Features of Cameroon Francophone English in the Production of Bilingual Students

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Abstract

This paper examines the written production of bilingual Francophone students of tertiary level in Cameroon. The influence of French and local languages is observed in the free compositions in English, the second official language (SOL) of young Francophone Cameroonians. For this study, 47 informants were randomly selected and asked to write a 200-word essay in English. Selinker's theory of Interlanguage was used as a framework for identifying, describing, and explaining the data. The findings reveal 167 instances of Interlanguage features, out of which 62 (37.1%) were from stabilisation, 57 (34.1%) from interference, 46 (27.5%) from overuse, and 2 (1.1%) from avoidance.

Keywords: Cameroon Francophone English, Interlanguage, essay, interference, Francophones

1. Introduction

With the global expansion of English, the language has evolved, developed new features, and taken new colours. New varieties of English are heard all over the world. This globalisation (of the English language) has resulted in what is known today as World Englishes. This new status led linguists like Kachru in the mid-1980s to classify the language into a model of three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle (Al-Mutairi, 2020). The *Inner Circle* includes countries where English is used as a native language such as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The *Outer Circle* refers to countries that are former colonies of the British Empire and where English is commonly used in social life or the government sectors, such as Cameroon, Nigeria, Kenya, India, Malaysia, Singapore, and others. The *Expanding Circle* comprises countries that introduce English as a foreign language in schools and universities, mostly for communicating with the *Inner* and *Outer Circles*. Examples of such countries are Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Cameroon is a multilingual country and home to more than 200 indigenous languages, two official languages (French and English), Pidgin English, and Camfranglais, a stigmatised metropolitan code popular among the youth group (Ayafor, 2005). The country is divided into ten regions, i.e., eight French-speaking regions and two English-speaking ones (North West and South West).

This paper analyses the essays of 47 level 2 bilingual Francophone students of the University of Yaounde I, focusing on aspects of Cameroon Francophone English. The rationale behind this study is to identify the type of errors in writing developed by Francophone Cameroonians learning English. This learning process results in an interlanguage or a distorted form of English known as CamFE. CamFE being a relatively new English variety (as compared to studies on Cameroon English), we must examine its features. Works on CamFE have mostly focused on the speech of Francophones and very few on their written production.

2. Background to the Study

After the First World War (1912-1914), Cameroon, a German colony, was divided into two separate territories, which were placed under the administration of France and Britain because of their victory over Germany during the war. French Cameroon gained independence in 1960 and was named the Republic of Cameroon. French was adopted as its official language. British Cameroon, which used English as its official means of communication, gained independence in 1961 and reunified with the French territory (the Republic of Cameroon). The two territories joined to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon, with French and English as its joint official languages.

Various attempts were made at different steps to promote bilingualism in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Echu (2004) says bilingual education has been implemented in Cameroon since 1961 to promote the policy of official language bilingualism. This means using French and English in education at all levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary), especially at the university level. As far as higher education is concerned, Kouega (2010) remarks that to foster bilingualism, the bilingual degree programme was set up at the University of Yaounde and the Higher Teacher Training College (*École normale supérieure – ENS*), and today this programme is available in all State universities of the country.

In Cameroon, there are two distinct educational systems: the Francophone subsystem and the Anglophone subsystem. In the Francophone subsystem of education, English is a compulsory subject up to the end of secondary education. In the Anglophone subsystem, French is compulsory only up to the general certificate of education (GCE) Ordinary level. The Department of Bilingual Studies of the University of Yaounde I is selective (only candidates with good grades in French and English are selected). It comprises two sections in level 1: BIF (*Bilingues Francophones*) and BIA (*Bilingues Anglophones*). This separation is because students undergo intensive courses in their second official language. In level 2, all BIF and BIA are put in the same class and follow the same courses. At this level, they are supposed to have some ability to manage both languages. In levels 1 and 2, students are taught specific language courses in English and French like grammar, lexicology, phonology, morphology, translation, comparative and contrastive studies of French-English, languages, semantics, literature, and linguistics.

