Strengthening Bilingual and Multilingual Learning Systems in Francophone Africa

Evidence from Senegal

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KNOWLEDGE INNOVATION EXCHANGE

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Introduction

Evidence has widely demonstrated multiple benefits of mother tongue–based education,[i] including better learning outcomes in both children's familiar languages and targeted international languages.[ii] Yet, the link between literacy skills in post-colonial languages such as French and socioeconomic mobility 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.[iii]

In Senegal, French is the official language and primary language of instruction. However, Senegal's Ministry of Education has demonstrated considerable interest in promoting the use of local languages in schools and has experimented with bilingual learning over the past several decades. In recent years, the Ministry of Education is working to harmonize the various bilingual models and experiments throughout the country and, in partnership with Associates in Research and Education for Development (ARED) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), have introduced large-scale language programming in select regions. This programming includes Lecture Pour Tous (LPT; French for "Reading for All"), which developed materials and trained teachers in bilingual education in six regions of the country, along with RELIT[1], its current follow-on program, which is scaling up LPT programming in additional regions and schools.

Research Objectives

This study aims to generate evidence to strengthen bilingual and multilingual learning in Senegal. To build knowledge about innovative solutions to plurilingual education challenges, we conducted mixed-methods research on determining optimal timing to transition from mother tongue instruction to French to ensure effective learning outcomes in both languages.

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).

In consultation with national stakeholders, we selected two regions (Dakar and Fatick) 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). Both regions have received bilingual

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[1] An acronym for *Renforcement de la Lecture Initiale pour Tous*, which is French for "Strengthening of Early Reading for All"

programming through ARED and/or LPT. We sampled a total of 70 schools split among the regions and across urban and rural districts. Our sample includes a mixture of schools that have begun bilingual teaching in local languages—Wolof in Dakar and Serer in Fatick—as well as schools that have not received programming and are teaching primarily in French. 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 1,691 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.

Summary of Findings

LANGUAGES SPOKEN

- Two of three children from our sample were monolingual, while more than a quarter of children (30 per cent) were bilingual, as depicted in Figure 1.

- Of the children in our sample, about 71% cannot speak or understand French as well as they can understand another language. Around 61% of the students speak Wolof as a dominant language and 40% speak Serer.

- When we look at this information across languages, we see large differences between the languages spoken by children and the likelihood that they were monolingual or multilingual, as displayed in Figure 2.

