

# The Impact of Diffidence and Stereotypes on the Performance of Francophone Learners of English

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article applies the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions by Fredrickson (1998) to analyse the performance and the psychological factors (diffidence and stereotypes) hindering the English language learning process in the Francophone system of education in Cameroon. 200 informants were randomly selected in 2 schools for this research: a public school, Lycée Bilingue d' Etoug-Ebé (LBE) and a private school, Collège Privé Moderne de l'Espérance d'Etoug-Ebé (COPMEE) in Yaounde. Our informants were selected from examination classes (Troisième, Première, and Terminale) in different streams, known as séries: literary studies and scientific and technological studies. 10 teachers were also selected for this study. The data were collected through an open-ended interview for teachers, an analysis of students' report cards, a questionnaire for students, and observation in class. The findings reveal that diffidence and stereotypes have a negative effect on Francophone learners of English. Female learners seem to be less affected by these psychological factors than male learners; just like learners below 15. Also, German learners, as well as learners from literary studies perform better in English and are less affected by psychological factors than Spanish learners.*

**KEYWORDS:** diffidence, stereotypes, performance, Francophone learners of English, psychological factors

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## INTRODUCTION

English is a worldwide language that is tremendously evolving, and its mastery is a concern for many. It is a global language (Crystal, 2009), it is a language of science, and it is a language of international relations. Hence, the need to render its learning easier for learners is an important objective for linguists and language teachers worldwide. In this light, we have had a critical observation of the behaviours and the performance of Francophone learners of English

in the Cameroonian context, and it seems necessary to look at psychological factors like diffidence and stereotypes. These psychological factors are regarded from a pedagogical perspective in this paper. We talk of diffidence in a classroom, a context where learners underestimate their abilities and, in their minds, lack self-confidence. As far as stereotypes are concerned, there are some preconceived considerations that learners have in mind about specific subjects. The present study seeks to check if diffidence and stereotypes have an impact on Francophone learners of English. To go about this objective, we envisage investigating the performance of the learners in the selected schools first. Thereafter, we will then check if the learners are influenced by diffidence and stereotypes before linking the factors and the performance.

### **Conceptual Framework and Relevant Literature**

The framework of the current paper is centred around the theory of the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions by Fredrickson (1998) that argues that experience of positive emotions can widen individuals' awareness and prompt novel and exploratory thoughts and actions, building up skills and personal resources over time (Fredrickson, 2001). Fredrickson believes that positive emotions can contribute to human flourishing and well-being by widening the thought-action repertoire that in turn can be "efficient antidotes for lingering effects of negative emotions" (Fredrickson et al, 2000). The theory comprises two hypotheses as it is suggested by its name: the broaden hypothesis and the build hypothesis.

Fredrickson posits that discrete positive emotions broaden the scope of attention and cognition then lead to a widened array of thoughts and action impulses in the mind. A corollary to this hypothesis is that negative emotions shrink this same array.

The build hypothesis explains the functionality of positive emotions during which the body becomes prepared physically and mentally for immediate action. The adaptive value of positive emotions lies not in the moment but over the long term. From an evolutionary standpoint, the resources accrued through repeated experiences of positive emotions enhance the odds of survival and of living long enough to reproduce. The resources gained through positive emotional experiences may be physical, social, psychological, or intellectual. Some of the candidate resources are physical (sleep quality, immunity from illnesses and diseases), social (expanded social connections, social support), intellectual (creativity, mindfulness), and psychological (trait resilience, optimism).

This theory inspired MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) in their article *Emotions that facilitate language learning: The positive-broadening power of imagination*. They tried to show that positive emotion facilitates the building of resources because it tends to broaden a person's perspective, opening the individual to absorb the language. In contrast, negative emotions produce the opposite tendency, a narrowing of focus and a restriction of the range of potential language input.

As the present study looks at emotions like diffidence and stereotypes, Fredrickson lets us know that the action tendencies produced by negative emotions powerfully dispose a person to a

specific action. For example, disgust leads to rejection as in spitting out spoiled food. The broaden and build theory stipulates that, positive emotions like joy, interest, contentment, pride, love, etc. can widen people's momentary thought-action repertoires and construct their enduring personal resources, from physical and intellectual background to social and psychological resources.

### **Diffidence**

Manktelov and Carlson (2011) cited in Van der Bergh (2013) differentiate between self-confidence and low self-confidence in language learning. The self-confident learner believes in himself/herself, takes risks, admits mistakes, and expects congratulations but he/she is overwhelmed by pride. The low self-confident one survives from others' opinions, does not take risks, works hard secretly, and values other people more than himself or herself but he/she is humble.

