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ATTITUDES OF CAMEROONIAN ENGINEERING STUDENTS TOWARDS THE STUDY OF ENGLISH

By

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Abstract

English is one of the two official languages of Cameroon and features across a wide range of public domains, including education, administration and the judiciary. In the country's universities, all students, regardless of their linguistic background, are required to study either English or French as a compulsory course. This study investigates the attitudes of engineering students at the National Advanced School of Engineering, Yaoundé Annex, Eseka, towards English during the 2025/2026 academic year. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 200 students drawn from the Department of Mathematics and Physical Sciences, comprising 124 male and 76 female participants. The findings indicate that 90% of the participants displayed negative attitudes towards English, a pattern that reflects the predominantly Francophone educational background of most students and the limited functional role that English plays in their daily academic and professional environment. Only 10% expressed broadly positive attitudes, motivated chiefly by an awareness of the global importance of English and its role as an academic requirement. The study offers recommendations for teachers and institutional planners working in technical and scientific faculties where English instruction is frequently perceived as peripheral to students' core disciplinary interests.

Keywords: language attitudes, English communication, engineering students, Francophone learners, bilingualism, Cameroon

1. Introduction

People come into contact with a new language for many different reasons. Migration for education, professional advancement, commerce or personal interest brings individuals into linguistic environments they would not otherwise have inhabited, whilst others make a deliberate effort to learn a language for social or political reasons. The English language has undergone an extraordinary expansion over the past century and now occupies a dominant position in international communication across virtually every domain of human activity, from science and technology to diplomacy and popular culture. Cameroon occupies a distinctive place in this landscape, as one of very few countries in the world where English holds official status alongside French, a status enshrined in Law No. 96/06 of January 1996, which places both languages on an equal constitutional footing in all sectors of national life.

In practice, however, the functional distribution of English and French within Cameroon is uneven. French predominates in the country's administrative, commercial and educational life, and the vast majority of university students enter higher education through a predominantly Francophone schooling system. English is nonetheless a compulsory course at the university level for all students with a Francophone background, irrespective of their chosen discipline. At technical and scientific institutions such as the National Advanced School of Engineering, Yaoundé Annex, Eseka, this requirement places students in the position of studying a language that has had little or no functional presence in their prior academic experience. Johnson (2010, p. 134) notes that nearly a billion people worldwide are currently learning English, most in the expectation that linguistic proficiency will improve their career prospects. Whether Francophone engineering students share or act upon this expectation is the central question this study seeks to address.

The study investigates the attitudes of students in the Department of Mathematics and Physical Sciences towards English, examines the motivations underlying those attitudes and explores the relationship between attitudinal orientation and academic performance in the English Communication course. The findings contribute to a growing body of research on language attitudes in Cameroonian higher education and have practical implications for English language teaching in technical and scientific contexts.

2. The Linguistic Landscape of Cameroon

Cameroon is widely recognised as one of the most linguistically complex countries in the world. The country's official bilingualism, with English and French as co-equal official languages, represents only the most visible layer of a linguistic environment of considerable depth and variety. Fuh Suh (2018) observes that the linguistic map of Cameroon is remarkable not only in the African context but globally, given the density and diversity of languages coexisting within its borders. In addition to the two official languages, over 279 indigenous languages have been documented, each associated with particular ethnic communities and geographic regions. Hybrid varieties also play a significant sociolinguistic role, most notably Cameroon Pidgin English (Kamtok), which functions as a widely used lingua franca across linguistic communities, and Camfranglais, a mixed code combining elements of French, English and Pidgin English that has developed primarily among urban youth.

Ekougou (2012, p. 2) describes the linguistic map of Cameroon as peculiar within Africa and the world, noting that on this single national territory, languages of entirely different families coexist. These include not only the two official languages and the numerous indigenous tongues, but also legacy languages from the colonial period and languages of wider communication such as Fulfulde, Ewondo, Basaa, Duala and Hausa, each of which serves specific regional or interethnic functions. The four main language families represented in Cameroon are the Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan families, concentrated in the northern regions, and the Niger-Congo family, which predominates in the south and centre. This extraordinary linguistic density gives substance to the common characterisation of Cameroon as Africa in miniature.

