



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 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 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.

Now, many people are calling for schools to reduce their use of colonial languages. Professor Mbacke Diagne of Dakar's Cheikh Anta Diop University studies language. He wants schools to add local languages into their programs. Diagne points to Wolof. Most children in Senegal speak this language at home and in their communities. They do this for at least seven years before they start primary school.

Diagne points out that these children start out learning Wolof. But when they go to school, all this knowledge is set aside. They must learn French. Diagne and others believe this slows learning and can make children dislike school.

Forcing children to learn in French may, in fact, be having a harmful effect. 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 started a reading program in seven Ethiopian languages. (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 the headmaster at a school in Dakar. Dieng sees the value of international languages. But he's concerned. He worries about how well children adjust to doing schoolwork in a language not spoken at home.

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 support it in the end.

"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."

Some groups 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.

More than 90 schools have been trying these programs. It is hoped that there will be good results. If so, perhaps the Senegalese government will fund the program in more places and with more local languages.

Voice of America contributed to this story.

Dictionary

bilingual (*adjective*) in two languages

literacy (*noun*) ability to read and write

local (*adjective*) having to do with a place nearby

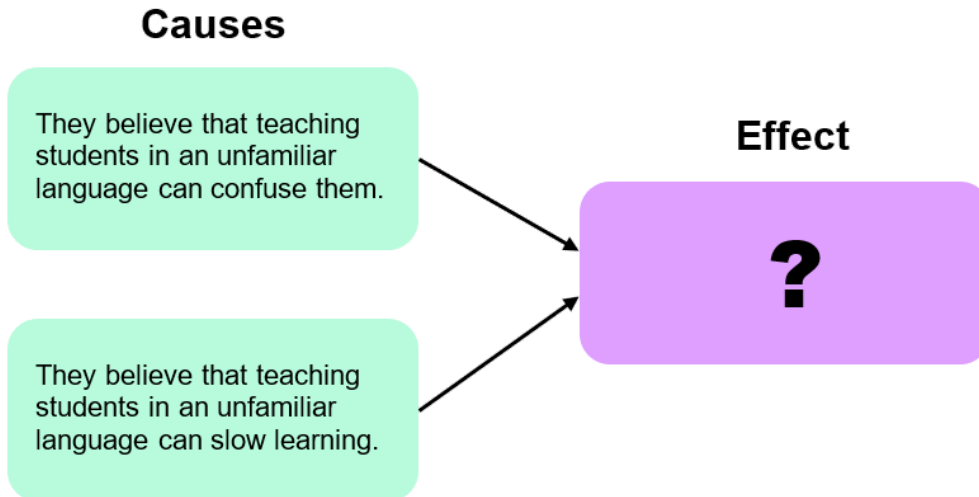
primary school (*noun*) the lower grades of school, also known as elementary school

secondary school (*noun*) high school

Activity

PART 1

Question 1



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

- Ⓐ Some people say that students who are taught in local languages are less likely to stay in school.
- Ⓑ Some people want schools to add local languages into their programs.
- Ⓒ Some people want schools to teach students using international languages.
- Ⓓ Some people say that students who learn in international languages will have more opportunities.

Question 2

Suppose you were writing a summary of the Article. Which of these would be **most** important to put in the summary?

- Ⓐ In sub-Saharan Africa, many students are taught in a different language than they speak at home.
- Ⓑ French is the official language of Senegal because the country was once a colony of France.
- Ⓒ Some groups have been testing bilingual teaching programs in Senegalese primary schools.
- Ⓓ In 2014, the Ethiopian government started a reading program in seven Ethiopian languages.

Question 3

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

Only some of these words are used in the Article.

- (A) Mixed and similar
- (B) Unfamiliar and usual
- (C) Keen and eager
- (D) Local and international

Question 4

Which of these is an opinion?

- (A) It would be best to begin teaching children French in preschool.
- (B) Some children in sub-Saharan Africa are taught using international languages.
- (C) Most children in Senegal speak a local language such as Wolof.
- (D) In Tanzania, children are taught entirely in Swahili.

Question 5

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

- (A) By looking in an encyclopedia of sub-Saharan Africa's oldest languages
- (B) By looking at old photographs of Senegalese schools
- (C) By reading a study about Senegalese students who drop out of school
- (D) By reading a book that explores the establishment of French colonies in Africa

Question 6

The Article states:

Others have mixed feelings. Meissa Dieng is one. He is the headmaster at a school in Dakar. Dieng sees the value of international languages. But he's *concerned*. He worries about how well children adjust to doing schoolwork in a language not spoken at home.

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

- (A) Satisfied
- (B) Troubled
- (C) Patient
- (D) Excited

Question 7

The reader can tell from the Article that _____.

- Ⓐ Meissa Dieng is confident that it is best for students to learn in an international language.
- Ⓑ Mbacke Diagne would like to see more schools use local languages to build literacy skills.
- Ⓒ Barbara Trudell worries that teaching Senegalese students in French won't offer them enough opportunities.
- Ⓓ Chris Darby believes that parents of school-age children ought to support the use of local languages in school.

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?

- Ⓐ In 2014, the Ethiopian government started a reading program in seven Ethiopian languages.
- Ⓑ 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.
- Ⓓ It is hoped that there will be good results. If so, perhaps the Senegalese government will fund the program in more places and with more local languages.