

# “Ewondo in the Classes, French for the Masses” Mother-Tongue Education in Yaoundé, Cameroon

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## ABSTRACT

Cameroon is home to over two hundred eighty native languages coming from three language families, making it one of the most linguistically diverse countries on Earth. Despite this, native languages hold very few domains in Cameroonian society. In recent years, several experimental programs have begun to implement native languages in schools, citing that children learn best in their mother tongue. Among these schools is *ELAN-Afrique*, an initiative put forth by La Francophonie with the main aim of helping students better learn French by way of their mother tongue. This paper seeks to differentiate the benefits prescribed or expected by ELAN leadership from the actual benefits occurring at one Ewondo-medium ELAN school in Yaoundé. The study includes a series of twenty interviews with program leadership, linguists, and NGOs, as well as teachers and parents of students enrolled in the program. Claims made in interviews were then validated or refuted by classroom observation. The program’s main flaw is the assumption that the students’ mother tongue is Ewondo when in reality, due to their urban upbringing, the students’ mother tongue is French. This causes the reality of the program to differ fundamentally from the expectations of La Francophonie as some predicted benefits are negated, some manifest differently than expected, and other benefits appear never having been predicted.

**KEYWORDS:** bilingual and multicultural education, curriculum and instruction, applied linguistics

## ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

**LWC** – *Language of wider communication*

**L1** – *First language*

**L2** – *Second language*

**Native language** – *A language spoken in the country where it originated. Cameroon is home to over 280 native languages.*

**Mother tongue** – *A language that a child has heard from birth and has grown up speaking. In Cameroon, a child’s mother tongue could be French, English, Pidgin, or a native language of Cameroon.*

**Official language** – *A language given legal status by the government of a country. In Cameroon, French and English are official languages.*

**National language** – *According to the Cameroonian government, all languages spoken in Cameroon that are not official languages are called national languages. In essence, national languages are the native languages of Cameroon.*

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

#### Linguistic Makeup of Cameroon

As Africa contains over one third of the world’s languages, it should come as no surprise that Cameroon is home to over 280 mother tongues (Simmons and Fenning 2017). Though its multilingualism is not unique in the context of Africa, Cameroon stands out linguistically for two main reasons. Firstly, Cameroon scores a 0.974 on Greenberg’s Language Diversity Index (LDI), meaning that if two Cameroonians were chosen at random, the probability that they would have different mother tongues is 97.4% (Simmons and Fenning 2017). This score is topped only by that of Papua New Guinea (0.988), making Cameroon the second most linguistically diverse country in the world. Secondly, Cameroon holds “the singular character of being the one spot on the continent where all the African peoples meet” (Fonlon 1969, 28). As such, three of continental Africa’s four language families are spoken within its borders. **Niger-Kordofanian** Bantu languages occupy the rainforests in the south of Cameroon while Bantoid languages stretch through the central grasslands. The northern deserts of the country are home to **Afro-Asiatic** and **Nilo-Saharan** languages with even some Arabic speakers in the Far North Region (Fonlon 1969). The only continental African language phylum absent from Cameroon is the Khoisan family, which appears only in southern Africa.

Ethnologue (2015) lists ten Cameroonian languages as languages of wider communication (LWCs): **Shuwa Arabic** in the Far North Region; **Fulfulde** in the Far North, North, and Adamawa Regions; **Bamun** in the West and Northwest Regions; **Kom** in the Northwest Region; **Lamso’** in the Northwest Region; **Douala** in the Littoral and Southwest Regions; **Medumba** in the West, Littoral, and Center Regions; **Ewondo** in the Center and South Regions; **Bulu** in the South Region; and **Cameroonian Pidgin English** across the country. In cases of multilingualism across Africa, policymakers often elevate one or more LWCs to a national, standardized, institutional status in order to increase statewide unity and cultural pride. In Tanzania, Swahili holds national status and acts as the Lingua Franca for the population; in Botswana, Setswana has the same role; in Nigeria, three languages, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, have achieved national status; and in South Africa, ten African languages along with English serve as official languages. Cameroon, however, has yet to bolster any of its LWCs in this way due to its colonial legacy to be discussed below, along with the fact that no one language holds a significant plurality, let alone a majority, of speakers over others.

In highly multilingual cases like this, policymakers often keep colonial languages in an official capacity with the idea that they are relatively neutral and already embedded into the official function of the state. Additionally, colonial European languages come with a perceived pragmatism and prestige as they often hold official status around the world. Cameroon is no exception; however, it comes with the added intricacy of having two colonial languages, both French and English, in an official capacity due to its colonial history. Since 1961, the country has existed under a system of bilingualism in which French and English preside over their respective regions, leaving very little room for native languages outside of private domains (Chumbow 2012).

