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A Language of Learning

Article

DAKAR, Senegal (Achieve3000, March 26, 2018). In sub-Saharan Africa, most children attend schools where lessons are not taught in their mother tongue. Instead, schools use a language that is more international, meaning that it's more commonly used worldwide. Some believe this system prepares kids for a successful future. Others say that teaching in an unfamiliar language can confuse children and affect learning.

Senegal is an example of an African nation where students in second grade learn to read—not in their first language, but in French. French is Senegal's "colonial language." It became the official language when Senegal was a colony of France, between 1895 and 1960. (Many African countries were once colonies of European nations, including France, the United Kingdom, and Portugal.) In Senegal, many people speak the language of their region or ethnic group at home instead of French. Likewise, in other African nations, many people speak local or ethnic languages rather than the colonial language.

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At school, these students in Kaolack, Senegal, are taught in an international language (French) rather than their local language.

It's this familiarity with local languages that has many people calling for schools to reduce their use of colonial languages. In Senegal, professor of linguistics Mbacke Diagne of Dakar's Cheikh Anta Diop University wants to integrate local languages into the standard teaching curriculum. He cites Wolof, the nation's most widely spoken language. Most children in Senegal have been speaking Wolof with their families and in their communities for at least seven years before they start primary school.

"They have structured their world in this language," Diagne said. "But as soon as these children get to school, all this knowledge is set aside in order to impose French." He and others believe that this slows the learning process and can discourage children from pursuing an education.

Statistics suggest that forcing children to learn in French may, in fact, be having a negative effect on their school performance. According to Education Policy and Data Center, Senegal's youth literacy rate is lower than the average for countries with similar economies. In addition, more than half of Senegal's secondary school-age children no longer attend school.

Such concerns have led schools in some countries to begin teaching in local languages. In 2014, the Ethiopian government and USAID, a U.S. government agency that works to address global poverty, launched a reading curriculum in seven Ethiopian languages to improve reading skills. (Ethiopia was never a colony, but English has been used widely in secondary schools.) And in 2015, Tanzania, once a British colony, introduced a policy to remove English as a medium of instruction. Children there are now taught entirely in Swahili.

But not everyone agrees with these efforts. Barbara Trudell is the Director of Research and Advocacy for SIL Africa, an organization that supports language development. Trudell says that favoring local languages can be complicated. That's because there might be more opportunities for speakers of international languages.

"That is the thing about French, English, [and] Portuguese," Trudell said. "They're sort of seen to be on a different level [than less widely used languages]."

Others have mixed feelings. Meissa Dieng is one. He is the headmaster at Alieu Samb, a school in Dakar. Dieng acknowledges the importance of international languages. But he's concerned about how well children adjust to the challenges of doing much of their schoolwork in a language they do not speak at home.

"Speaking French in school will allow children to really master the language," Dieng said of his school's effort. "But then there is the psychological impact of [changing] a thinking process that has already been established."

Chris Darby is a literacy and education expert at SIL. He says that parents often have strong views on teaching in international languages. But many of them ultimately support it.

"Parents are very keen, I think, for children to succeed," said Darby. "And they tend to think of success, as far as what a school can do, in terms of delivering an international language."

Organizations such as Associates in Research and Education for Development (ARED) have been piloting bilingual teaching programs in Senegalese primary schools. In these programs, children learn to speak French *and* build literacy skills in either Wolof or Pulaar, another local language. The local language is later used as a base to learn and read in French.

ARED currently operates in 98 primary schools spread between Dakar, the northern city of Saint-Louis, and the town of Kaolack. The pilot program was set to end in 2018. Program Director Awa Ka Dia hopes good results will encourage the Senegalese government to fund an extended version. An expanded program could cover more regions. It could also use other local languages.

Voice of America contributed to this story.

Dictionary

bilingual *(adjective)*   in two languages

curriculum *(noun)*   all of the courses taught at a school; the entire set of content taught at a school

linguistics *(noun)*   the study of language

psychological *(adjective)*   having to do with the mind or the way a person thinks and feels

statistics *(noun)*   numbers that represent facts

Activity

PART 1

Question 1

What is a cause and effect relationship that takes place in the Article?

(A) Because classes in Senegal are not taught in ethnic languages, some people say that these students are more likely to feel the need to stay in school.

(B) Because classes in Senegal are not taught in ethnic languages, some people say that this country will have a higher literacy rate.

(C) Some people want schools to integrate local languages into the curriculum because they believe that teaching students in an unfamiliar language confuses kids and slows the learning process.

(D) Some people want schools to teach students using international languages because they believe that teaching students using local languages results in lower secondary school attendance rates.

Question 2

Which of these is **most** important to include in a summary of this Article?

(A) In sub-Saharan Africa, many students speak a local language at home and are taught using an international language in school.

(B) The Ethiopian government and USAID launched a reading curriculum in seven Ethiopian languages to improve reading skills.

(C) Organizations such as ARED have been piloting bilingual teaching programs in Senegalese primary schools.

(D) French is the official language of Senegal because the country was a colony of France between 1895 and 1960.

Question 3

Which two words are the closest **synonyms**?

Only some of these words are used in the Article.

(A) Psychological and physical

(B) Integrate and exclude

(C) Pursue and abandon

(D) Importance and relevance

Question 4

Which of these is a statement of opinion?

(A) Some children in sub-Saharan Africa are taught using international languages rather than the languages spoken in their homes.

(B) In Tanzania, which was once a British colony, children are taught in Swahili as a result of a policy introduced in 2015.

(C) In their homes and communities, some children in Senegal speak local languages such as Wolof and Pulaar.

(D) The most sensible solution to the language dilemma in Senegal would be to begin teaching children French in preschool.

Question 5

Suppose Duane wants to find out about the history of Senegal. He would find **most** of his information _____.

(A) By traveling through Senegal for a month and photographing local people at work and in their homes

(B) By looking in a linguistics reference book that identifies local languages used in sub-Saharan African countries

(C) By reading a book that explores the colonization and later independence of sub-Saharan African countries

(D) By studying information published by officials at USAID about their efforts to address global poverty

Question 6

The Article states:

> **Chris Darby is a literacy and education expert at SIL. He says that parents often have strong views on teaching in international languages. But many of them *ultimately* support it. "Parents are very keen, I think, for children to succeed," said Darby. "And they tend to think of success, as far as what a school can do, in terms of delivering an international language."**

Which would be the closest **synonym** for the word *ultimately*, as it is used above?

(A) Regrettably

(B) Eventually

(C) Symbolically

(D) Occasionally

Question 7

The reader can infer from the Article that _____.

(A) Barbara Trudell worries that children who learn using an international language at school will have fewer opportunities in the future.

(B) Mbacke Diagne would agree with the approach that ARED is taking to build the literacy skills of children in Senegalese primary schools.

(C) Chris Darby believes that parents of school-age children ought to support the use of local languages in school.

(D) Meissa Dieng is confident that it is in the best interest of the students at his school to be taught using an international language.

Question 8

Which quote from the Article best supports the idea that the ability to speak and read a commonly used language like French is important to future success?

(A) Program Director Awa Ka Dia hopes good results will encourage the Senegalese government to fund an extended version. An expanded program could cover more regions. It could also use other local languages.

(B) In 2014, the Ethiopian government and USAID, a U.S. government agency that works to address global poverty, launched a reading curriculum in seven Ethiopian languages to improve reading skills.

(C) According to Education Policy and Data Center, Senegal's youth literacy rate is lower than the average for countries with similar economies.

(D) Trudell says that favoring local languages can be complicated. That's because there might be more opportunities for speakers of international languages.