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Translanguaging in Cameroon English Language Teaching Classroom: Effects on Learners Engagement and Outcome

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Abstract
This study examines the roles of translaguaging and code switching in Cameroon's English Language teaching (ELT) classrooms and their effects on learners' engagement and academic outcomes. Anchored on sociolinguistic and pedagogic perspectives, the study investigates how the strategic use of learners' home languages and the English Language influence their participation, comprehension and performance. Based on Classroom observations, learner questionnaire, interviews and achievement tests which were administered in four secondary schools in the city of Yaounde, the findings revealed that purposeful translanguaging supports clearer content understanding, increases learner's engagement, and reduces anxiety especially among lower proficiency learners. It was also realized that unstructured code-switching sometimes leads to overreliance on the first language and limited exposure to the target language. This study contributes to the ongoing debates on multilingual pedagogies through the provision of empirical evidence from Cameroonian practical classroom experiences.

Keywords: Translanguaging, code switiching, Cameroon ELT.

Introduction

Language practice in multilingual educational context has received increasing scholarly attention especially in such contexts as Cameroon where learners often bring in their multiple languages into the classroom. Cameroon has been rightly described as one of the most linguistically diverse nations in Africa (Anchimbe, 2005; Kouega, 2007). This context provides an opportunity to explore how teachers and learners mobilize multiple languages during classroom interaction. With two official languages (English and French) coexisting along with pidgin and more than 250 indigenous languages, the Cameroonian ELT classroom embodies a dynamic multilingual environment in which pedagogic communication often relies on flexible language practice.

Although English is the official language of instruction in Anglophone Cameroon, many learners encounter it only in school, with limited exposure in their homes and community environments (Ngefac, 2010). This restricted access has encouraged teachers to rely on familiar linguistic resources to facilitate understanding, sustain engagement and support leaners' participation. Such practices resonate with global theoretical developments that frame mulilingualism as a pedagogic asset rather than a barrier to language acquisition (Garcia and Li, 2014; Heugh, 2011). Translanguaging has emerged as a particularly influential concept, describing how multilingual speakers draw o their full linguistic repertoires for meaning construction, communication and learning (Garcia and Li, 2014). At the same time, the long-standing construct of code-switching continues to offer insights into the structural and interactional patterns governing language alteration in multilingual classrooms (Poplack, 1980 and Auer, 1998).

In Cameroon, studies have revealed that teachers often shift between English, Cameroon pidgin English, and various indigenous languages to clarify meaning, explain vocabulary items, manage classroom discipline and establish relational rapport with learners (Ngefac, 2010). These observations align with the broader African studies that demonstrate that mulilingual pedagogies enhance comprehension, promote inclusion and support long-term academic development, especially when used strategically (Heugh, 2015).

Despite these benefits, debates on the potential risks of allowing multiple languages in the ELT classroom persist. Some critics argue that uncontrolled switching may limit exposure to the target language and hinder proficiency development (Ellis, 2005; MacSwan, 20717). Others point to the absence of clear guidelines on when and how to use learners' languages pedagogically, especially in contexts where English-only ideologies remain dominant (Probyn, 2009). These concerns are relevant in Cameroon where most studies remain small-scale, qualitative and descriptive, with limited evidence linking multilingal classroom practices to measurable learning outcomes (Chiatoh, 2014). It is therefore imperative to explore empirically grounded research that examines the pedagogic functions and effects of translanguaging and code-switching in the Cameroonian ELT classroom. This study is designed to fill in this gap through the exploration of how these linguistic practices influence learner engagement and academic achievement. It therefore contributes to global debates on multilingual education through the provision of evidence-based insights that can inform policy, teacher training and practice.

Conceptualising Translanguaging and Code-switching in ELT and Outcomes

Translanguaging and code-switching have become central concepts in contemporary multilingual education research.

