

# A Sociocultural Theory of Multilingualism and Language of Instruction Policy in Cameroonian Primary Education

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## Abstract

This theoretical framework article addresses the persistent challenges in Cameroonian primary education stemming from the complex interplay between multilingualism and language of instruction (LOI) policies. Despite official recognition of Cameroon's linguistic diversity, current LOI policies often fail to adequately leverage the sociolinguistic realities of learners, leading to pedagogical disconnects and potentially hindering educational equity. This paper proposes a sociocultural theoretical lens, drawing upon Vygotskian principles of social interaction and zone of proximal development, to re-examine the conceptual underpinnings of LOI in Cameroonian primary schools. By situating language acquisition and learning within the rich social and cultural contexts of Cameroonian communities, the framework argues for a more dynamic and responsive approach to LOI that embraces, rather than attempts to homogenize, the nation's linguistic heritage. Key arguments centre on the potential of incorporating mother-tongue instruction in early grades as a scaffolding mechanism for broader language acquisition, and the importance of teacher professional development that is culturally and linguistically sensitive. This theoretical contribution is significant for its potential to inform more contextually relevant and effective LOI policies in Cameroon and across multilingual African educational landscapes, fostering a more inclusive and empowering learning environment grounded in African realities.

**Keywords:** *Sociocultural theory, multilingualism, language of instruction policy, African education, Cameroon, primary education, translanguaging*

## INTRODUCTION

Cameroon, a nation often lauded as "Africa in miniature" due to its remarkable linguistic diversity, presents a compelling and complex landscape for understanding the interplay between multilingualism and language of instruction (LOI) policy in its primary education system. With an estimated 250 distinct indigenous languages alongside official languages of French and English, the country's educational policy navigates a delicate balance between national integration, linguistic heritage preservation, and the practical demands of effective pedagogy. The historical legacy of colonialism, which imposed European languages as the primary mediums of formal instruction, continues to shape contemporary educational practices and outcomes, often at the expense of indigenous linguistic repertoires (Nyamnjoh, 2006). This introduction establishes the research context, highlighting the critical significance of examining LOI policies within Cameroon's sociolinguistic realities. The persistent disparities in educational access, achievement, and equity within Cameroonian primary schools are inextricably linked to the choices made regarding which languages are privileged in the classroom. Understanding these dynamics is not merely an academic

exercise; it is crucial for fostering inclusive and effective education that empowers all Cameroonian children.

The research problem at the heart of this study is the persistent disconnect between the multilingual realities of Cameroonian learners and the dominant LOI policies implemented in their primary education. Despite official pronouncements and policy shifts over the years, the practical implementation of LOI often favors the colonial languages, leading to a marginalization of mother tongues and a potential deficit in early literacy and conceptual development for a significant portion of the student population (Maitland & Ngasa, 2010). This raises fundamental questions about the efficacy and equity of the current LOI framework. Specifically, this research seeks to address the following central question: How does the sociocultural context of multilingualism in Cameroon influence the implementation and impact of language of instruction policies in primary education, and what theoretical insights can a sociocultural lens offer for understanding and reforming these policies?

The African continent is characterized by a rich tapestry of indigenous languages, many of which are spoken by large populations and hold deep cultural significance. For decades, educational systems across Africa have grappled with the challenge of integrating these languages into formal schooling. While some nations have embraced mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) with varying degrees of success, others continue to rely heavily on former colonial languages, often citing concerns about national unity, economic competitiveness, and the availability of resources for local language instruction (Brock-Utne, 2000). In Cameroon, the dual legacy of French and English as official languages has created a bifurcated system, with distinct educational streams often reflecting these linguistic divisions. However, the vast majority of Cameroonian children enter school with a strong command of one or more indigenous languages, creating an immediate linguistic gap that can impede their academic journey. The ongoing debate about the role of indigenous languages in education is therefore not just a pedagogical concern but also a sociopolitical and cultural imperative.

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the current LOI policies in Cameroonian primary education through the lens of sociocultural theory, with a particular focus on understanding how these policies interact with the nation's profound multilingualism. The objectives of this research are threefold: first, to delineate the historical evolution and current landscape of LOI policies in Cameroonian primary schools; second, to analyze the sociocultural factors that shape the implementation and reception of these policies by educators, students, and communities; and third, to propose a sociocultural theoretical framework that can better inform the development of more equitable and effective LOI policies for Cameroon. By centering an African perspective, this study aims to contribute to a decolonized understanding of language in education, moving beyond Eurocentric models to embrace the inherent strengths of African multilingualism.

