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Kuchah, Kuchah; Milligan, Lizzi O.

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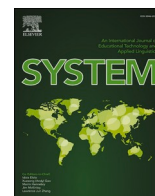
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‘Tu connais le answer?’: Multilingual children’s attempts to navigate monolingual English Medium classrooms in Cameroon

Kuchah Kuchah^{a,*}, Lizzi O. Milligan^b

^a University of Birmingham, School of Education, Ring Rd N, Pritchatts Rd, Birmingham, B15 2SA, United Kingdom

^b University of Bath, Department of Education, Claverton Down, Bath, BA2 7AY, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways that multilingual children attempt to access the English medium curriculum in Cameroonian primary education. We focus on Francophone Yaoundé where there has been a sharp rise in the number of children from predominantly Francophone multilingual homes attending English medium schools. The paper draws from a child-centred case study and data generated through classroom observations, child-group and individual interviews and recordings of student interactions around unsupervised tasks to show how learners are drawing from their multilingual resources to attempt to transgress monolingual norms in the classroom. The data also shows that learners are doing what they can to ‘get by’ but they are doing this in ways that are not supported by policy, pedagogy, or teaching materials. The paper concludes with a discussion of the ways that monolingual policies epistemically exclude children in an immensely complex multilingual context and draws implications for more inclusive policy and classroom practice.

1. Introduction

Decades of research from across the African continent have shown how learning in a dominant, ex-colonial language unfairly impacts on multilingual children’s ability to engage and succeed in their education (e.g. Desai, 2016; Kyeyune, 2003; Madonsela, 2015; Nomlomo & Vuzo, 2014; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Salie et al., 2020; Ssentanda et al., 2019). Recent studies (Kiramba, 2018; Kuchah et al., 2022) have usefully conceptualised this as a process of epistemic exclusion by which children are not able to access curricular content, make meaning in their learning or develop the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). There has been significant research that has explored the ways that teachers support learners’ access to the curriculum and meaning making through multilingual and translanguaging pedagogic practices (Banda, 2010; Krause & Prinsloo, 2016; Maseko & Mkhize, 2021; Norro, 2022; Probyn, 2015). However, there has been much less written about how multilingual children themselves navigate their learning, especially within schooling contexts where teachers are prevented, by policy, from drawing on children’s and their own multilingual resources. Recent global interest in Sustainable Development Goal 4 requires a closer understanding of learning in educational research and we would

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: h.k.kuchah@bham.ac.uk (K. Kuchah).

argue that there is no better source of knowledge about how learning takes place than learners themselves. We focus here on EME¹ schooling in Cameroon, where children are expected to learn in English from the first day of primary school. This exclusionary policy necessitates children to find their own avenues for different aspects of epistemic inclusion, revealing important insights for policy and practice in Cameroon and beyond.

Despite substantial research into EME in basic education in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is yet no research which specifically looks at how teachers and learners use language in EME primary schools in Cameroon. However, it is important to note that policy guidelines tend to either be silent on how language is used or promote an English-only approach. For example, the *Law to lay down guidelines for Education in Cameroon* (henceforth, *Education Law*) (1998) recognises *English-speaking* and *French-speaking* schools as the only two pathways to formal education in the country while staying silent on local languages, of which there are over 280 used across Cameroon (Ethnologue, 2009). In response to this law, the *National Syllabus for English Speaking Schools* (henceforth, *Syllabus*) (2000) recognises that ‘at the level of basic education in Cameroon, the mastery of English by the pupil enables him or her to grasp with ease the other subjects of the curriculum’ (p1) and requires teachers to ‘create avenues for maximum exposure of the pupil to English; *this entails that English should be taught in English*’ (p.17) (our emphasis) and by extension, that all subjects should be taught in only English. It is within this context of English-only policy and classroom practice that our study is situated.

2. Literature review

2.1. The epistemic and linguistic injustice of monolingual policies

A large body of research has highlighted the ways that monolingual EME policies have impacted on the quality of teaching and learning across Sub-Saharan Africa (Ampiah, 2008; Clegg & Simpson, 2016; Garrouste, 2011; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Pretorius & Currin, 2010). This literature consistently shows that at the point of transition to EME, learners struggle to write about complex issues, read textbook content (which is rarely adapted to second/third language learners), listen and fully understand what the teacher is saying or talk in group discussions in English. While the point of transition is usually at the start of grade four, it is important to note that in Cameroon, learners learn in English- or French-medium schools from the start of primary school and research has highlighted the additional challenges that this brings for learners (Kuchah, 2016; Kuchah, 2018).