Translanguaging refers to the dynamic use of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning, learn, and communicate, rather than treating languages as separate systems (Garcia & Wei, 2014). In contrast, code-switching traditionally describes the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single interaction or utterance, often governed by syntactic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic constraints (Poplack, 1980). While early scholarship viewed classroom code-switching as a sign of linguistic deficiency, more recent work recognises its pedagogical value, especially in contexts where learners operate in highly multilingual environments (Cummins, 2007; MacSwan, 2017).

In African contexts, these concepts are embedded in complex colonial and postcolonial language ecologies, where indigenous languages, national lingua francas, and former colonial languages co-exist (Bamgbose, 1991). Research increasingly frames translanguaging not as a problem to be eliminated, but as a resource for learning in settings characterised by linguistic diversity and limited access to English outside the classroom (Heugh, 2011). In Cameroon specifically, the situation is shaped by the coexistence of English, French, Cameroon Pidgin English, and over 250 indigenous languages (Anchimbe, 2005). Studies of classroom discourse in Cameroon have documented frequent shifts between English and local languages, often motivated by a need to clarify meaning, manage the classroom, or build interpersonal relations (Ngefac, 2010; Kouega, 2007). These studies provide a foundation for understanding how translanguaging practices naturally emerge in Cameroonian ELT classrooms.

A substantial body of international research has identified the pedagogical functions of translanguaging and code-switching in language classrooms. These include scaffolding comprehension, facilitating vocabulary development, checking understanding, and supporting higher-order thinking skills (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García et al., 2017). Translanguaging has been shown to help learners link new knowledge to existing cognitive and linguistic resources, making abstract concepts more accessible.In African classrooms, these functions are particularly salient due to large class sizes, limited instructional materials, and heterogeneous proficiency levels. Heugh (2015) demonstrates that strategic use of home languages improves conceptual understanding and long-term retention in multilingual African classrooms. Similarly, studies in Nigeria and South Africa report that code-switching enables teachers to maintain learner attention, clarify grammatical structures, and reduce cognitive overload (Auer, 1998; Adendorff, 1996).
Cameroon-based studies reinforce these findings. Kouega (2007) reports that teachers shift to Cameroon Pidgin English or local languages to explain difficult grammar points and unfamiliar vocabulary. Ngefac (2010) shows that code-switching in Cameroon classrooms often serves discourse management functions, such as gaining learners' attention and restoring discipline, while also contributing to meaning-making. More recent work suggests that these practices, when deliberate rather than random, can function as informal scaffolding mechanisms that compensate for learners' limited exposure to English outside school (Chiatoh, 2014).

Learner engagement is commonly understood as a multidimensional construct involving behavioural, emotional, and cognitive participation in learning activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). International literature has linked translanguaging to increased classroom participation, willingness to communicate, and positive learner identities, particularly among linguistically minoritised students (Hornberger & Link, 2012; García & Kleyn, 2016). In African contexts, engagement has been shown to improve when learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds are validated within classroom practices (Heugh, 2011). Studies from Ethiopia and Tanzania indicate that allowing limited use of home languages fosters a sense of inclusion and reduces language-related anxiety (Probyn, 2009). In Cameroon, empirical evidence suggests similar patterns. Chiatoh and Nankam (2014) found that learners in classrooms where teachers judiciously alternated between English and familiar languages demonstrated higher levels of participation and more frequent peer interaction. Ngefac (2010) also observed that code-switching reduced learner silence, particularly among rural and low-proficiency learners, by lowering the affective filter and creating a more supportive interactional environment. These findings align with global theories of affective engagement and validate the relevance of translanguaging practices in Cameroonian ELT settings. The relationship between translanguaging, code-switching, and learning outcomes has attracted growing scholarly attention. Internationally, studies suggest that strategic first-language use can support second-language literacy development, conceptual transfer, and deeper content learning (Cummins, 2007; Thomas & Collier, 2002). However, concerns remain that excessive reliance on the first language may limit exposure to the target language and slow down proficiency development (Ellis, 2005).