One of the factors related to diffidence is inhibition. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) viewed it as one of the factors influencing learners in developing their speaking skills. After highlighting the importance of the speaking skill as the first step before learning to read and write, they posited that communication among human beings, daily, mostly takes place while speaking. Henceforth, they stated that students who are inhibited are ashamed of others. Inhibition is a feeling of worry that stops people from telling or performing what they want (Cambridge A.L. Dictionary, 2000). As a remedy to this problem, Leong and Ahmadi suggested that teachers should praise their learners for speaking despite the mistakes, build a friendly relationship, and make learners enthusiastic and happy in class.

Tridinanti (2018) examined the relationship between speaking anxiety and self-confidence in the speaking achievements of EFL learners in private universities in Palembang. He realized that self-confidence has a great impact on speaking achievements. Additionally, he discovered that speaking anxiety does not influence speaking achievement as much as self-confidence does. Tridinanti raised the importance of self-confidence in an EFL class and encouraged instructors to help students develop self-confidence by creating real-life contexts of communication in teaching and learning situations.

Anxiety in language learning is a characteristic of diffident learners. In this light, Arifin (2017) mentions anxiety as characterized by shyness and fear. He defines anxiety as a "general term for the sense of fear that overtakes a student when he/she is called upon to speak or otherwise perform in front of a class". For these types of students, he suggested some measures among which: re-arranging seats to enable the learners to have new friends, encouraging them to respond during presentations, giving them some specific responsibilities in class, linking them with some confident learners, engaging private communications with them.

### **Stereotypes**

The term, stereotype threat, was first used by Steel and Aronson (1995) who showed in several experiments that Black college freshmen and sophomores had poorer performances on standardized tests than White students when the emphasis was laid on race. When there was no

emphasis on race, however, Black students had better performances and even equivalently with White students. The results showed that performance in academic contexts can be harmed by the awareness that one's behaviour might be viewed through the lens of racial stereotypes.

It has been shown that stereotype threat can harm the academic performance of any person for whom the condition invokes a stereotype-based expectation of poor performance. Everyone belongs to at least one group that is overwhelmed by this type of stereotype. Any salient social (or psychological) identity can have an impact on performance on an assignment that gives the possibility of confirming a stereotype. Some potential consequences of stereotype threats are the decrease in academic performance of students from a low socioeconomic background (Croizet & Claire, 1998), the decreased performance on tasks in non-academic domains like elderly memory performance (Levy, 1996), White men in sports (Stone, Sjomeling, Lynch & Darley, 1999), women in driving (Yeung & Von Hippel, 2008), etc.

### **Mechanisms behind stereotype threat**

There are many factors behind stereotype threat which are: anxiety, negative cognition, lowered performance expectations, physiological arousal, reduced effort, self-control, memory capacity, creativity, and flexibility, and speed. Previous works on stereotype threat have as indicated above focused on domains like sports, driving, etc. In this study, the stereotype factor is viewed as being a barrier to language learning; when learners believe that being able to learn English is a divine gift or an inborn capacity. In the present study, the diffidence of learners is regarded as a pessimistic thinking (by the student) that even through hard work, they can't achieve a good (or better) performance in English. This defeatism is more displayed through our second factor which is stereotypes. In this study, the common stereotype threats to Francophone learners are that the capacity to understand English is God's gift and people are born with the capacity to understand English. Thus, many students tend not to make efforts to read or study because they believe English is a difficult language, they were not given the capacity to understand it, and they were not born with the ability to do well in it. Consequently, the performance never reaches an average grade for those learners.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study was done using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Field research was organised in two stages. The first stage was the collection of data related to the performance of Francophone learners of English. The second stage was the collection of data related to the psychological factors (diffidence and stereotypes) hindering the English language learning process in the Francophone system of education. We selected 2 schools for our research, a public school, *Lycée Bilingue d' Etoug-Ebé* (LBE) and a private school, *Collège Privé Moderne de l'Espérance d'Etoug-Ebé* (COPMEE). 10 teachers (with at least 7 years of teaching experience) and 200 students were randomly selected in both schools (each, 100). Our informants were selected from examination classes (*Troisième*, which is the final year in the lower secondary, and *Première* and *Terminale*, which are the last two final years in the upper secondary). The latter were selected in different streams known as *séries*: literary studies (in this work referred to as Arts) and scientific and technological studies (referred to in this work

as Science). It should be noted that all *Troisième* students selected in this study either learn German (*Allemand* abbreviated here as All) or Spanish (*Espagnol* abbreviated here as Esp). At this level, they are neither language nor science students (they are referred to here as Unspecialised).