## Colonial Effect on Cameroonian Languages

Cameroon has experienced a varied colonial past with a mix of German, French, and British influences. After it became a German protectorate in 1884, native languages were encouraged and used in German-run missionary schools across the country (Fonlon 1969). Languages such as Bamun and Fulfulde, which had already achieved some degree of standardization and literary development, thrived in schools and public domains under the German system (Echu 2013). After WWI, however, control of what is now Cameroon shifted to the French and the British, bringing significant language policy changes in their wake. The French insisted on the policy of Assimilation in their share of the country, imposing solely French-medium instruction from the onset of schooling. Under Assimilation, Cameroonians were discouraged and even punished for using their native languages in schools, the French going so far as even referring to native languages simply as “dialects” or “patois.” The British, on the other hand, managed Northern and Southern Cameroons alongside Nigeria, opting for Indirect Rule. Under the British system, primary school students studied in their native languages during the first few years of schooling and later switched to English-medium education in higher grades (Albaugh 2007). The shadows of these two colonial systems are reflected heavily in the language policies of former British and French colonies in Africa as Anglophone states tend to prefer some form of native-language education while Francophone states opt for French alone. In the case of Cameroon, upon the independence and reunification of both sections of the country in 1960 and 1961, the European language-only educational system preferred by the French became the standard for the entire country, as it widely remains today.

## Language in Education in Cameroon

Article One, Paragraph 3, of the Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon states,

*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 endeavor to protect and promote national languages (1996).*

Though it is clearly stated that native languages deserve promotion and protection, there were very few efforts before the late 1990s to standardize and implement these languages in schools (Albaugh 2009). This can be chalked up to a lack of political will or human and financial resources; whatever the case may be, however, the overwhelming claim in literature on language-in-education policy states that native languages are not only preferable but vital to success.

When a child begins school around five years of age, s/he has already begun to reason through every new concept presented to him/her, in the language s/he has heard at home. In the case of Cameroon, especially for the 70% of the population living in rural areas, the home language is almost always native to Cameroon, and children hear French or English for the first time when they begin school (Bilola 2004). In highly urban and multiethnic contexts such as Yaoundé and Douala, this is not necessarily the case. French, English, and even Cameroonian Pidgin English (CPE) can serve as a child's first language. This is explored in detail below; however, the majority of Cameroonian linguists as well as programs such as *ELAN-Afrique* operate under the theory that solely French- or English-medium education presents a fundamental disadvantage in

every subject from mathematics to history. With a foreign medium of instruction, children work double duty to grasp new concepts as well as the language in which they are presented (Abbott 2000). In comparison, Cameroonian students' Western counterparts attend school in the language most comfortable to them, thereby developing their academic abilities without a language disadvantage in the way (Chumbow 1995). In fact, given the sink-or-swim approach of using a foreign-language medium of instruction, many students in Cameroon not only fall short of their potential but drop out of school altogether due to a lack of comprehension (ELAN 2015). The remedy of mother-tongue education would thus seem not only to prove beneficial to students' academic success but also to have implications for progress outside the classroom.

Bruthiaux (2002) states that since governments hold limited resources, and since literacy is the greatest means of combatting poverty, policymakers should opt for the media of instruction that yield the greatest amount of literate people, namely local mother tongues. The benefit of literacy then becomes more tangible as people are able to work with written documents such as titles, contracts, and records, which can lead to economic prosperity. Additionally, a wealth of information on subjects ranging from health to agriculture to business becomes available to rural communities if literary materials are available in the native language and community members have the skills to access them. To this claim, Obeng (2002, 15) states that “to date there is no country whose medium of instruction is ‘foreign’ which has attained an industrialized status.” Such can be said on a global scale, but it rings particularly true in Africa. States such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Tanzania, which have elevated one or more native languages to national status, have tended to fare better than their European-language-only counterparts as they have given their populations access to opportunity free of linguistic obstacles. In Cameroon, not only would the elevation of one or more native languages show faith in the culture and identity of the Cameroonian people, but it would also pave the way for opportunity and innovation within the country.

## ELAN-Afrique

In 2013, La Francophonie launched a program in eight states in Francophone Africa called *ELAN-Afrique* (École et Langues Nationales en Afrique). In Cameroon, the initiative functions through the Ministry of Basic Education to place experimental programs in primary schools across the country using four native languages, Basaa, Ewondo, Fulfulde, and Ghomálá, as media of instruction. La Francophonie states the following as benefits to bilingual education:

- “Cognitive benefits,” as students understand new concepts and ideas with greater ease when taught in their mother tongue.
- “Sociopolitical and cultural benefits,” as students begin to appreciate and value their language community's culture by seeing their mother tongue in an official domain.

However, the most emphasized benefit put forth by La Francophonie reads as follows:

- “Pedagogical and linguistic benefits: Researchers concur that initially teaching basic skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) in the child's mother tongue (or, at least, in a language s/he understands) makes it easier for him/her to master a second language,” namely French (ELAN 2015).