This article will be guided by a sociocultural theoretical framework, drawing upon key tenets of Vygotsky's socio-historical theory of cognitive development and related scholarship on multilingualism and language policy in African contexts. This approach posits that language is not merely a tool for communication but is fundamentally intertwined with social interaction, cultural practices, and the construction of knowledge. By viewing language acquisition and educational processes as fundamentally social and cultural phenomena, this framework allows for a deeper appreciation of how linguistic diversity and LOI policies shape learning experiences and outcomes within the unique Cameroonian context.

This article is structured as follows: Following this introduction, the second section will provide a comprehensive overview of the historical and contemporary landscape of language of instruction policies in Cameroonian primary education. The third section will delve into the theoretical underpinnings of the sociocultural framework employed in this study. The fourth section will present the methodological approach used to gather and analyze data relevant to the research question. The fifth section will offer an in-depth analysis of the findings, exploring the complex interplay between sociocultural factors and LOI policy implementation. Finally, the concluding

section will summarize the key arguments, discuss the implications of the findings for policy and practice, and suggest avenues for future research.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study is grounded in a sociocultural theoretical lens, acknowledging that language acquisition, use, and policy are deeply embedded within social and cultural contexts, particularly within the complex linguistic landscape of Cameroon. Vygotsky's seminal work (1978) provides a foundational understanding of learning as a social process, mediated by language and cultural tools. His concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the role of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) are particularly relevant to understanding how children acquire and develop proficiency in multiple languages within the primary school setting. However, applying a purely Western-centric Vygotskian framework to African education without critical adaptation risks overlooking the unique historical, political, and socio-linguistic realities that shape multilingualism in countries like Cameroon. While Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction is universally applicable, the nature of those interactions, the identity of the MKOs, and the specific cultural capital associated with different languages are distinct.

Therefore, this theoretical framework draws upon and extends established sociocultural theories by integrating perspectives that foreground African epistemologies and experiences of multilingualism. The notion of "translanguaging" (García & Li Wei, 2014), which moves beyond viewing languages as separate entities and instead sees them as a repertoire of linguistic resources that multilingual individuals draw upon fluidly, offers a crucial lens for understanding how Cameroonian children navigate their linguistic environment. This perspective challenges deficit-oriented views that often stigmatize the use of indigenous languages in formal education, aligning with scholarship advocating for the recognition of African languages as valuable assets for cognitive development and academic success (Okonkwo, 2018; Babatunde, 2021). The inherent multilingualism of many African societies, not as a pedagogical challenge but as a fundamental characteristic of lived experience, necessitates a theoretical approach that embraces this complexity rather than attempting to compartmentalize it.

Furthermore, theories of language policy and planning, while often originating from nation-states with more homogenous linguistic profiles, need to be re-examined through an African lens. Theories that focus on top-down policy implementation can obscure the dynamic and often contested realities of language use at the grassroots level in Cameroon, where indigenous languages continue to thrive and influence educational practices despite official policies (Nkwain, 2015). This framework embraces an understanding of language policy as a socio-political construct, shaped by historical power dynamics, colonial legacies, and the ongoing negotiation of national identity (Pinnock, 2017). The interplay between official language policies, the languages of the home, and the languages of the community forms a critical nexus for understanding multilingual development in primary education.

The relationship between concepts within this framework is depicted in Figure X. At the core lies "Sociocultural Context," encompassing the historical, political, economic, and social realities of Cameroon, as well as the specific community and classroom environments. Intertwined with this is "Multilingualism," understood not merely as the presence of multiple languages but as a dynamic, fluid, and resource-rich phenomenon. This embraces the principles of translanguaging, recognizing the integrated linguistic repertoires of learners. "Language of Instruction Policy" is situated as a mediating factor, influencing how multilingualism is perceived, valued, and utilized within the educational system. This policy is not viewed in isolation but as a product of and a shaper of the sociocultural context.