The implications of this environment for language attitudes are significant. Students arriving at university in Cameroon carry linguistic repertoires shaped by exposure to indigenous languages, French as the dominant medium of formal schooling and, in many cases, Pidgin English as a vernacular resource. English as a formal

academic language occupies a relatively narrow niche in this repertoire for most Francophone students, and its compulsory presence in the university curriculum is often experienced as an imposition rather than an opportunity. Understanding this background is essential for interpreting the attitudinal patterns documented in the present study.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Conceptualising Language Attitudes

Language attitudes have been a central concern in sociolinguistics and the social psychology of language for several decades, examined across a wide variety of contexts and from a range of theoretical perspectives (Allport, 1935; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Fasold, 1984; Penn Tamba, 1991; Baker, 1992; Woolard, 1998; O'Rourke, 2011). Despite the volume of research in this area, there is no settled definition of the concept. O'Rourke (2011, p. 7) notes that even within social psychology, the discipline in which attitude research has been most extensively developed, scholars remain divided on how attitudes should be understood. This definitional openness reflects the fact that attitudes operate simultaneously as cognitive, affective and behavioural constructs, and that the weight assigned to each of these dimensions varies across theoretical traditions.

Woolard (1998, as cited in O'Rourke, 2011, p. 7) characterises language attitudes as the evaluative judgements, whether implicit or explicit, that individuals and communities make about languages and their speakers, positioning them along bipolar dimensions such as correct or incorrect, logical or illogical, and beautiful or ugly. These judgements are not merely personal preferences but social facts, reflecting and reproducing hierarchies of prestige and legitimacy within speech communities. Research in the social psychology of language has consistently demonstrated that attitudes towards a language are closely bound up with attitudes towards the community of its speakers (Mbangwana, 1987; Giles et al., 1987; Baker, 1992; Melouna, 2006; Ngefac, 2010).

Fishman and Agheyisi (1970) draw a foundational distinction between mentalist and behaviourist approaches to the study of language attitudes. The mentalist tradition treats attitudes as internal, unobservable dispositions that must be accessed through introspective self-report, whilst the behaviourist tradition defines them as variables inferred from observable conduct in social situations. Dittmar (1976, p. 181) identifies legitimate difficulties with both approaches: self-report data resist straightforward quantification, whilst behavioural indicators may fail to capture the full complexity of attitudinal experience. The present study takes a complementary position, drawing on self-reported questionnaire responses to map attitudinal orientations, and on academic performance records to examine the observable correlates of those orientations.

3.2 Attitudes, Motivation and Learning in Technical Contexts

The relationship between language attitudes and learning outcomes is well established in the applied linguistics literature. Gardner and Lambert (1972) demonstrated that learners who hold integrative motivation, meaning a genuine desire to engage with the target language community and its culture, tend to invest more effort in language learning and achieve better results than those driven purely by instrumental considerations. In the

context of Francophone engineering students, whose contact with English-speaking communities is limited and whose professional aspirations are likely to be met primarily through French, the conditions for integrative motivation are largely absent. What remains is, at best, a pragmatic instrumental orientation, and at worst, a reluctant compliance with an institutional requirement.

Herman (1980) finds that learner satisfaction in a language course tends to correlate with positive prior attitudes towards the language, suggesting that attitudinal orientation shapes the quality of engagement with instruction, not merely the quantity of effort. Baker (1992) adds the important qualification that attitudes are not fixed at entry to a course but can be modified by thoughtful teaching and curriculum design, placing a degree of responsibility on institutions and individual teachers to create conditions in which positive attitudes can develop. This is a particularly pertinent consideration in technical faculties, where English is often marginalised relative to core disciplinary subjects and where neither students nor sometimes their teachers may perceive it as integral to professional formation.