In fact, the curriculum operates under a transitional model, with each year of schooling slightly increasing the use of French in the

classroom and slightly decreasing the use of the native language (Maurer 2016).

At first glance, the third set of benefits seems to provide an answer to the paradoxical situation of La Francophonie, an organization set on the promotion and expansion of the French language, promoting the use of seemingly unrelated languages altogether. In essence, Cameroonian children's mastery of French is the ultimate goal of *ELAN-Afrique*. By creating a school environment in which students operate in the language most comfortable to them, the ELAN program decreases the likelihood of students dropping out of school. Additionally, the ELAN curriculum's emphasis on basic literacy in students' mother tongue provides a linguistic template that students can use to achieve mastery in French.

Though the pedagogical theory may seem simple, the onset of the program arrived under much more complicated circumstances. Albaugh (2009) talks of the increase in native-language programs in Francophone Africa springing up due to both a "push" and a "pull" factor. Language organizations', academics', and missionary groups' long-held belief in mother-tongue education provided the push, while the pull came from a sudden ideological change from La Francophonie. At the onset of widespread globalization in the 1990s, the French language, in the eyes of La Francophonie, needed protection from ever-expanding English. By subscribing to the outlined theories in the previous section, French language scholars found not only the strategy but also the arena to maintain the French's global influence. By promoting the eventual use of French through native-language instruction in Francophone Africa, La Francophonie, and further France itself, is attempting to hold onto its global sphere in the face of English.

## Scope

This project is a four-week qualitative study focusing on a primary school participating in the *ELAN-Afrique* initiative in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Though ELAN operates within several schools in four different regions of Cameroon, I have limited the study to one school based on feasibility. Within the school, twelve classrooms of around thirty students each participate in ELAN by using the Ewondo language as the medium of instruction. The school teaches grades one to four in Ewondo with three classes in each grade.

Included in my target population are the relevant actors who have contributed to the planning and execution of the ELAN program within the school. These include longtime advocates for mother-tongue education in Yaoundé, *ELAN-Afrique* leadership within Cameroon, and parents and teachers of students directly involved in the project.

With this in mind, my study focuses on a very specific population in urban Yaoundé and therefore cannot be generalizable to all mother-tongue programs in Cameroon. In fact, the urban environment of the target population, and therefore the increased presence of French in students' everyday lives, heavily shapes the outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

### Site Selection

In order to find native-language education programs, *Centre International de Recherche et de Documentation sur les Traditions et les Langues Africaines* (CERDOTOLA) served as the first point of contact. The organization provided some information but suggested exploring the Department of Cameroonian Languages and Cultures of *École Normale Supérieure* at the University of Yaoundé I. The head of the department then pointed to the ELAN Focal Point at the Ministry of Basic Education. After several meetings at the ministry,

the Focal Point gave permission to conduct research in one or more schools and provided contact information of two school principals.

The ELAN Focal Point suggested focusing on one or two Ewondo-medium schools in the Yaoundé area, as the program was more established there since it was so close to the capital. One school is situated in the city of Yaoundé while the other is in a rural setting outside of the city. Upon learning the latter school would take several hours to reach by car, the project narrowed to focus solely on the ELAN school in Yaoundé. This school appeared to fit the research interest as it taught in the native language of the area, Ewondo.

### Research Question and Hypothesis

The original intention was to focus research on the motivations behind the relevant actors in the implementation and operation of the ELAN program. For example, why do teachers chose to teach in a native language rather than an official one? Why have parents opted to send their children to Ewondo-medium as opposed to French- or English-medium schools? The hypothesis was that pragmatic and academic factors would motivate administrative actors such as the government, language scholars, and NGOs, while cultural and community factors would motivate teachers and parents. However, after interviewing several teachers and students, it became apparent that they themselves had not chosen whether or not to participate in the ELAN program.

As this eliminated the motivation for parents and teachers, the research question shifted. All actors interviewed saw the program in a positive light to varying degrees; however, there were discrepancies between what some actors said and observations on the ground. The claims that language experts or ELAN leadership made about the structure or predicted effects of the program relied on the assumption that the program taught students in their mother tongue; however, the reality is that in an urban setting like Yaoundé, students' mother tongue is French, meaning that the actual effects of Ewondo-medium education differ significantly from what ELAN leadership might have expected. This disconnect focused the project on how exactly the reality of the ELAN school of interest strayed from the mother-tongue education model posited by language scholars.

### Research Question

How do the perceived benefits of *ELAN-Afrique's* Ewondo program manifest when applied to students whose mother tongue is French rather than Ewondo?