Recent scholarship has usefully drawn on theories of social (in)justice to further conceptualise the ways that epistemic and linguistic injustices of monolingual policies reproduce and exacerbate structural disadvantage (Piller, 2016; Tikly, 2016; Adamson, 2021; Milligan, 2020; Phyak & Sah, 2022). This is supported by evidence from across sub-Saharan Africa which shows that the learners who struggle are disproportionately those already at risk of marginalisation due to their location, gender or socio-economic status (see Milligan et al., 2020; Pretorius & Currin, 2010; Pufall et al., 2016). If children enter EME classrooms on an unequal footing – due to, for example, their limited access to LoLT resources at home or their need to engage in household labour – the expectation that they will learn only in an unfamiliar language further prevents any possibilities for ‘universal participation on terms of equality of all inquirers’ (Anderson, 2012, 72; see also Milligan, 2020). This has clearly been demonstrated in monolingual classroom-based research from across sub-Saharan Africa, where it is only small numbers of learners who are following content and engaging with the teacher (Kuchah et al., 2022; Erling et al., 2017). There are also many examples of what looks only at first glance to be indicative of universal participation. Here, studies report classrooms with high levels of ‘performative participation’ and ‘safe talk’, where learners are responding to scaffolded questions with one-word or short phrase responses, usually in chorus with other learners (Chick, 1996; Kuchah et al., 2022; Rubagumya, 2003). Teachers and learners can complete a lesson and cover the content required but with very limited opportunities for more cognitively and linguistically demanding exercises that would develop learners’ language and further their understanding. In other words, when multilingual children are learning exclusively in an unfamiliar LoLT, they may be physically present in school, but they are epistemically excluded from meaningful participation in the classroom because the LoLT prevents them from engaging in dialogic interactions which enable both teachers and learners to co-construct subject knowledge and develop language (Kiramba, 2018; Kuchah et al., 2022; Vuzo, 2010).

2.2. Monolingual policies, multilingual practices

Despite the existence of monolingual policies and ideologies (Esch, 2011; Norro, 2022), there is also significant evidence that teachers in the African continent defy the mono-lingual discourses prescribed in language education policy (Banda, 2010) by using learners’ familiar languages in the classroom – e.g., through code-switching and translation - to help them to access specific vocabulary and curricular content (e.g. Brock-Utne, 2005, 2015; Ferguson, 2003; Makgato, 2014; Ncoko et al., 2000). Translation refers to when teachers repeat a word, phrase, sentence or short text in learners’ home or familiar language (Erling et al., 2017; Hall & Cook, 2012). It is usually a word-for-word translation and tends to only be used by teachers orally (Halai & Karuku, 2013). Code-switching, on the other hand, is defined by Erling et al. (2017: 8) as a ‘common communicative practice among multilinguals of alternating between their languages within and across sentences.’ In practice, it is often used by multilingual teachers to go fully into a language with which

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. We acknowledge that we have both used EMI in previous writing, including in relation to the grant that funded the research presented in this paper.

learners are more familiar for short periods before returning to the medium of instruction. Erling et al. further explain that this occurs through different forms of teacher talk - such as paraphrasing, translating, clarifying, explaining or giving examples – with the purpose of facilitating student understanding and for classroom management. Halai (2011) suggests that the two main functions of code-switching in maths classrooms are seeking understanding of the task and its demands and explaining the maths itself. Halai and Karuku (2013) further highlight the importance of code-switching for increasing learner understanding and improving the quality of classroom interactions.

There is also a growing body of research in the African context (e.g., Bagwasi, 2017; Krause & Prinsloo, 2016) which argues for the potential of translanguaging pedagogy to facilitate epistemic inclusion in EME. This research argues that translanguaging enables the use of two or more languages to promote fuller and deeper understanding because learning is based on broadening not restricting pre-existing knowledge (Bagwasi, 2017: 207) and to reinforce and deepen understanding of subject matter. Probyn (2015) describes the potential for translanguaging practices in science classrooms in South Africa to act as a bridge between learners' everyday knowledge and the scientific content of the curriculum. However, most of this literature is not in primary schools where children have low levels of proficiency in the language of schooling. In fact, Williams (2002, cited in Lewis et al., 2012) who first introduced the concept, warns that translanguaging pedagogies might be more appropriate for learners with considerable mastery of the languages they draw from and may be challenging for children still developing proficiency in a second language as is the case with Francophone multilingual children in Cameroon.

Similarly, Milligan et al. (2016) have shown how the systematic use of language supportive pedagogy, particularly the use of first language to support English language development, in Rwandan primary classrooms can lead to significant improvements in learning outcomes. Other examples of language supportive strategies highlight the potential learning outcomes when encouraging learners to speak and write in English (Probyn, 2006) and supporting access to the curriculum through the provision of multilingual and multimodal resources such as stories and poems (Abiria et al., 2013).