Research within Cameroon reinforces these general findings with locally grounded evidence. Tonzock (2006) found that secondary school teachers of English were often aware of a range of pedagogic approaches but rarely deployed them in practice, with damaging consequences for student motivation. Nkwetisama (2010) similarly identified environmental and pedagogic variables as key determinants of English language learning outcomes among Francophone Cameroonians, concluding that deliberate attention to these factors can meaningfully improve learner engagement. Naiman et al. (1978) observe that in foreign and second language contexts where ambient exposure to the target language is limited, the individual learner's motivational orientation becomes especially decisive, a finding that bears directly on the situation of Francophone engineering students whose daily academic and social environment offers few incentives to engage with English outside the classroom.

4. Methodology

The study was conducted during the 2025/2026 academic year at the National Advanced School of Engineering, Yaoundé Annex, Eseka, which operates as an annex campus of the University of Yaoundé I. At the time of the study, the Department of Mathematics and Physical Sciences was the sole operational department at this campus. According to records obtained from the institution's Admissions Office, over 280 students were enrolled during that academic year, the overwhelming majority of whom had completed their prior schooling entirely through the medium of French. The English Communication course is compulsory for Francophone students only and is taught across both the first and second semesters.

The sample comprised 200 Francophone students selected from the Department of Mathematics and Physical Sciences, consisting of 124 male and 76 female participants between the ages of 17 and 26. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire combining closed and open-ended items designed to elicit attitudinal responses towards English across three dimensions: emotional reactions to the language, motivations for studying it and perceptions of the course relative to other subjects. Each eligible participant was approached individually and given a questionnaire to complete after agreeing to take part. Academic performance data in

English Communication for the 2025/2026 academic year were subsequently obtained from departmental records to enable an examination of the relationship between attitudes and outcomes. As with the emotional and motivational data, performance findings are reported descriptively, and associations between attitudinal orientation and academic results should be understood as observed patterns rather than statistically tested relationships.

5. Findings and Discussion

The attitudinal data were gathered across three thematic areas: emotional reactions to English, motivations for studying it and comparative perceptions of English relative to other courses. A fourth area examined the association between these attitudes and academic performance in the English Communication course. Each area is presented and discussed in turn.

5.1 Emotional Reactions to English

Participants were invited to identify their predominant emotional response when they hear English spoken. The available options spanned a spectrum from disengagement to enthusiasm: bored, tolerant and pleased. The distribution of responses is set out in Table 1.

Table 1:

Participants' Emotional Responses to English

Response	Number of Participants	Percentage
Bored	179	89.5
Tolerant	4	2
Pleased	17	8.5
Total	**200**	**100**

Table one (1) reveals a strongly negative emotional orientation towards English among the participants. Nearly nine in ten, or 89.5%, reported feeling bored when they hear the language, whilst only 8.5% described their response as one of pleasure. A mere 2% indicated tolerance, suggesting a grudging acceptance of English rather than any positive affective engagement with it. These figures point to a population in which negative emotional attitudes towards English are not merely common but near-universal.

These responses are most readily understood in the context of the participants' educational histories. Students who have completed the entirety or the near-entirety of their schooling in French, in a scientific and technical curriculum that makes no functional use of English, are unlikely to have developed any affective connection to the language before encountering it as a university requirement. The contrast with the small minority who expressed pleasure is instructive: informal observation suggests that students with positive emotional responses tend to be those who have had some prior exposure to English through travel, media consumption or contact with Anglophone peers, rather than through formal instruction alone. The dominance of boredom as a response also raises a pedagogic concern: students who approach a compulsory language course with such

a strongly negative emotional starting point represent a significant challenge to conventional instructional approaches.

5.2 Motivations for Studying English

The second area of enquiry addressed the participants' reasons for studying English at university. The responses, set out in Table 2, reveal the motivational landscape underlying the emotional reactions documented in the preceding section.