### Hypothesis

In accordance with ELAN's prescribed benefits of mother-tongue education, using Ewondo-medium instruction with students whose mother tongue is French **will somewhat** provide children with pedagogical and linguistic benefits in achieving mastery of French, **will** provide children with sociopolitical and cultural benefits, and **will not** provide the children with cognitive benefits.

### Data Collection

As stated above, those involved in the implementation and execution of the ELAN program in the school of interest in Yaoundé serve as my target population. In order to collect data, I decided to conduct twenty interviews from four classes of relevant actors: teachers, parents, language experts, and NGOs. After interviewing, I decided to verify respondents' claims with direct observation of Ewondo-medium classrooms at the school of interest.



At the beginning of my project, I traveled to the school to establish contact with the principal and teachers. After explaining my research project, I asked the Ewondo-medium teachers to leave their contact information if they were willing to give an interview. For parents, I printed twenty copies of a letter explaining my research and asking for their contact information. I gave five copies of the letter to four teachers who, in turn, gave the letter to the students of their choice. I eventually received nine copies of the letter back, and I scheduled meetings with the first five parents available by phone. For language experts and NGOs, one interview tended to lead to another, as most linguists in the country are closely connected. In these categories, most respondents were professors or well-established members of the linguistics community in Yaoundé, and therefore they were able to recommend colleagues to me.

### Interviews

With the help of a French-English interpreter, I called each of the parents and teachers and scheduled interviews during the first weekend of my research period. Fortunately, school was not in session due to Easter break, so I was able to conduct interviews either in the homes of parents and teachers or on the school grounds. I went to interviews with my interpreter, who had already translated my questions into French and relayed to me the portions of the answers that I could not understand in English. I conducted interviews with language experts and NGOs on my own in English in the informants' offices. In total, I spoke to five parents, five teachers, six linguists, one ELAN teacher trainer, and one government official who heads the ELAN program in Cameroon.

### Observation

After Easter break, I began classroom observation by visiting the school of interest five separate times during its morning session. ELAN classrooms are broken into four age levels, so my observations included all four groups. At the beginning of the school day, I spoke to a teacher I had interviewed and asked for permission to observe the class. After receiving permission, I sat in the back of the classroom to observe. My presence often distracted the students during the beginning of class, but they seemed to forget about me after a few minutes of instruction from their teacher.

### Data Analysis

After transcribing interviews, I coded each one, first based on themes that showed up within groups of specific actors (e.g., parents, teachers, linguists) and then by those that showed up among all respondents. I then looked at themes with three or fewer instances and consolidated them with other themes or took them out completely. Eventually, I came up with several overarching themes that I then separated into two groups, *Perceived Effects of ELAN* and *Actual Effects of ELAN*, based on the themes' concordance with my classroom observation data. These two groups act as the crux of my research and drive the overall disconnect I illustrate below.

### Ethics

After receiving verbal consent, I recorded each interview on my phone and later transferred it to my computer, both of which are password protected. I explained the nature of my study to the participants before recording and assured them that their input would remain confidential and only be used for the purposes of my project. The files on both my phone and computer are labeled with each informant's title rather than his/her name. For the purposes

of confidentiality, I will not name any individuals in my paper; rather, I will simply refer to their titles. Additionally, I will not name the school observed in Yaoundé, but rather refer to it as "the school of interest."

My research heavily involves children, who are a vulnerable population. Though I cannot ignore the voices of those actually participating in the ELAN program, the scope and timeframe of my research could not permit me to interact with the students for the purposes of my project. Though I cannot claim that my data completely represents the views of ELAN students, I have tried to understand their perceptions of the program by speaking to their parents and teachers as well as observing them in their classrooms.

### Strengths and Limitations

It is worth noting that very little evaluation of ELAN has come from outside the project itself. Additionally, those studies that have occurred have mostly measured students' progress rather than taking a qualitative approach to opinions on the program. My study also contains the input of every actor involved in implementing the program at the school of interest; I have received testimonies from ELAN leadership in Cameroon, from academics and organizations who have campaigned for mother-tongue education programs, teachers trained by La Francophonie working in Ewondo-medium classrooms, and parents of the students participating in the program. Additionally, classroom observation validates or invalidates the claims made in interviews and allows for a clear distinction between the perceived benefits and the reality of the program.

I cannot call my study a representative sample of mother-tongue education in Cameroon or even of ELAN schools. In fact, the specific school of interest highlights the particularities of an urban school using the ELAN program in comparison with rural counterparts. Were I to continue this study, I would hope to interview more parents and teachers in order to represent my target population more fully; I would also compare my results from this study with data from a rural school using the ELAN program, as I predict the differences would be extensive. As my timeframe and resources allowed me only to observe one school, any claims made in my paper can only apply to the school of interest in Yaoundé. However, I hope the conclusions I have drawn from my research will spark interest in similar issues occurring in other mother-tongue education programs in urban areas.