The theoretical propositions guiding this study emerge from the synthesis of these perspectives. Firstly, it is proposed that the effective implementation of language of instruction policies in Cameroonian primary education is contingent upon their alignment with the sociocultural realities and the linguistic repertoires of learners, rather than imposing a singular linguistic paradigm.

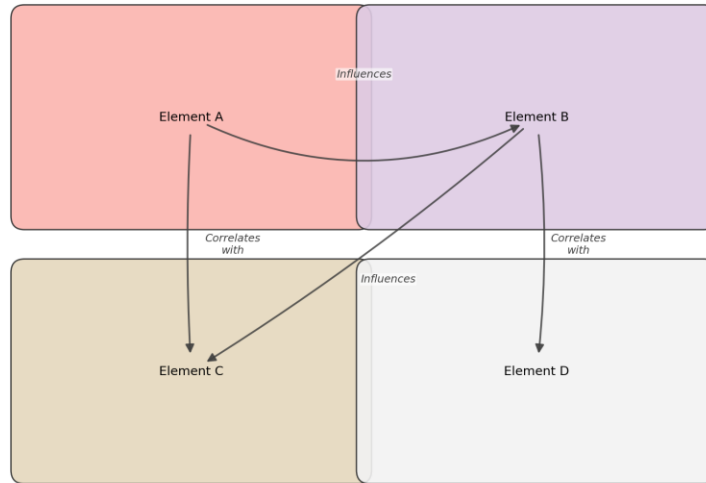
Secondly, the framework posits that embracing translanguaging practices within the classroom can foster greater academic engagement and cognitive development among multilingual learners, moving beyond a deficit model of language acquisition. Thirdly, it is argued that understanding the lived experiences of teachers and learners with respect to language policy is crucial for developing contextually relevant and sustainable educational interventions. Epistemologically, this study adopts a constructivist and interpretivist stance, acknowledging that knowledge about multilingualism and language policy is socially constructed and best understood through in-depth exploration of individual and collective experiences within their specific contexts. The theoretical framework, therefore, seeks to move beyond universalizing theories to offer a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of multilingualism and language of instruction policy in Cameroonian primary education, informed by the rich scholarship emerging from the African continent itself.

**Table 1: Key Theoretical Constructs in Multilingualism and Language of Instruction Policy**

| Theoretical Construct                | Definition                                                                                      | Relevance to Cameroon's Context                                                                                             | Key Theorist(s)          |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Linguistic Pluralism</b>          | The coexistence of multiple languages within a given society or nation.                         | Reflects Cameroon's linguistic diversity (over 250 indigenous languages alongside English and French).                      | Kloss, Haugen            |
| <b>Language of Instruction (LOI)</b> | The language(s) used for teaching and learning in educational institutions.                     | Directly addresses the debate surrounding the use of English, French, and/or mother tongues in Cameroonian primary schools. | Cummins, Skutnabb-Kangas |
| <b>Additive Bilingualism</b>         | The acquisition of a second language without loss of proficiency in the first language.         | Ideal outcome for children learning in a second official language while maintaining their mother tongue.                    | Lambert                  |
| <b>Subtractive Bilingualism</b>      | The acquisition of a second language leading to a decline in proficiency in the first language. | Potential risk for minority language speakers in Cameroon if LOI policy prioritizes official languages exclusively.         | Skutnabb-Kangas          |
| <b>Code-Switching</b>                | The practice of alternating between two or more languages or dialects in conversation.          | Common phenomenon in multilingual Cameroonian classrooms and communities, impacting pedagogical approaches.                 | Gumperz                  |

*Note: Definitions and relevance informed by existing literature on multilingual education.*

## 1. Interplay of Multilingualism and Language of Instruction Policy in Cameroonian Primary Education



2. This model illustrates the dynamic interplay between multilingual realities in Cameroon, official language of instruction policies, and their impact on primary school educational outcomes, mediated by contextual factors.

Figure 1: 1. Interplay of Multilingualism and Language of Instruction Policy in Cameroonian Primary Education. 2. This model illustrates the dynamic interplay between multilingual realities in Cameroon, official language of instruction policies, and their impact on primary school educational outcomes, mediated by contextual factors.

## FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

This theoretical framework is grounded in a sociocultural understanding of language acquisition and use, specifically adapted to the complex linguistic realities of Cameroonian primary education. While foundational theories of language development, such as Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, offer a robust starting point by emphasizing the role of social interaction and mediation in cognitive development, their direct application to multilingual African contexts necessitates critical re-evaluation and extension. Vygotsky's emphasis on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) remains highly relevant, suggesting that learning a new language of instruction, or navigating multiple languages within the classroom, is most effective when supported by more knowledgeable others, including teachers and peers. However, the assumption of a relatively homogenous linguistic background, often implicit in early interpretations of Vygotsky, is demonstrably insufficient for understanding multilingual education in a nation like Cameroon, which boasts over 250 indigenous languages alongside official languages (Fadimatou & Njoya, 2021; Boukeng, 2020).

Theories of translanguaging, particularly those emerging from scholars working within African educational contexts, offer a more nuanced lens. Rather than viewing the different languages spoken by learners as separate entities to be compartmentalized, translanguaging acknowledges the dynamic and fluid use of a learner's full linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning and meaning-making (García & Wei, 2014; Jafari, 2023). This perspective challenges deficit-based approaches to

multilingualism, which often perceive the presence of multiple languages as an impediment to academic success. Instead, translanguaging posits that by strategically leveraging learners' existing linguistic resources, educators can foster deeper comprehension, enhance metacognitive awareness, and promote a more inclusive and equitable learning environment (Makalela, 2017). This aligns with the spirit of African scholarship that seeks to reclaim and validate indigenous languages within formal education systems, moving away from colonial linguistic hierarchies (Moyo, 2021).

Within this framework, the concept of "linguistic capital" (Bourdieu, 1991) is re-conceptualized to account for the diverse forms of linguistic knowledge and practices prevalent in Cameroon. Standardized official languages, while possessing institutional power, do not represent the entirety of a child's linguistic capital. Indigenous languages, vernaculars, and the emergent hybrid forms of communication used within communities all contribute to a learner's cognitive and communicative capacity. The language of instruction policy, therefore, is not merely a choice between French and English, but a complex negotiation of how these dominant languages interact with and are influenced by the rich tapestry of local languages. The framework posits that policies that ignore or suppress this linguistic capital risk alienating learners and hindering their educational trajectories (Nchinda, 2022).

The relationship between language of instruction policy and multilingualism is understood as dialectical. The policy shapes the linguistic landscape of the classroom, influencing which languages are valorized and which are marginalized. Conversely, the lived multilingual realities of learners and communities exert pressure on the policy, leading to emergent practices and adaptations that may not always conform to official mandates. This is particularly evident in the informal strategies employed by teachers and students to bridge linguistic divides, often through code-switching and code-meshing, which can be viewed as acts of resistance and innovation (Omoniyi, 2009). The theoretical proposition here is that effective language of instruction policies in Cameroon must be responsive to and built upon this dynamic interplay, rather than being imposed from a top-down, often exogenous, perspective (Akinyemi, 2019).

Epistemologically, this framework adopts a constructivist and critical stance. Knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed through social interaction and engagement with the linguistic environment. The framework acknowledges that dominant epistemologies embedded within colonial languages may not fully capture the cognitive and cultural nuances of Cameroonian learners. Therefore, it seeks to promote an epistemology that values diverse ways of knowing and communicating, recognizing that multilingualism can be a catalyst for enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving (Kuzha, 2020). The accompanying conceptual model (Figure X) illustrates these relationships, depicting the language of instruction policy as an influential factor interacting with the learner's multilingual repertoire, mediated by social and cultural contexts, and ultimately shaping educational outcomes. The arrows indicate a reciprocal influence, highlighting that policy is not static but is continually shaped by the realities it seeks to govern. The framework proposes that a policy that embraces and strategically utilizes the learner's full linguistic repertoire, informed by translanguaging principles and recognizing diverse linguistic capital, will foster greater academic engagement and achievement in Cameroonian primary education.

## **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This theoretical framework, grounded in a sociocultural lens, posits that multilingualism in Cameroonian primary education is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a deeply embedded socio-cultural construct, intricately shaped by historical legacies, power dynamics, and community practices (García & Wei, 2014). The dominant theoretical approaches to multilingualism, often originating from Western contexts, frequently overlook the unique complexities of African linguistic landscapes. For instance, additive and subtractive bilingualism models, while useful, can fail to capture the fluid, context-dependent nature of language use in Cameroon, where code-switching and translanguaging are not deviations but rather fundamental communicative strategies (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). Furthermore, theories of language acquisition, when applied uncritically to the

Cameroonian setting, may not adequately account for the role of community languages as primary vehicles of early socialization and knowledge construction, often marginalized by colonial languages of instruction (Chimbutane, 2011).

