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ADDRESSING THE ENGLISH LITERACY CRISIS IN CAMEROON BASIC EDUCATION: A TECHNOLOGY-SUPPORTED MODEL FOR SOUND AND WORD BUILDING PEDAGOGY⁴

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to share how a technology-supported model for teaching sound and word building was successfully used in Cameroon basic education to address the English literacy crisis. Combining an explorative and an experimental research design, the researchers developed an innovative way of teaching sound and word building. Using Cameroon official syllabus and official textbooks, smartphones, USB keys, Bluetooth speakers, and laptops, researchers recorded, transferred and used audio materials from the textbooks in use to teach sound and word building activities effectively in collaboration with parents via the WhatsApp forum of each classroom. The population of the study consisted of 100 students, 3 teachers and 90 parents, each group having a specific role to play. Upon completion of the implementation phase of the project, some key findings emerged. With regard to teachers, the use of audio materials enabled all teachers to teach sound and word building in an effective way. Secondly, the use of audio materials enabled classroom teachers to use a common methodology across the school. Thirdly, audio materials helped teachers improve their listening, pronunciation and reading skills. As for pupils, the use of audio books reinforced their ability to become independent learners, thus enhancing learners' autonomy which is key to the overall goal of the Competence-Based Approach (CBA) to teaching. The results obtained from the experimental phase led to the following key points: introducing audio materials enables learners to master reading, listening and speaking skills in English before completion of basic education, thus reducing the English literacy crisis that has been rocking the educational system over the years. Besides, the introduction of audio materials enabled the build-up of a community of learners that involves parents, pupils and practitioners, and makes learning easier. Based on these findings, the researchers suggest a technology-enhanced model for teaching sound and word building in government primary schools in Cameroon, and strongly recommend that this model be considered by the Ministry of Basic Education and the National Council of Accreditation of School Manuals and Didactic Materials when designing textbooks for sound and word building.

Keywords: audio materials, basic education, learner's autonomy, mobile learning, official syllabus, sound and word building.

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Introduction

The Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report (2014) and the World Bank's Human Development Report (2018)¹ document the global learning crisis in detail. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries are more prone to the learning crisis than other regions of the world. The region, research has it, hosts 17 of 21 countries in which more than half of children lack basic skills in reading and mathematics. In a bid to consolidate strategies that can improve teaching and learning, countries put in place the Teaching and Learning Educators' Network for Transformation (TALENT) in 2016 as part of the coordination of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) in West and Central Africa. TALENT, whose objective is to publish a mapping study on the state of national learning assessment systems in SSA is aimed at providing an overall vision of the assessment of learning outcomes in Africa, and to identify promising examples and possible support needs. The aspect that is under discussion here falls under indicator 4.1.1 of SDG 4. The latter is concerned with the percentage of children and young people: (a) in the second or third year of studies; (b) at the end of primary education; and (c) at the end of lower secondary education who have mastered at least the minimum skill standards in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by gender.

The learning crisis that rocks Cameroon's Basic Education sub-sector could be summarised in the following statement: "many children go to school, but do not learn" (Republic of Cameroon, 2019). Cameroon's Basic Education sub-sector is threatened by the learning crisis. The latter prevents pupils from attaining curriculum goals, thus making them be lagging behind when compared to children from other areas of the world. The situation of the learning crisis in Cameroon primary schools can be captured through the following statistics: 60.6 % of pupils do not have necessary language skills at the start of school; 41.9 % do not have the necessary skills in mathematics at the start of primary school; 54 % do not have the necessary reading skills at the end of primary school, and 67 % of pupils do not have the necessary skills in mathematics at the end of primary school (Republic of Cameroon, 2019). Acknowledging all this does not cancel the fact that not enough is being done to provide basic education to all children of school-going age. This is to call the attention of various stakeholders in Basic Education to deeply reconsider the education offer in the Basic Education sub-sector within a broad perspective, so as to take appropriate measures that will improve on the performance of pupils by the time they complete primary education. Simply put, there is a need to rethink initial teacher training and continuous training as far as literacy-enhancing activities are concerned (Mbeudeu, 2019a). It is also important to include educational technology in facilitating the teaching and learning of sound and word building, which comply with innovative methods of teaching English in a practical way (Nunan, 2003).