The researchers made use of different methods for collecting data: an open-ended interview for teachers, an analysis of students' report cards, a questionnaire for students, and observation in class. The main questions of the interview for teachers investigated their opinion concerning the performance of Francophone students in English, reasons for the performance, and suggestions. The analysis of students' grades in English focused on the 1<sup>st</sup> term results. The first part of the questionnaire focused on diffidence and the second part analysed stereotypes. The presentation and the analysis of data collected is divided into two parts: the first part which investigates the performance of the students, and the second part which emphasises diffidence and stereotypes.

### **Data Analysis**

This section analyses the interview and the main factors that affect the performance of the informants.

### **Interview**

Our hypothesis in this section held that academic underachievement in English of examination-class students had resulted from psychological factors and, consequently, created ineffective proficiency in the four language skills for Francophones who considered English as being a 'difficult' course. To test this hypothesis, we interviewed teachers in LBE and COPMEE. The teachers were asked to state, firstly, the performance of their students, then reasons for that performance, and lastly, potential suggestions to remedy the poor performance. Here are some comments from the teachers:

**1<sup>st</sup> teacher:** *"Their performance depends on the levels. In classes like 6e and 5e, it is generally good while in the second cycle, it is poor. This, in my opinion, is due to the fact that as students grow older, their interest in education decreases as they are more interested in things that have nothing to do with school (boy/girlfriends, games, entertainment, football for boys or telenovelas for girls). At times some have to practice an activity so as to have money to pay their school fees ... I don't think they are improving given that as time goes by, the loss of interest in education in general and in the God given English thinking by students increases... Generally, for my students in COPMEE, it is poor"*

**2<sup>nd</sup> teacher:** *«In the city, the performance is below average. Though learners do better when they are well followed up both in school and at home. In the outskirts it is very poor. Learners lack motivation due to poor access to information. No improvement... Learner performance here is poor.*

**1<sup>st</sup> teacher:** *“Poor, they lack interest, they lack textbooks, and they don’t do their homework. They are not improving because there is no motivation. Here, my students’ performance is below average.”*

**2<sup>nd</sup> teacher:** *“the performance is below average. As justification, the class average in English is between 8 and 9 on 20. Most of them think English is too difficult and only those chosen by God can make it. I realise that there is no improvement as days go by. It even worsens. Concerning my students, it is below average.”*

**3<sup>rd</sup> teacher:** *“Due to the fact that in our secondary schools, evaluations are exclusively on written aspects, learners try to have average marks. The spoken part remains very poor. Those who try to make a difference are learners that have an extra motivation, which most often are related to their future careers, dreams to travel abroad or day to day dwelling with Anglophones. I don't really see an improvement as the years go by. Learners, here, are just average.”*

**4<sup>th</sup> teacher:** *“For the majority, they are below average. This is because they are not enough exposed to the English language. We also notice a lack of practice and they seem not to be aware of the importance of English. They are improving as their attitude toward English is changing... My students are below average.”*

**5<sup>th</sup> teacher:** *“In my opinion, their performance is below average. Students appear to be less interested in the subject. I have been on the field for about 9 years now, but I have not noticed any positive change. Generally, learners of Anglais in LBE are below average.”*

**6<sup>th</sup> teacher:** *“Poor performance though some Francophone learners try their best to learn English. if most of them could like English, we would have good marks in class. Unfortunately, it is not the case. The present performance is not different from the past year’. In LBE, I think it is below average.”*

**7<sup>th</sup> teacher:** *“The level is poor, very poor in general and not about to change, simply because they make no efforts. It is even a battle when it comes to checking the prerequisites. In this way, even a miracle won’t be enough to make them improve upon their level. The level here is poor.”*

**8<sup>th</sup> teacher:** *“It’s very poor. Most of them cannot use English for whatsoever. Reference to basic language skills... not at all; from my ten years of experience, the situation gets worse as years go by. My students’ performance is poor.”*

**9<sup>th</sup> teacher:** *“Very poor, they are not willing... No improvement for Science students but language students, I can say only 10% per class improve as time goes by. In LBE, Francophone students’ performance in English is poor.”*

**10<sup>th</sup> teacher:** “Fair, I really enjoy my 6e students. They are very reactive and dynamic but in the upper classes, it is not always the case. They do improve as years go by. Generally, my learners are fair in English.”

As can be read above, all the teachers we interviewed believe learners' performance in English is generally poor or below average. From these views, a conclusion to draw from the majority (8/10), is that learners do not perform well, and learners are not improving as years go by.