2.1 Cameroon Francophone English

Safotso (2012) identifies two main varieties of English in Cameroon: the first variety is called Cameroon English (CamE), spoken by English-speaking Cameroonians (Atechi 2011). The second variety, Cameroon Francophone English (CamFE), is the variety of the French-speaking Cameroonians (Kouega 2008). Safotso (2016) presents its history and evolution in five phases:

(1) The *Institutionalization phase*. The Constitution of 1961 made French and English the two official languages of the country. However, English was not popular among French-speaking Cameroonians, which was (and still is) the majority group in the country from a linguistic and numerical point of view.

(2) The *Indifferent phase*. The Constitution of 1972 gave equal status to French and English. At that time, many Francophone Cameroonians were not yet interested in English. In other words, English was not really "necessary" to most Francophone Cameroonians.

(3) The *Rush for English medium schools*. This phase began around 1990 when French-speaking parents saw the importance of English in the world and started sending their children to Anglophone primary and secondary schools.

(4) The *Spread of Bilingual Francophone Cameroonians*. This phase is characterized by the high number of French-speaking children in Anglophone schools across the country, the high number of French-speaking Cameroonian civil servants trained in bilingual pilot centres created by the government, and a considerable number of Francophone Cameroonians who teach English in secondary/high schools and universities.

(5) The *Spread to neighbouring* countries like Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Congo Brazzaville, Central African Republic, Gabon (which are Francophone countries whose students come to study in Cameroonian universities) and to the English-speaking areas of Cameroon.

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Interlanguage Hypothesis by Selinker (1972)

Selinker (1972) first proposed the term "Interlanguage" in 1972 as L2 systematic knowledge independent of both L1 and L2. Interlanguage is a type of language used by second and foreign language learners who are learning a target language. It is a learner's current version of a language he or she is learning. Muñoz (2010:61) says that, later, works by Corder (1981) and Mitchell & Myles (2004), among others, revised the topic of Interlanguage. That theory came up after two other prominent approaches that were popular in language acquisition: the Contrastive Analysis (CA) theory in the early decades of the 20th century and Error Analysis (EA) as a reaction to the drawbacks of CA. The CA theory has been severely attacked by applied linguistic scholars who said it lacked consistency and objectivity in its procedures. Similarly, EA was viewed as a model to assess and account for the errors of L2 learners in terms of causes and then evaluate and correct them, but without confining the causes of L2 learners' errors to the learner's L1 (Mahmood & Murad, 2018).

Citing Selinker (1972), Lakshmanan & Selinker (2001) argued that the "psychologically relevant data" of L2 learning are those behavioural events where learners attempt to express meanings, which they may already have, in a language that they are in the process of learning (i.e., attempted meaningful performance in an L2). This means that the learners add elements of their language to the language he is learning. For example, in English, an adjective appears before the noun it modifies (the lonely girls). In contrast, in French, the adjective usually comes after the noun (*les filles seules*). With interlanguage a Francophone learning English may say (*the girls lonely*). In other words, *Interlanguage* is, according to Richards & Schmidt (2002), the type of language produced by second and foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a language. It is a unique/special linguistic system that is neither L1 nor L2 but is characterised by similar features of both systems. Wang & Fan (2020: 32) point out that Interlanguage is dynamic, permeable, and systematic.

3.2 Cross-Linguistic Influence and Language Transfer

Cross-linguistic influence or transfer (the effect of the native language on an interlanguage) refers to how a language can affect another within a speaker (how two languages can affect one another in a bilingual speaker). It was propounded by Kellerman & Sharwood (1986). Forsyth (2014) says a second language acquisition theory acted as the interplay between earlier and later acquired languages. This umbrella term includes transfer, interference, avoidance, borrowing, overuse, and L2-related aspects. Many researchers believe that the term cross-linguistic influence can be used to designate the processes involved regardless of the direction of the influence (L1 to L2 or L2 to L1). The term also englobes studies on second and foreign language acquisition. This means that the acquisition of a target language (L3/foreign language) can be influenced not only by the native language (L1/native language) of the speaker but also by other non-native languages (L2/second language). Kellerman and Sharwood (1986) describe cross-linguistic influence as a specific domain of investigation in second language acquisition and foreign language learning with an emphasis on the problems related to the identification and explanation of how the native and target languages interact in second language acquisition and performance (Chapetón, 2008).