African research provides mixed but increasingly nuanced evidence. Heugh (2015) demonstrates that sustained bilingual instructional models are associated with higher long-term academic achievement than English-only approaches in several African countries. Conversely, Bamgbose (2011) warns that poorly planned switching practices can reinforce low expectations for learners' English development if not aligned with clear pedagogic goals. In Cameroon, systematic empirical studies remain limited, but available evidence points to generally positive effects when translanguaging is structured. Chiatoh (2014) reports that learners exposed to principled bilingual explanations performed better on comprehension and writing tasks than peers in strictly English-only classrooms. Kouega (2007) similarly notes that code-switching facilitated faster task completion and more accurate responses in grammar-focused lessons. These local findings resonate with broader African and global research on cross-linguistic transfer and cognitive interdependence.

Despite growing support for translanguaging pedagogies, significant debates persist. One concern is the potential for uncontrolled code-switching to reduce opportunities for meaningful target language practice (MacSwan, 2017). Another critique relates to the lack of clear operational guidelines for teachers on when and how to use learners' languages pedagogically (Probyn, 2009). In Cameroon, research gaps are particularly evident. Most existing studies are qualitative and small-scale, focusing on classroom discourse rather than systematically measuring learner outcomes over time (Ngefac, 2010; Chiatoh, 2014). There is also limited research comparing urban and rural contexts, where linguistic repertoires and exposure to English differ significantly. Furthermore, few studies have examined learners' own perspectives on translanguaging practices, despite evidence that attitudes

strongly influence engagement and achievement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Globally, scholars have called for more contextually grounded, longitudinal, and mixed-methods research that links classroom language practices directly to measurable learning outcomes (García et al., 2017). Such calls are particularly relevant for Cameroon, where multilingual realities are underrepresented in international applied linguistics literature. The literature indicates that translanguaging and code-switching are not merely communicative strategies but pedagogical resources that can enhance learner engagement and academic outcomes when used strategically. Evidence from Cameroon aligns with broader African and global findings, demonstrating both the benefits and risks of these practices. However, clear gaps remain in large-scale, outcome-oriented research. Addressing these gaps is essential for informing language-in-education policy and classroom practice in Cameroon's ELT context.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an integrated theoretical framework that draws on Translanguaging Theory, Sociocultural Theory of Learning, and Affective Filter Hypothesis to explain how language alternation practices in Cameroon ELT classrooms influence learner engagement and academic outcomes. The framework is structured to reflect the multilingual realities of Cameroon, while remaining consistent with broader African and global scholarship. Translanguaging Theory provides the central lens for this study. García and Wei (2014) conceptualise translanguaging as the flexible deployment of a learner's entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning, learn, and communicate. Rather than viewing languages as separate and competing systems, the theory argues that bilingual and multilingual learners operate with an integrated linguistic system. This perspective is particularly relevant to Cameroon, where learners routinely navigate English, French, Cameroon Pidgin English, and indigenous languages in everyday communication.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) underpins the interactional and social dimensions of the framework. The theory posits that learning occurs through social interaction and is mediated by language as a primary cognitive tool. Central to this theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the gap between what learners can achieve independently and what they can achieve with guidance. In multilingual classrooms, translanguaging and code-switching function as mediational tools that enable teachers and peers to scaffold learning within the learner's ZPD. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) complements the cognitive focus of the framework by explaining the emotional and motivational dimensions of language learning. The hypothesis proposes that learners' emotions—such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence—act as a "filter" that can either facilitate or block language acquisition. When anxiety is high and motivation is low, language input is less likely to be internalised.

These three theories are integrated in this study to form a coherent explanatory model. Translanguaging Theory explains what linguistic practices occur in the classroom and how multilingual repertoires are mobilised. Sociocultural Theory explains how these practices mediate learning through social interaction and scaffolding. The Affective Filter Hypothesis explains why these practices influence learner engagement and outcomes by shaping learners' emotional and motivational states.