While the practices discussed above are widely used by teachers across the continent, this is not often the case in Cameroon where an English-only policy in *English-Speaking* schools prevents teachers from drawing from multilingual strategies as is the case in other countries. Research has highlighted how this exclusionary policy and practice context constitutes an injustice to multilingual young learners who face additional challenges in accessing learning (Kuchah, 2018). Where these practices occur elsewhere in Africa, they are rarely officially sanctioned and often rely on the capabilities, time, resource and language proficiency of individual teachers. Both translation and code-switching are not planned activities, rather they are responsive and tend to be used by teachers in their dictation to the class. Furthermore, the practices themselves can bring tensions for teachers who can feel that they are 'smuggling the vernacular into the classroom' in direct opposition to official policy (Probyn, 2009). In one study from Tanzania, Clegg and Afitska (2011) give clear examples of how code-switching is often contentious, taking place covertly and with teachers and learners often feeling that they are doing something wrong since this is non-compliant with official language policies. Even where policy and practice promote multilingual practices, constraints such as the monolingual (English-only) nature of exams and the multiple home languages of learners in the same classroom prevent teachers from fully engaging in translanguaging and language supportive pedagogies (Krause & Prinsloo, 2016; Norro, 2022). It is therefore 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 & Simpson, 2016). This resonates with the notion that children's home languages are seen as a problem, rather than a right or resource (Ruiz, 1984).

The studies discussed so far have highlighted some of the pedagogic approaches used by teachers to help children access content and shown how these approaches tend to happen at the micro-level and by individual teachers, with no training or support in how to effectively use a variety of languages as a resource in the classroom. These studies also predominantly focus on teacher pedagogic and linguistic practices (e.g., Charamba, 2020; Krause & Prinsloo, 2016; Maseko & Mkhize, 2021; Norro, 2022) with no consideration of children's own lived experiences of learning. In this paper, we argue that it is important that we also shift the focus to learners themselves to see how different teaching practices impact multilingual children's participation, engagement, language development and learning outcomes. As Kiramba (2019) highlights, while teacher use of heteroglossic practices may facilitate greater students access to science content, using children's home languages does not necessarily result in more student talk and greater interaction.

There is also very little written about the ways that learners themselves navigate monolingual curricula, away from their interactions with the teacher which minimises the role of the learner's agency in their own learning trajectories. How do children themselves translate or code-switch to help themselves and their peers? How does this support epistemic inclusion? We argue that these questions are particularly important in contexts such as Cameroon where teaching is conducted monolingually in English, leaving children to find their own ways to bring in their familiar language(s) to support their learning. Our study, therefore, foregrounds multilingual young learners' actual learning experiences to explore and understand the ways that they navigate learning across the curriculum in a language that is not their familiar language.

2.3. The context of EME state school education in Cameroon

Cameroon is a multilingual country with 283 local languages representing 13.5% of Africa's languages and possibly the highest population-languages ratio in the continent (Ethnologue, 2009). Yet, the country is known as a bilingual country because of its two official languages - French and English – as captured in the 1996 Constitution:

The official languages of the Republic of Cameroon shall be English and French, both languages having the same status. The state shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country. It shall endeavour to protect and promote national languages (Article 1/3)

Within the educational system, the ‘promotion of Bilingualism’ is manifested in a variety of bilingual education models (see Kuchah, 2016), but these are based on a recognition of only two mediums of education as captured in Section 15/1 of the 1998 Education law: ‘the educational system shall be organized into two sub-systems: the *English-speaking sub-system* and the *French-speaking sub-system*, thereby reaffirming our national bi-culturalism.’ Formal education is therefore conducted in either the medium of English or French from the first day of schooling, depending on the sub-system. None of the 11 subjects in the primary curriculum is a local language and it is important to note that only English language and Mathematics are assessed in the official entrance examination into secondary school. Besides, the official end-of-primary certificate examination (the *First School Leaving Certificate*) includes six subjects all assessed in the medium of English except French language.

