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B.P. 234 Saint-Louis (Sénégal) – Tel : 00 221 77 651 70 14

mbayemarie65@yahoo.fr
revuehorizonslittéraires@gmail.com

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« Il » est un autre : comment Victor s'est fait personnage romanesque de Hugo ?

Moustapha Faye 1 - 16

Singer comme singe, songer comme songeur : quand le jeu des psychopathes névrosés insinue l'exigence d'une nouvelle épistémè du genre dramatique dans *Le mensonge de Nathalie Sarraute*

Diokel SARR 17 - 32

Journalisme et réseaux sociaux en Côte d'Ivoire : désinformation et défis pour la cohésion sociale

Jacques Emmanuel DALE 33 - 48

School Children at the Crossfire between Home Illiteracy and School Literacy in Senegal

Moustapha FALL 49 - 60

Royal Incest and Sexual Violence : Materialization of Chaos in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*

Dramane OUATTARA 61 - 77

Le corps en crise dans *The River Between*, *Devil on the Cross* et *Wizard of the Crow* de Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Fortuné Konan KOFFI 78 - 90

Le transhumain et progrès de l'humanité dans *The rosewater insurrection* de Tade Thompson

Souleymane TUO 91 - 106

La pertinence des facteurs extralinguistiques dans le sous-titrage de la série « Game of Throne »

Omar DIOP 107 - 116

La leçon de vie sociale dans le conte ivoirien : l'exemple du conte wê « Ne soyons pas trop difficiles » de François-Joseph d'Aby Amon

Massandjé CHÉRIF 117 - 127

Le respect de l'environnement comme substrat d'une éducation dans les contes ouest-africains : l'exemple des Aventures de Tôpé- l'araignée de Mina TOURE

Lonan CAMARA 128 - 139

Paroles chantées et jeux d'enfants, une épreuve formative en milieu wolof

Modou Fatah THIAM 140 - 154

**School Children at the Crossfire between
Home Illiteracy and School Literacy in Senegal**

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Dr. Moustapha FALL
Department of Applied Linguistics
University of Gaston Berger
Associate with the University of Victoria Canada
fallm77@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper unpacks the notion of partial literacy and evaluates its impacts on the learning and/or acquisition of L2 French among children at the elementary school in Senegal. It first starts by defining the concept of partial literacy in relation to non-western societies where the concept is oftentimes overlooked. It finally analyzes France's colonial French-Only-Policy and assesses their impacts on the performance of school children caught into acute crossfire between home illiteracy and school literacy.

Key words : partial literacy, crossfire, home illiteracy, school children, L1-Wolof, L2-French.

Résumé

Ce travail procède d'abord par un défrichage sémantique du concept de l'alphabétisation partielle et évalue ses impacts sur l'apprentissage du français par les écoliers de l'élémentaire à Touba, Sénégal. Il s'agit d'abord de définir le concept de l'alphabétisation partielle en comparaison avec les sociétés non-occidentales où il est parfois occulté. Ensuite, on évalue la politique éducative coloniale de « *French Only-Policy* » pour, enfin, évaluer les impacts sur les écoliers sénégalais pris dans le feu-croisé entre analphabétisme dans leur langue maternelle (e.g. ; Wolof) et alphabétisme dans une langue étrangère (e.g. ; français)

Mots clés : alphabétisation partielle, feu-croisé, analphabétisme, écoliers, L1-wolof , L2-français.

Introduction

In contemporary times, the concept of “literacy” has been used in a much broader sense to describe an individual's ability to perform tasks that require the knowledge and use of print (e.g., computer literacy and emergent literacy). Definitions of this nature strongly suggest that literacy has always been associated with print. Currently, a small number of studies are

School Children at the Crossfire between Home Illiteracy and School Literacy in Senegal