### Student's grades in English

This section concerns the analysis of students' grades in English for the 1<sup>st</sup> term. The following table contains the performances of the learners who were present for the evaluation and the scores/percentages ranging from average and above then give the percentages.

|                        | <i>Poor (≤10/20)</i> | <i>Average (10-13)</i> | <i>Good (14-16)</i> | <i>Excellent (≥16)</i> |
|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| <b>LBE</b><br>n=100    | 78%                  | 19%                    | 2%                  | 1%                     |
| <b>COPMEE</b><br>n=100 | 82%                  | 14%                    | 4%                  | 0%                     |

Table 1: Students' Grades

For all the 6 sequences, during the 5 sequences, 1ere A4 Esp students didn't get a grade  $\geq 10$ . It is only in the 6<sup>th</sup> sequence that they got 10.71%.

### The Factors

All the data on the factors (diffidence and stereotypes) are presented in tables comments or analyses given beneath.

#### Diffidence

For diffidence, we had one (1) question: If you work hard in English, you can score: a) from 0 to 4.5; b) from 5 to 9.5; c) from 10 to 14.5; d) from 15 to 20.

For this question, all those who believe they cannot perform beyond 9.5 are influenced by diffidence in their English learning process. Many Francophone learners of English in the Cameroonian context do not believe they can score good grades on English language tests. Therefore, they fail to work hard or make personal efforts because there is a psychological blockage, they have built by themselves in believing that they cannot do better whatever the case. Some aspects enable us to notice diffidence in Francophone learners of English: some say overtly that they cannot score an average mark, some do not treat the test entirely; many do not work on essay writing, some allow empty spaces on their scripts, and some absent classes. For our questionnaire, we have opted to enable the learners themselves to choose the range of grades they can reach if they work hard.

| Row Label            | From 0 to 4.5 | From 5 to 9.5 | From 10 to 14.5 | From 15 to 20 | Total      |
|----------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|------------|
| <b>COPMEE</b>        | <b>2</b>      | <b>62</b>     | <b>19</b>       | <b>17</b>     | <b>100</b> |
| <b>Arts</b>          | <b>1</b>      | <b>22</b>     | <b>10</b>       | <b>7</b>      | <b>40</b>  |
| 1ère ALL             |               | 5             |                 | 5             | 10         |
| 1ère ESP             |               | 7             | 3               |               | 10         |
| Tle ALL              | 1             | 4             | 3               | 2             | 10         |
| Tle ESP              |               | 6             | 4               |               | 10         |
| <b>Unspecialised</b> | <b>0</b>      | <b>14</b>     | <b>2</b>        | <b>4</b>      | <b>20</b>  |
| 3ème ALL             |               | 6             | 1               | 3             | 10         |
| 3ème ESP             |               | 8             | 1               | 1             | 10         |
| <b>Science</b>       | <b>1</b>      | <b>26</b>     | <b>7</b>        | <b>6</b>      | <b>40</b>  |
| 1ère C               |               | 7             | 3               |               | 10         |
| 1ère D               | 1             | 3             | 2               | 4             | 10         |
| Tle C                |               | 8             | 1               | 1             | 10         |
| Tle D                |               | 8             | 1               | 1             | 10         |

Table 2: Learners' Self-evaluation in COPMEE

Table 2 indicates that 62% of students in COPMEE think their best performance can be between 5 and 9.5 and 2% think their best performance can be between 0 and 4.5. We realised that out of 100 learners, only 17 are sure to score grades beyond 14.5. We observe that 19% of students think if they work hard, they can have a grade between 10 and 14.5. Thus, the total of students influenced by diffidence is 64%. In detail, 23 out of 40 literary students (57.5%) are affected, 14 out of 20 Unspecialised students (70%) are affected and 27 out of 40 Science students (67.5%) are affected. Among Arts students, Spanish learners are 13 out of 20 whereas German learners are 10 out of 20. Table 3 presents the responses to learners' self-evaluation in LBE.

| Row Label            | From 0 to 4.5 | From 5 to 9.5 | From 10 to 14.5 | From 15 to 20 | Total      |
|----------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|------------|
| <b>LBE</b>           | <b>6</b>      | <b>49</b>     | <b>28</b>       | <b>17</b>     | <b>100</b> |
| <b>Arts</b>          | <b>2</b>      | <b>16</b>     | <b>15</b>       | <b>7</b>      | <b>40</b>  |
| 1ère ALL             | 1             | 4             | 3               | 2             | 10         |
| 1ère ESP             |               | 2             | 6               | 2             | 10         |
| Tle ALL              | 1             | 3             | 4               | 2             | 10         |
| Tle ESP              |               | 7             | 2               | 1             | 10         |
| <b>Unspecialised</b> | <b>1</b>      | <b>12</b>     | <b>3</b>        | <b>4</b>      | <b>20</b>  |
| 3ème ALL             |               | 5             | 2               | 3             | 10         |
| 3ème ESP             | 1             | 7             | 1               | 1             | 10         |
| <b>Science</b>       | <b>3</b>      | <b>21</b>     | <b>10</b>       | <b>6</b>      | <b>40</b>  |
| 1ère C               | 1             | 5             | 2               | 2             | 10         |
| 1ère D               |               | 4             | 4               | 2             | 10         |
| Tle C                | 1             | 6             | 2               | 1             | 10         |
| Tle D                | 1             | 6             | 2               | 1             | 10         |

