

# Strengthening Bilingual and Multilingual Learning Systems in Francophone Africa

## Evidence from Côte d'Ivoire

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### Introduction

Evidence has widely demonstrated multiple benefits of mother tongue-based multilingual education,<sup>i</sup> including better learning outcomes in both children's familiar languages and targeted international languages.<sup>ii</sup> There is also clear evidence that literacy skills in French and other post-colonial languages are linked to socioeconomic mobility, and there is a high demand for education in French in Côte d'Ivoire. This leads to the fact that children are often required to begin school and literacy instruction in language(s) they do not speak at home or in their communities, or to transition out of their home language after only brief periods.<sup>iii</sup>

### Research Objectives

This study aims to generate evidence to strengthen bilingual and multilingual learning in Côte d'Ivoire. To build knowledge about innovative solutions to plurilingual education challenges, we conducted mixed-methods research on determining optimal timing to transition to French from mother tongue instruction to ensure effective learning outcomes in both languages. We apply this method to help inform the development of successful plurilingual learning models for Côte d'Ivoire.

### Overview of Research Design

Our study draws on student and teacher language and literacy assessments (quantitative methods), as well as interviews and focus group discussions with parents, teachers, students, school directors, and national-level stakeholders (qualitative methods).

We selected three regions (Abidjan, Gbêkê, and Poro) for inclusion in our study to cover diverse language zones and both urban areas (which are likely to have more languages spoken) and rural areas (which are likely to have more predominant local languages). We sampled a total of 70 schools split among the regions and across urban and rural districts. From each school, we sampled Grade 2 and Grade 4 students. We randomly selected approximately 12 students per grade level from each school, for a total sample of about 1,680 students. For the qualitative approach, we purposively selected at least one urban and one rural school from each of the regions of the quantitative sample. Table 1 presents the actual school and student sample sizes for the analyses by region.

### Summary of Findings

#### LANGUAGES SPOKEN

- 88 per cent of the students were monolingual, while only 11 per cent were bilingual (Figure 1).
- We see large differences between the languages spoken by children and the likelihood that they are monolingual or bilingual (Figure 2).

#### KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. WHAT LANGUAGE(S) DO STUDENTS SPEAK AND UNDERSTAND?
2. TO WHAT EXTENT IS THERE A MATCH BETWEEN LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT LANGUAGE SKILLS?
3. IS THERE A THRESHOLD LEVEL OF L1 LITERACY SKILLS AND L2 ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS REQUIRED FOR L2 LITERACY?
4. WHAT ARE TEACHERS' PROFICIENCY LEVELS IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE(S) AND THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF SPECIFIC PEDAGOGIES FOR BILINGUAL / MULTILINGUAL LEARNING?
5. WHAT ARE PARENTS' AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PREFERENCES REGARDING BILINGUAL / MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION?
6. WHAT ARE THE PERCEIVED COSTS AND BENEFITS TO CHILDREN AND PARENTS OF A MOTHER TONGUE-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION MODEL?

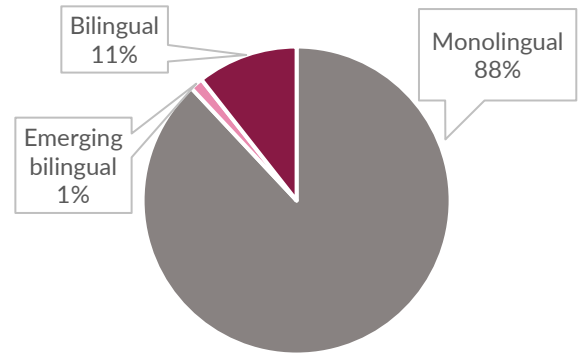
## LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION AND LANGUAGE SKILL MATCH

- Students in Abidjan are likelier to be French speakers, and thus, more likely to be in classrooms in which they understand the language of instruction.
- However, only 20 per cent of children in Poro and 33 per cent of children in Gbêkê classified as being able to speak the language of instruction (French). There were schools in both Poro and Gbêkê in which none of the children knew the language of instruction. In Gbêkê, the level of mismatch between the languages students knew and the LOI ranged from 48 per cent to 100 per cent while in Poro, that mismatch ranged from 31 per cent to 100 per cent.

