

# English in Cameroon: Issues of teacher Language Proficiency

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## Abstract

Over the last three decades, the standards of English in Cameroon as well as the performance of students in the English language at the General Certificate of Education (GCE) examination have been on a steady decline. While many Cameroonians keep making their way into the English language teaching industry as a result of the rapid expansion of English as a global lingua franca, the quality of language input administered to learners seems to leave much to desire. Thus, although a number of studies have attributed the continuous downward spiralling of standards to a variety of reasons, this study set out to investigate the extent to which teachers of English as a second language (ESL) in Cameroon master the language they teach, as a demonstration that the teacher is one of the major problems to be addressed. Our main objectives were to test teachers' language skills. Employing the Homogeneous Purposive Sampling Technique, a total of 40 ESL teachers in Tiko and Buea Sub-divisions of the South West Region of Cameroon were investigated using questionnaires and interviews. Of the 40, 36 showed difficulties with spelling, 33 with punctuation, 30 with pronunciation, 28 with capitalization, 27 with sentence construction, and five with agreement.

**Keywords:** standards of English, GCE, language skills, ESL, Cameroon

## 1. Introduction

It is generally agreed that the input of the language teacher is an important factor for all children learning language (Swain, 1988; Lightbown, 1992; Gass, 1997; Anthony, 2008; Ellis & Collins, 2009). Thus, as Eposi, (2009) indicates, the learners' output may be dependent, significantly, on the teacher's input. Anthony (ibid), for example, argues that both the quality and the amount of language input children experience around them have an influence on both native language and second language acquisition. In other words, children who receive more input develop higher and better language skills than children who are provided with less input (Hart & Risley, 1995). What this means is that those exposed to less input are deprived of the adequate amount and quality of language that they need to be able to give maximum output.

As Kimberly (2009) points out, for teachers to be able to administer relevant input to learners, the former must be knowledgeable in their area of study. In other words, following Metuge (2006), it is professionally necessary for a teacher to be familiar with his/her students' subject-specialism. What these authors essentially imply is that, in order to teach English successfully, the teacher is expected to have a good mastery of the English language itself and be adequately knowledgeable of the salient facts that meet the needs of learners. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), these facts consist of knowledge of grammar which includes vocabulary, syntax and phonology; textual and pragmatic knowledge related to the communicative goals of the language user and the context in which the language is used; functional knowledge, as well as socio-linguistic knowledge. Hence, effective teaching can partly be measured by the level of a teacher's mastery of the language which could be a prime predictor of students' learning. In the light of this view, Fakeye (2012) points out that there is a high correlation between what teachers know and what they teach, arguing that a teacher whose understanding of a given subject is thorough uses clearer language, and more connected discourse, and he/she is capable of providing better explanations than a teacher whose background is weak.

As it stands, due to falling standards for the last three decades, students have been performing poorly in the English language as a subject in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level examination in Cameroon where

English is learned and spoken by Anglophone Cameroonians as a second language.( Note 1) While previous research has generally attributed the problem of student failure to the falling standards of English in Cameroon, no one has seriously taken up the question of teacher's competence into consideration. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to test the language proficiency of English language teachers in Cameroon by critically looking at what language skills they possess.

For the organization of the work, Section 2 that follows takes a look at previous studies and clarifies the salient problem. Section 3 looks at the methodology, stating the sample population and the methods of data collection and analyses. Section 4 then discusses the findings while Section 5 summarizes the work and proposes relevant recommendations.

## **2. Previous Studies and the Problem**

Within the last three decades, scholars have increasingly observed that the performance of students in the English language at the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level examination, as well as the standards of English in Cameroon are on a steady decline (Ntonifor, 1992; Ayafor, 1996; Tasah, 2002; Fontem & Oyetade, 2005; Ndongmanji, 2005; Beyang, 2006; Lebsia, 2006; and Fontem, 2012). According to Ndongmanji (ibid), the standard of English in Cameroon has fallen to a 'lamentable state', considering the performance of students in the GCE Ordinary Level examination.

Although researchers have frequently ascribed this poor performance and declining standards to the lack of motivation on the part of the learners (for example, Fonka, 2014), the influence of Pidgin English (PE) and French (Chumbow & Simo-Bobda, 1995; Schroeder, 2003), and sometimes to pedagogic and socio-psychological factors such as inadequate teaching/learning resources, negative influence from the learning environment, overcrowded language classrooms, learners' attitudes towards the language, and inadequate teacher training (Fontem & Oyetade, 2005), it would seem that there is more to the puzzle than is actually perceived, especially with respect to the teaching of English as a second language (ESL) in Cameroon. Specifically, it seems that, apart from other factors, ESL teachers in Cameroon generally have a poor mastery of the language itself, a fact that can largely be blamed for the problem, if proven.