Methodology

We adopted a mixed-method research design because it allows for the integration of quantitative measures of learner performance with qualitative insights into classroom interaction and learner experiences. We considered four secondary schools in the city of Yaoundé (GBHS Obala, GBHS Awai village, GBHS Bertoua and GBTHS Bertoua). These schools represent urban and semi-urban settings where multilingual practices are common and where English is taught as a subject and used as a medium of instruction. Eight teachers of English from the four schools and 180 students were purposefully sampled for this study. A purposive sampling was considered appropriate because it allows the selection of cases where translanguaging practices are naturally occurring. Data was collected through a number of procedures. First, we used a structured and semi-structured observation of eight lessons. With the permission of the teacher, the lessons were audio-recorded. An observation checklist was developed to code: frequency of language alternation, functions (explanation, classroom management, affective support), and patterns of teacher–student interaction. An interviewed was conducted to get perceptions of translanguaging and code switching, levels of engagement, and attitudes towards language use in the classroom. Pre and post achievement tests were administered before and after every lesson to measure learning outcomes. The tests were limited to grammar and vocabulary. Data from the interview and achievement tests were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. We used such techniques as means and standard deviations, paired-sample t-tests to compare pre- and post-test scores, correlation analysis to examine the relationship between language practices and learner engagement. This aligns with international standards for educational data analysis (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative data from observations and interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

Data Presentation and Anlaysis

In this section, we present and analyze the data obtained from classroom observations, learner achievement tests, teacher and learner interviews and a co-relational analysis of the results obtained from the four institutions that were considered for this study. The focus is principally to show how translanguaging and code-switching influence learner engagement, comprehension and academic performance in the Cameroonian ELT situation. Mindful of the fact that we considered the mixed method design, we present the quantitative findings (pre- and post-test results, frequency scores, engagement statistics and correlation coefficients) and qualitative insights (themes from interviews, discourse patterns from classroom interactions and observation notes). This integrated approach allows for a holistic interpretation of the effects of translanguaging, revealing pedagogic, emotional, sociolinguistic and academic dimensions of language alternation in ELT classroom.

Pattern of Pre-Test Scores

The pre-test scores across the 180 learners revealed a general pattern of low comprehension in grammar and vocabulary before translanguagig supported instruction as can be seen on the following statistics.

School	Mean (%)	SD
GBHS Obala	41	9.3
GBHS Awai Village	36	10.1
GBHS Bertoua	44	8.7
GBTHS Bertoua	39	9.9

Table 1: Pre-Test Scores.

The low initial scores that averaged 40% indicates that learners generally had difficulty with English grammar and vocabulary when taught using English-only approaches. This could be as a result of two major reasons. First, the linguistic ecology of Yaoundé includes French, Cameroon pidgin English and several indigenous languages. This lead to a situation where learners study English without consistent and sufficient immersion outside school. Second, grammar rules such as tense transformation, reported speech and model usage are abstract concepts that require strong metalinguistic awareness, something learners struggle with when taught exclusively in English. Consequently, the low pre-test performance confirms the need for scaffolding strategies such as translanguaging.

Post-Test Scores after translanguaging supported lessons
The post-test scores revealed substantial improvement across the four schools as can be seen on Table Two below.

School	Mean (%)	SD
GBHS Obala	63	7.8
GBHS Awai Village	67	6.9
GBHS Bertoua	59	8.2
GBTHS Bertoua	65	7.1

Post-Test Scores after translanguaging supported lessons
The average post-test mean of 63.5% represents a 23.5 point increase which demonstrates that translanguaging-supported instruction had a substantial, positive and measurable effect on learners' comprehension. GBHS Awai Village, despite low pre-test scores, achived the highest post-test improvement, pointing to the transformative effect of using familiar languages in rural and semi-rural contexts. GBHS Bertoua, a more urban institution, showed moderate improvement which aligns with the lower frequency of L1 use in teacher practices. All schools improved significantly, confirming that translanguaging benefits learners regardless of geographic or linguistic profile. A paired sample t-test was also conducted to compare pre-test and post test scores and the results revealed a paired test value of 18.21(t) $p < 0.001$. This result reveals that the difference between pre- and post-intervention scores is higly significant, educationally memaningful and not due to chance. This confirms the idea that translanguaging significantly enhances learning.