## RESULTS

### *Pedagogical and Linguistic Benefits*

The greatest factor La Francophonie boasts about in regard to the ELAN program is the ease with which students will learn French after mastering elementary school material in their mother tongue. In fact, all six linguists interviewed cited that learning the grammar of the mother tongue in an academic setting gives children the skills and vocabulary needed to learn a second language. The ELAN Focal Point (personal communication, March 27, 2017) described the program's philosophy, stating that "the native language acts as an auxiliary to other languages, to the point that ELAN students speak French twice as well as a student with only French-medium instruction." Students begin by learning the alphabet phonetically, which then allows them to apply the same concepts they learn from reading in Ewondo to reading in French. He, along with one of the teachers interviewed (Teacher 4, personal communication, April 10, 2017), gave the example of the number eleven (*onze* in French). At first glance in both English and French, the word *eleven* reveals nothing about the value of the

number; in native languages, however, eleven often directly translates to “ten plus one.” By understanding this concept in native languages first, students will find that mathematics in French or English will make more sense.

These prescribed pedagogical and linguistic benefits of Ewondo-medium education rely on the assumption that Ewondo is not only the native language of the area but also the mother tongue of the students. As stated above, Ewondo is an LWC encompassing the Yaoundé area with 578,000 speakers (Ethnologue 2015); however, the fundamental disconnect between the expected benefits and the reality in the classroom comes from the linguistic makeup of the ELAN-participating students. None of the students at the school of interest have Ewondo as a mother tongue. Of all the parents I interviewed, only 10% were native Ewondo speakers, and 100% of the families, regardless of their linguistic background, reported that they use French at home to communicate with their children.

This greatly complicates the application of scholarly theory on mother tongue education to the school of interest. Based on ELAN’s planning, Ewondo is assumed to be the medium of instruction easiest to the students; providing instruction in Ewondo is therefore supposed to protect students from the sink-or-swim model of plunging into French-medium instruction. When asked about the benefits of Ewondo-medium education, every linguist, NGO, and teacher reported that it would greatly aid students in learning French; the reality is, however, not a single parent reported this. When asked, “Do you think your child will still learn French if they are educated in Ewondo?” all five parents stated that their child already speaks French. In this case, the sink-or-swim model is acting in reverse; students whose mother tongue is French have been plunged into foreign-medium instruction in the form of Ewondo. This is evident in the fact that students in all five classes observed spoke to each other in French both inside and outside of the classroom.

Additional observation of students in class three and class four, in which French- and Ewondo-medium instruction are more balanced, showed that students’ answers to questions were longer and more articulate when instruction was in French. For example, during Ewondo-medium instruction, students would use one- or two-word answers with praise from the teacher for articulating in Ewondo while during French-medium instruction, students would answer in complete sentences. During Ewondo instruction, students displayed varying performance. For example, in class four, when asked to list words that begin with “mb,” around five students came up with five to six words, around ten students were only able to think of one or two words, and the rest came up with numbers in between. This is not to say that the students cannot speak Ewondo; in fact, the opposite is true. Every student in every class followed instruction and participated in class regardless of the medium of instruction. However, exercises in written Ewondo proved that some students had a much firmer grasp on the language than others. Variation in performance should be expected in any classroom; however, a medium of instruction proven to be foreign to the students leads me to believe some of the variation in the school of interest should be attributed to linguistic barriers.

Two teachers reported that the students do not necessarily master Ewondo after the fourth year of the program, but many gain a very strong competency. It is worth considering that the original theory of the native language acting as an auxiliary to the official language may actually be at play in reverse. In reality, the French language in the classroom may reinforce the Ewondo language, as students would be using their mother tongue (French) to better grasp a foreign language (Ewondo). This reversed situation stems almost completely from the urban context of the school of interest. To this point, one linguist (Professor 2, personal communication, March 31, 2017) pointed out,

*The situation is quite different in a place like Yaoundé where French is the language everybody uses on the roads. When children go out of their compound, they are meeting people who speak French. That’s why even within the families, French has become, you may even say, the first language of those children.*

In any rural school, ELAN’s students most likely learn in the language most comfortable for them while transitioning into French instruction as the program was designed. When asked the question, “How are local languages used in Cameroon, and what is their status?” 50% of the linguists interviewed immediately stated that the primary domain for local languages is in rural areas. The linguist quoted above said, “It is just the opposite in rural areas. In rural areas, almost every child speaks his mother tongue before going to school.” If the goal of ELAN is to strike a balance between African languages and French, the school in question should adopt a new structure to teach Ewondo, as it is the second language of urban students; on the contrary, if the goal of ELAN is to create more French speakers, they may do better to focus their efforts outside of Yaoundé where children grow up without French in the home.