Table 3: Learners' Self-evaluation in LBE



Table 3 reveals that 6 of 100 students in LBE think their best performance can be between 0 and 4.5 and 49 think their best performance can be between 5 and 9.5. We realised that out of 100 learners, only 17 are sure of scoring grades beyond 14.5. We observed that 28 students think if they work hard, they can have a grade between 10 and 14.5. Thus, the total of students influenced by diffidence is 55, thus representing 55%. In detail, 18 out of 40 Arts students (45%) are affected, 13 out of 40 Unspecialised students (65%) are affected and 24 out of 40 Science students (60%) are affected. Among Arts students, Spanish learners are 9 out of 20 whereas German learners are 7 out of 20. Here again, there are more Spanish learners than German ones.

|        |                 | Mark  | 0 – 4.5 | 5 – 9.5 | 10 - 14.5 | 15 - 20 | Total |
|--------|-----------------|-------|---------|---------|-----------|---------|-------|
|        |                 | Age   |         |         |           |         |       |
| COPMEE | Female students | <15   | 2       | 1       |           | 3       | 6     |
|        |                 | >15   |         | 22      | 16        | 6       | 44    |
|        | Male students   | <15   | 1       | 3       | 2         |         | 6     |
|        |                 | >15   | 1       | 34      | 4         | 5       | 44    |
| LBE    | Female students | <15   |         |         | 1         | 1       | 2     |
|        |                 | >15   | 1       | 22      | 17        | 8       | 48    |
|        | Male students   | <15   |         | 3       |           |         | 3     |
|        |                 | >15   | 5       | 24      | 11        | 7       | 47    |
|        |                 | Total | 10      | 109     | 51        | 30      | 200   |

Table 4: Learners' Self-evaluation According to Gender and Age

In Table 4, we notice that in COPMEE, out of 50 female students, 25 are influenced by diffidence whereas out of 50 male students, 39 are influenced by diffidence. Respectively, female students represent 50% out of 50, and male students represent 78% out of 50. Among female students, 6 are below the age of 15, and 44 are above the age of 15. Among male students, 6 students are below the age of 15, and 44 students are above the age of 15.

We also see that in LBE, out of 100 female students, 23 are influenced by diffidence whereas out of 100 male students, 32 are influenced by diffidence. Respectively, female students represent 46% out of 100, and male students represent 64% out of 100. 48 female students are above the age of 15. Among male students, 3 students are below the age of 15, and 47 students are above the age of 15.

### Stereotypes

In this section, we had two questions: *Do you think people are born with the capacity to understand English: yes or no?* and *Do you believe it is God who gives the capacity to understand English: yes or no?*

Those who say people are born with the capacity to understand English and those who believe it is God who gives the capacity to understand English are here considered influenced by stereotypes. Here, the results of the two questions are grouped into one table for each school.

It is very common to hear Francophone learners of English in Cameroon uttering sentences like : ‘*c’est Dieu qui donne l’anglais*’, ‘*il est né avec son anglais*’, ‘*je ne suis pas fait(e) pour l’anglais*’, ‘*est-ce que je suis à gauche?*’. We believe this has an impact on the English language learning process because believing that proficiency in English comes from God means there is nothing humanly possible to be done in other to perform well. For some, proficiency in English has to do with genes. They think people are born with the capacity to understand English. These are beliefs that prevent learners from giving their best. The responses of the informants are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