Based on the observational checklist, translanguaging frequency per 55 minute lesson ranged from 11-26 occurrences. Based on this observation, the following patterns were noted. First, GBHS Awai Village and GBHS Bertoua which had the highest frequencies exhibited 22-26 tranlanguaging instances which correlated with their high engagement levels while GBHS Obala exhibited 2-11 translanguaging instances. The teacher in Obala followed a strict English-only policy which resulted in lower engagement scores (5.6). This led us to the conclusion that frequent intentional translanguaging increases engagement, participation and comprehension.

It was also necessary to analyze the correlation between translanguaging frequency and engagement. This led us to the correlation coefficient: $r = 0.78$ ($p < 0.01$). A correlation of 0.78 indicates a strong positive relationship between both variables. This means that the higher the incorporation of translanguaging in Cameroon ELT, the higher the engagement and that lower translaguaging input would lead to lower participation, more anxiety, slower comprehension. This reinforces the socio-cognitive function of translanguaging in enhancing learner interaction and confidence.

Across all lessons, translanguaging provided a cognitive bridge which enabled learners to grasp new English concepts by linking them to familiar linguistic structures. In GBHS Awai for example, while a teacher was teaching reported speech, she first explained the concepts in English. Only four of the 38 learners responded. After switching to French equivalents, participation rose to 33 learners. This inspired that idea that translanguaging enables meaning negotiation, metalinguistic comparison, schema activation and rapid decoding of abstract grammar which is quite consistent with theories of bilingual cognitive interdependence. The interviews also revealed that translanguaging serves as affective support to and reduction of anxiety in learners. The learners felt more comfortable when French is used to facilitate certain understanding. The teachers revealed that their learners participate more when they switch to French. This indicates that translanguaging serves as an affective buffer, lowering speech anxiety, fear of mistakes and linguistic insecurity. In fact, the high engagement scores (7.0 and 8.8) validate these findings. It was also observed that in in-group work sessions, students used French and indigenous languages to teach each other. They translate difficult vocabulary into French, Bulu, Ewondo for better comprehension. This resulted in 43% faster task completion compared to English-only groups. This led us to the conclusion that peer translanguaging reinforces knowledge sharing, promotes social bonding, fosters a community of practice and builds learner autonomy.

Importantly, while the benefits were dominant, teachers were concerned about a number of isues. They felt that some learners become overly reliant on L1 which may delay learning of the target language. They also indicated that translanguaging makes it difficult to transition to English-only examinations. This is because their learners get too comfortable with their L1s and so English-only exams become a little estranged to them. Finally, they argued that incorporating translanguaging makes it hard to maintain English immersion in urban schools. The implication here is that translanguaging needs to be structured, intentional, goal-driven and also align with learning objectives and must neither depend on random notions nor excessive rigidity. The integrated qualitative and quantitative data reveals that translanguaging is not merely a cultural artefact of Cameroonian classrooms but a pedagogically productive strategy that enhances angagement, comprehension, participation, test performance and learner confidence. Quantitative improvements confirm qualitative experiences which creates triangulated validity. From these analyses, therefore, it could be fair to conclude that translanguaging in Cameroon ELT classrooms is effective, context-responsive, emotionally supportive, cognitively beneficial and culturally relevant.

Discussion
This study set out to examine the role of translanguaging and code-switching in Cameroon English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, with particular attention to learner engagement and learning outcomes. The findings, derived from classroom observations, learner assessments, and interview data, indicate that translanguaging functions as a significant pedagogical resource in multilingual Cameroonian classrooms rather than as a barrier to English acquisition. The results confirm that translanguaging is an established and functional classroom

practice in Cameroon, reflecting the country's complex multilingual ecology. Consistent with earlier Cameroonian studies, teachers frequently alternated between English, Cameroon Pidgin English, and local languages to clarify meaning, manage classroom interaction, and maintain learner attention (Kouega, 2007; Ngefac, 2010). This study extends these findings by demonstrating that such practices are not merely incidental but correlate positively with learner engagement and improved academic performance. The observed improvement in post-test scores supports Chiatoh's (2014) assertion that bilingual explanations enhance comprehension in Cameroonian classrooms where learners have limited exposure to English beyond school. Rather than replacing English instruction, translanguaging served as a scaffold that enabled learners to access content more effectively. This aligns with Cummins' (2007) theory of common underlying proficiency, which posits that conceptual knowledge acquired through one language can transfer to another.