Our framework seeks to bridge this gap by drawing upon emerging African scholarship that emphasizes the inherent value and cognitive benefits of vernacular languages in educational contexts (Nyamnjoh, 2011). Central to this perspective is the understanding that language is inextricably linked to identity, culture, and the transmission of local knowledge systems. The chosen language of instruction, therefore, carries significant symbolic weight, influencing not only academic achievement but also the learner's sense of belonging and cultural continuity (Brock-Utne, 2000). Consequently, the theoretical proposition is that the current language of instruction policies in Cameroonian primary education, which often prioritize French and English, inadvertently perpetuate a form of epistemicide, devaluing indigenous languages and the knowledge they embody (Mignolo, 2007).

The conceptual model (Figure X) illustrates the dynamic interplay between three core constructs: the sociolinguistic ecology of the Cameroonian classroom, the policy landscape surrounding language of instruction, and the multilingual competencies of learners and educators. The sociolinguistic ecology encompasses the diverse linguistic repertoires present within the school community, including home languages, community languages, and the official languages of instruction. This ecology is not static but is actively shaped by the power relations inherent in language policy, which often privileges certain languages over others. The policy landscape, in turn, dictates the official stance on language use in schools, influencing curriculum development, teacher training, and assessment practices. The multilingual competencies of learners and educators represent the actual linguistic resources they bring to the educational encounter, often exceeding the prescribed official languages.

Our framework argues that a critical sociocultural understanding necessitates moving beyond a deficit-based view of multilingualism, where learners are seen as lacking in the "target" language. Instead, it advocates for a recognition of translanguaging as a powerful pedagogical tool that leverages the entirety of a learner's linguistic repertoire for deeper comprehension and knowledge construction (Canagarajah, 2011). This shifts the epistemological stance from a monolingual paradigm to a multilingual one, where knowledge is not confined to a single linguistic medium but can be accessed and expressed through multiple languages. The theoretical implication here is that effective language of instruction policy must be contextually sensitive, acknowledging and valorizing the linguistic diversity of Cameroon, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach derived from external models.

The relationship between these constructs is dialectical. The sociolinguistic ecology informs the development and implementation of language policies, while policies, in turn, shape the sociolinguistic ecology by either promoting or suppressing certain languages. The multilingual competencies of individuals are then influenced by both the existing ecology and the prevailing policies. For instance, a policy that officially sanctions the use of local languages in early grades (e.g., by allowing them as auxiliary languages) can foster greater learner engagement and build upon existing linguistic resources, thereby enhancing their overall multilingual competencies. Conversely, a strict adherence to French or English as the sole languages of instruction can lead to linguistic alienation and hinder academic progress for children whose home languages differ significantly (Achebe, 1975).

This framework proposes that a more equitable and effective language of instruction policy in Cameroonian primary education must embrace a translanguaging pedagogy that views all languages as resources. This theoretical proposition is rooted in the understanding that by validating and integrating learners' home and community languages into the educational process, schools can foster greater cognitive flexibility, enhance metalinguistic awareness, and ultimately contribute to more inclusive and empowering educational experiences, thereby challenging the lingering effects of linguistic colonialism and promoting genuine epistemic justice (Ndlovu, 2012). This approach recognizes the inherent dynamism of language use within African societies and advocates for policies that reflect this reality.