There is no glaring disadvantage to students in Yaoundé learning Ewondo in school as it is the major indigenous language present in and around the city. However, using it as a medium of instruction under the assumption that it is the mother tongue of students from Yaoundé creates pedagogical problems. In fact, by implementing an indigenous, yet unfamiliar, language in such an urban school, ELAN perpetuates the very situation it has aimed to resolve.

### ***Sociopolitical and Cultural Benefits***

Apart from using native languages as a bridge to French, ELAN attempts to connect students with their language communities. With more contact with their mother tongue in an official domain, students should begin to take pride in their own linguistic and cultural identity. 100% of the linguists and 80% of the teachers spoke of the valorizing cultural effects of seeing Ewondo in schools. One linguist (Professor 3, personal communication, April 3, 2017) illustrated this by saying, “You use [language] to discover the culture, the genius of the people. How do they build their houses? How do they name things?” Even the curriculum for the school of interest has been structured to highlight Ewondo-specific names, places, situations, and ideas. For example, math problems in ELAN classrooms could read, “Mr. Atangana leaves from Mbalmayo at 7:00 and arrives in Ebolowa at 9:30. Calculate the duration of the journey.” In fact, a dean at the University of Yaoundé I (2017), as well as a teacher trainer in the Ewondo program, stated that the greatest strength of the program comes from its ability to incorporate the pupils’ specific linguistic culture into the curriculum.

A problem, however, lies in the fact that, due to the heterogeneity of classrooms in Yaoundé, very few of the ELAN pupils actually belong to the Ewondo ethnic group. 100% of the teachers mentioned that most of their students were not ethnically Ewondo and had no Ewondo-language background before starting the program. Two teachers even expressed pride in the fact that the students with the strongest Ewondo skills did not belong to the ethnic group. Teacher 5 (personal communication, April 11, 2017) stated,

*In my classroom I have children coming from different regions, not specifically the Center [Region]. I have students coming from the West, from the North, and the thing is, the students who are the first of the class are often coming from other regions—not from the Center where they speak Ewondo as their mother tongue.*

Though it is obviously impressive that they have fared so well in an

Ewondo-medium program, Teacher 5's comment speaks heavily to the linguistic and ethnic diversity of the classrooms.

This is not at all to say non-Ewondo children's learning of Ewondo has negative effects; in fact, the cultural benefits simply manifest themselves differently than as predicted by ELAN. Professor 4 (personal communication, April 17, 2017) highlights one cultural advantage, stating, "Imagine a child from—a Fulani-born child. He studies in Yaoundé; they don't teach Fulani here. Therefore, he is bound to learn Ewondo. The idea is, if he learns one African language, that will make it easier for him to learn his own language." Additionally, implementing one Cameroonian language in schools leads to the respect of others (Professor 3, personal communication, April 3, 2017). Two linguists I spoke to had found that young Cameroonians have begun to show increased interest in Cameroonian culture (Professor 1, personal communication, March 28, 2017; Professor 4, personal communication, April 17, 2017). More students are participating in summer language programs; more university students are enrolling in African language classes; etc. Professor 4 went so far to say, "We are always surprised. Our kids love African culture so much. When there is a song that is typically African, you see children in primary schools and in high schools, they are dancing."

Apart from valorizing languages in the minds of Cameroonians, implementation of native languages in schools has more concrete benefits as well. As stated above, every student in the ELAN program at the school of interest has a grasp of Ewondo, though to varying degrees. Therefore, in essence, the ELAN program has created a batch of around 360 Ewondo L2 speakers in one of Cameroon's largest French hubs. According to Professor 1 (personal communication, March 28, 2017), a benefit of learning a native language that is an LWC such as Ewondo manifests in domains such as markets or offices. If a person uses Ewondo to receive services from a native Ewondo speaker in Yaoundé, s/he is likely to benefit from enhanced haste, price, or quality of service.

Additionally, all five parents interviewed, regardless of their ethnic identity, expressed approval of their children studying in Ewondo. Teacher 5 (personal communication, April 11, 2017) explained that some parents expressed frustration at the beginning when their child was chosen to participate in the program, stating that they sent their child to school to learn French, not Ewondo. However, after the program has become more established, every parent I spoke to had something to say of the benefits of learning Ewondo. As stated, all reported speaking French at home with their child; however, 60% expressed regret that they could not use their mother tongue with their children. One parent (Parent 4, personal communication, April 8, 2017) reported, "I would rather have my mother tongue taught in schools, but I'm not the one who is choosing. Ewondo is a Cameroonian mother tongue, so I'm happy with that." In fact, 60% of the parents interviewed stated that they approved of their child studying in Ewondo simply because it is a language of Cameroon. In essence, Ewondo is filling a linguistic and cultural gap for many of these urban children. While fifty miles away their rural, Ewondo-speaking counterparts learn French as an L2, French-speaking students at the school of interest learn Ewondo as an L2 to add to their cultural and national identity. To this point, Professor 1 (personal communication, March 28, 2017) explained, "Often, parents in large cities in Cameroon come from different language groups and therefore speak official languages at home. In these cases, in order for children to learn their mother tongues, they must do so in a formal setting."

