
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Language Dominance in the Input and Use Patterns of Cameroon's Special Bilingual Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines dominance in the language input and use patterns of students of Cameroon's Special Bilingual Education Programme (SBEP). The participants were 373 bilingual students from 10 schools set in French-speaking Cameroon, who submitted self-ratings via an adapted version of the Bilingual Language Profile questionnaire by Birdsong, Gertken and Amengual (2012). The data were analysed using the subtraction method to determine dominance. The results showed a consistent pattern of OL1-dominance for all the three domains considered under language input (viz. listening, reading, and watch time), but a more contrasted pattern for language use, as the respondents were found to be French-dominant (or slightly OL1-dominant to balanced) in the outer circle of relationships (circle of friends and school environment) and OL1-dominant in the inner circle (self-talk and family circle). The findings of this study suggest that individual language use is more significantly impacted by societal dominance than language input is, most likely because the latter is less constrained by relationships and offers a greater possibility of choice. They equally suggest that there is a directionality in the influence of societal dominance, with a decreasing effect from the public to the private sphere. Lastly, the study underscores the powerful negative impact the lack of official recognition can have on the maintenance of local ethnic languages in a multilingual context.

KEYWORDS

Language dominance, bilingualism, bilingual education, Cameroon's special bilingual education programme

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1. Introduction

Cameroon's Special Bilingual Education Programme (SBEP) was instituted fifteen years ago with the ambition to yield 'perfectly bilingual'¹ individuals, following the Bloomfieldian view of the bilingual experience, which equates bilingualism to "native-like control of two languages" (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 56). Accordingly, the programme places its primary emphasis on the students' proficiency in the two official languages (French and English), with balanced bilingualism as the ultimate goal. This emphasis seems to have impacted research into the programme, as most descriptions of the language of SBEP students, so far, have focused on the proficiency component, leaving several aspects of their language experience unexplored or under-researched. The current paper explores two of these under-researched aspects, viz. language input and use, with the idea that, in line with the current understanding of bilingualism, language dominance is the norm, and balance, the exception (cf. Grosjean 1998, Treffers-Daller, 2011).

2. Literature Review

2.1 The concept of language dominance

The concept of language dominance is linked to the idea that bilinguals are not two monolinguals in one and, consequently, that balanced bilingualism, in the sense of an ideal perfect, equivalent command of two languages, is "a myth" (Treffers-Daller, 2019).

¹ Cf. Circular Letter No. 28/08/MINESEC/IGE of 2 December 2008

As a matter of fact, in real life, bilinguals use their languages to varying degrees of ability and frequency, depending on the specific domains involved (Grosjean, 1998; Treffers-Daller, 2015). In other words, a bilingual will most likely have a stronger (or preferred) and a weaker (or less used) language, as they navigate from one context to another (e.g. when talking to parents or colleagues, when discussing science or sports, or when at church or at school). This view runs counter to the now vastly abandoned absolutist vision of the bilingual experience, which equates bilingualism to 'perfect' mastery of two languages (Treffers-Daller, 2015; Grosjean & Byers-Heinlein, 2018). The concept of language dominance therefore acknowledges the fact that imbalance and relativity are inherent to the bilingual experience.

Language dominance can be studied both at the macro and micro level, i.e., at the level of societies (societal language dominance) and at the individual level (individual language dominance) (Baker, 2001; Treffers-Daller, 2019). In its societal sense, language dominance references an imbalance in the status and importance given to the languages of a bilingual or multilingual community, such that different languages are assigned different levels of importance and are used for different purposes (Accurso, 2015; Treffers-Daller, 2015). When applied to individuals, it denotes "differences in proficiency and use of different languages by individual bilinguals" (Treffers-Daller, 2015, p. 3) or "observed asymmetries of skill in, or use of, one language over the other" (Birdsong, 2014, p.374) – although broad interpretations of the concept include several linguistic, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic dimensions of language experience (Treffers-Daller, 2019), like "proficiency, fluency, ease of processing, thinking in a language, cultural identification, frequency of use and so forth" (Gertken, Amengual, & Birdsong, 2014, p. 208).