We observe that, although Fontem and Oyetade (2005) and Fontem (2012:136) suggest that teachers are a contributing factor to the declining standards and proficiency of English in Cameroon, nothing of great substance has been done to actually investigate teachers' competence and performance in the English language to see what impact it has on the students' output. This is probably so because researchers have generally shied away from looking at the ESL teacher in Cameroon as a potential problem. This disregard for teachers' input compounds the problem because some important aspects in the teaching/learning of English such as the irregular aspects of the language require the teachers' intuition since these can only be acquired and not learned. In other words, if teachers don't use English correctly, students will be left with no other choice than to acquire the wrong usage to which they are exposed.

## **3. Data Collection and Analysis**

### *3.1 Participants*

Given that sample size is not representative by virtue of its largeness, but by its content with respect to the variables under study, a total of forty (40) ESL teachers from eight public secondary schools in Tiko and Buea Sub-divisions of the South West Region of Cameroon took part in this study. A major reason for the choice of public schools as opposed to others including lay private and missionary is because public school teachers are generally considered to be those who have received professional training and are therefore assumed to be qualified to teach in the classroom. Thus, we take for granted that these trained public school teachers have a solid mastery of their subject matter which would enable them to provide learners with adequate input that will yield positive results. Of the 40 teachers examined, 26 came from Buea Sub-division, and 14 came from Tiko Sub-division. The disparity in number results from the fact that there are more government schools and therefore teachers in Buea Sub-division, than in Tiko Sub-division. There was no gender bias in selecting the participants as both male and female teachers were given an equal chance to participate in the study. Also, participants in the study came from different places across Cameroon (essentially Anglophone West Cameroon) – as indicated in the following subsection, provision was made for place of origin.

### 3.2 Instruments

To ensure reliability of the findings, we made use of both quantitative and qualitative data collected by means of administering questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire contained open-ended questions which required respondents to provide answers by writing elaborately, which then let us to error analysis. The questionnaire equally includes space for respondents to state their qualifications, town of origin, and number of years in the teaching profession. With respect to interviews, we interviewed respondents on issues of the English language classroom, and then further analysed the recorded interviews for pronunciation, choice of words, sentence formation, and fluency.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Data collected for this investigation were analysed using the qualitative content analysis (QCA) method developed in the 1980s by Philipp Mayring. The QCA approach was used to analyse data in order to apply a more qualitative text interpretation of the data collected. Since Mayring's method can basically be applied in analysing any kind of recorded communication, that is, transcripts of interviews/discourses, protocols of observation, video tapes and written documents in general, data collected through the questionnaires were analysed descriptively using simple tables, frequencies and percentages which are appropriate in describing trends. In addition, Error Analysis (EA) was applied in the process of analysing the data because the rationale of the study was to pick out errors made by English language teachers both in writing and in speaking as evidence of their lack of proficiency in the language they teach. Finally, the data collected were keyed into Microsoft Excel 2010 and exported to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0 for statistical analyses.

## 4. Findings

In the course of carrying out this investigation, all the four main language skills were tested. The findings are as follows:

### 4.1 Listening and Reading for Understanding

Listening is undeniably one of the most important skills one needs in life. As a matter of fact, how well one listens has a major impact on the quality of their interaction and relationship with others. Among other reasons, one may listen in order to understand, learn, or obtain information.

In essence, we observed from the data collected that participants were not proficient at listening/reading and understanding, although to a reasonable degree, they were active in listening. (Note 2) For example, there was the absence of feedback in many instances, what shows that they did not understand the questions that we asked. Some of the responses to the questions in both the interview and questionnaire were not appropriate. For instance, asked in the questionnaire how they plan their lessons, one of the respondents said 'language need of students constitutes language area focus'. All these are indicative of their lack of listening/understanding and reading skills.

### 4.2 Writing

#### 4.2.1 Spelling

In this study, respondents' spelling skills were measured based on their ability to render words according to the conventional orthographic rules. Therefore, in the course of analysing the questionnaires for which answers were provided by respondents, several spelling errors were identified. Of the 40 respondents, 36 (i.e., 90%) spelt many words wrongly. The table below illustrates some of the wrong spellings of words used by the respondents and their corresponding correct versions. The asterisks placed against some words and the number of the asterisks indicate the number of respondents who spelt the relevant words wrongly.