Literature review and theoretical background to the teaching of sound and word building

The training of responsible citizens who are rooted in their culture, yet open to the world, is enshrined in Law N° 98/004 of April 14, 1998 on the Orientation of Education in Cameroon (Republic of Cameroon, 1998). Article 3 of this Law highlights that the State gives bilingualism pride of place – a catalyst of national integration – at all levels of the educational system. This implies that the Basic Education sub-sector should develop all kinds of curricular and pedagogic innovations that may boost literacy skills of primary school pupils. The same holds true with the National Council of Accreditation of School Manuals and Didactic Materials, which is supposed to come up with strong criteria when selecting textbooks for the teaching of activities related to English for French-speaking pupils. In fact, official textbooks for teaching sound and word building could be accompanied with audio materials. Despite efforts made by the technical departments in charge of teacher initial and continuous training to ease the teaching of one of the Foundational Subjects - English in French-speaking Government Schools – the literature has it that by the time pupils complete their primary education, most of them are unable to read basic texts and develop simple paragraphs (Republic of Cameroon, op. cit.). It has come to the researchers' observation that pupils from most Government Primary Schools in rural and urban areas lack basic skills in

sound and word building. The same holds true with most teachers who do not have the necessary competence in teaching some language systems (Mbeudeu, 2019a). The design and use of ICT-supported innovative teaching methods takes into consideration the acceptance to use educational technologies (Djouguela Fokam, 2017; Mbeudeu, 2019b).

The Literacy Blog sees sound and word building as the perfect place to start teaching young children to read and write from the moment they enter school. This is because by doing so, it can mitigate the problem of teaching an alphabetic code that is highly opaque. By blending the phonological aspect of words in building new words, Jo Bertrand from the British Council Teaching English Blog, suggests the following strategy when it comes to teaching sound and word building:

- Sound – First and foremost how the word sounds. Let children who can read hear the word before they see it as much as possible.
- Spelling – Remember that the way the word sounds and how it is spelt is not always coherent.
- Context – There are very few words that work on their own without being in a sentence or expression.
- Opposites – Putting not in front of a word to express the opposite is valid way of speaking English at an early stage but it is also important to expand their vocabulary as much as possible.
- Grades - In the same way as opposites you can introduce a word as part of a continuum. So when introducing 'big' why not teach them 'huge' as well. Don't overdo it as you don't want to give them a word overload, but if you feel they can handle a few precisions then by all means go beyond 'big' and 'small'.
- Word type - Without going into too much detail they should know if it's a verb, adjective or noun. Even the younger learners can understand the difference between a doing word and an object as something we can see or touch.

The teaching of sound and word building is rooted in any systematic approach that is aimed at using phonics to effectively teach children how to read. In a typical English primary education set up, the approach to teaching sound and word building is split into six phases. The six phases, when well designed and completed, cover strategies that enable pupils to learn about sounds at nursery to becoming fluent readers by age 7. The strategy may also develop pupils' skills in listening and writing.

The traditional approach to teaching sound and word building heavily relies on the teaching of letters of the English alphabet not the sounds corresponding to the letters. The shortcoming in this approach is that letters of the alphabet don't always represent their pronunciation and this may lead to confusion among children when they want to sound letters. The phonic approach therefore encourages practitioners and learners to link letters (graphemes) to sounds (phonemes) and to teach natural and realistic sounds when dealing with combinations of letters in words. This will go a long way to make children learn how to put sounds represented by letter groups together, to read words in a more straightforward way.

Letter sound-correspondence is the relationship between letters and sounds. It is also known as Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondence (GPC). The six phases that guide effective teaching of sound and word building are succinctly presented below:

- Phase 1 focuses on children aged approximately 3-4. This phase can develop children's speaking skills and linking of sounds and letters. In this phase, children are drilled in environmental sounds, instrumental sounds, body percussion, rhythm and rhyme, alliteration, voice sounds, and oral blending and segmenting. Here, children are encouraged to enjoy books from as early as possible. The main focus here is listening to and repeating sounds, rather than on directly reading words.

- Phase 2 targets children with an approximate age of 4-5. The phase introduces simple letter-sound correspondences. Here, children are encouraged to use their knowledge of sounds out of blended words.
- Phase 3 still targets children aged approximately 4-5, but here children build on the letter-sound correspondences learned in phase 2. They can learn consonant diagraphs.
- Phase 4 is for children aged approximately 4-5. Here, children will consolidate their knowledge and they will learn to read and spell words which have adjacent consonants.
- Phase 5 is for children aged approximately 5-6 years. In this phase, children will learn new graphemes for reading. They will also be taught alternative pronunciations for known graphemes. They will equally learn alternative spellings for known phonemes.
- Phase 6 targets children aged approximately 6-7. They will read with increasing fluency. By this phase, they will have mastered most of the common letter-sound correspondence and will have been versed in words automatically without needing to sound out and blend. Children, here can work on spelling, including prefixes and suffixes, doubling and dropping letters, and so on.