2.2 Previous studies on the language input and use of SBEP students

Most descriptions of the language input and use of SBEP students appear in studies whose main focus is the relative proficiency of the respondents. Thus, such information is generally minimal and analysed as a secondary aspect of the students' language experience.

For instance, in a study carried out to measure the bilingual proficiency of second cycle Francophone and Anglophone special bilingual students in Maroua, Nkah Mambo (2015) collected background data on the language input and use of the respondents via questionnaire items. In the first, the respondents were requested to indicate the number of languages spoken in their neighbourhood. Three language combinations were proposed, with the first language being the dominant one: French and English, English and French, and Fulfulde and French. They were equally given the option to add other languages. The result for this item indicated that 83.33% of the respondents lived in neighbourhoods where Fulfulde was the main language and French was the minor one, while 16.66% of others lived in neighbourhoods where French was the major language and English the lesser one. None of the respondents lived in an English-dominant environment. For the second item, the students were asked to indicate the language in which they performed the following tasks: listening to the radio, watching television, reading for pleasure, writing letters, chatting on Facebook, and writing messages. The percentages indicated that, in almost all domains (except listening to the radio), the students used French more than English, even though data reporting was problematic, because the cumulative percentages were constantly over 100%. The students were also asked to indicate their language of communication with teachers, friends, and family. Here too, French emerged as the dominant language. The researcher linked the dominance of French with the fact that French is the main official language spoken in the region where the data were collected.

Kamba (2016) equally collected questionnaire data on the home language of SBEP students, as part of a survey on the implementation of the SBEP in Cameroon's high schools. Her sample was made up of 50 students from GBHS Abong-Mbang (a semi-rural area in the interior of the country), and 25 students from GBHS Etoug-Ebe (in Yaoundé). The results highlighted the impact of societal dominance on individual language use, as no student from GBHS Abong-Mbang (where French is the main official language) used English outside the classroom, while 60% of their counterparts used either English or both official languages in the same context. Youmbi Wonkam (2020) made the same analysis of her data, as 70% of the 40 SBEP graduates of her comparative study between SBEP graduates and graduates from the mainstream classes indicated that they spoke either French or both official languages at home. As in Kamba (2016), the students lived in Yaoundé, a French-dominant city which also has a sizeable English-speaking community. The same trend can be observed in Guidona Baikao and Ndzedzuk (2011), Doudjo Hama, Mpouli Monny and Berka Mainsah (2013), two studies set in the Far-North of the country.

On her part, Fondap Sienkep (2016) focused on the language of communication among SBEP students in the classroom. Her questionnaire data from a sample of 40 final-year students from three schools situated in Yaoundé showed that French was the first language of communication among the students. Most notably, none of the Bilingual Francophone (OL1-French students) indicated any use of English in the classroom, while most of their Anglophone counterparts reported using both official languages. Kouega and Dempowo (2022), in a more recent study, specified more domains, viz. communication in class with Francophone classmates; outside class with Francophone classmates; outside class with Anglophone friends; outside class in different clubs; outside class with the English teacher; in class with the English teacher; and at home with parents, brothers and friends. But unlike the preceding study, their 60-student sample was solely made up of Bilingual Francophone students. As per the findings, French

was the dominant language in all domains, except those that involved communication with an English-speaking person or participation in English clubs.

From the foregoing, it is clear that dominance is a regular feature of the language of Cameroon's special bilingual students, even though it is often considered as an anomaly. And indeed, dominance is a normal feature of the language of all bilinguals, given that language use is fundamentally domain-specific and linked to the speaker's living environment and life experiences (cf. Grosjean's Complementarity Principle). The current study adopts this view of bilingualism, and considers that dominance is the norm among Cameroon's special bilingual students in the less explored aspects of language input and use.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

373 bilingual students aged between 12 and 24 participated in the study. They were selected through uncontrolled quota sampling (as per convenience) from 10 Special Bilingual Education schools situated in French-speaking Cameroon. Cameroon's Special Bilingual Education Programme (SBEP) offers French-English semi-immersive bilingual education based on a syllabus that integrates classroom and outdoor activities for increased language exposure and proficiency. For now, it is directed towards a select minority of students from the country's two subsystems of education and is implemented at the secondary level (secondary and high school).