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Dr. Moustapha FALL

underway investigating whether communities of people who lack a writing system and use oral languages to communicate among themselves, can be simply labelled as illiterate (Cummins 2000; Garton & Pratt, 1989; McBride-Chang, 2004; Verhoeven & Durgunlu, 1998). In a recent study on the development of spoken and written language in children, Garton and Pratt (1989) argue that what constitutes literacy is not only limited to the ability to read and write, but also includes ability to master spoken language. “A literate person”, they write, “is someone who has the ability to talk, read, write and [listen to] another person, and the achievement of literacy involves learning how to talk, read and write [and listen] in a competent manner” (Garton & Pratt, 1989, p.2). Clearly, this definition dismisses all the previous basic definitions grounded in the sole knowledge of print or acquaintance with literature as a more scholarly activity. As the very definition of literacy continues to spark controversies, the understanding of its function has also engendered provocative scholarly thoughts in various interdisciplinary studies. It is worth noting, however, that no sooner had the very concept of literacy been an object of considerable studies across disciplines, than a new concept (i.e.; partial literacy) suddenly became another considerable focal point under heavier scrutiny in the field of Second Language Acquisition. That is, if the very concept of literacy has been discussed in several disciplines, the concept of partial literacy is a new emerging idea, barely scrutinized, in the non- western societies. Partial literacy can be defined as the lack of having developed two skills in the mother tongue before developing four skills in the second language being learned (Fall, 2020).

A considerable number of pre-schools across Senegal, children are partially illiterate and subsequently taught to develop basic reading skills in a foreign language, French. Most of the immersion programs fail to consider the vast linguistic and cultural differences apparent in Senegal. For example, the city of Touba, which is predominantly Murid, has been very reluctant in participating in the Senegalese government’s widespread literacy campaign which promotes literacy in the French language. Almost all children enrolled in Touba elementary schools develop their first literacy in Arabic prior to learning French.

In this paper, we first unpack the concept of partial literacy in the context of Senegal before discussing France’s colonial language policies (e.g.; *French Only Policy*) and assessing the lingering consequences pertaining to the partial literacy that this very French Only Policy has created leading school children to be viciously caught into a partial-literacy-crossfire the consequences of which has significant setbacks on students’ performance at the French elementary school.

1. Unpacking Partial Literacy in the Context of Senegal

Despite major efforts and resources directed towards the promotion of literacy in foreign languages (i.e., French and English) across Senegal, government authorities and language policy-makers continue to overlook the fundamental question of how partial literacy in the mother tongue could affect students who learn a second language. While Senegal continues to implement the carbon copy of the language policy inherited from France up to the present day, the rising number of children's academic failure in reading comprehension in French at the elementary level (Fall, 2020) is indicative of a lack of literacy skills grounded in the mother tongue. Despite the full range of empirical studies that explore the issue of full literacy in which mother tongue literacy is first developed prior to learning a second language (i.e., Spanish & English, French & English), less is known about the issue of partial literacy in which individuals who are illiterate in their mother tongue (e.g., Wolof children in Senegal) learn a second language. In more specific terms, there is little research evidence addressing the central question of whether the absence of literacy in the mother tongue hinders the process of developing language acquisition in French.

Although this question may seem irrelevant to many Western communities where children already develop full literacy in their mother tongue prior to learning a second language, partial literacy has become a major source of concern for a vast majority of post-independence African countries like Senegal in which a foreign language is the dominant medium of instruction in schools to the detriment of the mother tongue. For instance, an overwhelming majority of Wolof children in Senegal do not read and write in their mother tongue (Wolof) when they began learning the French language; only a minority of them would develop their first literacy in the Arabic language through Qur'anic schooling prior to learning L2 French. In fact, our first volume, dedicated to the impacts of illiteracy on second language acquisition, has raised many red flags in the broken Senegalese education system's continued failure to meet the needs of children at the elementary school level. It then clearly demonstrated that the partial literacy we discussed earlier is the resulting effect of an existing widening literacy gap between home literacy (Wolof) and school literacy (French).

School Children at the Crossfire between Home Illiteracy and School Literacy in Senegal

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Dr. Moustapha FALL

2. Strategic Location of Senegal & Early Conquest



Source : Ohada.com /Senegal

Geographically, Senegal was ideally situated for trade between three major civilizations: Black-African, Arab-Islamic and Western. European explorers from several nations realized early on that Senegal would be an indispensable port of triangular trade. Colonists and adventurers were drawn to Senegal as early as 1444 and 1445, when the Portuguese first arrived and opened commercial links between the interior of Senegal and the rest of the African continent (Ngom, 2009). The Portuguese were followed by the Dutch in 1588, the British in 1763, and finally, by the French in 1815 (Diallo, 2010).