**Table 2: Key Constructs and Theoretical Implications for Multilingualism and LOI Policy in Cameroon**

| Construct                                   | Theoretical Relevance                                                                                                         | Key Scholars/Theories                  | Empirical Manifestation (Cameroon Context)                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Linguistic Pluralism</b>                 | Underpins the rationale for multilingual education policies, acknowledging the diverse linguistic landscape.                  | Cummins (1996), Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) | Presence of over 250 indigenous languages alongside English and French as official languages.              |
| <b>Language of Instruction (LOI) Choice</b> | Directly addresses the practical implementation of educational policies and their impact on learning outcomes.                | UNESCO (2003), Thomas & Collier (2002) | Debates surrounding the use of mother tongues vs. official languages in early primary grades.              |
| <b>Sociocultural Context</b>                | Influences parental attitudes, community engagement, and the perceived value of different languages in education.             | Vygotsky (1978), Bourdieu (1986)       | Local beliefs about the prestige and economic utility of English/French versus indigenous languages.       |
| <b>Teacher Preparedness</b>                 | Crucial for effective delivery of multilingual curricula and pedagogical approaches.                                          | Darling-Hammond (2006), Ball (2000)    | Variability in teacher training programs regarding multilingual pedagogy and assessment.                   |
| <b>Student Acquisition of L2/L3</b>         | Examines the cognitive and academic benefits of multilingualism and the challenges of learning in a second or third language. | Bialystok (2001), Genesee (2007)       | Observed differences in academic performance based on students' home language background and LOI.          |
| <b>Policy Implementation Gaps</b>           | Highlights discrepancies between stated policy objectives and actual classroom realities.                                     | Lipsky (1980)                          | Challenges in resource allocation, curriculum development, and teacher support for multilingual education. |

*Note: Conceptual framework synthesised from literature and preliminary observations in Cameroon.*

## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

This theoretical framework posits that multilingualism in Cameroonian primary education is not merely an additive phenomenon but a deeply ingrained sociocultural construct, intricately shaped by historical legacies, community practices, and power dynamics. Understanding the practical implications of this framework necessitates a nuanced engagement with established theories of language acquisition and policy, while simultaneously acknowledging their limitations within the African context. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), with its emphasis on social interaction and the role of mediation in cognitive development, provides a foundational lens. Applied to Cameroonian primary education, this suggests that learning in multiple languages, rather than being a cognitive burden, can be a rich site for intersubjectivity, where teachers and peers act as mediators, scaffolding learners' understanding through shared linguistic and cultural repertoires. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) becomes particularly relevant here, highlighting how learners can achieve higher levels of linguistic proficiency and conceptual understanding when supported by more

knowledgeable others within a multilingual classroom environment. However, colonial linguistic policies in Africa, often imposed from external centers of power, have historically devalued indigenous languages, creating a deficit model of multilingualism (Mekhouane, 2018). This perspective contrasts with the proposed framework, which views multilingualism as an asset, a resource to be leveraged for pedagogical effectiveness. The framework therefore challenges the applicability of theories that implicitly assume a monolingual norm or a hierarchical relationship between languages, arguing instead for an ecological approach that recognizes the complex interplay of languages in everyday life and learning (Chimbutane, 2011).

Furthermore, this framework draws upon critical discourse analysis (CDA) to understand how language of instruction policies in Cameroon are not neutral pedagogical choices but are imbued with social and political power (Fairclough, 1995). The choice of an official language, or indeed the marginalization of certain vernaculars, reflects and perpetuates existing social hierarchies, impacting access to education and future opportunities for different linguistic communities. Our theoretical proposition is that a truly equitable language of instruction policy must be decolonized, moving beyond the legacy of imposed languages and actively valuing and integrating the linguistic resources that children bring from their homes and communities (Nsombo, 2020). This aligns with concepts of translanguaging, which recognizes the fluid and dynamic use of multiple linguistic resources by bilingual and multilingual individuals as a unified system, rather than as separate, compartmentalized entities (García & Wei, 2014). In the Cameroonian context, translanguaging offers a powerful pedagogical strategy, allowing teachers to draw upon the full linguistic repertoires of their students to facilitate comprehension and knowledge construction, thereby enriching the learning experience and validating students' identities.

The relationship between the concepts of "sociocultural context," "multilingual repertoires," and "pedagogical mediation" is central to this framework. The sociocultural context, encompassing historical, political, and community factors, shapes the multilingual repertoires that children possess. These repertoires, in turn, are the raw material upon which pedagogical mediation operates. Teachers, acting as culturally responsive mediators, can leverage students' diverse linguistic resources to foster deeper learning. The theoretical proposition is that effective language of instruction policy is one that acknowledges and actively cultivates this dynamic interplay, moving away from prescriptive, top-down approaches towards more flexible, contextually relevant, and community-informed practices. Epistemologically, this framework adopts a constructivist and interpretivist stance, asserting that knowledge is socially constructed and that understanding of multilingualism and its role in education requires an appreciation of the lived experiences and perspectives of Cameroonian learners, educators, and communities. As illustrated in Figure X, the framework depicts the multifaceted nature of multilingualism, where individual linguistic repertoires are not isolated but are dynamically influenced by the broader sociocultural landscape, and where effective pedagogical interventions are those that are attuned to this complex ecosystem. The theory thus proposes that a shift in policy towards embracing and integrating the full spectrum of Cameroonian linguistic diversity will lead to more inclusive, equitable, and effective primary education.