Table 1: Participants

School	Region	Number of respondents
Government Bilingual High School (GBHS) Meiganga	Adamawa	26
Amasia Bilingual School Complex (Yaoundé)	Centre	47
GBHS Mfou		31
Lycée de Ngoa-Ekellé (Yaoundé)		11
GBHS Maroua	Far-North	57
Lycée Mixte de Kousseri		4
GBHS Bonabéri (Douala)	Littoral	48
GBHS Kribi	South	9
GBHS Dschang	West	70
GBHS Mbouda		70
Total		373

Two strata were defined in accordance with the country's official language configuration: students whose first official language is French (called OL1-French students, N=332) and those whose first official language is English (OL1-English students, N=41). The students were all in the upper grades (second cycle) of the Francophone or Anglophone subsystem of education. Among the participants, 110 had studied in an English-medium primary school, 152 in a French-medium school, and 90 in a dual-language bilingual primary school (22 missing observations were recorded for this background question). In spite of their different educational backgrounds, most of the participants were early learners of English and French (onset age of acquisition < 6 years). The average length of residence in a French-dominant setting was 12.44 years for OL1-English students, as opposed to 15.33 years for their OL1-French peers. In contrast, the average length of residence in an English-dominant setting was 9.28 years for the former group, and 2.96 years for the latter.

3.2 Materials and procedure

The data were collected via an adapted version of the Bilingual Language Profile (BLP) questionnaire by Birdsong, Gertken, and Amengual (2012). The BLP gathers information on the respondent's language history, use, proficiency and attitudes through a series of scaled questions (19 in its basic version), in order to assess their dominance in each of these areas. The version used in this study adds items on language input, as well as biographical elements. The current paper is based on the language input and use component of the questionnaire (7 questions). In the language input component, the respondents were asked to indicate (by ticking the corresponding box) the percentage of time they read, listen to music and watch videos in French, English and other languages in an average week. In the language use component, they were requested to indicate their frequency of use of English, French, and other languages in the family circle, the circle of friends, school, and self-talk over a typical period of one week. We administered the questionnaire in 20 to 30-minute presential sessions, which included time to clarify points the respondents found difficult to understand. (The entire process took place between September and November 2022). The scripts were then checked for errors and collected on site. In schools we were not able to access in person, we enlisted the help of trained assistants (mostly teachers in the programme), who administered the questionnaire and mailed the scripts back to us.

3.3 Data analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires were extracted and processed with the help of software, namely Sphinx Plus² (Lexica Edition, version.5.1.0.2) and JASP (version 0.16.1). In practice, the questionnaire was first replicated in the interface of the Sphinx Plus² software (with a specific code for each item); then, after the collection process, the data from each respondent were keyed in and recorded in the database, allowing for an automatic processing of the results. At the end of the process, the data were imported into JASP, where descriptive statistics were obtained, including the mean, median, mode, minimum and maximum of each series. To determine language dominance, the mean frequencies (and also, where relevant, the medians) were compared (subtraction method, cf. Birdsong, 2014). Lastly, graphs were generated to illustrate the difference between datasets (via Microsoft Excel).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Dominance and language input

The analysis of the data for language input revealed a consistent pattern of OL1-dominance for all the three domains considered, viz. listening, reading, and watch time, to varying degrees for the two language groups.