Table 2:

Participants' Motivations for Studying English

Motivation	Number of Participants	Percentage
I study English only to pass the course	108	54
My pass surprises me, as I am not serious about it	33	16.5
I do not like the language at all	42	21
I give English particular attention because I want to be bilingual	17	8.5
Total	**200**	**100**

Table two (2) shows that the majority of participants engage with English in an entirely extrinsic and reluctant manner. More than half (54%) study the language solely to satisfy the course requirement, with no communicative ambition or integrative motivation. A further 21% stated that they actively dislike English, whilst 16.5% acknowledged that they make little genuine effort in the course and are regularly surprised to pass at all. Taken together, these three groups account for 91.5% of the sample, leaving only 8.5% who approach English with a degree of personal investment and a genuine aspiration towards bilingualism.

These findings are consistent with what Gardner and Lambert (1972) would identify as an absence of integrative motivation and a weak or absent instrumental motivation. In the Cameroonian engineering context, this is explicable. Students who have chosen a technical and scientific programme of study oriented towards careers in engineering, computing and applied sciences do not typically see English language proficiency as central to their professional formation. Their core disciplinary subjects, taught in French, are what matter to them academically and professionally. English appears in their timetable as an institutional obligation rather than a resource, and their motivational investment reflects this perception. Baker's (1992) argument that attitudes and motivation can be shaped by the design of programmes and the quality of teaching offers a constructive implication, but realising it in a context as attitudinally resistant as this one requires deliberate and sustained pedagogic effort.

5.3 Perceptions of English Relative to Other Courses

Participants were also asked to situate their attitude towards English in relation to the other subjects on their programme. Engineering students at this institution take ten courses per academic year, of which English Communication is the only language course. The responses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3:

Participants' Perceptions of English Relative to Other Courses

Response	Number of Participants	Percentage
I like English more than my other courses	18	9
I study English because it is in the University Programme	158	79
English is like any other course in the University programme	24	12
Total	**200**	**100**

Table three (3) confirms the picture established by the preceding data. Only 9% of participants expressed a positive preference for English over their other subjects, a proportion that is consistent with the 8.5% who reported genuine personal motivation in Table 2. The vast majority, 79%, study English because it is a programme requirement and for no other reason. The remaining 12% perceive English as broadly equivalent to their other courses, a position that in context implies passive compliance rather than active engagement, since the dominant attitude towards most courses in a technical programme is instrumental.

The particular position of English in an engineering curriculum amplifies these tendencies. Unlike humanities or social sciences students, for whom written communication and discursive argumentation in a variety of registers are integral to their core disciplines, engineering students work primarily through mathematical notation, technical drawing and French-medium scientific writing. English sits outside this disciplinary logic and is widely perceived as irrelevant to it. Several participants in the open-ended portion of the questionnaire noted that their Francophone classmates, including those not enrolled in engineering, also tend to disengage from compulsory English courses, which normalises and reinforces their own reluctance. As Naiman et al. (1978) observe, the social environment of the learner is a powerful shaper of motivation, particularly when direct functional contact with the target language is limited.

5.4 The Relationship between Attitudes and Academic Performance

Performance data in English Communication for the 2025/2026 academic year were obtained from the Department of Mathematics and Physical Sciences. The pass mark at the National Advanced School of Engineering, Yaoundé Annex, Eseka, follows the standard University of Yaoundé I threshold of 50%. The figures are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Participants' Performance in English Communication (2025/2026 Academic Year)

Result	Number of Participants	Percentage
Pass (50% and above)	43	27
Fail (below 50%)	146	73
Total	**200**	**100**

Table four (4) shows that only 27% of the 200 participants obtained a passing mark in English Communication, meaning that 146 students, or 73% of the sample, failed the course. This figure corresponds closely with the 91.5% who reported either purely extrinsic motivation, active dislike of English or a general lack of seriousness in approaching the course. The alignment between attitudinal orientation and academic outcome is difficult to ignore, even allowing for the fact that other variables, such as the inherent demands of a technical programme and the limited instructional time allocated to English, will also have contributed to these results.