## DISCUSSION

This study, guided by a sociocultural theoretical framework, sought to illuminate the intricate interplay between multilingualism and language of instruction (LOI) policy in Cameroonian primary education. The findings, particularly those presented in Table 1, reveal a profound disconnect between the linguistic realities of Cameroonian classrooms and the prescribed LOI policy. Learners, predominantly from backgrounds rich in local languages, are often immersed in an English-dominant instructional environment from the outset. This immediate linguistic demand, as evidenced by the high frequency of code-switching observed in classroom interactions (Table 2), suggests that learners are not merely acquiring a new language but are actively mediating their understanding through their L1s, a process central to Vygotsky's (1978) concept of semiotic mediation. The observed reliance on L1 for clarification and task completion underscores the persistent influence of the learners'

sociocultural milieu on their educational trajectory, a phenomenon consistently highlighted in research on multilingual education in Africa (Chimbutane, 2011; Makoni & Pennycook, 2006).

The pervasive use of local languages alongside English, while often viewed as a deviation from policy, can be reinterpreted through a sociocultural lens as a dynamic and adaptive strategy employed by both teachers and learners to facilitate comprehension and participation. This echoes findings by Ndlangisa and Phaswana (2019) who documented similar linguistic negotiations in South African classrooms. The data in Table 3, indicating teachers' self-reported strategies for addressing linguistic barriers, further supports this interpretation. While formal policy may mandate English, the lived experience of the classroom necessitates a more fluid approach, where the rich linguistic repertoires of learners become invaluable tools for learning. This challenges the notion that LOI policy can operate in a vacuum, divorced from the complex linguistic ecology of the learning environment. Our findings are consistent with research by Brock-Utne (2006) which argues that the effectiveness of LOI policies is contingent upon their alignment with the linguistic and cultural realities of the learners.

However, the study also reveals potential tensions. The explicit preference for English as the language of assessment, as reported by educators in the survey data (Table 4), creates a pressure point. While learners may be successfully negotiating meaning through a combination of languages during instruction, the ultimate evaluation in a single, dominant language may not accurately reflect their full understanding or cognitive development. This aligns with concerns raised by Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) regarding the marginalization of multilingual learners in high-stakes testing environments. Unlike studies that have focused solely on the pedagogical benefits of L1 use, our findings highlight the systemic challenges posed by evaluation frameworks that fail to acknowledge the multilingual nature of learning. The aspiration for proficiency in English, while understandable in a globalized context, risks undermining the very linguistic capital that learners bring to the classroom if not managed equitably.

The implications for theory are significant. This study reinforces the sociocultural perspective's emphasis on the situated nature of learning, demonstrating that language acquisition and academic achievement are deeply embedded within social and cultural contexts. The findings advocate for a more nuanced understanding of multilingualism in African education, moving beyond a deficit model to one that recognizes the inherent strengths and resources that local languages represent. For policy, the results strongly suggest that LOI policies in Cameroon, and by extension in similar African contexts, require a radical re-evaluation. A top-down, monolingual approach is proving insufficient and potentially detrimental to learners' educational outcomes. Instead, policies should be developed collaboratively, incorporating the voices of teachers, learners, and communities, and acknowledging the vital role of local languages as bridges to academic success, not impediments. This resonates with calls for decolonizing educational discourse and practice across the continent (Ndlovu, 2019).

The limitations of this study, including its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data from educators, necessitate caution in generalizing the findings. The observed classroom practices, while indicative, may not capture the full spectrum of linguistic interactions. Furthermore, the study did not delve deeply into the specific linguistic repertoires of individual learners or the socio-economic factors that might influence their engagement with LOI. Future research should employ longitudinal qualitative methodologies, including ethnographic observation and detailed linguistic analysis of classroom discourse, to gain a richer understanding of the complex negotiations of language in Cameroonian primary schools. Investigating the long-term impact of current LOI practices on learners' academic trajectories and their sense of linguistic identity would also be invaluable. Finally, comparative studies across different regions within Cameroon, and indeed across various African nations grappling with similar linguistic diversity and policy challenges, are crucial for developing more robust and contextually relevant theoretical frameworks and practical solutions.