4.1.1 Reading input

The average reading time for both OL1-English and OL1-French students in a typical week was above 50% in the first official language. However, by comparison, OL1-English students were generally more dominant in their OL1 than their OL1-French peers (+23%, as opposed to +11% for OL1-French students). It is also notable that, for both groups, languages other than French and English occupied a very little portion of the reading time (less than 8%). (cf. Fig 1)

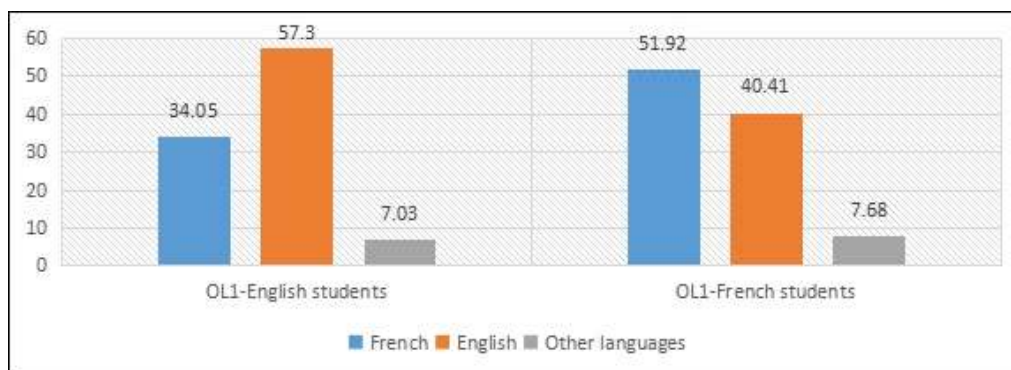


Figure 1: Showing the percentage of time the average special bilingual student spends reading in French, English and other languages in a typical week

These figures could be explained by the fact that nearly half of OL1-French respondents (N=142) study in the Anglophone subsystem of education (as opposed to 02 OL1-English students in the Francophone subsystem) and, therefore, have more requirements to read in English than their OL1-English counterparts have in French. (In the SBEP, only four subjects are done in the student's OL2, namely French/English, Citizenship Education, Craftwork, and Sports & Physical Education). This analysis takes into account the fact that internet usage is still relatively limited in Cameroon (37.8% of the population as of 2020, according to World Bank estimates). On the other hand, languages other than French and English are seldom used when reading. This is not surprising, because very few Cameroonians can read their native language, and the vast majority of local languages do not possess a written literature. The only other reading materials readily available for students would be their foreign language textbooks (for students of the Francophone subsystem).

4.1.2 Listening input

As far as listening input is concerned, the average OL1-English student was significantly more dominant in English than their OL1-French peer was in French ($D \approx 29$, as opposed to $D \approx 08$), even though they both live in a predominantly French-speaking environment. In this aspect too, other languages (including Cameroon Pidgin English, ethnic languages and other foreign languages) were insignificantly represented.

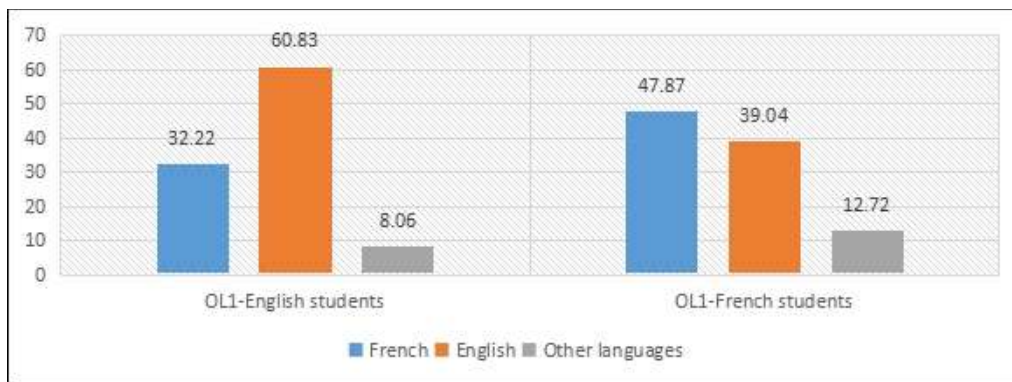


Figure 2: Showing the percentage of time the average special bilingual student spends listening to audio material in French, English and other languages

4.1.3 Audio-visual input

The last item, audio-visual input (watch time), followed the same trend. On average, the OL1-English students devoted 53.25% of their watch time to English, as opposed to 39% for French and 5.64% for other languages; proportions similar to those of their OL1-French peers: 62.5% for French, 29.01% for English, and 8.32% for other languages.