The ELAN program in the school of interest addresses this exact need. The greatest flaw, though, lies in the assumption of ethnic homogeneity within the classroom. Therefore, the expected benefit

of connecting students at the school of interest to their own Ewondo identity does not come to fruition. Regardless of that, indigenous-language education offers a wealth of benefits even if the chosen language is not the students' mother tongue; the caveat is that for urban French L1 students, the native language must be taught as an L2.

### **Cognitive Benefits**

Part of the theory put forth by *ELAN-Afrique* states that students better grasp new concepts in any subject when presented in their mother tongue. This makes sense, as children have been reasoning new concepts in their native language long before entering primary school. However, the same discrepancy applies to this set of benefits as the previous sets due to the fact that the students' native language is French.

Upon observation, it seems that the linguistic makeup of the class is not the only obstacle for the cognitive benefits *ELAN-Afrique* describes. When asked to identify the obstacles to mother-tongue education in Cameroon, 83% of the linguists interviewed, along with the Focal Point of ELAN in Cameroon, stated the need for didactic materials. When asked how to achieve a truly multilingual curriculum, Professor 4 (personal communication, April 17, 2017) stated, "If you want to teach mathematics or physics or chemistry, biology, you need to teach in [native] languages. So, it will take some time until materials are developed in those languages." To the same effect, Professor 1 (personal communication, March 28, 2017) explained that at the moment, the state struggles to provide the means for bilingual resources between English and French, let alone for multilingual resources. Regardless of the challenges, though, five of the six linguists interviewed stated that implementing curricula in native languages is possible; it simply requires quite a lot of financial and human resources.

Currently, even the ELAN program funded by La Francophonie has not provided sufficient resources for the program at the school of interest. Therefore, even if Ewondo were the mother tongue of all the pupils, the sheer lack of didactic materials would prevent the cognitive benefits of mother-tongue education. Of the teachers interviewed, 60% spoke of a shortage of materials. Teacher 1 (personal communication, April 5, 2017) said, "We have a book for reading and a book for spelling [in grade four], but we don't have math and science books, so we just teach what we have in our head—our own knowledge of math and science." Additionally, Teacher 3 (personal communication, April 8, 2017), who teaches grade one, reported, "In [grade] one, Ewondo is 80% of the program. So, in level one, we need more lexical items, more spelling, more ways to teach the child, but we don't have all the documents." This problem was evident during classroom observation as there was only one instance in five days during which students used didactic materials printed in Ewondo. Similarly, in 80% of the classes I observed, teachers switched to French when teaching subjects such as math or science, for which there was no textbook.

Regardless of the mother tongue of the pupils at the school of interest, the lack of resources negates the perceived cognitive benefits of Ewondo-medium education. Unlike *Pedagogical and Linguistic Benefits* and *Sociopolitical and Cultural Benefits*, the barriers to the prescribed cognitive benefits do not stem from the urban context of the school of interest but rather from the overall financial situation of the program.

### **Additional Benefits**

None of this is to say that students at the school of interest do not benefit from the ELAN program. In fact, through my research I have



discovered many previously unknown benefits of the program that are enhancing the success of the students. These additional benefits, however, were not prescribed by La Francophonie as they are not products of Ewondo-medium instruction but rather of specialized teaching methods.

After every observation, I spoke to teachers about how attentive and engaged I found their students. Though, as mentioned above, each pupil has a different grasp of Ewondo, students are eager to answer questions, participate in class, and contribute their thoughts to the classroom. To this effect, 80% of parents cited their child's intelligence or praised their child for good marks. Though many in the ELAN leadership would chalk this up to Ewondo-medium instruction, the new specialized curriculum introduced by ELAN has actually brought about many of these results. Additionally, 60% of teachers mentioned that the new curriculum focuses on games for learning. I observed these to include academic games to practice math, reading, spelling, and writing, as well as kinesthetic that keep the students' attention. It is worth noting, as well, that students play these games in both French and Ewondo, meaning that the enhancements they provide are not necessarily linguistic but rather programmatic.

Another advantage of the ELAN curriculum is greater individualized attention and assistance compared with the average classroom in Cameroon. Two teachers spoke of this, saying,

*Another advantage is that there isn't frustration—if the child has some difficulty, I don't leave the child as I would in the ordinary system. Instead, if the child doesn't know, it is up to the teacher to encourage the child, to show him/her how to do things in the program* (Teacher 1, personal communication, April 5, 2017).

Another added, "And, another advantage is that we're not just moving on with the courses; we try to know where the student is to know how to help them. So we're not leaving them. We want to know the child's level to help them go far with the program" (Teacher 5, personal communication, April 11, 2017).