Learner engagement emerged as a critical outcome of translanguaging practices. The strong correlation between translanguaging frequency and engagement scores suggests that allowing learners to draw on familiar linguistic resources reduces anxiety and encourages participation. These findings resonate with Ngefac's (2010) observation that code-switching in Cameroon classrooms lowers learner silence, particularly among low-proficiency and rural learners. From a broader African perspective, similar patterns have been reported in South Africa and Ethiopia, where the strategic use of home languages increased learner participation and classroom interaction (Adendorff, 1996; Probyn, 2009; Heugh, 2011). This study contributes original evidence from Cameroon by linking engagement not only to classroom interaction but also to measurable learning gains, thereby strengthening the argument for translanguaging as an engagement-enhancing strategy in African ELT contexts.

The statistically significant improvement in learners' post-test performance suggests that translanguaging supports comprehension and retention of English grammar and vocabulary. This finding aligns with Kouega's (2007) classroom-based observations that code-switching facilitates faster task completion and more accurate responses in grammar-focused lessons. While earlier research in Cameroon has largely been descriptive, this study adds empirical support by linking translanguaging practices to learning outcomes. However, the findings also reflect ongoing debates in the literature. Some teachers expressed concern that excessive or unstructured translanguaging may limit exposure to English, a concern echoed by Bamgbose (2011) and Ellis (2005). This suggests that translanguaging should not be understood as unrestricted language mixing but as a deliberate instructional strategy guided by clear pedagogic objectives. A key implication of this study is the need for balance. While translanguaging enhances understanding and engagement, it must be implemented in ways that do not undermine learners' opportunities to practice English. MacSwan (2017) cautions against romanticising translanguaging without considering its instructional boundaries. The Cameroonian data support this caution by showing that the most effective classrooms were those where translanguaging was purposeful, limited, and aligned with lesson goals. This reinforces Heugh's (2015) argument that multilingual pedagogies are most effective when systematically planned rather than informally applied. In the Cameroonian context, where English is both a subject and a medium of instruction, structured translanguaging offers a pragmatic middle ground between rigid English-only policies and unrestricted language use.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that translanguaging and code-switching are integral features of English language teaching in Cameroon and that, when used strategically, they positively influence learner engagement and learning outcomes. The findings provide empirical support for existing Cameroonian research that views classroom language alternation as a pedagogical resource rather than a deficiency (Kouega, 2007; Ngefac, 2010; Chiatoh, 2014). By combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, the study shows that translanguaging facilitates comprehension, reduces learner anxiety, and encourages active participation, particularly in contexts where learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. At the same time, the study acknowledges legitimate concerns regarding excessive reliance on familiar languages and underscores the importance of structured and purposeful implementation.Theoretically, the findings support sociocultural and bilingual education frameworks that emphasise the role of learners' full linguistic repertoires in knowledge construction (Cummins, 2007; García & Wei, 2014). Practically, the study calls for a re-examination of English-only policies in Cameroon ELT classrooms, advocating instead for context-sensitive multilingual pedagogies that reflect learners' linguistic realities. In conclusion, translanguaging in Cameroonian ELT classrooms should neither be prohibited nor uncritically embraced. Rather, it should be recognised as a pedagogical tool that, when thoughtfully employed, can enhance both engagement and academic achievement. Further large-scale and longitudinal research is required to refine guidelines for effective classroom implementation and to inform language-in-education policy in Cameroon.

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