux comprendre? (*And you think this translation into French helps you to understand better?*)

L8: Oui, ça m'aide à comprendre mieux. (*Yes, it helps me understand better.*)

Further probing revealed that children used different resources at home – such as family members, or bilingual dictionaries – to enable large amounts of translation. In one case, the student used Google Translate to translate all homework into French, complete tasks in French and then use Google Translate to translate her response back to English.

Code switching, borrowing and safe talk

Code switching was also very common in children's interactions. As discussed in section 2.2 above, code switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or language varieties, within a single utterance or discourse. As can be seen in the excerpt from the unsupervised task above, children constantly alternated between French and English to convey their message and contribute to the final output of their group task. Other examples from the data included utterances such as the following: 'Après on dit que *sir we have finished*', 'On avait meme *spell ça dans human rights*', 'Après il écrit the *direction and the old woman*'. In some cases where children's interaction was mainly in French, English words were 'borrowed' directly and used in French sentences as in the following examples: 'Tu connais le *answer*', 'J'aime le *flag*', 'Snake est toujours dangereux', 'Tu as vu *that story*?'. Gardner-Chloris (2009) warns that understanding the language use of bilinguals requires some insider knowledge to determine whether code-switching is a result of competence or deficiency in the languages being used. Based on the evidence presented in sections 4.1.3 and 4.2.1 above, we argue that English is not part of these children's linguistic repertoire apart from within the classroom and as a result, their use of English in learning is mainly to consolidate basic content knowledge and they need their other languages (predominantly French, as the evidence shows) to enable them to do that.

The specificity of language use in the examples presented in this section is that French seems to be their dominant language and they only draw upon a limited number of key vocabulary items in English to sustain content knowledge. This use of a limited number of English words in their discourse was further evident in their classroom interactions with teachers. Classroom observations showed, for

example, that children interaction in English was mainly limited to safe talk as very often they were only required to show understanding through completing teacher statements using one or two words, for example:

Teacher: Somebody who sells things in the market is called ...

SS: ... a trader.

This in some way supports learning but limits it to knowledge and understanding, rather than to more cognitive/critical processing of the knowledge itself.

5

Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to document and understand Francophone multilingual schoolchildren's resources and strategies for accessing learning in an English medium educational context in Cameroon. The study was conducted in the cosmopolitan city of Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon, with upper primary level children. As the findings presented above show, these children had access to a range of different learning resources to support education in the medium of English and as such could be seen as better resourced than many children, particularly in the majority rural communities of the country. Despite access to these resources, the findings suggests that these children were not engaging critically with learning for a variety of reasons related to the language of schooling. It was found, for example, that for all these children, English, the language of schooling, was not spoken anywhere outside the classroom and that at home and in different social settings, including in the playground at school, children communicated mostly in French and other local languages. This rather limited access to the language of schooling has been shown to constitute a major barrier to the quality of learning for multilingual children in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Ampiah 2008; Clegg and Simpson, 2016; Desai, 2016; Milligan, Clegg and Tikly, 2016; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Ssentanda et al. 2019). This is mainly because, with very limited opportunity to use the language of schooling outside the classroom, children are not able to develop both the basic interpersonal communication skills and the cognitive academic language proficiency (Cummins, 2008) needed to engage with learning in the medium of English. This is made the more challenging for children when, because of the monolingual policy in place, teachers do not provide space for them to draw upon their familiar languages as resources for engaging with learning in the classroom.

Despite this, findings from classroom observation, unsupervised tasks and child-participant interviews showed that while their teachers insisted on using only English language, children were using their multilingual

resources covertly in the classroom as strategies to unpack basic content knowledge, a situation which Probyn (2009) describes as 'smuggling' home languages into the classroom. This finding is consistent with the vast amount of literature which suggests that there are possible multilingual strategies which make use of learners' multilingualism as a resource to support curriculum engagement and English language development. As was discussed in section 2 above, these include translation (e.g., Halai and Karuku, 2013; Erling et al., 2017), codeswitching (e.g., Makgato, 2014; Clegg and Simpson, 2016), language supportive pedagogic strategies (e.g., Milligan, Clegg and Tikly, 2016; Gabrieli, Sane and Alphonse, 2018) and translanguaging (e.g., Bagwasi, 2017; Maseko and Mkhize, 2021). Unfortunately, in the context of this study, policy does not yet allow for any of these strategies to be used. As a result, learners who are visibly struggling to access learning in English tend to rely on strategies such as translation that just help them 'get by' and teachers' approaches such as safe talk which allow learning content to be covered without real engagement with the cognitive and linguistic activities which help students co-construct and understand new knowledge.