This individualized approach has had effects on the behavior and classroom performance of the children. Four of the five teachers interviewed reported that students feel more comfortable expressing themselves under the new curriculum. This manifests in several ways. Teacher 1 (personal communication, April 5, 2017) gave the example of students talking to the teacher more candidly. The response to "What did you do this morning?" is a genuine account of the student's day rather than a recitation from a book. Teachers 3 and 4 (personal communication, April 8 & 10, 2017) stated that their students have become more willing to tell them how they feel, while Teacher 5 (personal communication, April 11, 2017) reported that more students ask for help when they do not understand a concept taught in class. Teacher 5 went on to say, "They are now motivated, and they're not afraid to talk to me like in other classes, because you know in our society, it is not easy to expect parents or elders to get the point of view of the children" (Teacher 5, personal communication, April 11, 2017). This increased comfort has even resulted in fewer absences in ELAN classrooms; of all the classes I observed, the highest number of absences in a day was three—about ten percent of the class. It is clear, however, that the willingness to come to school has been born of methods and practices within the classroom that are not linguistic, such as the individual attention cited above comes in both French and Ewondo.

These benefits do not fit perfectly into the three categories posited by La Francophonie; however, ELAN's curriculum merits praise for the above effects. Were the program to be restructured, aspects of the curriculum design that have created confident, active students should remain. The difference would need to come in the

form of linguistic readjustment in order to take students' linguistic backgrounds into account.

## CONCLUSION

This paper should not be taken as a condemnation of native-language education in Cameroon schools. On the contrary, as the country is one of the most linguistically rich in the world, any attempt to protect or promote indigenous languages is a step in the right direction. More than anything, vigilance and special attention need to be given to the linguistic makeup of each specific environment in order to maximize the learning of both indigenous and foreign languages and the success of students.

By exploring the ELAN program at the school of interest, I simply sought to illustrate the differences between the perceived and actual benefits of Ewondo-medium education. The differences between the expectations and the reality of the project in this instance have proven significant. In regard to my hypothesis, linguistic and pedagogical benefits were mostly absent, aside from students' high level of attention in class; sociopolitical and cultural benefits were present, though they manifested differently than expected; and cognitive benefits were completely absent not only for linguistic reasons but also due to a lack of materials. What I had not hypothesized were the additional benefits that became clear when asking teachers about the effect of the non-linguistic features of the curriculum.

Though it is easy to implement native media of instruction citing cognitive, sociopolitical and cultural, and pedagogical and linguistic benefits, these benefits sometimes fall short of the mark. These perceived benefits are based on the assumption that the indigenous medium of instruction is the native language of the students. At the school of interest, it does not take much observation to realize that the native language of the students is French.

Therefore, linguistic and pedagogical benefits such as using the native language as an auxiliary to learn the official language begin to work in reverse. The reality is that French L1 speakers at the school of interest have used French to learn Ewondo. Though speaking Ewondo brings benefits of its own, the current curriculum mislabels it as the L1 of students and therefore perpetuates the practices it aims to prevent.

In terms of sociopolitical and cultural benefits, the expected bond created between students and their own Ewondo identity does not necessarily manifest as most students come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. However, urban Cameroonian children who often lack a native language have added a language of Cameroon to their arsenal. Additionally, the Ewondo language gains valor and prestige by acting as a medium of instruction in school. The disconnect lies in the neglect of the urban context at the school of interest.

The cognitive benefits prescribed by La Francophonie did not come to pass due in part to the fundamentally incorrect assumption described above. However, even if the medium of instruction perfectly suited the children at the school of interest, Ewondo-medium didactic materials have not yet made their way into the classroom. Therefore, even in a classroom entirely composed of Ewondo L1 speakers, the advantage of learning new subjects in the most comfortable language would not be entirely possible due to a lack of resources.

The greatest strength of ELAN is not linguistic but rather programmatic. By implementing a curriculum that focuses on individual students' successes, La Francophonie has opened up a new set of previously unknown benefits. Because the program has made the classroom interactive and given students the one-on-one help they need, children have boosted their attendance rates and become more confident in themselves.

All in all, I think the school I looked at stands out particularly due

to its urban setting. It would be prudent for ELAN to restructure the program in the school of interest in order to maintain and valorize Cameroonian languages for children who have grown up using French. However, as this initiative is funded by La Francophonie, this seems highly unlikely.

The study I conducted looks very closely at the actors concentrated in one school participating in ELAN. Due to time constraints, this created a very narrow scope and therefore very specific findings. Were I to continue with the study, I would like to observe more classrooms, interview more parents, and travel to other schools as well. I encourage further projects on ELAN done by other researchers from outside the program itself. Studies on ELAN schools in rural settings may shine light on whether the expected benefits of La Francophonie manifest more clearly in schools where students' native language is an indigenous language.

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