| People are born with the capacity to understand English |           |           |            | It is God who gives the capacity to understand English |           |            |
|---|-----------|-----------|------------|--|-----------|------------|
| Row Label   | No        | Yes       | Total      | No   | Yes       | Total      |
| <b>COPMEE</b>   | <b>31</b> | <b>69</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>43</b>  | <b>57</b> | <b>100</b> |
| <b>Arts</b>   | <b>14</b> | <b>26</b> | <b>40</b>  | <b>20</b>  | <b>20</b> | <b>40</b>  |
| 1ère ALL  |           | 6         | 10         | 5  | 5         | 10         |
| 1ère ESP  | 4         | 10        | 10         | 5  | 5         | 10         |
| Tle ALL   | 5         | 5         | 10         | 6  | 4         | 10         |
| Tle ESP   | 5         | 5         | 10         | 4  | 6         | 10         |
| <b>Unspecialised</b>                                    | <b>4</b>  | <b>16</b> | <b>20</b>  | <b>9</b>   | <b>11</b> | <b>20</b>  |
| 3ème ALL  | 2         | 10        | 10         | 7  | 3         | 10         |
| 3ème ESP  | 2         | 6         | 10         | 2  | 8         | 10         |
| <b>Science</b>  | <b>13</b> | <b>27</b> | <b>40</b>  | <b>14</b>  | <b>26</b> | <b>40</b>  |
| 1ère C  | 4         | 6         | 10         | 4  | 6         | 10         |
| 1ère D  | 2         | 8         | 10         | 4  | 6         | 10         |
| Tle C   | 4         | 6         | 10         | 3  | 7         | 10         |
| Tle D   | 3         | 7         | 10         | 3  | 7         | 10         |

Table 5: Learners’ Belief about the Source of the English Language Proficiency in COPMEE

In COPMEE, out of 100 students, 69% believe people are born with the capacity to understand English. Among 40 Arts students, 26 of them (65%) believe people are born with the capacity to understand English. Among 20 Unspecialised students, 16 of them (80%) also believe people are born with the capacity to understand English. As far as Science students are concerned 27 out of 40 learners (67.5%) believe that people are born with the capacity to understand English. Among Arts students, 11 are German learners and 16 are Spanish learners (more Spanish learners than German learners). Table 5 also indicates that out of 100 students, 57% believe it is God who gives the capacity to understand English. Among 40 Arts students, 20 (50%) believe God gives the capacity to understand English. Among 20 Unspecialised students, 11 of them (55%) also believe in the divine capacity of learning English. As far as Science students are concerned 26 out of 40 learners (65%) are of the view that people are given the capacity to learn English by God. Among Arts students, 12 are German learners and 19 are Spanish

learners (more Spanish learners than German learners). Table 6 presents the students' responses in LBE.

| You think people are born with the capacity to understand English |           |           |            | You believe it is God who gives the capacity to understand English |           |            |
|---|-----------|-----------|------------|--|-----------|------------|
| Row Label   | No        | Yes       | Total      | No   | Yes       | Total      |
| <b>LBE</b>  | <b>36</b> | <b>64</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>37</b>  | <b>63</b> | <b>100</b> |
| <b>Arts</b>   | <b>16</b> | <b>24</b> | <b>40</b>  | <b>17</b>  | <b>23</b> | <b>40</b>  |
| 1ère ALL  | 4         | 6         | 10         | 2  | 8         | 10         |
| 1ère ESP  | 5         | 5         | 10         | 4  | 6         | 10         |
| Tle ALL   | 5         | 5         | 10         | 8  | 2         | 10         |
| Tle ESP   | 2         | 8         | 10         | 3  | 7         | 10         |
| <b>Unspecialised</b>  | <b>7</b>  | <b>13</b> | <b>20</b>  | <b>6</b>   | <b>14</b> | <b>20</b>  |
| 3ème ALL  | 5         | 5         | 10         | 4  | 6         | 10         |
| 3ème ESP  | 2         | 8         | 10         | 2  | 8         | 10         |
| <b>Science</b>  | <b>13</b> | <b>27</b> | <b>40</b>  | <b>14</b>  | <b>26</b> | <b>40</b>  |
| 1ère C  | 5         | 5         | 10         | 3  | 7         | 10         |
| 1ère D  | 4         | 6         | 10         | 6  | 4         | 10         |
| Tle C   | 1         | 9         | 10         | 3  | 7         | 10         |
| Tle D   | 3         | 7         | 10         | 2  | 8         | 10         |

Table 6: Learners' Belief about the Source of the English Language Proficiency in LBE

In LBE, among 100 learners, 64 of them (64%) believe people are born with the capacity to understand English. Among 40 Arts students, 24 of them (48%) believe people are born with the capacity to understand English. Among 20 Unspecialised students, 13 of them (65%) also believe people are born with the capacity to understand English. As far as Science students are concerned 27 out of 40 learners (67.5%) believe that people are born with the capacity to understand English. Among Arts students, 16 are German learners and 21 are Spanish learners (more Spanish learners than German learners).