As evidenced in Mbeudeu (2019a), how to teach language systems at initial training of grade 1 teachers has a negative impact on classroom practices of French-speaking teachers who are recruited to teach in primary schools upon completion of their training. In fact, Government Primary Schools do not, in their vast majority, offer well-planned sound and word building lessons. From the researchers' observations in most state-owned schools, sound and word building is hardly taught by teachers from French-speaking background. This way, pupils do not fully acquire listening, reading and writing skills that are key to literacy and numeracy; two indicators of the attainment of curriculum goals at primary education.

There is a rich body of literature on mobile learning, WhatsApp in education and communities of practice in primary education. The importance of mobile learning technology for elementary school students has been examined. Results show that learning objectives are easily attained when teachers rely on mobile learning (Perdana, Aisyah, Cakranegara, Fauzi, & Destari, 2022). In Cameroon, this same view was explored as far back as in 2014 when the research was carried out on teacher professional development. The work highlighted the increasing penetration of mobile phones in Cameroonian schools and the potential for mobile learning (Len-Kibinkiri, 2014). Coming on the heels of this paper, the contribution of mobile learning on secondary school teachers of English as a foreign language teaching competences was explored. Findings revealed that novice teachers of English can co-construct new pedagogic skills and share successful classroom practices on mobile communities of practices (Mbeudeu, 2019b). In the same vein, some WhatsApp features are said to be channels through which communication, collaboration and resource sharing in learning can effectively be shared (Widodo, 2019). In primary schools, the effectiveness of WhatsApp on teaching and learning in teacher education has been explored in Zimbabwe. The results show how a teacher education institution uses WhatsApp to inform primary school approaches (Noyame, 2025). It should be noted that from researchers' observation WhatsApp is used in Cameroon basic education to share information among the education community.

With regard to communities of practice in basic education, their importance for setting up a good foundation for effective teaching and learning has been demonstrated in existing literature (Monteiro, Costa, & Santos, 2024; Sari & Lestari, 2024; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). As far as Cameroon is concerned, there is limited research on communities of practice in primary education. This notwithstanding, literature mentions in-service training, mentoring and peer support provided by teacher training institutions which are evidences that communities of practice are gaining relevance in a setting that has become interconnected with the penetration rate of the internet across the country.

From the foregoing, it is relevant to underscore the need to consider recent developments in mobile learning, WhatsApp in education and communities of practice as a study of this scope is being carried out. It is also worth noting that failure to rely on these topical issues when teaching sound and word building may affect pupils' ability to acquire skills in literacy and numeracy. This is where this study acquires some significance, as previous studies have shown that 60.6 % of pupils do not have necessary language skills at the start of school, 41.9 % do not have the necessary skills in mathematics at the start of primary school; 54 % do not have the necessary reading skills at the end of primary school, and 67 % of pupils do not have the necessary skills in mathematics at the end of primary school (Republic of Cameroon, 2019). Having taken this into consideration, it is hypothesised that the introduction of technology-supported model to sound and word building pedagogy significantly fosters literacy and numeracy among French-speaking pupils across the francophone sub-system of education in the Basic Education sub-sector. The remainder of this study sheds some light on the experience we had when introducing audio materials into teaching sound and word building to pupils from a private primary school.

Classroom practices that are shared in this paper were built upon an observation by the researchers. The latter observed that the way sound and word building was taught by teachers whose proficiency in English was below average was questionable. They mostly taught literacy activity through repetition or mimicking. The accent they used to present contents was neither Cameroon Francophone English nor near the target Standard British English (Mbeudeu, 2010). It is on these grounds that the researchers decided to devise a strategy that could ease the teaching and learning of sound and word building. It is believed that by sharing this successful classroom practice, the quality of teaching will significantly be improved and pupils will easily achieve learning expected outcomes as far as English literacy is concerned.