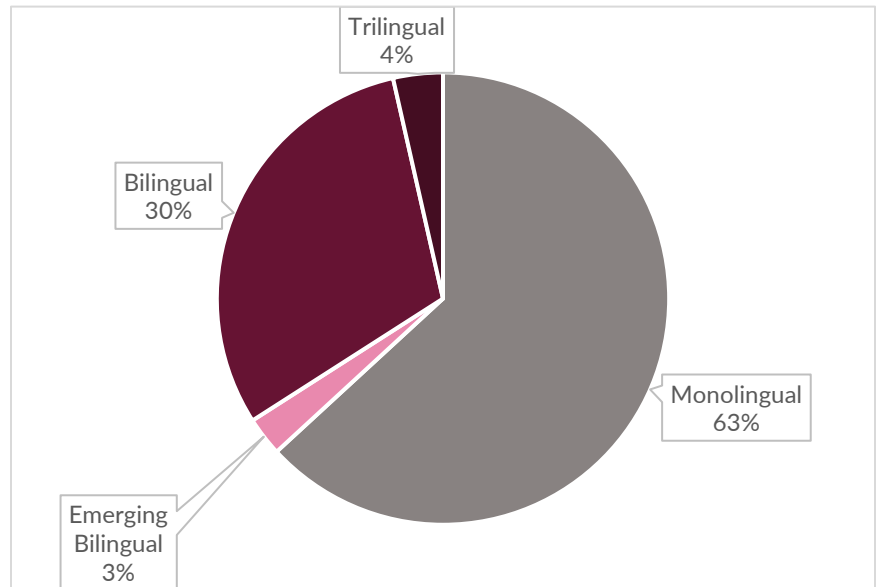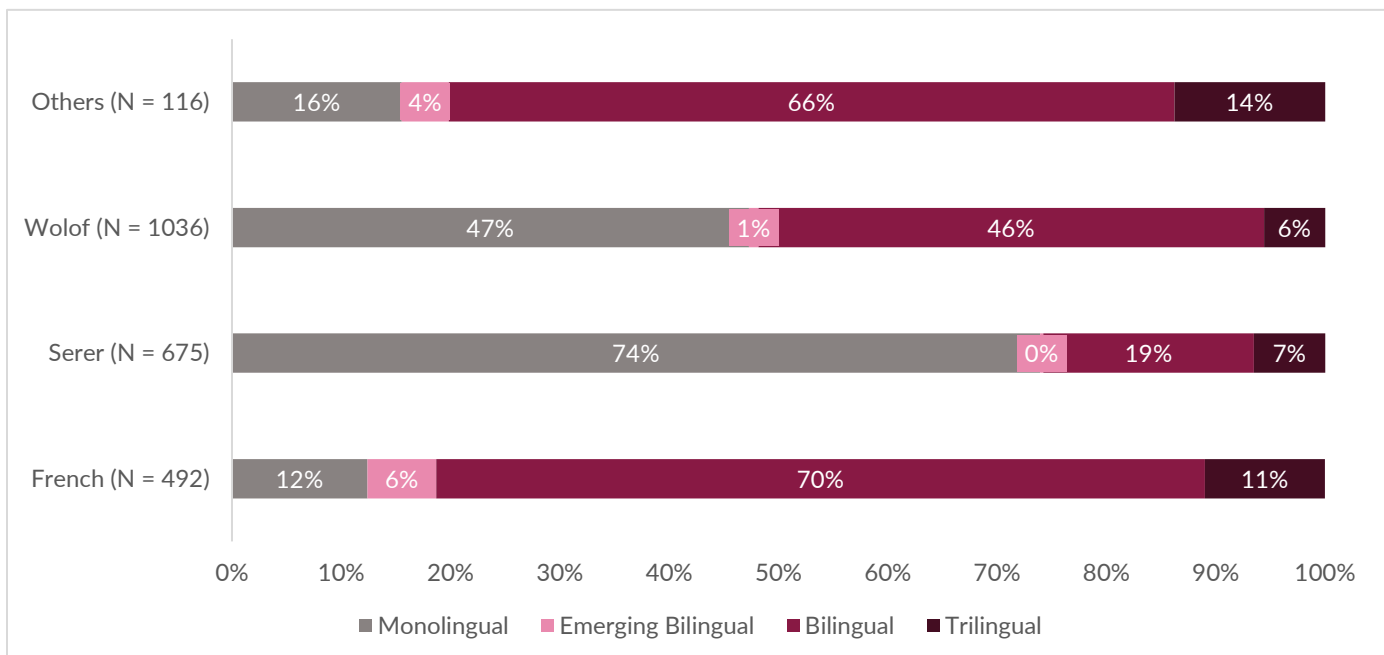**Figure 1. Percentage of monolingual, bilingual, and trilingual students**

**Figure 2. Multilingual Distribution of Children in Senegal, by Language**

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- Our student assessment data showed that students who know French have better achievement scores on decoding and reading comprehension literacy sub-tasks, when compared to those who do not know French. This difference in achievement is even more pronounced for those students who are bilingual and know French to those who don't know French.

- In the Dakar region, 55 per cent of the children classified as being in classrooms where they do not speak the official language of instruction, compared to 87 per cent of children in Fatick.

- While 61 per cent of the children in Grade 2 do not know French, this numbers falls to 53 per cent in Grade 4. This implies that children are learning French language skills, but a large fraction of children are still not acquiring these skills by Grade 4.