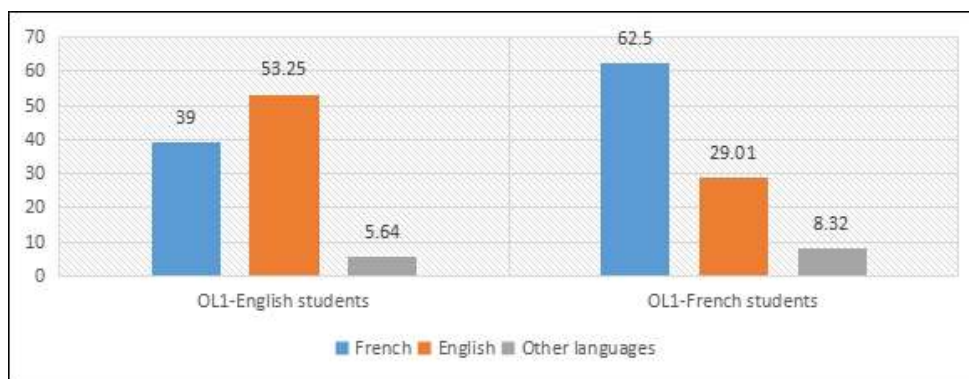


Figure 3: Showing the percentage of time the average special bilingual student spends watching audiovisual material (videos) in French, English and other languages

These figures indicate that OL1-French and OL1-English students are significantly OL1-dominant in their input habits, as the differential between the OL1 and the other languages is constantly above 10%. In this respect, OL1-English students prove to be more OL1-dominant than their OL1-French counterparts. This dominance pattern seems to be a reflection of the students' choices more than an effect of societal trends. As a matter of fact, although French is still largely dominant in the cable television panorama in Cameroon, viewers can choose from a large selection of English-speaking channels. Moreover, among young people, social media (and not television) tends to be the prime source of video content. These offer a greater variety of content, as well as the possibility of choice.

4.2 Dominance and language use patterns

4.2.1 Language use in the circle of friends

It was found that OL1-English students use French (their OL2) more often than English when interacting with friends, as do their OL1-French peers (45% of the time for English as opposed to 47% for French). The same analysis also showed that both language groups seldom use languages other than French or English in the circle of friends, even though this was more noticeable for OL1-English students.

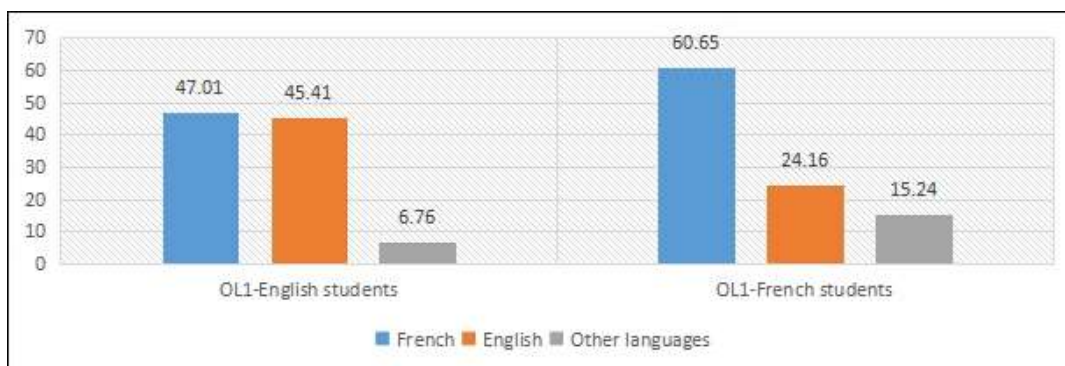


Figure 4: Showing the percentage of time the average OL1-French and OL1-English special bilingual students use French, English and other languages when talking to their friends