The policy landscape within which this study was conducted still promotes foreign languages above local languages and in school contexts there is even stronger marginalisation of local languages and their benefits to student learning. In fact, the exclusion of home languages from the classroom has been described as a linguistic genocide (Nkwetisama, 2017) on children's local languages and an epistemic injustice (Esch, 2010; Milligan, 2020) in education. An English-only policy promotes the belief that local languages have no educational value and as a result, deprives children from benefitting from parental support in the home language. The evidence from this study shows that children are attempting to transgress the monolingual barriers to their learning by drawing from their other linguistic resources to develop knowledge

and understanding. Unfortunately, because this is not supported by teachers, children's use of these linguistic resources and strategies only helps them navigate learning in limited/limiting ways. There is therefore a need for a policy change which recognises the multilingual repertoires of learners and their value in facilitating learning. There is evidence from this and other studies that 'learners will be better served if the language education models draw and reflect on everyday African multilingual realities of the communities concerned' (Banda, 2010, p. 232).

The multiple languages used by these children in out-of-school spaces and their use of some of these languages, particularly French, in mediating learning and engaging with each other in the unsupervised tasks are a useful basis for developing multilingual policies, materials and pedagogic resources and strategies. In fact, there is strong evidence elsewhere in the African continent, of teachers drawing on multilingual resources – for example, through the use of language supportive materials (Milligan, Clegg and Tikly, 2016; Gabrieli, Sane and Alphonse, 2018) as well as through multilingual pedagogic strategies such as code-switching (e.g., Makgato, 2014; Ncoko et al. 2000) and translanguaging (e.g., by Bagwasi, 2017; Charamba, 2020; Maseko and Mkhize, 2021) – to help multilingual learners broaden pre-existing knowledge and deepen their understanding of and engagement with subject matter. What is more, as explained in the Introduction

to this report, Cameroon already has a bilingual policy (in English and French) in place and there is a growing societal acceptance for multilingual practices outside the school, for example, in the popular use of Camfranglais – a mixture of Cameroonian French, English and local jargon – amongst youth (Stein-Kanjora, 2016; Vakunta, 2014). However, in the school system, French and English, as well as other local languages continue to be treated as mutually exclusive codes of communication. The evidence presented in this study shows that multilingual primary school children are transgressing the monolingual educational norms of the school and using both languages in a mutually supportive manner to access learning. It might therefore be more pedagogically relevant to support children's use of their multilingual repertoires to enable them to transcend basic translation and actually engage in/with learning.

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Appendix

Children's unsupervised story writing task: Final text

The Magic Forest

Once upon a time there was an old woman who lived in a forest. She was called Mary she was living in a hut. One day she left her hut and saw a snake. Very surprise the snake was talking to her the snake said, if you want to go out of this dangerouse forest climb on this tree and take one of it's fruits if the fruit is green don't take it but if it is red take it. The old woman refuse to climb on that tree. She did not climb because she was afraid of the snake. She took a stone and heat the head of the snake but she foggot that the animals of this forest are magic the snake became angry because she refuse the proposition and shoot a stone on his head. The snake wanted to bite her but, she ran away. When running, she saw a lake and she wanted to drink water. And a tortuse appear. Please please help me. How can I help you says the tortuse a snake want to bite me. Come let go away the old woman was not sure that the tortuse wanted to help her prouve me that you want to help me said the old woman. If you are not sure go away now I am sorry now I am sure that you want to help me the tortuse hold the hand of the old woman and they disappear. the appear in front of a tree the tortuse said to the old woman to ask what you wanted to this tree. the woman said show me the way to go to town yes I will do what you want says the tree. The tree said to the old woman climb on my branch and it will bring you to town.



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