Although West (1965) observes that spelling is a major problem not only to foreign learners of English, but also to native speaker learners, the kind of spelling errors (as seen in Table 1 above) observed during the investigation are sufficiently disturbing, not least because the wrongly-spelled words are mainly basic and very commonly used words for any language teacher to spell correctly. Besides, some of the wrong spellings were recurrent in some of the answers provided in the questionnaire, a fact that shows that the wrong spellings were not errors, but rather a lack of knowledge of the right spellings.

The fact that such spelling errors came from English language teachers is a major cause for concern because, as language teachers, they are expected to have a sound mastery of spelling in English. What is even surprising is the fact that some words like 'syllabus', 'textbooks' and 'motivated' were used in the questionnaire items, yet, in answering the questions using these same words, many respondents spelt them wrongly. Thus, taking a close look at

the kind and frequency of errors these teachers make, one can justifiably conclude that they are partly responsible for the spelling errors among English language learners (ELLs) in Cameroon.

**Table 1.** Some Spelling Errors Made by Respondents

Spelling error	Correction of the error
gramar**; gramma*; grammer****	grammar
syllables****	syllabus
vocabulary*	vocabulary
multivated***	motivated
in other**	in order
compolsary/compulsary**	compulsory
text books*****	textbooks
grammartical*	grammatical
absentism*	absenteeism
durring**	during
forcuses*	focuses
occurences**	occurrences
creat**	create
incooperating*	incorporating
erradicate*	eradicate
sheduled**	scheduled
myselve*	myself
anable*	enable
pratitioner*	practitioner
graps*	grasp

#### 4.2.2 Punctuation and Capitalization

It was observed that an overwhelming majority of the respondents have difficulties using punctuation marks accurately. Of the 40 respondents, 33 (i.e., 82.5%) used punctuation marks wrongly. To begin with, 26 of them (i.e., 65%) constructed sentences without an end-punctuation to indicate that the sentence had ended. Also, connecting devices such as *also*, *furthermore*, and *in addition* that are always followed by a comma when used to introduce a sentence were written without any, by seven of them (i.e., 17.5%). In addition, it was observed that some of the respondents – seven in number (i.e., 17.5%) showed no knowledge of how to use the apostrophe-s to mark possession. As a result, genitive plural-form nouns like *learners'* and *students'* were repeatedly written as simple plural nouns (i.e., *learners* and *students*), placing the apostrophe neither before nor after the final plural-s.

It was equally observed that 28 of the 40 respondents (i.e., 70%) had difficulties with capitalization. That is, in the course of filling the questionnaires, many of them did not capitalize correctly. For instance, whereas a sentence should start with a capital letter, 23 of the 40 respondents (i.e., 57.5%) constructed sentences beginning with small letters. Also, whereas the personal pronoun 'I' must be a capital letter, 11 respondents (i.e., 27.5%) wrote it as a small letter, both at the beginning as well as in the middle of sentences. Further, it was observed that 12 of the 40 respondents amounting to 30 per cent unnecessarily spelt some words beginning with capital letters in the middle of sentences.

#### 4.2.3 Agreement and Choice of Word

Some of them – five in number (i.e., 12.5%) demonstrated serious lapses with intrasentential agreement. Such errors of agreement include subject-verb agreement and quantifier-noun agreement. The following ungrammatical sentences are extracted from the recorded interviews to demonstrate the problem.

1. **Every students possesses** some chance to express themselves in different ways.  
**Correction:** Every student has a chance to express themselves in different ways.
2. **It also help** the students to bring out hidden talents.  
**Correction:** It also helps the students to discover hidden talents.
3. **Their answers shows** that they have interest in the English language.  
**Correction:** Their answers show that they have interest in the English language.

As these excerpts also show, participants also generally demonstrated a weakness in choice of words when speaking. For example, 'bring-out' will not be the right choice of word when it comes to finding one's hidden talents while doing something. As the correction in (2) above shows, a better word would be 'discover'.