3.3 Evidence of Interlanguage in Language Learning

This section reviews some works on learners' errors in learning a second or foreign language and Interlanguage. Al-Khresheh (2011) analysed written compositions of a group of Arabic-speaking Jordanian learners of English to check the carry-over of Arabic (L1) syntactic structures into English (L2). The focus was on the use of the coordinating conjunction *and* which is equivalent to *wa* in Arabic, and on the frequency of these errors in their productions. The findings revealed that the subjects made a high number of errors concerning the coordinating conjunction *and*. Interlingual interference could be the main cause of errors. He then made some suggestions to improve the EFL teaching-learning process. Mammeri (2015) explored the different morphosyntactic errors made by 120 EFL students of the English department of Bejaia University (Algeria). Her focus was the sentence. She reported the following morphosyntactic errors: (1) word order, (2) subject-verb agreement, (3) verb structure, (4) noun/adjective/adverb structure, (5) word/morpheme addition, (6) word/morpheme omission, (7) short forms/abbreviations, and (8) conversational informal words. The reasons advanced for the errors were the incomplete application of rules, overgeneralization of rules, false concepts hypothesized, and Interlanguage interference mainly, with French.

Agustiani (2019) described the morphosyntactic errors found in the scripts of 22 fourth-semester students' written descriptive texts of a genre-based writing class and tried to identify the dominant type of errors. She identified 98 errors and suggested that students should learn more about morphology and that lecturers should give extra attention to students who still struggle with morphosyntax. Deni et al. (2020) looked at the Interlanguage errors made by Rena Aprilia, a third-semester communication science student at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University of Jakarta. The results showed that the subject created her grammatical system when she tried to use the simple present and past tense. The new system was between the target language (English) and her native language (Bahasa Indonesia). As a result, Rena made four new patterns or Interlanguage to denote the simple present tense (Subject + Verb-ing) and three new language systems to indicate the simple past tense (Subject + Irregular Verb-ed).

These studies show that interlanguage errors are a common problem for all language learners across the Outer Circle. Some works have emphasized the errors committed by second/foreign language learners in Cameroon, but few works have described them under CamFE as its actual existence as a *peculiar* language has just recently been reported (Safotso, 2015; Atechi 2015). The few works on CamFe have focused on describing the phonology of Francophones. This study tries to describe some features of CamFE at the morphosyntactic and lexical levels.

4. Methodology

The informants involved in this study were all students of the Department of Bilingual Letters of the University of Yaounde I, who had been recently promoted to level 3 of their studies; this means that they were promoted to the final year to obtain their bachelor's degree, and thus had a proficiency in English that could be judged acceptable. Since the class was mixed/bilingual (Anglophones and Francophones), only Francophones with the classic *Baccalauréat* (and not holders of the bilingual *Baccalauréat)* were asked to write the essay. Forty-seven students produced their essays for analysis. They were made up of 31 girls and 16 boys. Most of the informants (24) were aged between 20 and 21 years old and had been studying English since primary school. They were thus all proficient in English. They were asked to write a 200-word essay on a general topic (*Why is it important to be bilingual?*). The scripts were numbered (S=Student, S1, S2, S3…) and coded, and the errors committed by the informants were examined and classified under interlanguage features showing traces of the first official language and local languages at various language levels. The interlanguage features were observed in the borrowing of French or local languages words or structure, the transfer of the French grammatical or morphological rules, literal translation, or the wrong choice of words. The findings are presented below.

5. Findings and Discussion

We used progress indicators, and the scripts were labelled using letters. Each label was attached to a different level of student performance, as can be summarised in the table below:

Table 1. Scores of the informants in the written composition

Score	N= 47	Percentage
A (90-100)	2	4.2%
B (80-89)	4	8.5%
C (70-79)	19	40.4%
D (60-69)	5	10.6%
E (50-59)	10	21.2%
F (below 50)	7	14.8 %
Total	**47**	**99.7%**

As the table shows, most students scored at least 50 (2.0), the minimum overall to pass a course. It can be explained by the fact that the topic chosen is a general (*Why is it important to be bilingual?*), and as aspiring *official* bilingual students (which they are supposed to be already if we consider their selection into the programme and their promotion to level 3) this is a topic they probably came across several times. The vocabulary will be familiar to them. The following table presents the types of features resulting from learners' Interlanguage. They are examined and grouped into four types: First official language/Local languages interference, avoidance, overuse, and stabilisation. Each type is explained according to the sources of these errors.