Since the late 1990s there has been a dramatic rise in the number of children from Francophone homes being enrolled in English medium primary schools. This can be explained by several factors which have been extensively discussed in the literature (e.g., Anchimbe, 2007; Kuchah, 2016; Mfortheh, 2008). For example, following the enactment of the 1998 Education Law reaffirming the commitment of the State to ‘institute bilingualism at all levels of education’ the MoE published several orders enforcing and facilitating the teaching and learning of French and English in primary schools (See Kuchah, 2018: 38). It has been suggested that because of the unplanned nature of this policy, Francophone parents, eager for their children to reap from the perceived benefits of English and dissatisfied with the quality of English taught to their children in French-medium schools, resorted to English-medium schools as the best spaces for developing their children’s bilinguality (Kouega, 1999; Mfortheh, 2008). Anchimbe (2007) has described the rush by Francophone parents to send their children to EME schools as a form of linguistic opportunism. This is supported by other research that has shown that the local policy on regional balance favours Francophones who obtain qualifications from EME institutions (e.g., Mfortheh, 2008; Kuchah, 2016). In effect, therefore, being an Anglophone in Cameroon is now politically equated with pursuing education in the medium of English, regardless of which of the official languages is most familiar to the individual.

These changes are further compounded by an educational context that is facing significant resource constraints which hinder the provision of quality education, particularly in state schools. Issues identified in the literature include large classes, lack of infrastructure, limited textbooks and other teaching materials, an overloaded curriculum, lack of curriculum emphasis on oral development, pedagogic practices that favour knowledge reproduction rather than production and low teacher proficiency (see Essongo, 2017; Kuchah & Smith, 2011; Tante, 2017). In the face of these challenges, teachers in EME schools are expected to teach monolingually and research with Cameroonian EME teachers, suggests that they believe that an English-only pedagogy is the best form of education (Nkwetisama, 2017). Chiatoh (2014: 32) explains that ‘decades of educational colonization and [colonial] language dominance have produced inferiority complexes so that the local or indigenous languages [...] because of their unofficial status, are perceived as liabilities rather than assets’, especially within formal education. In a study with primary school teachers in Cameroon, Esch’s (2011) points to an epistemic injustice in the use of punishment to exclude local languages from the classroom and school domain, arguing that such a practice has transformed teachers’ ‘habitus’ and forced them to internalise a conceptualisation of ‘language’ as something outside their home language; as English. It is within this policy and practice landscape that the study reported here is situated.

2.4. Research question

Given the context described in Section 2.3 above, this research set out to investigate the lived learning experiences of multilingual Francophone children in EME schools to understand how they navigate education in a context where policy and practice do not embrace their multilingual resources. The research was guided by the following research question:

- How do multilingual Francophone children in EME schools in Cameroon draw on their language resources to both develop their English and access subject content across the curriculum?

3. The study

3.1. Design and methodology

To enable an in-depth exploration of children’s experiences of accessing learning in EME, we used an exploratory case study design (Yin, 2014) and a range of qualitative methods of data collection. This methodology was informed by a child-oriented conceptual framework which suggests not only that children have a right to have their perspectives heard but also that children’s experiences, views and opinions, if taken seriously, can offer unique insights which challenge adult perspectives in powerful ways (Christensen & James, 2000). Primary aged children have been shown to demonstrate agency both in learning and research contexts (Pinter & Zandian, 2014; Pinter & Kuchah, 2021) which can be relied upon in the enactment of decisions about their education.

3.2. Research setting

The setting for this study was two under-resourced state EME primary schools in Yaoundé, the cosmopolitan capital city of Cameroon. Most learners in EME schools in Yaoundé come from multilingual homes where French and other local languages are used for interaction. The two schools were selected based on their reflection of the socioeconomic diversity of student intake. Being the national capital and the seat of the Ministry of Basic Education, state schools in Yaoundé tend to enrol learners from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds and are the first implementers of national policy. So, focusing on schools here could generate insights which have potential to be replicated elsewhere in the country.

3.3. Research participants

The research was undertaken with 22 upper-primary (Grade 5 & 6) children from the two schools. Participant selection was conducted purposively to first identify learners who came from Francophone homes and then through a combination of tools, including (i) an initial questionnaire to identify home language-use differences (ii) playground observations and informal conversations to identify child friendship groups, and (iii) discussions with teachers to identify proximity in classroom sitting positions for ease of observation. Six participants, representing a mixture of gender and mother tongues, were initially selected from each of the two grades from each school, making a total of 24 children from the four classes. Grades 5 & 6 children were assumed to have had substantial exposure to EME, experience of navigating the curriculum, and the potential to make judgements on what has worked for them over time. In line with our child-focused approach, children were given information about the research and asked to give their assent to take part, alongside gaining formal consent from parents/caregivers. 22 of the 24 children selected agreed to take part (for more information on the ethical approach to our work, see: [Kuchah & Milligan, 2021](#)).

3.4. Data generation

Data was generated through qualitative methods including 12 classroom observations, eight unsupervised recorded group tasks (for English and Maths) as well as four child-group and four individual interviews. Classroom observations were conducted by Kuchah and a local research colleague 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 on the other. Our notes and reflections further provided information about noticeable 'incidents' ([Spencer-Oatey, 2002](#); [Wragg, 1994](#)) involving children's interactions in class for exploration in child-group and individual interviews.