Europe's repeated attempts at conquering Senegal, from the early fifteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, not only contributed to a disruption of the relative peace among these pre-colonial empires, but also shook the very foundations of their social, economic, cultural, and educational structures (Ngom, 2010). Consequently, these pre-colonial empires became increasingly important as places of resistance and mediation or what McLaughlin calls the "Contact Zone" or "Lieux de Colonization." (McLaughlin, 2008, p. 713). Each of the colonial cities has its own unique history. They are, to be sure, often histories of economic exploitation and slavery, but they are also histories of cultural métissage where new forms of identity, new cultural practices, and new languages came into being. (McLaughlin, 2008, p. 713)

3. French Only Policy and Its lingering Impacts on Language Acquisition

Like most African states during the colonial period, Senegal was coerced into using the French language at the expense of its national languages. In 1826, a decree was made, banning the use of indigenous languages. It stipulates that: “French will be the only language used by students [...] and the use of any indigenous languages is prohibited” (Bulletin Administratif des Actes du Government 1844, pp.137-138, as cited in Diallo, 2010, p.42).

French West Africa (AOF) organized education in the colonies, effectively expanding the same decree in most French colonies throughout Africa. Nevertheless, as it is the case today through organizations like Francophonie, the colonial language administrative act then was designed to dispel fear over the speculated decline of the French language. The colonial authorities always thought that the French language would decline and lose its prestige due to the widespread use of indigenous languages in their respective French colonies (Fall 2020; Diallo, 2010).

Despite these efforts, this fear of losing their grip on the education system in Senegal and in most of French West Africa reached a boiling point in 1944 when De Gaulle, worried about the linguistic and political situation in his colonies called for the Brazzaville conference. The Brazzaville conference was meant to “rethink French policies” in the French West African territories and to “redefine the objectives” of the teaching policy (Lehmil, 2007, p.171).

In the context of Senegal, the measures discussed in the Brazzaville conference had already been imported and rigorously implemented in several schools. Louis Faidherbe, the appointed governor and architect of the French “civilizing mission” in Senegal from 1854 to 1865, had developed different strategies to bring about profound changes in the Senegalese school system. He first set up the secular schools (i.e., *Écoles Laïques*) and engaged in endless efforts to attract local children to the French colonial schools (Diallo, 2010). Faidherbe’s cunning nature helped him realize that local parents had previously rejected the French education system because of its association with the Christian values upheld by the missionaries. By creating the secular schools, he was able to draw several children by maintaining the assimilation policy and assigning a secondary role to the missionary schools.

During the French colonial period, the local colonial authorities forbade any formal teaching of the Senegalese vernacular languages. The French language was the only medium of instruction in schools and the only language spoken in major government offices across the country. Schoolchildren, who “misspoke”, meaning they used their native language in school, were

School Children at the Crossfire between Home Illiteracy and School Literacy in Senegal

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Dr. Moustapha FALL

harshly punished and often forced to carry a heavy wooden object for the duration of the school day. This coercive policy of making school children speak the French language at all costs continued to be implemented in various schools in Senegal even after the country's independence in 1960. Faidherbe's governorship reinforced that coercive policy with another radical policy of assimilation through which he was charged with further spreading the ways of French civilization to the local people who resided in the interior of Senegal. Faidherbe and his allies were convinced that once the school system was established, the assimilation process would be easy to complete. However, few people in Faidherbe's cabinet knew at that time that the policy of assimilation, implemented without enabling the native Senegalese to develop literacy in their mother tongue Wolof, would have dramatic consequences on learners' acquisition of L2 French. In that respect, Descemet, Faidherbe's personal secretary, was very open to the idea of having the native Senegalese translate French words into Wolof using the Latin alphabet.

This led to his publishing a forty-eight-page collection of approximately 1,200 everyday French phrases translated into Wolof (Laughlin, 2008). This monograph has linguistic as well as educational implications. In it, Descemet disapproved of the fact that many Wolof children read in French without being able to resort to their mother tongue to understand certain French concepts. He was openly critical of what he observed happening at the elementary school level where Wolof children were taught to read in the French language without developing even minimum skills in their mother tongue. The "deplorable result of this misguided policy", writes Descemet, "is a generation of school children who may read fluently in French after a certain number of years at school without understanding a single word of what they have read" (Laughlin, 2008, p.716).