Table 2. Classification of Interlanguage occurrences

Types of Interlanguage	Number of occurrences
Stabilisation (misuse of parts of speech, missing inflections)	62 (37.1%)
Negative transfer (interference)	57 (34.1%)
Overuse (overgeneralization) (tense inflection misuse)	46 (27.5%)
Avoidance (omission of language items)	2 (1.1%)
Total	**167 (99.8%)**

As can be seen in the table above, the types of Interlanguage features found in learners' scripts are stabilisation (37.1%), negative transfer (34.1%), avoidance (27.5%), and overuse (1.1%).

5.1 Stabilisation and Interference

Concerning *stabilisation*, the analysis reveals that 37.1%, that is, 62 occurrences, were found in the scripts of the informants. Learners' *interference* from L1 (French/Local language transfer) also occurs at the lexical and grammatical levels. Below are some occurrences at the syntax, grammar, morphology, and lexicology level.

5.1.1 At Syntactical Level

Example 1: A real Cameroonian should *only* not speak French but also English (should not *only* speak French…).

Example 2: Some of us *we* feel that the government does not make efforts *much*. (*Some of us, we feel that the government does not make much effort.*)

Example 3: *As I am not very informed I can watch the TV or listen to the music to make my knowledge of speaking writing listening better*. (Punctuation and addition of words instead of *As I am not very informed, I watch TV or listen to music to improve my knowledge of speaking, writing, and listening.*)

In the above examples (1 and 2), the informants changed the order of the words *only* and *much*. This is a word-to-word translation from local languages. Some semi-Bantu languages will add the determiner *much* at the end. This is the case for example with *Shupamem*, a grassfield Bantu language spoken in the Noun division of the West region of Cameroon (Ngoungouo and Wokwendam 2020). The third sentence is not punctuated, and we observe the addition of the definite article *the* in front of *music*, which is a French translation of *la musique.*

5.1.2 At Grammatical Level

Example 1: When I was in secondary school, my father *use* to take me to Limbe (*used*, past tense)

Example 2: My sister *speak* and *write* in English, I want to be like her (*speaks; writes,* 3rd person singular, this is a serious problem for almost all the informants)

Example 3: Bilingualism is an advantage, it *give* you the possibility to meet new people (3rd person singular; *gives*)

Example 4: I *make* all what I can to be bilingual; I try to speak, read and write. (Wrong use/translation of the verb in French *faire*, wrong combination of words instead of I do all that I can to be bilingual; I try to speak, read and write.)

Example 5: The people *which* can speak English have more opportunities to find a job. (Wrong use of the relative pronoun, instead of *who*, used with an animate subject to refer to a person or a group of people)

Example 6: *The* bilingualism is the ability to speak two languages. (Wrong use of the definite article, *the* should be deleted)

Example 7: Unfortunately, *the book of English* is not available everywhere. (*English book* for *le livre d'anglais* in French)

In the above examples, the verbs *to use, to speak, to write*, and *to give* could be better conjugated in examples 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Verbs in the 3rd person singular in the present tense do not add the morpheme -s in French as they do in English. In French the verb remains unchanged in the 1st person (for example, *je mange, tu manges, il/elle mange*). Francophone Cameroonian learners have difficulty mastering the 3rd person singular -s due to the French official language interference. A study by Sokeng Piewo (2014) reveals that one of the most common errors made by Francophone Cameroonian learners of English is at the level of verb tense. The 3rd person singular of the simple present in English poses a problem to learners with the addition of the bound morpheme –s in English, which is often omitted. Other examples include the wrong use of the relative pronoun and the definite article *the*.

5.1.3 At Morphological Level

Most problems at this level centre on the inflectional bound morpheme. The examples below focus on the plural marking.

Example 1: The development of *language* will also be possible with *this* activities (*languages, these*)

Example 2: In my class, I have a lot of *friend* who think that English is not important. (*friends*)

Example 3: My *beautifuls* teachers made me love English (*beautiful*, adjectives do not agree with the noun, which is here in the plural form)

Example 4: English is nice, it is *entertainment* (*entertaining*, derivation, wrong word choice)

Example 5: Many *childs* in primary school do not know that it is important in the future (*children*, poor inflection for the plural)

In the above examples, the informants did not respect the plurality rule in some cases and chose the wrong one in others. For example, in English (contrarily to French), adjectives do not vary. However, in example 3, some informants added the inflectional bound morpheme –s to the adjective *beautiful* (16 instances in 7 scripts were identified for similar mistakes). In example 5, the plural form of the noun *child* is child*ren* and *child-s*, as French would translate *enfant-les enfants*.