Together with classroom teachers, and with subsequent advice from schoolchildren (see [Kuchah & Milligan, 2021](#) for children's input) we designed grade-appropriate 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 and unsupervised on each task and group interactions were audio-recorded and later analysed with the aim of identifying participants' language resources. 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.

3.5. Data analysis

All data was transcribed and then analysed thematically and iteratively, by the two authors separately, following a combination of procedures recommended by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). The analysis of classroom observation data, transcripts of video recordings and unsupervised tasks was guided by [Spencer-Oatey's \(2002\)](#) and [Wragg's \(1994\)](#) critical incident research processes. We read the data to identify instances of language use and observable non-verbal behaviour (e.g., the linguistic and non-linguistic resources which children use to negotiate meaning in communicative episodes) that suggested children's efforts to be epistemically included and organized these under themes. In analysing the data, both authors drew on their different linguistic and cultural experiences and understandings. Kuchah is Cameroonian and a speaker of French and English and at least 5 Cameroonian languages while Milligan is British and a mainly monolingual English-speaker who studied French at GCSE level in the UK and has years of experience of research in EME schools in East Africa. Transcripts from interactions in the unsupervised tasks and interviews were purposively read without translation so that we would pick up different aspects of the language use of the children before identifying themes from across the datasets. This approach to data analysis enabled our linguistic and cultural positionings to see the data with different eyes while also identifying the aspects that spoke loudly to us.

4. Findings

In the following sections, we present the findings from our analysis of the data based on how children use their language resources to navigate learning with, or despite their teachers and how they do this in the absence of their teachers. Although our focus is on children, we start by briefly describing teachers' practices and then present the language resources of child-participants to shed light on how the current monolingual policy and teacher practices could be epistemically exclusionary.

4.1. Teachers' classroom pedagogy

In the four classrooms observed in this study teachers implemented the English-only policy in their teaching of both English language and all other subjects in the curriculum. There were no instances of teacher codeswitching, translation or translanguaging as recorded in some of the EME literature in other African contexts. In fact, as we show later in this paper, any instances of other language use in the classroom were by the children, not the teacher. All observed lessons were heavily teacher led with very little opportunity for children to interact with each other or even with the teacher beyond responding to the teacher's questions in chorus. Learner responses were mainly single words or short phrases or sentences to close-ended questions. For example, in an English lesson focusing on vocabulary, interactions such as the following were common:

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

Ls: ... a trader.

In a maths lesson on 'Finding the lowest common multiple,' the teacher listed a range of numbers and proceeded to explaining the process. Learner participation in this lesson was limited to completing the teacher's utterances by naming a number. For example, in asking learners to say the highest number in a list of numbers including 3, 4, 6, and 18, she started the sentence with, 'The highest number here is ...' to which children replied in chorus: 'Eighteen.' This pattern was repeated throughout the lesson meaning that children did not engage in the process of developing their understanding of the activity beyond just *safe talk*. The practice exercises which learners were given were conducted individually and in silence and as a result, there was no opportunity for learners to develop subject content knowledge through interaction with their peers or even with the teacher. However, as we shall show in the next sections, learners relied on each other when the teacher's attention was not on them and in doing this, used their other language resources.

4.2. Children's language resources

Data from the initial selection questionnaire and group interviews showed that the 22 child-participants in this study came from nine different home language backgrounds and they spoke these home languages in addition to French. The languages included Bafia, Bamun, Bulu, Duala, Eton, Ewondo, Fulfulde, Hausa and Makaa. All 22 participants said they mostly used French outside the classroom, including in the school playground, on their way to and from school as well as in public spaces such as churches, mosques, and markets. In ranking their preferred languages of communication, only two participants identified English as their first choice, while six participants chose their mother tongue and 14 chose French. English was ranked as second and third preferred language by nine participants, respectively. Clearly, therefore, English was not the most preferred or used language by these children and teaching them exclusively in the medium of English as we observed is de facto an epistemic exclusion. Even the two children who listed English as their preferred language of communication had difficulties interacting in the language. For example, one of them found it difficult to sustain a conversation in English during the individual interview:

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]

When asked why she listed English as her preferred language, it emerged that being the only one of four children attending an EME school, her parents and siblings referred to her as 'the Anglophone' and this meant that she had grown to identify herself more with English, than the languages of her siblings and parents – French and Ewondo – although she was neither fully confident nor proficient in English as can be seen in the excerpt above.