#### 4.2.4 Sentence Structure

In this study, we further observed that 27 (67.5%) of the 40 respondents had difficulties with sentence construction. Some of them constructed incomplete sentences (fragments), and others constructed sentences that are simply incomprehensible and ungrammatical. For instance, when respondents were asked to give their views on what should be done to improve on the teaching of English as a second language in Cameroon, one of them wrote, 'more grammar', a fragment where the thought is incomplete. It is highly likely that the respondent intended to say that in order to improve on the teaching of English as a second language in Cameroon, 'more grammar lessons/drills should be introduced'. Again, when respondents were asked to point out the various factors which they often take into consideration when planning their lessons, one of them said 'class of the size'. This sentence is syntactically incorrect and therefore ungrammatical. It would normally be 'the class size' or 'the size of the class'. Although the deviance can be seen as an error, it demonstrates the general lack of competence in the ESL teacher in Cameroon.

### 4.3 Speaking

#### 4.3.1 Pronunciation

Everything being equal, English language teachers in Cameroon are expected to pronounce words or sounds as in Standard British English or Received Pronunciation (RP), which in principle, is the officially approved standard for English in Cameroon (Mbangwana, 1987). However, it was observed that 30 of the 40 respondents (i.e. 75%) had serious difficulties with pronunciation. The table below illustrates some words that were used and wrongly pronounced by respondents in the interview, juxtaposed with the RP pronunciations.

**Table 2.** Respondents' Wrong Pronunciations and the RP Versions (Note 3)

Glossary	Respondents' pronunciation	RP pronunciation
colonel	/kolonel/	/□kɜ:n <sup>ə</sup> l/
no	/no/	/nəʊ/
students	/students/	/□stju:d <sup>ə</sup> nts/
letter	/leta/	/letə <sup>r</sup> /
above	/abov/	/ə'baʊv/
phone	/fon/	/fəʊn/
reported	/rɪ'poted/	/rɪ'pɔ:tɪd/
thing	/tɪŋ/	/θɪŋ/
third	/ted/	/θɜ:r:d/
water	/wɔta/ or /wata/	/wɔtə <sup>r</sup> /
short	/ʃɔt/	/ʃɔ:t/

As Table 2 shows, the pronunciation errors made by respondents vary. Thus, diphthongs were reduced to monophthongs (as in the case of 'no' and 'phone'), the voiceless fricative [θ] was replaced by the voiceless stop [t] (as in 'thing' and 'third'), long vowel sounds were shortened (as in 'short', 'water', 'third'), the schwa [ə] was replaced by the central vowel sound [a] as seen in words like 'water' and 'letter', and many other changes. What this

actually means is that vowels are generally conflated with groups of vowels reduced to single vowel sounds.(Note 4) Although Fontem (2012) suggests that bad pronunciation is not necessarily a sign of poor mastery of a language [at least in terms of its syntax], the language teacher is expected to have a mastery of pronunciation as part of a complete package for language teaching, especially in an L2 classroom context (like Cameroon) where students need to be motivated by a native-like pronunciation of the L2 teacher.

#### 4.3.2 Fluency

Although there is not a single agreed-upon definition in the literature, fluency is often understood to refer to one's ability to speak or write a given language smoothly and with ease (Chambers, 1997; Koponen & Riggenbach, 2000). According to Jong and Perfetti (2011), performance fluency in language is highly dependent on the knowledge and skills of the speaker, which are the bases of cognitive fluency. This implies that fluency is related to the extent of a speaker's linguistic knowledge as well as the use of that knowledge, the speed of access, and control over the available linguistic forms and syntactic devices.

In the present study, it was found that a large majority of our respondents were not fluent in speaking (as well as in writing). Although we could not have access to the appropriate linguistic tools that could be used to analyse respondents' speech and measure their fluency, the findings discussed above on respondents' difficulties with spelling, punctuation, intrasentential and phrasal agreement, sentence construction, and pronunciation all attest to the observation. Table 3 below provides a summary of the errors discussed above.

**Table 3.** Distribution of Respondents According to Errors Made

Error type	Total number of respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Spelling	40	36	90
Punctuation	40	33	82.5
Pronunciation	40	30	75
Capitalization	40	28	70
Sentence construction	40	27	67.5
Agreement and choice of word	40	5	12.5