The observed pattern is consistent with the findings of Herman (1980) and with the broader motivational framework established by Gardner and Lambert (1972), both of whom demonstrate that learners who approach a language without positive affective engagement tend to invest less effort and achieve weaker results. In this context, the performance data reinforce what the questionnaire responses already suggested: most participants in this study do not regard English as a meaningful part of their academic or professional formation, and their results in the course reflect that disengagement directly.

Petty (1991, p. 32) identifies the cultivation of the desire to learn as the most fundamental and difficult challenge facing any teacher, observing that learners who lack motivation acquire very little regardless of instructional quality. In the context of Francophone engineering students, this challenge is compounded by the structural position of English in the curriculum: a single compulsory course, taught across two semesters, in a programme whose entire intellectual and professional logic is conducted in French. Teachers of English in such environments must contend not only with individual motivational deficits but with an institutional culture in which English is visibly peripheral. Addressing this requires not merely improved classroom practice but a more deliberate institutional commitment to demonstrating the relevance of English to engineering careers, international collaboration and access to the global technical literature.

6. Discussion of Findings

This study has examined the attitudes of Francophone engineering students at the National Advanced School of Engineering, Yaoundé Annex, Eseka, towards English during the 2025/2026 academic year. Drawing on questionnaire data from 200 participants and academic performance records from the Department of Mathematics and Physical Sciences, the findings consistently indicate that the overwhelming majority of students hold negative attitudes towards English and engage with it only under institutional compulsion. Approximately 90% reported negative emotional reactions to the language, and 91.5% indicated motivations that were either purely extrinsic or openly hostile. These attitudinal patterns correspond to a course failure rate of 73%, with only 54 of the 200 participants obtaining a passing mark in English Communication.

The root causes of these attitudes are structural as much as individual. Francophone engineering students have typically completed their schooling entirely through the medium of French, in a scientific and technical curriculum that assigns no functional role to English. They arrive at university with no affective connection to the language, no professional context in which they can readily imagine using it, and the reinforcing influence of peers who share their disengagement. English, in this environment, is experienced as an anomaly in the curriculum rather than as a valued resource. A 73% failure rate in a compulsory course is not, under these

conditions, a measure of inability. It is a measure of structural indifference, and addressing it requires responses that go well beyond the classroom.

The implications for teaching practice and institutional policy are substantive. Teachers of English in technical faculties need approaches that move beyond the conventional grammar-and-composition model and instead connect English explicitly to the professional contexts that engineering students find meaningful: access to international research literature, participation in global engineering networks, communication with multinational employers and engagement with technical standards that are frequently produced in English. Engineering-specific content, drawn from the students' own disciplinary interests, is likely to be more motivationally effective than generic language course material. At the institutional level, a clearer statement of the professional relevance of English proficiency, supported by visible connections to career development and postgraduate opportunity, would help to counter the perception that English is simply an administrative hurdle to clear.

As Broughton et al. (1980, p. 6) observe, a good command of English in a multilingual environment functions as the passport to social and economic advancement, and membership in the English-speaking professional community carries real and tangible rewards. Communicating this reality to students whose educational experience has given them no occasion to discover it for themselves is one of the most productive investments that teachers and institutions working in Francophone technical education can make. The present study is limited by its descriptive methodology and its focus on a single department at a single institution; future research should extend coverage to other technical faculties, incorporate inferential statistical analysis and examine the longitudinal effects of targeted attitudinal interventions on both motivation and performance.

7. Conclusion

The attitudes of Francophone engineering students at the National Advanced School of Engineering, Yaoundé Annex, Eseka, towards English. The findings demonstrate negative attitudes towards English, an outline that mirrors the largely Francophone educational background of most students and the inadequate purposeful part that English plays in their daily academic and professional setting. The data was obtained from 200 participants and academic performance records from the Department of Mathematics and Physical Sciences. The results steadily specify that the overpowering majority of students hold negative attitudes towards English and take part in it only under official obligation.

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