The evidence presented here suggests that child-participants live in multilingual homes and are confident speakers of languages which could serve as rich linguistic resources for generating learning across the EME curriculum, yet these are not used in the classroom. Instead, children are subjected to an English-only curriculum and monolingual pedagogic practices which might epistemically exclude them from accessing curriculum content and language development.

4.3. Children's use of language resources in learning

Given the multiple home and preferred languages of these children, we focus here on how they used their multilingual resources to navigate learning both in the classroom during lessons and out of the classroom, e.g., during the unsupervised task and at home.

4.3.1. Learners' language choices for learning in the classroom

Despite the monolingual practices of their teachers, child-participants in this study often drew from their multilingual repertoires and the support of their peers to foster their learning. Evidence from classroom observations revealed that learners covertly asked questions to each other in French, while the teacher was explaining content knowledge or writing on the board in English. In an English language lesson on quantifiers of uncountable nouns, for example, we noted the following:

T has invited students to list other similar words to 'some' and 'much' and as they do, L3 can be seen asking L2 "'a lot of' veut dire quoi?" [what does 'a lot of' meaning?] L2 whispers 'c'est quand il y a beaucoup de l'eau' [it's when there is much water] ... T writes the following words – water, cheese, rice, meat, chalk, oil, bread, sand – on the board and continues to explain the new lesson: ' ... today we are not going to use these very words [...] Since they are uncountable nouns, we cannot count them, but if I am to give you an instruction to give me something in this list that you have to measure it, you have to do something about it. So, what kind of words are you going to use for small quantities? [total silence]. T explains for about 7mins trying to elicit new quantifiers. Children's responses include 'few cheese; a packet of cheese; a bit of rice; a bag of meat; enough of meat; give me

one bread; a bucket of sand; 5 bottles of oil; a box of chalk' etc. L3 can be heard asking: 'comment on dis encore morceau?' [how do we say 'piece' again?] and once another child tells him the word, L3 raises hand and shouts out, 'a piece of chalk'

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*]

The excerpts above are just two of several examples from across the dataset which show that learners mediated their learning predominantly by using their familiar language – French - to navigate the barriers posed by the teacher's English-only practice.

Furthermore, we observed that children's choice of language of learning in class depended largely on their interlocutor at each point. For example, learners who identified as confident about their English proficiency in the interviews tended to communicate more often with the teacher in English through questions and answers in class. On the other hand, those learners who were less confident about their proficiency relied more on their peers for learning support using predominantly French. Sometimes, the same learner chose to ask for further support from the teacher or their peers depending on their language proficiency in relation to the specific subject content:

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

L5: Mes camarades (*My peers*)

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

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

This excerpt reveals that for these learners, English is associated with the teacher and their lack of proficiency epistemically excludes them from opportunities to engage with their teacher forcing them to rely on their more proficient peers for support via the medium of a familiar language, French.

Crucially, in seeking support from teachers and peers, 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.

Classroom observation and interviews revealed that children's use of French as the mediational tool in the classroom was mostly through translation. 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 sought help from different sources at home – such as family members, or bilingual dictionaries - to enable large amounts of translation. In one case, a child revealed that he used google translate to translate all homework into French, complete tasks in French and then translate back to English.

4.3.2. Use of language resources for learning outside the classroom

All datasets revealed that French was clearly the dominant language through which children negotiated out-of-classroom learning. In all interviews, learners expressed a preference for content to be explained to them in, or translated into French, arguing that this will ease understanding. This was further evidenced in their interaction during the unsupervised tasks. For example, in an English task, Kuchah co-constructed the first sentence of a story with the children, and they were then asked to complete the story in their groups. The table given in [Appendix 1](#) shows the five-minute interaction text (presented as continuous text) with the excerpts of the written text that the children chose to include in their final draft. It took five minutes and 781 words of talk, mostly in French, to enable them to write the three additional sentences. Similarly, in responding to an unsupervised maths task requiring them to find the lowest common multiple (LCM) of a set of fractions the following interaction was recorded (with core subject vocabulary in English in bold):

S1: ... Le maths-ci est dur *deh!* Moi je crois qu'il aura les **BODMAS**

S2: **BODMAS** c'est quoi?

S1: Je crois qu'on va faire le **brackets open** ici. Puis, on va fire le **division** ici, puis la **multiplication** dans tous les **brackets**.

S3: C'est ca qui va donner le **answer**.

S1: Oui, et on va faire **addition** de tous les **denominator** ici avant la **division** avant de trouver le **LCM**.

S2: C'est **total fraction** alors!

[...]