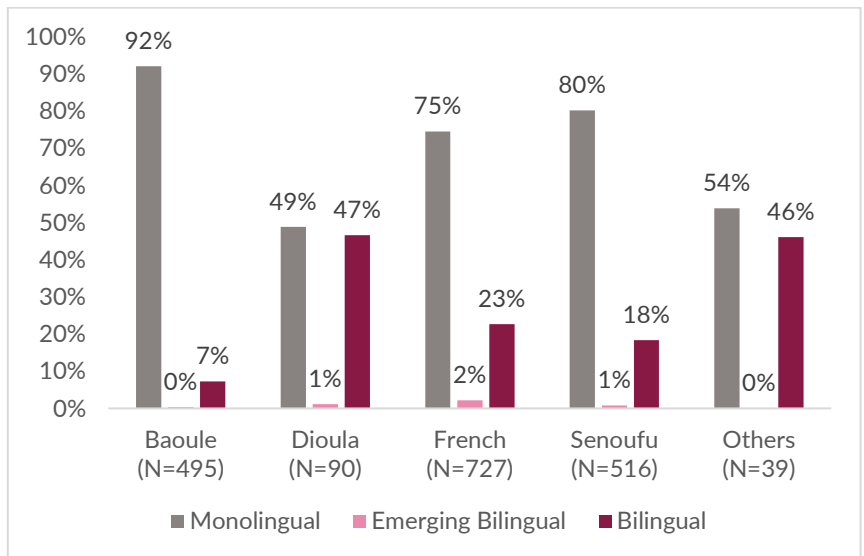
## LANGUAGE THRESHOLDS SKILL

- Theory suggests that two skills—listening comprehension of an L2 and decoding skills of the mother tongue (L1)—are positively correlated with reading skills in an L2 (French in this case).
- Although we would expect to see a threshold point where students better learn to decode in French after reaching a certain level of proficiency for decoding in their familiar language, this threshold appears to be lower and less clear among Ivorian children (Figure 3). It is important to note that this does not mean no threshold exists, however the sample of students in Côte d'Ivoire are taught in French as soon as they enter school, so they are never intentionally learning to read or write in their mother tongue. As such, they are not developing those initial literacy skills in a language they know well which we hypothesize can be used to facilitate the acquisition of skills in a second language (French).
- We found that French language comprehension is a critical predictor of French reading comprehension. In line with theory, we found no threshold for French language comprehension either (Figure 4). Because language comprehension is a

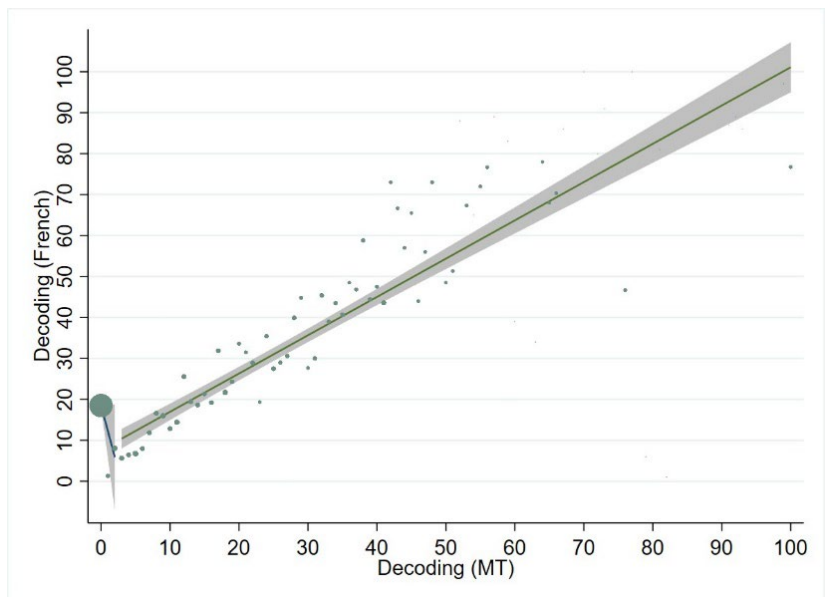
**Figure 1. Percentage of monolingual and bilingual students**



**Figure 2. Multilingual Distribution of Languages**



**Figure 3. Relationship between Mother Tongue Decoding and French Decoding Skills**



continually developing skill—in contrast to decoding, in which one reaches a point where one has learned all the sounds of letters in a language—this result aligns with expectations that there is no definitive level of language comprehension in the L2 above which decoding in L2 is greater.

#### TEACHER LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

- Many teachers reported little to no knowledge of the mother tongues of their students.
- Teachers reported being much more competent in French than in students' mother tongues.

#### KNOWLEDGE OF BILINGUAL AND MULTILINGUAL PEDAGOGIES

- Overall, teachers indicated that they did not feel well equipped to teach in students' native languages.
- Most teachers and school directors did not appear to understand the concept of “transitioning” from mother tongue instruction into French. Those teachers that did offer their opinions on this topic suggested that students should transition to French instruction in Grade 1, Grade 2, or even in preschool.
- Such qualitative data suggest that teachers and school directors will need further training and resources to identify if and when students should transition into another LOI.

#### TEACHERS' PRACTICES

- In terms of current practices, teachers reported using French as the only language of instruction.
- Some teachers reported using students' home languages on occasion, to amuse students or to help them understand concepts.
- Teachers navigate teaching French in their classrooms in several ways. Most teachers agreed that they began French instruction orally, by using poetry, asking students to repeat letter sounds, or using other listening comprehension strategies. They reported using simple language or gesturing to students.

