



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 the same language they speak at home. Instead, schools use a language that is more international. That means the language is 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 in French. But that is not their first language. French is Senegal's "colonial language." It became the official language when Senegal was a colony of France. (Many African countries were once colonies of European nations, including France, the United Kingdom, and Portugal.) In Senegal, many people speak a local language at home instead of French. It's the same in other African nations. Many people speak local languages rather than the colonial language.



Credit for photo and all related images: R. Shryock/VOA

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

This familiarity with local languages has many people calling for schools to reduce their use of colonial languages. Professor Mbacke Diagne of Dakar's Cheikh Anta Diop University studies language. He wants to integrate local languages into the standard teaching curriculum. Diagne points to Wolof, the nation's most widely spoken language. Most children in Senegal speak Wolof at home and in their communities. They do this 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." Diagne and others believe this slows the learning process and can discourage children from pursuing an education.

Forcing children to learn in French may, in fact, be having a harmful effect on their school performance. 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, began teaching children entirely in Swahili.

But not everyone agrees with these efforts. Barbara Trudell is an official with an organization that supports language development. Trudell says that favoring local languages might not be a good idea. There might be more opportunities for speakers of international languages.

Others have mixed feelings. Meissa Dieng is one. He is headmaster at a school in Dakar. Dieng recognizes the importance of international languages. But he's concerned. He worries about how well children adjust to doing 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 [effect of changing] a thinking process that has already been established."

Chris Darby is a literacy and education expert. He says that parents often have strong views on teaching in international languages. But many of them eventually 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."

Groups such as Associates in Research and Education for Development (ARED) have been testing bilingual teaching programs in Senegalese primary schools. In these programs, children learn to speak French. But they also build literacy skills in a local language. The local language is later used as a base to learn and read in French.

ARED currently operates in more than 90 schools. The pilot program was set to end in 2018. The head of the program hopes good results will encourage the Senegalese government to fund an extended program. 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

integrate (*verb*) to put separate things together

literacy (*noun*) ability to read and write

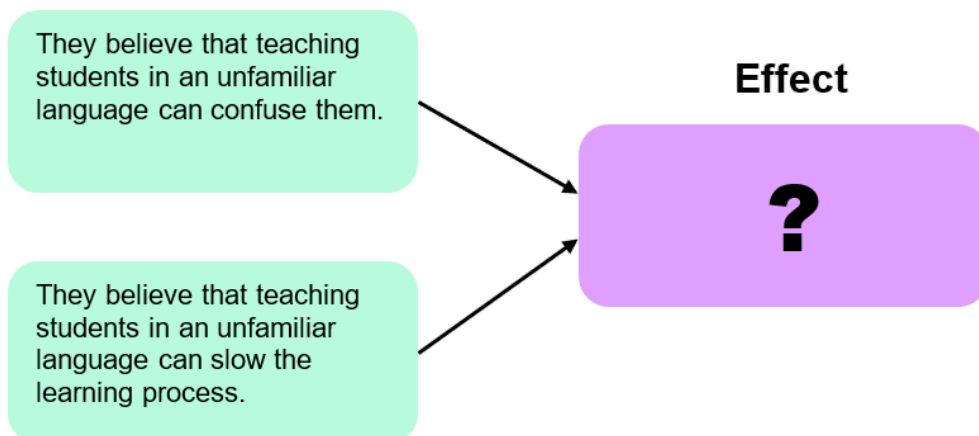
pursue (*verb*) to work at something or carry it out

Activity

PART 1

Question 1

Causes



Based on the Article, which best replaces the question mark in the diagram above?

- Ⓐ Some people want schools to teach students primarily using international languages.
- Ⓑ Some people say that students who are taught in local languages are less likely to feel the need to stay in school.
- Ⓒ Some people say that students who learn in international languages will have a higher literacy rate.
- Ⓓ Some people want schools to integrate local languages into the curriculum.

Question 2

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

- Ⓐ Some groups have been testing bilingual teaching programs in Senegalese primary schools.
- Ⓑ In sub-Saharan Africa, many students speak a local language at home and are taught using an international language in school.
- Ⓒ The Ethiopian government and USAID launched a reading curriculum in seven Ethiopian languages to improve reading skills.
- Ⓓ French is the official language of Senegal because the country was once a colony of France.

Question 3

Which is the closest **synonym** for the word *integrate*, as it is used in the Article?

- Ⓐ Lock
- Ⓑ Sneak
- Ⓒ Switch
- Ⓓ Blend

Question 4

Which of these is a statement of opinion?

- Ⓐ The best solution to the language problem in Senegal would be to begin teaching children French in preschool.
- Ⓑ In Tanzania, which was once a British colony, children are taught entirely in Swahili.
- Ⓒ Some children in Africa are taught using international languages rather than the languages spoken in their homes.
- Ⓓ In their homes and communities, most children in Senegal speak local languages such as Wolof.

Question 5

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

- Ⓐ By reading a book that explores the colonization and later independence of sub-Saharan African countries
- Ⓑ By traveling through Senegal for a month and photographing local people at work and in their homes
- Ⓒ By studying information published by officials at USAID about their efforts to address global poverty
- Ⓓ By looking in a reference book that identifies local languages used in sub-Saharan African countries

Question 6

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

Only some of these words are used in the Article.

- Ⓐ Unfamiliar and usual
- Ⓑ Colonial and official
- Ⓒ Pursue and seek
- Ⓓ Curriculum and schoolwork

Question 7

The reader can tell from the Article that _____.

- Ⓐ Barbara Trudell worries that children who learn using an international language at school will have fewer opportunities in the future.
- Ⓑ Chris Darby believes that parents of school-age children ought to support the use of local languages in school.
- Ⓒ Mbacke Diagne would agree with the approach that ARED is taking to build the literacy skills of children in Senegalese primary schools.
- Ⓓ Meissa Dieng is confident that students will do the best if they attend a school that teaches in 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?

- Ⓐ The head of the program hopes good results will encourage the Senegalese government to fund an extended program. An expanded program could cover more regions. It could also use other local languages.
- Ⓑ 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.
- Ⓒ Trudell says that favoring local languages might not be a good idea. There might be more opportunities for speakers of international 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.