S3: On connaît **1/24 all over 24 minus 13**. Donc **24 equals to 24 minus 13** ici, **equals to 13** ... Alors pour trouver **fraction left on Monday et Tuesday** ... on **subtract 24 minus 13**

These two examples of children's interactions during the unsupervised tasks show that they predominantly used French to mediate their learning. Although the final product was in English language, the process of co-constructing the text and completing the maths task was predominantly mediated using French with a few instances of local languages used mainly for exclamations of approval or disapproval. Besides, French served a variety of purposes, including for explanation, clarification, correction amongst other things. We note, however, that the words in English are the curriculum content and subject specific vocabulary, which they are required to know; the words in French around these are used to mediate their understanding of the core content which must be known in English.

Other examples reveal further ways in which children drew on their language resources via code-switching. Examples from unsupervised tasks included utterances such as: "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*?". Clearly, their use of English here is limited to expressions they use to speak to their teacher or familiar classroom and subject content vocabulary and this restricts their ability to engage with each other and the teacher in a way that helps them develop proficiency in English through classroom talk.

In both group and individual interviews, it was revealed that child-participants had proficiency challenges in English and therefore preferred to use French to help them understand learning as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: [...] pourquoi alors tu n'as pas beaucoup parlé en classe ce matin? [why then did you not speak a lot in class this morning?]

L3: quand je ne connais pas le mot en anglais, je préfère rester comme ça. [when I do not know the word in English, I prefer to stay like that]

Interviewer: Comment? [how?]

L3: Je préfère me taire parce que le maitre va se moquer de moi. Je préfère demander à mon ami. Il comprend mieux l'anglais [...] avec mes camarades, quand je ne connais pas le mot en anglaise, je peux dire certaines choses en français, ils ne vont pas rire. [I prefer to be quiet because the teacher will laugh at me. I prefer to ask my friend. He understands English better [...] with my mates, when I do not know the word in English, I can say somethings in French, they will not laugh].

This excerpt illustrates how the learners' lack of proficiency in English prevents him from participating actively in the lesson; also highlights the learners' fear of being laughed at by the teacher. It seems clear therefore, that for this student, English is a barrier to engagement with the teacher and the lesson and it is only through interaction with peers in a familiar language that the learner is able to navigate learning more confidently.

5. Discussion

The *English-speaking* sub-system of education in Cameroon recruits multilingual learners from both Francophone and Anglophone backgrounds and the syllabus suggests that when learning in English, children should be able to 'grasp with ease the other subjects of the curriculum' (*Syllabus 2000*). Evidence from our study shows that even after 5 years of EME, English is still not the preferred language of learning and most children from Francophone homes would prefer learning mediated through French. Classroom observation, and interviews revealed that rather than helping these children to grasp curriculum content, English is a significant barrier to accessing such content. While English is the language of *teaching*, there is very limited use of it as the language of *learning*. Teaching children who do not have English as their most used or preferred language through an English-only approach constitutes an epistemic injustice because it excludes them from full engagement with learning. However, just as *Probyn (2009)* showed that teachers 'smuggle the vernacular into the classroom', we see evidence of children covertly bringing in other languages (predominantly but not exclusively French) to help them to keep up. This is most clear in examples of children whispering to their peers to ask for translations of particular words or phrases that the teacher is using.

Here, there are also distinct differences between learners. Learners report that when they feel confident to ask a question in English, they may ask the teacher. However, in the frequent situations where the learner does not understand the language being used, they consistently ask their peers to translate words or to check understanding. This finding supports other studies that have shown that it is the more confident English speakers who ask questions and are called on by the teacher, often with the consequence that English proficiency is associated with higher academic ability (*Esch, 2011; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009*). Children also use code-switching and translation to mediate their understanding of basic concepts. The findings of this study resonate with the teacher-focused literature

reviewed in Section 2.2, in the sense that, as with teachers, learners' practices rely on the time and resources of individual learners (Probyn, 2009; Clegg & Afitska, 2011) rather than on a systematic and supported form of multilingual communication. In fact, the predominance of French, with occasional inclusion of subject content vocabulary in English, in some student interaction could hardly be seen as a case of code-switching, translation or a fluid movement between languages.

Gardner-Chloros (2009) warns that understanding the language use of multilinguals requires some insider knowledge to determine whether the use of more than one language in utterances is a result of competence or deficiency in the languages being used. Based on the data presented here as well as our observations and interactions with the learners, we argue that their use of more than one language is not a reflection of proficiency across languages, but an attempt to draw from a familiar language to navigate the challenges of learning through an unfamiliar language. 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 in some way supports learning but only limits them to knowledge, rather than to more cognitive and critical processing of the knowledge itself.