Table 6 also indicates that out of 100 students, 63 of them (63%) believe it is God who gives the capacity to understand English. Among 40 Arts students, 23 of them (57.5%) believe God gives the capacity to understand English. Among 20 Unspecialised students, 14 of them (70%) also believe in the divine capacity of learning English. As far as Science students are concerned 26 out of 40 learners (65%) are of the view that people are given the capacity to learn English by God. Among Arts students, 16 are German learners and 21 are Spanish learners (more Spanish learners than German learners). Table 7 is on gender and age.

| Do you believe people are born with the capacity to understand English? |                 |     | N         | Yes        | Total      |
|---|-----------------|-----|-----------|------------|------------|
| COPMEE  | Female students | <15 |           | 3          | 3          |
|   |                 | >15 | 16        | 31         | 47         |
|   | Male students   | <15 | 2         | 3          | 5          |
|   |                 | >15 | 13        | 32         | 45         |
| LBE   | Female students | <15 |           | 1          | 1          |
|   |                 | >15 | 22        | 27         | 49         |
|   | Male students   | <15 | 1         | 2          | 3          |
|   |                 | >15 | 14        | 33         | 47         |
| <b>Total</b>  |                 |     | <b>68</b> | <b>132</b> | <b>200</b> |

Table 7: Beliefs about an Innate Source of English Language Proficiency According to Gender and Age

In COPMEE, we have 34 female students (68%) out of 50 and 35 male students (70%) out of 50 who answered in the affirmative: among female students, 3 of them (6%) are below the age of 15 and 31 female students (65%) above the age of 15 and among male students, 3 of them (6%) below the age of 15 and 32 male students (64%) above the age of 15.

In LBE, we have 28 female students (56%) out of 50 and 35 male students (70%) out of 50. Among female students, 1 of them (1%) is below the age of 15, and 55% are above the age of 15. Among male students, 4 of them (4%) were below the age of 15, and 66 male students (66%) were above the age of 15.

Table 8 presents the details on gender and age.

| You think it is God who gives the capacity to understand English |                 |     | NO        | YES        | Total      |
|--|-----------------|-----|-----------|------------|------------|
| COPMEE   | Female students | <15 | 2         | 1          | 3          |
|  |                 | >15 | 27        | 20         | 47         |
|  | Male students   | <15 | 1         | 4          | 5          |
|  |                 | >15 | 13        | 32         | 45         |
| LBE  | Female students | <15 | 1         |            | 1          |
|  |                 | >15 | 22        | 27         | 49         |
|  | Male students   | <15 |           | 2          | 2          |
|  |                 | >15 | 15        | 33         | 48         |
| <b>Total</b>   |                 |     | <b>81</b> | <b>119</b> | <b>200</b> |

Table 8: Learners' Belief about a Divine Source of the English Language Mastery According to Gender and Age

Let's focus on those who believe it is God who gives the capacity to understand English according to gender and age. In COPMEE, we have 21 female students (42%) out of 50 and 36 male students (72%) out of 50. Among female students, 1 of them (2%) is below the age of 15, and 20 female students (40%) are above the age of 15. Among male students, 4 of them (8%) are below the age of 15, and 32 of them (64%) are above the age of 15.

In LBE, we have 27 female students (54%) out of 50 and 35 male students (70%) out of 50. Among female students, none of them (0%) is below the age of 15, and 54% are above the age of 15. Among male students, 2 of them (4%) are below the age of 15, and 33 of them (66%) are above the age of 15.

Many conclusions can be drawn. In the first place, as other works suggested, Francophone students' performance in English needs a remedy (Sokeng Piewo, 2011). Secondly, we have evidence that diffidence and stereotypes have a negative effect on those learners as far as English is concerned. From a general observation, the two schools suffer from these factors. However, we observe that LBE seems to be less affected by the factors (from a general perspective) than COPMEE. The findings reveal that among the series, Science students are the most affected, followed by Unspecialised students and the less concerned are Arts students, which may be justified by the fact that they deal with languages more than the other series. Within Arts students, we notice that German learners are more favourable to English than Spanish learners. As far as age and gender are concerned, we notice the factors mostly affect male students and learners beyond the age of 15 than female students and learners below the age of 15.

### **Interpretation with regard to other works**

Observing the performance of the students from a general perspective, we can strongly agree with Kouega and Sokeng Piewo's (2013) observation that Francophone Secondary School leavers do not reach college-level English.

Realising that LBE's performance in English is the best among the two schools, we can hypothesise that it is due to the presence of purely Anglophone students in the school. This means there is a positive impact of Francophone learners coexisting in the same environment with Anglophone students, as it keeps the former ones in touch with their target language. This situation, though not reaching our expectations, gives worth to Krashen's input hypothesis (1985) that language is acquired when exposed to "comprehensible input" even slightly beyond a learner's current level of competence.