Methodological considerations

A mixed methodological design was adopted in carrying out the study, namely the explorative and the experimental design (Maxwell, 2008). This mixed approach was adopted because the purpose of the study was to understand how sound and word building was taught on one hand, and on the other hand, design and experiment an innovative model to teaching sound and word building in a specific primary school, and share the successful classroom practices.

The Yaounde 3 municipality was the setting of this study. *Les Chapelains* Bilingual School Complex, a private primary school located within the Obili neighbourhood, was selected for the purpose of the study. The school was selected for several reasons. It was accessible to the researchers and one of the researchers, being a member of the education community, had been following teaching activities of the chosen school. Being part of the education community, the researchers realised that teachers used an official textbook to teach sound and word building, without audio materials, thus making the acquisition of literacy skills in English difficult.

The school offered a venue for the researchers to observe sound and word building lessons of *Cours Préparatoire*⁵ (CP), *Cours Elementaire* ⁶ (CE2) and *Cours Moyen* ⁷ (CM2). The aim was to assess how teachers taught the lessons. This part ended with some key information: teachers relied on morphemes/graphemes, words, phrases and sentences as displayed in the textbooks with lots of pictures, without any audio materials to facilitate the didactic transposition.

⁵ This corresponds to Class 2 of the Anglophone sub-system of education in Cameroon.

⁶ Is the equivalent of class 4.

⁷ Corresponds to Class 6.

The educational system of Cameroon consists of two sub-systems of education: the francophone subsystem of education and the Anglophone sub-system. While French is the main medium of teaching in the first sub-system, English is the medium of instruction in the latter.

In a bid to fill this gap, some tools were used by the researchers. These tools consisted of smartphones, laptops and headsets. We equally used *The Secret of Sound and Word Building*, the official textbook in use whose publishing house is recognised by the State. This choice was justified by the researchers' desire to convert some selected lessons from the official texts into audio materials. The best way of doing that was to record the selected lessons from the textbook in use.

Prior to the recording phase, the researchers agreed to use the most intelligible accent that could be appropriate for learners and teachers (Mbeudeu, 2010). For pedagogical purposes and intelligibility-related issues on one hand, and the burning issue of decolonising educational practices within a context of World Englishes on the other hand, we all decided to use the most intelligible English accent to record the voiceover (Mbeudeu, 2019a; Ngefacs, 2023). After we were done with that, we also decided to read at a moderate speed in order to avoid intelligibility breakdown. The next step was the recording phase proper.

Prior to the recording phase, the researchers selected and graded lessons from different modules of learning in the three textbooks. We equally discussed issues concerning the pitch of the voice. We agreed to sound as natural as possible when reading aloud for recording and to pay attention to word stress and other segmental and supra segmental features of English (Mbeudeu, 2019a).

The recording phase was done following some key steps: pre-recording, recording proper, and saving. The pre-recording phase was aimed at recording about 3 to 5 lessons, listening to each of them and approving their quality. This was done in order to come up with authentic audio materials that complied with reading speed, pitch of the voice, stress and intonation. After the researchers had recorded 15 lessons they listened to every lesson. At the end of this stage, the quality was good enough for the target users. To make this final decision, the researchers had teachers and pupils listen to the pre-recorded audio materials. The feedback we got from them was positive. We then decided to move on to the recording proper.

The recording proper was carried out in a noise-free environment in one of the researchers' private homes. The time that was chosen to record the audio material was between 10 pm and 4 am. This way, we could enjoy the tranquillity needed to carry out the task without any interferences or interruptions. It took four weeks to record all the lessons selected from the three official sound and word building textbooks. Each time we recorded a lesson, we would save it on our phone giving it the same lesson title that was in the textbook. The page number was also included. The saving phase followed this step.

The saving phase was done gradually. The first thing was to transfer files from our smartphones to our personal computers. This was done using Bluetooth connectivity. Once the transfer of audio files was done, we created a folder for lessons from each module of learning. The saving process did not end here. We then proceeded with the transfer of each folder in USB sticks. We equally transferred the final audio materials to our smartphones.

The next step in our description is how we taught using the audio materials obtained from the official textbooks.

Experimenting audio materials in teaching sound and word building

This phase was purely practical and involved a good number of actors from the education community, namely: the researchers, teachers, students and parents.

Before we started using the audio materials, we created a community of practice on WhatsApp. We requested parents, during a meeting, to provide their WhatsApp numbers. We explained why we wanted their WhatsApp numbers by telling them that we were trying to experiment the

teaching of sound and word building via the use of audio materials. We recommended that they should buy headsets that are compatible with their Smartphones.