What is significant about our findings is that Francophone multilingual learners are left wholly unsupported as they navigate the English Medium curriculum. Classroom observations contribute further evidence that learning in a dominant language is a barrier to learners' propensity to talk freely, question and explore new curricular concepts within the classroom (Brock-Utne, 2010; Kuchah, 2018; Williams, 2011). After at least five years of learning in English, children are doing what they can to just keep up with surface-level content. Through this, they are not only prevented from accessing curricular content but epistemically excluded from opportunities to develop their English language and crucially to cognitively process and engage with deeper or more conceptual understanding (Kuchah et al., 2022).

Children are thus impoverished in their learning by prescriptive monolingual policies that provide little space for teachers to support them and for themselves to draw on their language resources. This is particularly stark when we see in the unsupervised Maths and English tasks that they had linguistic resources which could be drawn upon in their learning. However, these tasks also revealed how the extended discussion was narrowed down to grammatically poor sentences and basic decoding of curriculum content. It is also important to note that, although we did not set out to investigate learners' proficiency levels in any of the languages they are using, there is very little evidence that children have very rich and varied linguistic repertoires or that they are translanguageing. For these children, we suggest that learning in and through French, their shared familiar language, and clear support to learn French, would best support their learning trajectories.

Our findings have shone a light on the resourcefulness of children to do what they can to keep up with basic curriculum content, often doing a lot to transgress monolingual norms imposed by the curriculum and promoted in the dominant transmissive practices of their teachers (Banda, 2010). There is a clear need for more research that spotlights learners and their varied languaging practices and learning experiences to gather more evidence of the processes of epistemic exclusion, and the ways that learners attempt to counter them. This is particularly important given that these learners may be just about getting by in primary schooling but are unlikely to develop the conceptual understanding and English language academic proficiency required for transitioning to secondary education with successful learning outcomes.

6. Conclusions

This study set out to examine how multilingual children in a predominantly Francophone context navigate learning in an EME school in Cameroon. The findings reveal that despite a strong curriculum insistence on English-only practices, these children continue to rely on code-switching and translation, mainly into French, to access basic curriculum content. A lot of the recent literature on language-in-education in Sub-Saharan Africa cited in this paper has focused on the benefits to student learning of teachers' use of multilingual and translanguaging approaches in their teaching (e.g. Clegg & Afitska, 2011; Krause & Prinsloo, 2016; Probyn, 2009). This literature challenges deficit conceptions of local languages as barriers to English language development and argues that teacher practices often challenge and covertly navigate English only policies in their classrooms. The context of this study – English Medium schools in predominantly French-speaking Yaounde – alongside observed monolingual, English-only teaching practices in the classrooms, suggest an important additional avenue for language-in-education research: understanding the ways to best support multilingual learners who are consistently epistemically excluded from classroom learning and meaning-making because of a coherence between monolingual policy and classroom practice (see also Kuchah et al., 2022).

In presenting evidence of learners' experiences and perspectives, we have shown the ways in which learners are finding ways to access basic content knowledge in the classroom. If we had only focused on the teacher, and stayed within the confines of the classroom, we would have found evidence of silence but little about learners' agency, how actual learning happens or the ways that learning is impeded. This highlights the importance of child-focused studies to inform policy reform, given what can be missed through teacher-focused observations or policy analysis (Pinter & Zandian, 2014; Pinter & Kuchah, 2021; Mitchell & Milligan, 2023).

Our findings have clear implications for EME policy and practice in Cameroon, and with resonance for other highly multilingual contexts where English is being promoted as the sole language of teaching and learning, especially at primary school level. In previous scholarship, we have argued that 'leaving learners and teachers unsupported in EMI is a multi-scalar injustice' (Milligan, 2020, 938) and the findings from this paper provide clear evidence to further this argument. We conclude by advocating for richer understandings of what children do to navigate the curriculum and to use this as a basis for developing policies and pedagogic practices which draw upon the resources that children bring to the learning experience, otherwise they are likely to sink or swim at their own peril.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Kuchah Kuchah: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Lizzi O. Milligan:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Appendix

Unsupervised English language writing Task.

The Magic Forest

Recorded learner interaction

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, elle n'avait pas a daughter. She was not having a daughter [Noise and random talking] She was called ... 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 catarpillar. [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/, surprise a deux/p/. Regardez ce que Sombo a parlé eh! Surprise. Un surprise, 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. 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 voice 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.

Written text

Once upon a time there was an old woman who lived in a 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 if you want to go out of this dangerous forest climb on this tree and take one of his fruit. If the fruit is green, leave it, but if the fruit is red, take it and eat the fruit.

(continued on next page)

(continued)

The Magic Forest

Regards comment tu écrit 'climb'. Climb, on this forest? Hehe! 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.

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