LANGUAGE SKILL THRESHOLDS

- When our data analysts compared children's decoding skills in the mother tongue to their decoding skills in French, we found a breaking point above which there is a stronger relationship between decoding skills in the mother tongue and decoding skills in French. In other words, **once children achieve foundational decoding skills in their mother tongue, they are able to transfer those skills at a higher rate to French.** While the actual threshold point is not transferrable to other types of assessments which may include simpler or more complex decoding tasks, the existence of a breaking point in decoding

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

skills indicates that the acquisition of basic decoding skills in a familiar language leads to improved decoding skills in French.
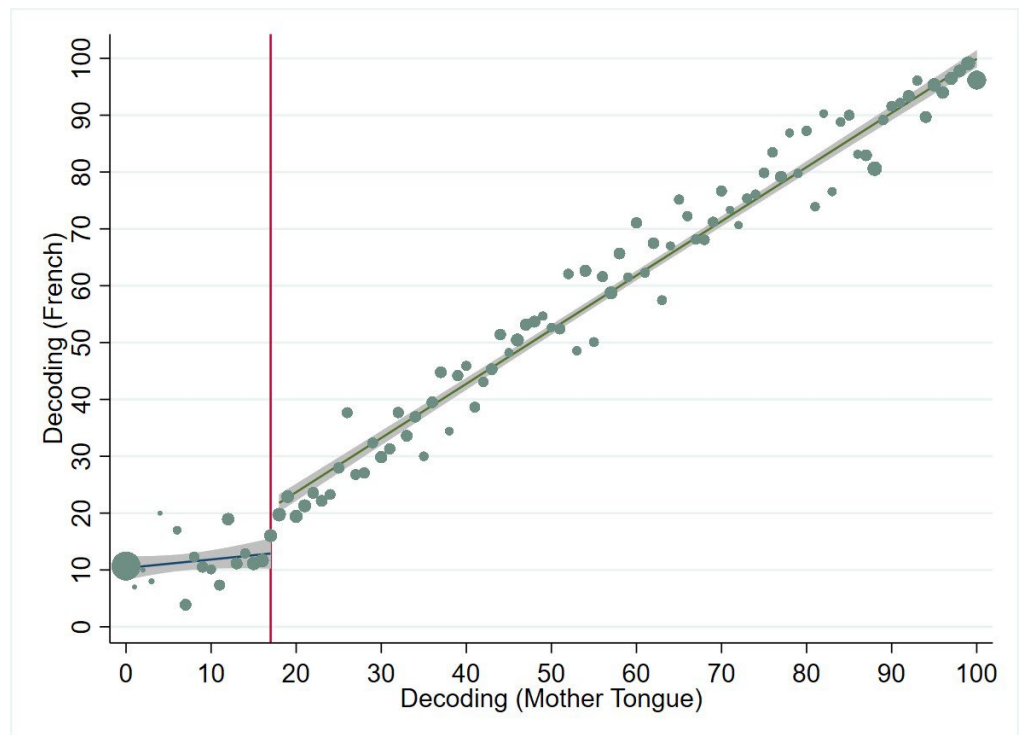
- Additionally, we found that children's French comprehension skills are correlated with French decoding skills. However, there is no breaking point, above which children acquire decoding skills at a faster rate. Because language comprehension is a continually developing skill—in contrast to decoding, in which one reaches a point where one has learned all the sounds of letters in a language—there is no definitive level of language comprehension above which decoding is greater.

TEACHER LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

- Most Senegalese teachers in our qualitative sample claimed to speak their students' home languages sufficiently, although some reported not being comfortable speaking those languages. In such cases, teachers

often reported relying on students who understand either the teacher's mother tongue or French to translate into the other students' language.

TEACHER PRACTICES

- Across both Dakar and Fatick, **schools introduce French early**. Most students reported being taught in French in Grade 1, and sometimes even in preprimary settings.

- Even in schools in which teachers had not received formal training on bilingual or multilingual pedagogies, **most teachers and students noted the use of local languages to explain concepts**, especially in early grades. However, they explained that French is still the primary language of most lessons, with local languages used mostly for translating or reiterating what teachers had previously explained in French.

TEACHER ATTITUDES

- Most teachers and school directors in our sample expressed **favorable attitudes toward teaching in students' native languages**, based on (a) their experiences implementing a bilingual education model as part of USAID's RELIT program, (b) anecdotal and news reports about bilingual education, or (c) their challenges with monolingual education. Teachers who had implemented bilingual education perceived a positive impact of local language instruction on student literacy and engagement, which led them to speak highly of the bilingual model.