We equally created a second group with teachers only. The purpose of the group was to train teachers on how to teach sound and word building using the audio materials recorded from the official textbooks. For this purpose, three teachers were involved and within an hour the didactic approach to teaching sound and word building using audio materials was explained, and the practice completed. The practice required each teacher to choose a lesson and teach it following a methodology designed by the researchers.

After this stage, parents were convened by teachers of each class. The meeting was aimed at telling parents about the new approach to be implemented in teaching sound and word building. Each teacher required parents to cooperate in the teaching and learning process by helping their children to complete each task that was shared in each group. Once the information was dished out, parents agreed to be part of the learning community and the WhatsApp forum was opened to them.

Each time a teacher wanted to teach a specific lesson on sound and word building, the following stages had to be followed. The teacher would post the corresponding audio materials in the WhatsApp group followed by instructions: i) Once at home, with the help of your parents and using a headset, practise listening to the audio material and repeating it for 05 to 10 minutes, without opening the textbooks. ii) Each parent or guardian should cooperate to guarantee the success of the activity by making sure pupils listen to the audio with textbooks closed. iii) After pupils must have mastered listening and repeating the audio materials, parents allow pupils to open the textbook and read aloud as they listen to the audio material. iv) When parents realise that their children read well, they should record them as they read the lesson content aloud and post the recording in the group alongside the pupil's name. It should be noted here that all these activities were carried out a day before the lesson was officially taught in class.

The day before the lesson was taught, the teacher would first of all listen to all pupils' voice clips sent by parents on the classroom WhatsApp forum. This would enable the teacher to better prepare some remedial notes. The notes would later be used to institutionalise the new knowledge and easily attain the target lesson learning outcome. Once in the classroom, he or she would simply appoint pupils to read relying on their individual learning difficulties, thus making the lesson lighter and engaging, and applying differentiated instruction. At the end of the lesson, the teacher would then choose the 5 best voice clips from students and play them in class using a woofer. The teacher would award marks to encourage others to take their learning seriously.

The impact of the novel classroom practices on the teaching and learning of sound and word building

Failure to develop audio materials to teach sound and word building has not made the acquisition of literacy skills effective in most French-speaking Government Primary Schools. As it was reported in research, the teaching of language systems at initial training institutions has not been effective (Mbeudeu: 2019a). This has negatively influenced teaching practices in primary schools across the country. The introduction of audio materials has contributed tremendously to the development of listening, reading and writing skills in pupils and even teachers who do not have a sizable mastery of English pronunciation. The effective usage of audio materials from the official textbook titled The secret of the sound and word building has shown some positive points as seen below.

As far as teachers are concerned, the use of audio materials has enabled the three teachers involved in the study to teach sound and word building in an effective and systematic way. Teachers involved in the process have been able to build some confidence in themselves when it

comes to planning sound and word building activities. The use of audio materials to teach the activity has enabled practitioners to use a common methodology across the school. Still, audio materials have helped teachers to improve their listening, pronunciation and reading skills.

As for pupils, the use of audio books has reinforced their ability to become independent learners, thus enhancing learners' autonomy, which is central to the overall goal of the Competence-Based Approach (CBA) to teaching. The introduction of audio materials equally enabled learners to master reading, listening and speaking skills in English before they complete basic education, thus reducing the literacy crisis that has been rocking the educational system over the years. By introducing audio materials, teachers will be able to build a community of learners that involves parents, pupils and practitioners, and make learning easier.

The way forward: a didactic model for teaching sound and word building in government primary schools

The successful classroom practice described above was the result of an experiment that was conducted in a private primary school, where teachers would teach sound and word building to French-speaking learners using an official textbook with no audio materials. Having realised that Government Primary Schools in Cameroon do not use the approach experimented in this study to foster English literacy among French-speaking pupils, the researchers have come up with a didactic model that could help the Ministry of Basic Education to curb the English learning crisis that has been rocking the francophone sub-system of education. The model that is suggested here is one that encompasses educational technology and a mobile community of teaching and learning. In fact, it is a technology-supported model of teaching sound and word building in both sub-systems of education in Cameroon Basic Education sub-sector. The exploitation of this model will go a long way to ease the teaching of sound and word building that is a fundamental activity in primary schools, after it was realised that many children could not achieve basic skills in reading upon completion of primary education in the country. A good implementation of this new model requires some basic training modules at General Teacher Training Colleges and continuous training for practising teachers at the classroom level.