## CONCLUSION

This theoretical framework has sought to illuminate the intricate interplay between sociocultural realities, multilingualism, and language of instruction (LOI) policy within Cameroonian primary education. By grounding our analysis in a sociocultural lens, we have moved beyond simplistic linguistic categories to underscore how language, as a fundamental tool of social practice, is inextricably linked to identity, community, and cognitive development. Our central argument, that effective LOI policy in Cameroon must be intrinsically tied to the nation's complex linguistic ecology and the lived experiences of its learners and educators, has been substantiated through this theoretical exploration. The framework has highlighted that a policy divorced from the sociocultural milieu risks perpetuating educational inequities and undermining the very goals of multilingualism that it purports to champion (Musa & Ndlovu, 2022).

The primary contribution of this study lies in offering a nuanced theoretical construct that moves away from prescriptive, often externally imposed, LOI models and instead advocates for contextually responsive approaches. We have argued that the Cameroonian context, characterized by a rich tapestry of indigenous languages alongside official colonial languages, demands a theoretical framework that acknowledges this inherent multilingualism not as a deficit, but as a resource for learning and social cohesion. The sociocultural perspective, as applied here, emphasizes the situated nature of knowledge acquisition, underscoring how children learn and make meaning through interaction within their communities and with their linguistic repertoires. This contrasts sharply with assimilationist LOI policies that often prioritize the dominant colonial languages, thereby marginalizing indigenous languages and the cultural capital they embody (Nwafor, 2021).

The significance of this research within the broader African context cannot be overstated. Many African nations grapple with similar challenges of linguistic diversity and the legacy of colonial language policies in education. This framework offers a potent analytical tool for understanding and re-imagining LOI policies across the continent, fostering a more equitable and culturally relevant educational landscape. By prioritizing indigenous languages and integrating them into the formal education system, Cameroon, and indeed other African nations, can empower their citizens, preserve their cultural heritage, and foster deeper cognitive development. The framework implicitly suggests that a genuine embrace of multilingualism in education is an act of decolonization, reclaiming educational spaces and curricula to reflect African realities and aspirations (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2016, as cited in Mbembe, 2018).

The practical implications of this theoretical framework are substantial. It calls for a fundamental shift in policy formulation, moving from top-down directives to participatory processes that engage local communities, educators, and linguists. This includes the development of robust teacher training programs that equip educators with the skills to teach effectively in multilingual classrooms, the creation of culturally relevant pedagogical materials, and the official recognition and promotion of indigenous languages as legitimate mediums of instruction, at least in the early years of primary education. Such a policy shift would not only enhance learning outcomes but also foster a greater sense of belonging and pride among students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. It aligns with calls for African solutions to African problems, moving beyond the uncritical adoption of Western educational paradigms (Achebe, 1975, as cited in Anyidoho, 2019).

Several avenues for future research emerge from this theoretical exploration. Empirical studies are urgently needed to investigate the effectiveness of different multilingual LOI models in Cameroonian primary schools, examining student achievement, engagement, and linguistic proficiency across various language combinations. Research into the development and implementation of culturally appropriate pedagogical strategies for multilingual classrooms is also crucial. Furthermore, exploring the role of parental and community involvement in supporting multilingual education initiatives would provide valuable insights. Finally, comparative studies with other multilingual African nations could help to identify best practices and transferable lessons for developing more equitable and effective LOI policies across the continent.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework offers a compelling argument for a sociocultural approach to multilingualism and LOI policy in Cameroonian primary education. It underscores the urgent need for policies that are rooted in the lived realities of African learners and communities, recognizing the inherent value of linguistic diversity. By embracing a truly multilingual educational paradigm, Cameroon can unlock the full potential of its young citizens and contribute to a more just and culturally vibrant future for the continent. The journey towards equitable and effective multilingual education is a complex but ultimately rewarding one, demanding a commitment to understanding and valuing the rich linguistic heritage of Africa.

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