4.2.3 Language use in the family circle

The data revealed a predominance of the first official language in the family circle of the respondents. As a matter of fact, OL1-English students were found to interact with family members in English 56.32% of the time, in French 26% of the time, and in other languages 16.32% of the time. In the meantime, their OL1-French peers used English with their family 13.69% of the time, French 61.32% of the time, and other languages 25.13% of the time.

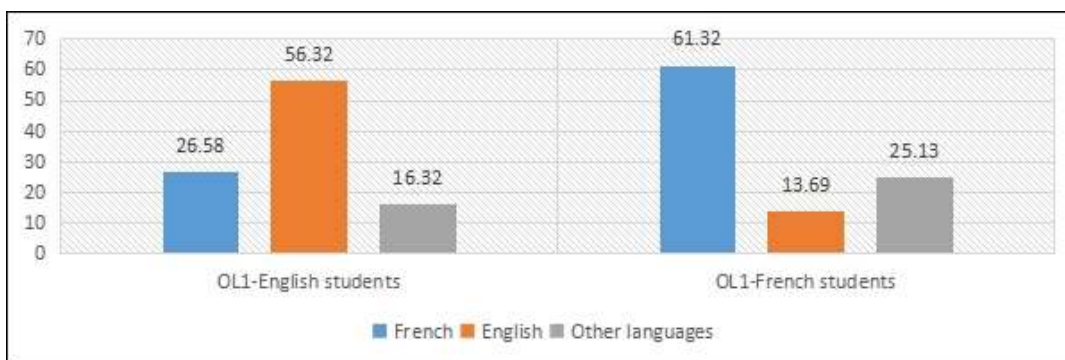


Figure 5: Showing the percentage of time the average OL1-French and OL1-English special bilingual students use French, English and other languages when talking to family members

4.2.3 Language use at school

This item yielded the following result: as per the means, each group was dominant in their first official language, even though the OL1-English students exhibited very close percentages of use of French and English at school. But following the medians, the OL1-English students were balanced (50-50%), while their OL1-French counterparts were French dominant (60-40%). As concerns other languages, the two groups had similar percentages of use, which did not amount to 10%.

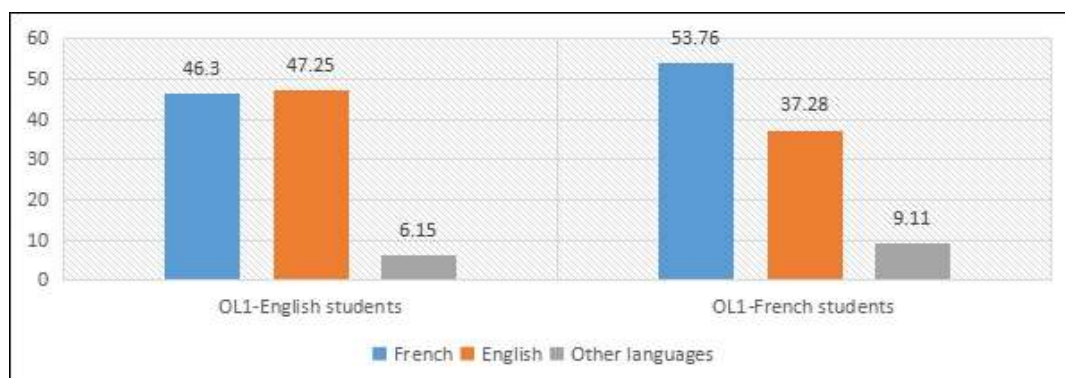


Figure 6: Showing the percentage of time the average OL1-French and OL1-English special bilingual students use French, English and other languages when at school

This result seems to illustrate the link between societal dominance and individual dominance. As it appears, the predominance of French in French-speaking regions extends to the English-medium school, where OL1-English students tend to use the language as much as they use English.