While comparing Arts students, we realised that German learners perform better in English and are less affected by psychological factors than Spanish learners. This situation has stimulated our curiosity and has pushed us to brainstorm and think about the language family relationship. English is an Indo-European Germanic language which links it more to German than to French. However, French is an Indo-European derived from Latin (as Spanish with the same system of writing). It means English is closer to German whereas French is closer to Spanish. This may explain why German learners tend to be more comfortable in English than Spanish learners.

This analysis goes in the same line with Nuzzi and Pedica (2016) stipulating that acquisition/learning of a foreign language greatly depends on the level of proximity between the target language and the learner's first language. Therefore, one will notice that Francophone students perform and feel comfortable better in Spanish than in English.

This study has also enabled us to compare male and female students as far as their performance and their comfortability (psychological factors) in the English language are concerned. We have thus realised that female learners perform better and are less affected by psychological factors than male learners. It has been proven by some authors that gender has a great impact on language learning (Oxford, 1993; Young & Oxford 1997). It is shown that female students generally display more integrative motivation and more positive attitudes to L2 than male learners. Zhuanglin (1989) supported that male and female students are gifted with different linguistic abilities; female students learn to speak earlier than males and learn foreign languages quicker and better than males.

We have also considered age in this study and it occurs that learners below 15 are less influenced by the factors than those above. There have been many debates on age-related to SLA or language learning. Slobin (1982) believes there is a "sensitive" period (during childhood) when SLA is optimised as learning is not influenced by the surrounding variations and individual cognitive ability.

## **DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

According to Hortwitz (2001), the tension and discomfort related to language learning call for the attention of the language teaching profession. An objective observation of the case of English language to secondary school learners has enabled us to realise that the entire teaching body has a role to play; from basic education to secondary education, the ministries, the pedagogic inspectors, the school's administrations, the teachers and the learners themselves must be part or involved in making the English language learning process free from psychological blockages.

Generally, language is learned to be used both in speaking and writing, though daily and in real-life situations, it is spoken more and written less. What can also bring about insecurity is the fact of focusing more on the written part and less on the spoken part. Approaching language teaching and learning with the same importance given to spoken and written (why not start with speaking before moving to writing) use can be a good beginning. Failing to do so is one of the aspects that will create phenomena like anxiety, shame, or fear to speak or to be evaluated sooner or later.

In some cases, learners who constantly fail in English tend to have negative impressions about it both as a subject and as a language. They end up developing diffidence and stereotypes because they believe one must have a divine ability or an innate capacity to do well, they think no matter how hard they work, they won't score a pass mark. What happens next is hatred against the language. Consequently, learners display negative disciplinary behaviours in class

in the presence of the teacher when lessons are being taught and many decide to be absent from the English classes believing that nothing can be done to improve their performances. As such, the psychological factors influence the performance and hence raise indiscipline and as days go by, the situation gets worse.

Attempting to bring some suggestions that can help overcome the psychological problems faced by Francophone students in learning English at secondary school levels, we think it is necessary to start from the root of the basic education given that age has an impact on language acquisition/ learning. The statistics show that the population which is less affected by diffidence and stereotypes is mostly below the age of 15. As such, our findings match with the above-mentioned authors' view about a sensitive age (tender age) whereby language can be easily acquired and learned. We then postulate that in our context, Francophone learners of English should be exposed to enough comprehensible input at a tender age. As people grow up, they become less capable of memorising content. This means that at a tender age; Francophone learners should be given enough memorisable amounts of English language. This should be a long-term approach, that is; reducing memorisable input gradually as learners grow up. An effective way to implement this approach may be to teach some subjects in English (for example simplified lessons of History, Geography, Science, Literature...). It is also important to teach them many songs in English with the contents of those songs. The learners may also be taught basic communicative skills. By so doing, learners will acquire the basic knowledge of the language, and it will prevent them from being diffident or feeling uncomfortable in English when they grow up because of the lack of necessary words to express themselves.

## **CONCLUSION**

The objective of this study was to verify if (and how) diffidence and stereotypes had an impact on the performance of Francophone learners of English, the case of two selected schools in Yaounde (Cameroon). We looked at the performance before investigating the factors. We realised that the learners' performance is poor and that really, they are influenced by diffidence and stereotypes. It appears, that there is a high proportionality between the learners' grades and their level of comfortability in the English language. Simply put, it has been discovered that the more the students are diffident and stereotyped, the worse their performance is. Another remark about diffidence and stereotypes is that they are interrelated; diffidence is caused by stereotypes in the sense that learners think they cannot score good grades on English tests or be proficient because, for them, those who succeed in English are those who have an innate ability or are gifted by God. Therefore, in their minds, there is a blockage which is the belief that even if they work hard, it won't help. We suggested two main measures that can be helpful to overcome the factors. The first measure is to maximize the teaching of spoken English and to maximize the input of learners at a tender age.

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