#### TEACHERS' ATTITUDES

- Teachers and school directors noted some potential benefits of teaching in national languages; namely, increasing the engagement of students and parents and improving student comprehension. According to survey results, around 80 per cent of teachers agreed that it was important for students to learn to read in their native languages.
  - Around 70 per cent of surveyed teachers agreed that, if students learned to read in their L1, it would help them read better in French, and around 80 per cent of teachers agreed that teaching students to read the L1 and French at the same time would help them read well in both languages.
- On the other hand, many interviewed teachers and school directors criticized the idea of teaching in national languages. They broadly stated that doing so would negatively affect French language learning, overburden teachers, and offer little value to students.
  - 55 per cent of surveyed teachers agreed that teaching students to read in local languages would take too much time away from teaching them to read French.
  - Teachers also believed that Ivorian languages were not worthwhile to teach because they afford few educational or professional opportunities to students.
- The respondents broadly highlighted the linguistic diversity in Côte d'Ivoire, and they pointed to the challenges of teaching in linguistically mixed classrooms. Several suggested that this placed additional burden on teachers to learn new languages, which would impede the quality of multilingual instruction. Several others

suggested using a regional language approach, teaching only that language which is dominant in a particular area.

#### STUDENTS' VIEWS ON LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

- Most students preferred to learn French, but they would be happy to learn their mother tongue as an auxiliary to French. Students highlighted the importance of learning French to be able to speak to people throughout Côte d'Ivoire, to continue their studies, and to find a good job.
- Students seemed accustomed to French-language instruction, so they were skeptical of multilingual education. A few reminded interviewers that they were not allowed to speak their home language in school or that they come to school to learn French, not their mother tongue.
- Despite this, many students who preferred French would be happy to also learn the local language because of a desire to speak their parents' mother tongue. This was true across all sampled regions, regardless of urbanicity, as students expressed pride in their mother tongue if they spoke it or a desire to learn their mother tongue if they did not.

#### PARENT VIEWS ON LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

- Parents unanimously expressed the importance of French fluency because of its function as the lingua franca in Côte d'Ivoire.
- Moreover, parents commonly equated education with the French language, saying things like *"I don't really see the point of coming to school to speak [a national language. . . . There's no real change or contribution for the children]"* (parent, urban Poro). For this reason, most parents in both urban and rural areas believed that mother tongues should be taught within the family, while all levels of schooling should be conducted in French so as to best support French language acquisition.
- When probed about the possibility of using local languages in schools, parents were more divided on the way bilingual instruction might work in practice.
- A few parents did see value in including local language instruction within classroom curricula, believing such instruction might help students comprehend lessons and learn French.

#### PERCEIVED COSTS

- Ministry of Education officials and partners indicated that developing a strategy and detailing a clear language-of-instruction policy would need to be an important first step for using local languages in schools. However, interview respondents believed that choosing a local language for instruction would be a notable challenge if Côte d'Ivoire were to implement a national language-of-instruction policy. While several people recommended that the schools use the primary language of the community as the language of instruction, many others expressed concern that using national languages in schools would be difficult for classrooms in which students did not all speak the same mother tongue. Furthermore, policy decisions could cause controversy or resentment among ethnic groups whose languages were not selected for classroom instruction.
- In addition to the challenge of policy development, qualitative informants indicated that in order to teach in local languages, teachers would need high-quality training and classroom materials, which would require substantial resources.
- In addition to training teachers, teachers' language abilities and teacher mobility also pose challenges to implementing such policies.

## Recommendations

Based on the results of our research, we make the following recommendations:

1. We recommend that decision-makers **use language mapping data to determine language needs at the school and community level**. In Côte d'Ivoire, there is a need to focus on developing new policies and expanding small-scale bilingual education pilot projects. The expansion of existing pilot projects would include the selection of mother tongues and national languages for small-scale deployment, and then the introduction of French literacy acquisition at the time of acquisition of a threshold level of literacy in local languages.
2. When revising curricula, **teacher professional development should be done in tandem**. The results of this study shed light on some of the cognitive and linguistic mechanisms of learning that underlie the acquisition of multilingual literacy in Côte d'Ivoire. These findings can provide an empirical perspective through which curricula can be reviewed and revised. Our study also argues for a continued emphasis on oral French teaching from the early grades, given the strong correlation between French comprehension skills and French decoding skills. Similarly, teacher professional development programs should be revised to emphasize the importance of using mother tongue skills to develop both mother tongue reading skills and the development of reading skills in French.
3. In the case of linguistically mixed classes and classes with a wide range of student levels, **it is necessary for teachers to make assessment-informed decisions to determine which languages are spoken by the majority of their students**. It is important to note that teachers should have several easy-to-use tools and methods to help them support students who may then find themselves in classrooms where they do not speak the language of instruction (i.e., new bilinguals whose weakest language is not the language of instruction, or monolinguals in classrooms where their colloquial language does not match the language of instruction). Participants in our study also recommended formally assessing students with respect to literacy in their mother tongue to encourage students and parents to invest in the development of these skills.
4. Finally, we **recommend advocating among parents, teachers, and community members for the use of local languages in education**. Education leaders should promote community engagement on the benefits of mother-tongue-based education for the development of successful bilingual and multilingual learners.

## Contact

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<sup>ii</sup> Evans, D. K., & Acosta, M. A. (2020). *Education in Africa: What are we learning?* Center for Global Development Working Paper.

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