4. Impacts of French Only Policy on Students' Language Acquisition

In this experimental study we conducted in two French immersion schools in Senegal, we concluded that the absence of literacy in the mother tongue hinders the development of literacy in the second language French for these Wolof children in the areas of phonological awareness, decoding skills and reading comprehension in French (Fall, 2020 Routledge). In all those areas we have measured the schoolchildren' L2 language acquisition success, we found out that most

children had poor performance due to the partial literacy whether it is in decoding skills and/or reading comprehension in French as these following Figure 1 illustrates it.

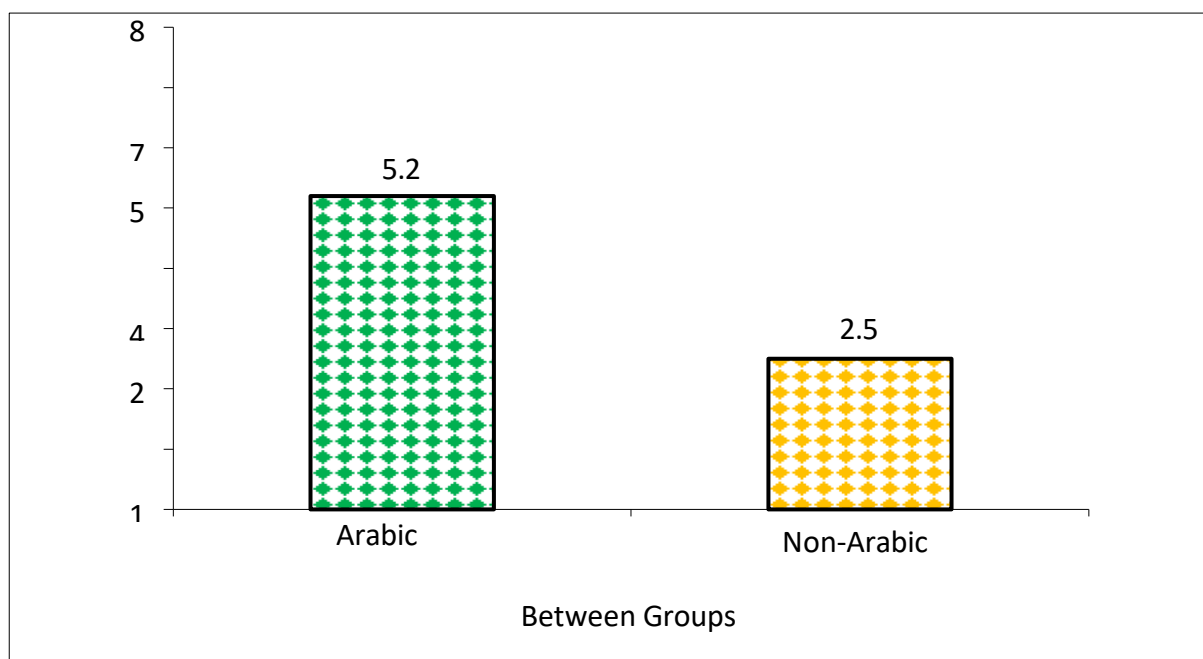


Figure 1

For instance, early decoding skills, one important component of home literacy, are thought to be indispensable for early success in decoding skills for children at school. Decoding skills, known as the “the ability to translate [map] written words into speech” (Bryant, P., Bradley, L. Maclean, M., & Crossland, 1989 p.54) constitute a crucial component of reading comprehension as well. School children who do not read and write in their mother tongue, Wolof at home showed very poor performance against those who developed early literacy at home through the Qur’an or had been exposed to print materials.

Reading, or the ability that one must establish and master the correspondence between written words and spoken words to determine the meaning being conveyed is thought to be an important cognitive activity (Adams, 1990). It was hypothesized in our research that the lack of reading skills in Wolof at home may hinder the acquisition of reading comprehension in L2 French. Thus, when presented with reading materials in French at school, students with no grounding

School Children at the Crossfire between Home Illiteracy and School Literacy in Senegal

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Dr. Moustapha FALL

in reading at home showed significant lower scores compared to students who acquire reading before learning French as illustrated in this following Figure 2.