As Table 3 indicates, spelling featured as the major factor posing difficulties to ESL teachers in Cameroon with about 90% of them facing spelling problems, followed by punctuation (82.5%), pronunciation (75%), capitalization (70%), sentence construction (67.5%) and agreement (12.5%). These findings thus confirm our hypothesis that English language teachers in Cameroon do not have adequate mastery of the language they teach. To that effect, this study is innovative in that it has brought English language teachers to the lime light as one of the possible factors responsible for the poor performance of students in the English language, and the falling standards of English in Cameroon.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The main aim of this study has been to test teachers of English as a second language (ESL) in Cameroon against the four main language skills of speaking, listening/understanding, writing, and reading, to determine how much mastery of the language they have, in a bid to demonstrate that the teacher is one of the major problems responsible for the continuous falling standards of English in Cameroon. Thus, employing the Homogeneous Purposive Sampling Technique, a total of 40 ESL teachers in Tiko and Buea Sub-divisions of the South West Region of Cameroon were investigated using questionnaires and interviews. By so-doing, the findings have revealed that the teaching of ESL in Cameroon is generally characterized by teachers who have an inadequate mastery of the English language itself, even as trained teachers. Specifically, of the 40 respondents in our sample, 36 showed difficulties with spelling, 33 with punctuation, 30 with pronunciation, 28 with capitalization, 27 with sentence construction, and five with intrasentential agreement. Thus, there is need to go back to the drawing board and redefine the criteria for training and/or recruiting ESL teachers in Cameroon. For that reason, we recommend that:

1. Existing English language teachers should be given capacity building courses through seminars and conferences so that they can update their knowledge to cushion the challenges that are inherent in language teaching.
2. The recruitment of English language teachers should be highly competitive and properly scrutinised to ensure that only meritorious and qualified candidates are retained at the end of the recruitment process. This will go a long way to guarantee a brighter future for English language teaching and the standards of the English language in Cameroon.
3. The training of teachers in Universities and other Teacher Training Colleges should also include serious and constant drills on spelling, pronunciation, punctuation, word building, vocabulary, and other core aspects of the English language. In other words, since English in Cameroon is not a native variety, the training of teachers of English cannot simply be restricted to pedagogy, even if the selected candidates already have a higher qualification in English.

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## Notes

Note 1. Note that Cameroon is officially bilingual in French and English as a colonial heritage. Thus, Francophone Cameroonians, who speak French as a second language, learn and speak English as a foreign language (EFL).

Note 2. Active listening entails making a conscious effort to hear, not only the words and sentences that an interlocutor uses, but more importantly, to understand the complete message being delivered. In order to do this, one must carefully pay attention to the interlocutor. In the process of conducting interviews, we observed that respondents were sometimes distracted by happenings around, while others kept interrupting without respecting turn-taking etiquettes.

Note 3. The RP pronunciations are taken from the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Third Edition (2005).

Note 4. Conflation of vowel sounds is actually an age-old problem in Cameroon – see discussion in Mbangwana (1987).

## Appendix: The questionnaire

This is a survey in the teaching of English as a second language. We would be very grateful if you could take some time off your busy schedule to fill out this questionnaire for us. We wish to also assure you that any information you provide here will strictly be treated as confidential and will be used only for the purpose of this research. **Tick** or **write** your answer(s) where necessary, and be honest as much as possible.

### Basic Information

- a) Sex: (a) Male                      (b) Female
- b) Age: (a) 15 – 25                    (b) 26 – 40                    (c) 41 – 54



c) Town of origin: \_\_\_\_\_; Town of residence \_\_\_\_\_

d) What are your qualifications?

- ❖ G.C.E Advanced Level
- ❖ DIPES I (Lower Diploma obtained from the teachers training college in Cameroon)
- ❖ DIPES II (Higher Diploma obtained from the teachers training college in Cameroon)
- ❖ Bachelor’s Degree
- ❖ Master’s Degree
- ❖ Other,

Please,specify

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e) How many years have you been teaching English language?

- a) 1 – 5 years
- b) 5 – 10 years
- c) 10 years and above

**Questions**

1) How many students do you have in your class? \_\_\_\_\_

2) What different areas of English do you teach your students?

- a) \_\_\_\_\_
- b) \_\_\_\_\_
- c) \_\_\_\_\_
- d) \_\_\_\_\_
- e) \_\_\_\_\_
- f) \_\_\_\_\_
- g) \_\_\_\_\_

3) a) What according to you are the students’ attitudes towards learning English language?

- Motivated

➤ Not motivated

b) What makes you think they are motivated/not motivated?

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4) What kind of teaching aid(s) do you often use in class?

- a) Textbooks and a dictionary
- b) Slide projector
- c) Flash cards
- d) Charts
- e) All of the above
- f) Other,

Please, specify \_\_\_\_\_

5) (a) Which teaching approach do you use in class?

- ⇒ Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach
- ⇒ Competency-Based Approach (CBA)
- ⇒ Other,

b) What does the approach you use entail?

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