- On the topic of teaching Senegalese languages, however, several teachers and school administrators in our qualitative sample emphasized the idea that **the government must provide adequate support** to schools to implement bilingual programming. These respondents expressed that curriculum and policy changes happened often and that policymakers sometimes failed to consult teachers or provide adequate resources to schools. While supportive of teaching local languages, respondents urged the government to provide training and manuals in support of such an initiative.

PARENT VIEWS ON LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

- Parents unanimously agreed that **everything should be done to increase students' level in French**. They noted that, because French is spoken internationally, it provides opportunities that local languages do not offer. Further, students could have a "brighter future" and a "good job and help their parents" if they master the French language.

- As for the benefits of bilingual education, some parents and educators did note that **instruction in children's familiar languages may support students' literacy in French and the mother tongue, as well as comprehension in other subjects.** They additionally noted the futility of teaching in French before children understand the language. One parent, for instance, explained, *"Everyone has said [that students'] current level is not good. Today, if we taught them through their mother tongue, which they master better, their comprehension would be faster than what we teach them in French."*

- In addition, some qualitative informants highlighted the idea that **bilingual instruction could help preserve local languages,** which are a "national pride" and source of identity for Senegal. Both parents and students expressed a desire to speak and learn in their languages and viewed mother-tongue education as a means to preserve those languages.

PERCEIVED COSTS

- Many parents and teachers fear that promoting the use of Senegalese languages in schools might limit students' literacy in French.

- **National-level education stakeholders, however, noted several concerns about the literal costs associated with developing and providing resources for bilingual learning**. The teacher training and materials of the ongoing bilingual programming have incurred considerable costs, which foreign partners have largely financed. For this reason, some interview participants questioned the sustainability of these initiatives.

- Other participants noted that **policy decisions regarding languages of instruction and the provision of resources in select languages may favour some ethnic and linguistic groups over others**.

Recommendations

Based on our research findings, we make the following recommendations:

1. **We recommend that policymakers use language mapping data to determine language needs on the school and community level.** In addition, teacher placement practices should consider teachers' language skills so that teachers' linguistic background corresponds with that of their students and, relatedly, the language of instruction.

2. In Senegal, where some children are already learning to read in their mother tongues, our data show that acquiring a foundational level of decoding skills in a familiar language provides a sufficient basis for introducing literacy instruction in French. Our study also makes the case for continuous emphasis on French oral language instruction beginning in the early grades, considering the strong correlation between French comprehension skills and French decoding skills. **Teacher professional development curricula should thus be revised to stress the importance of utilizing mother tongue skills in developing *both* mother tongue reading abilities, but also for French reading development.**

3. In cases of linguistically mixed classrooms and classrooms with a large range of student level levels, **there is a need for teachers to make assessment-informed decisions to determine which language(s) are spoken by a majority of their students**. Importantly, teachers should be given several easy-to-use tools and methods to help them support students who may then be in classrooms where they do not speak the language of instruction (i.e., emerging bilinguals whose weaker language is not the language of instruction, or monolinguals in classrooms where their familiar language does not match the language of instruction). These teacher-student scaffolds are critical for supporting all children in the classroom. Participants in our study also recommended formally assessing students on mother tongue literacy to encourage student and parental investment in developing those skills.

4. Lastly, **we recommend advocacy among parents, teachers, and other community members regarding the use of the local languages in education and corresponding policy decisions**. Participants in our study widely perceived benefits to the use of local languages in the classroom – even if only as a steppingstone for French. Many teachers already use local languages to support learning in the classroom. Education officials should harness these existing attitudes and practices through advocacy efforts, as well as promote community engagement about the benefits of mother tongue-based education for developing successful bilingual and multilingual learners.

Contact

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[i] UNESCO. (1953). The use of the vernacular languages in education. *Monographs on Foundations of Education*. UNESCO; UNESCO. (2003). *Education in a multilingual world*. UNESCO Education Position Paper. Paris: UNESCO.

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

[iii] Arnold, C., Bartlett, K., Gowani, S., & Shallwani, S. (2007). Transition to school: Reflections on readiness. *The Journal of Developmental Processes*, 26–38; Ouane, A., & Glanz, C. (2010). *Why and how Africa should invest in African languages and multilingual education: An evidence- and practice-based policy advocacy brief*. UNESCO Institute for lifelong learning.