4.2.4 Language use in self talk

Lastly, the data on language use in self-talk equally indicated that each group is markedly dominant in their first official language. It also showed that languages other than French and English are seldom used by special bilingual students, irrespective of their first official language.

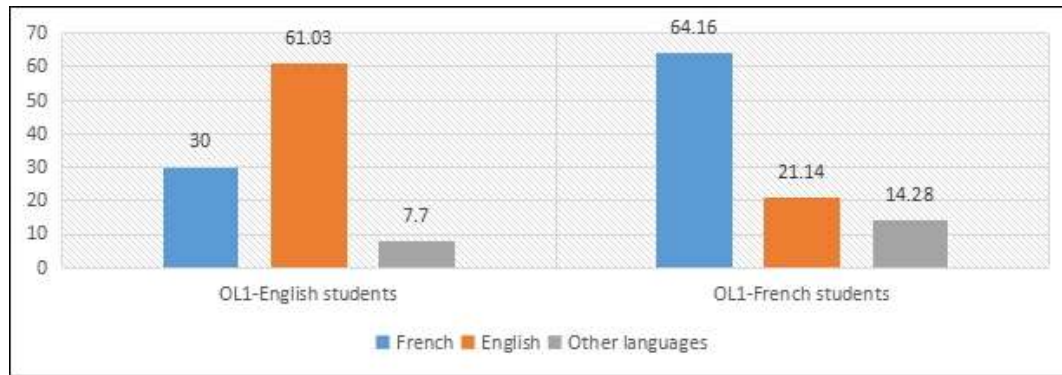


Figure 7: Showing the percentage of time the average OL1-French and OL1-English special bilingual students use French, English and other languages in self-talk

The findings of this section (4.2) draw the following dominance pattern: both OL1-French and OL1-English students tend to be OL1-dominant in the inner circle of relationships (self-talk, family circle) and French-dominant or balanced in the outer circle (circle of friends, school environment). In other words, language use in the public sphere tends to be dominated by French, while the private sphere is usually occupied by the first official language. In the meantime, ethnic languages and Cameroon Pidgin English enjoy limited use. This seems to bear out previous observations about the connection between societal dominance and individual dominance (e.g. Baker, 2001 and Treffers-Daller, 2019). Indeed, this pattern matches the broad language dominance pattern in French-speaking Cameroon, where French is, by far, the main language heard in the street, at the market, at school, and in most other domains. A minority language, English is generally confined to academic or official purposes, whenever it ventures out of the family circle. As for local languages, they are decreasingly used among the younger generation, particularly in urban centres.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined dominance in the language input and use of students of Cameroon's special bilingual education programme (SBEP). The results showed a consistent pattern of OL1-dominance for all the three domains considered under language input (viz. listening, reading, and watch time), but a more contrasted pattern for language use, as the respondents were found to be French-dominant (or slightly OL1-dominant to balanced) in the outer circle of relationships (circle of friends and school environment) and OL1-dominant in the inner circle (self-talk and family circle). The findings of this study suggest that individual language use is more significantly impacted by societal dominance than language input is, most likely because the latter is less constrained by relationships (in a Fishmanian sense, cf. Fishman, 1965) and offers a greater possibility of choice. They equally suggest that there is a directionality in the influence of societal dominance, with a decreasing effect from the public to the private sphere. Lastly, the study underscores the powerful negative impact the lack of official recognition can have on the maintenance of local ethnic languages in a multilingual context. Unfortunately, the link between the input and use patterns uncovered in this research and the students' attitudes towards their two official languages was not investigated. Moreover, due to security concerns, this research did not collect data from the English-speaking regions of the country. Future works could address these limitations and, thus, help gain a better understanding of the language of Cameroon's special bilingual students.

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