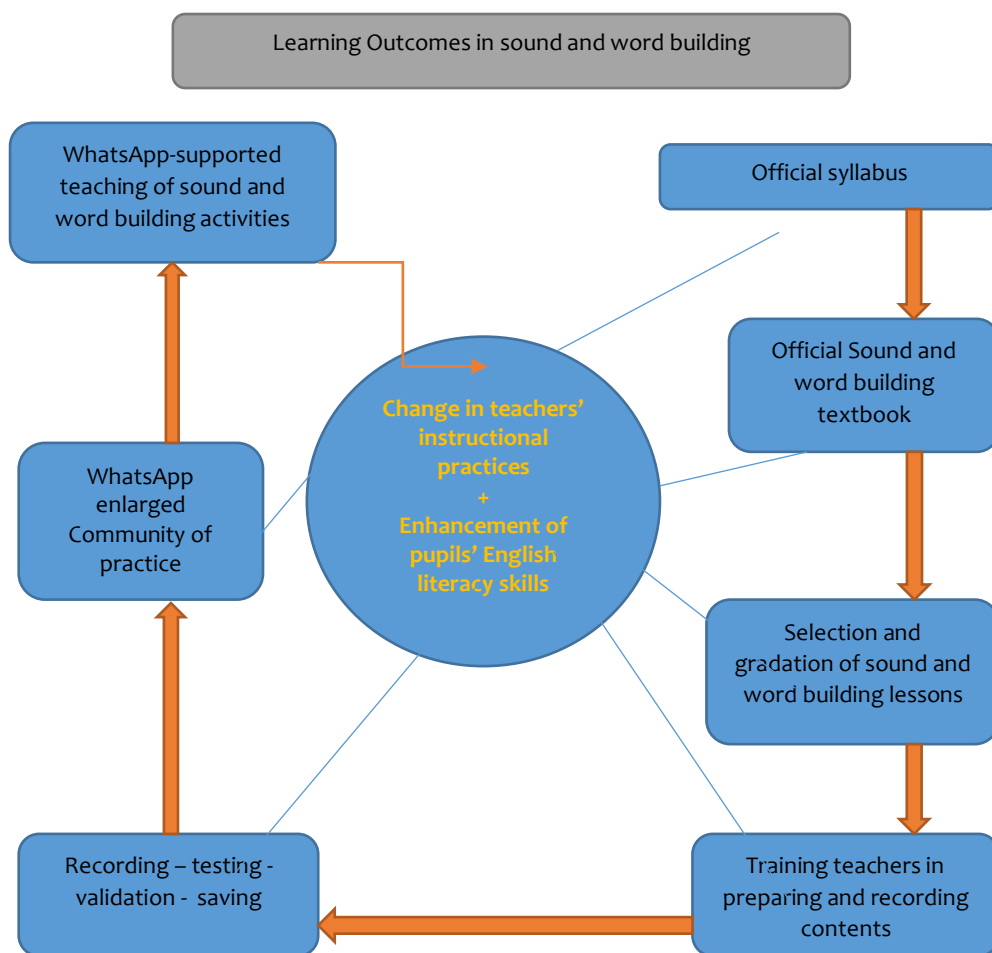


Figure: Suggested technology-enhanced model for teaching sound and word building in Cameroon government primary schools

There are many implications that come with this proposed model. The core implication is that by adapting this model, the quality of sound and word building lessons will be improved, thus triggering a change in pupils' ability to listen, speak, read and write.

Conclusion

The teaching of language systems in General Teacher Training Colleges has been neglected over the years. This has had a negative impact on the teaching of sound and word building in francophone primary schools across the country. It is on these grounds that the researchers believe that the design of a new model of teaching this aspect of the language system may yield better fruits. The English learning crisis that has hitherto rocked the francophone sub-system of education in Cameroon Basic Education may be defeated over the coming years if the suggested model for teaching sound and word building is further elaborated and popularized among communities of practice. From the experience that was shared here, it boldly stands out that the

use of technology-supported methods in teaching sound and word building has come to stay and has demonstrated that if well used in the classroom, pupils will listen, read and write well by the time they complete primary education. The highest contribution of introducing audio resources into teaching sound and word building is the achievement of early literacy in our pupils and also the improvement of sound and word building pedagogy.

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