5.1.4 At Lexical Level

Most errors here come from the wrong use of words due to confusion over meaning.

Example 1: Last year I was in level 2 and *actually* I am in level 3. (Wrong choice of words, from the French word *actuellement* which means *now* instead of *in fact*. The informant is trying to say *Last year I was in level and now I am in level 3*)

Example 2: If you *pretend* to become a translator in the future, you must speak English. (Wrong choice of words, from the French word *pretender* instead of *if you think of becoming*)

Example 3: I intend to spend my *journeys* with Anglophones to ameliorate my English skills (Wrong choice of words, the informant simply translated the French expression *passer mes journées* to mean spend some *time*. The words *journey* and *journée* are false friends)

Example 3: With English and French, I can be *a big personnality* in Cameroon tomorrow. (This is an example of French influence to mean *an influential/important person/a rich person*, it is a literal translation of *une haute personnalité,* whereas in English, a *big personality* would mean someone who is confident, outspoken, or attractive)

The errors in word choice may be induced by the informants' L1 (mother tongue or French). Carrio-Pastor & Mestre-Mestre (2014) in analysing the lexical errors by Spanish researchers when writing a paper in English remarks that they could arise because of confusion of form, between two near-synonyms, misinterpretation of meaning, choice of a general instead of a specific term, or erroneous collocation.

5.2 Overuse

The overuse of certain grammatical forms in L2 acquisition is often results from processes in intermediate languages, e.g., over-generalizing. Below are some illustrations:

Example: When we go to *the* school, it is to become perfect in French and English. (Overuse of the definite article *the*; the correct form is: *When we go to school, it is to become perfect in French and English.*)

In this example, the article *the* is overused in the construction of the sentence. The informant translated the expression *aller à l'école* in a case where there should be zero article in English. The article here should be omitted as the informant is not talking about a specific school.

5.3 Avoidance

Avoidance occurs when there is evidence that L1 speakers consciously avoid the use of some words or language structure in L2. This leads to omitting some necessary language items, as seen in 1.1% of the informants' scripts. The following sentence is an example:

Another thing I will like do is go to England. I meet British people. (Omission of prepositions and conjunction.) It should read: *Another thing that I would like to do is to go to England and to meet British people*).

Here, the student missed out the preposition *to* and the conjunction *and*. He used his knowledge of French to understand and translate the sentence in English. The student translated the French expression *j'aimerais faire* by 'will like do'.

Sokeng Piewo (2014) researched the grammatical errors of Francophones and concluded that correcting errors is as important as identifying and describing them for educators in the design of syllabi or teaching plans and test according to students' different language levels and learning objectives. This will help to improve the learners' language by guiding them to learn more effectively and thus reduce interlanguage. This paper addressed some Interlanguage features of Cameroon Francophone English in the written production of level 2 Francophone bilingual students of the University of Yaounde 1. The analysis showed 167 instances of Interlanguage features, out of which 62 (37.1%) were due to stabilisation, 57 (34.1%) to interference, 46 (27.5%) to overuse, and 2 (1.1%) to avoidance. More examples of stabilisation at syntactic and morphological levels could be observed with the use of the wrong parts of speech or the dropping of the inflectional morpheme. There were also 57 cases of interference, mainly with an influence of French, and 46 features of overuse where the informants misused tenses. Two cases of avoidance were also identified. From our analysis, in their attempt to bridge the gap of fluency in English, the official L1 of the informants, which is French, has dramatically influenced the features of CamFE. This can be pointed out in their written production. This paper aimed to find evidence of what these features are in Cameroon Francophone English.

6. Conclusion

CamFE is very specific to Francophone Cameroonians. It is a unique blend of English and French, spiced up with local languages. This influence can also be observed at the level of written composition. It should be noted that Interlanguage is an inevitable state in language learning and has a significant influence on second/foreign language acquisition. Even though Interlanguage features are often regarded as errors or mistakes in the language by second

or foreign language teachers, it should be noted that in Cameroon, CamFE serves as a bridge for communication between two official languages inherited from the colonisers. It should, therefore, draw more researchers' attention to solving Interlanguage problems in all aspects of language.

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