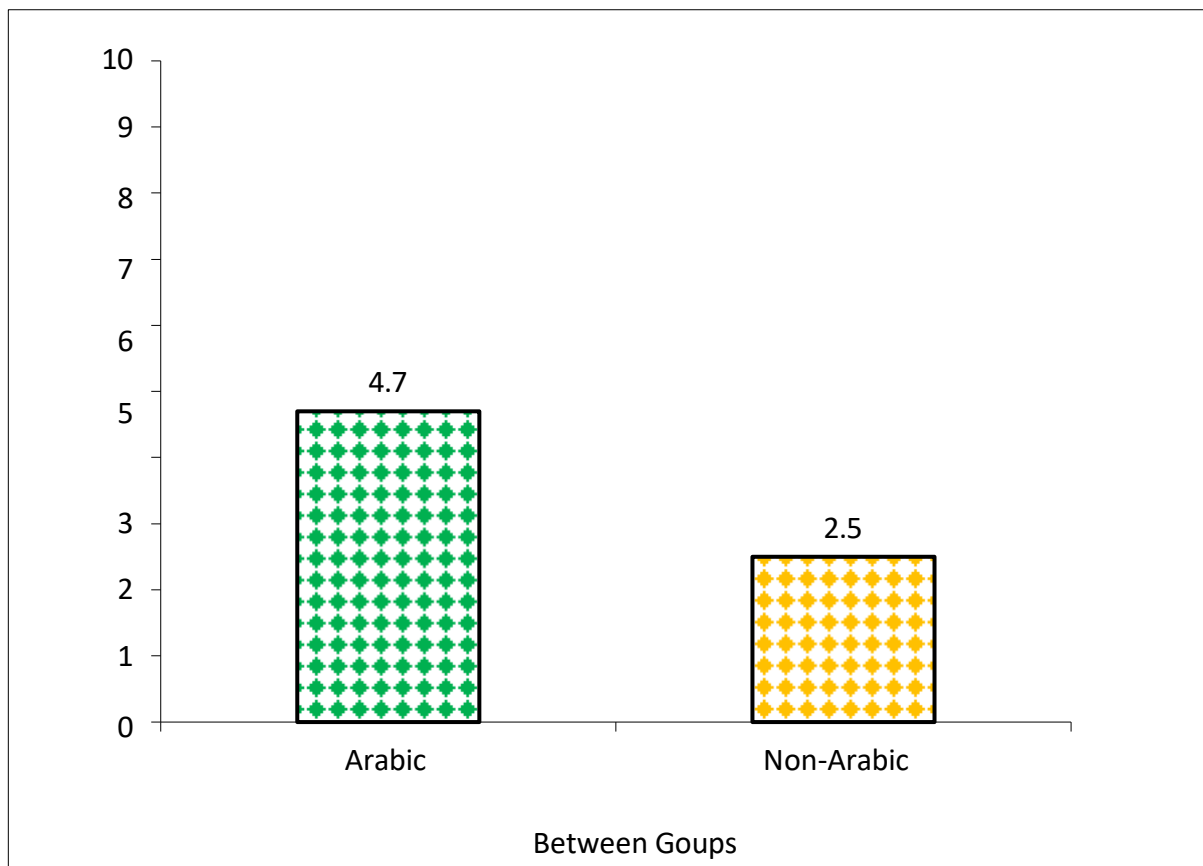


Figure 2

Prior to my earlier work on the issue, a groundbreaking study reported further evidence outlining a Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (DIH), which examines the links between first language literacy and second language learning (Cummins, 1979, 1984, 2000). In a series of studies that involved immigrant children in the United States, Cummins (1979, 1981a, 1981b, 1986, 1997) observed that the lack of a strong development of L1 at home caused children to have a low reading performance in L2 English. Most importantly, Cummins has further argued that certain first language knowledge can be positively transferred during the process of second language acquisition. That is, in the context of children's learning development, the L1 linguistic knowledge and skills a child possesses can be transferred and become instrumental to the development of corresponding abilities in the L2 acquisition. An

Horizons Littéraires
Revue du Centre de Recherches sur la Critique Littéraire Africaine
N° 8 - Décembre - 2024

extensive body of research evidence (Verhoeven, 1998; Cummins, 1979; Gonzalez, 1977) has supported this view of cross-linguistic transfer from one language to another as indicated in Cummins' work. Overall, the development of mother tongue literacy at home (e.g.; Wolof, Pulaar Serere etc..) is instrumental in helping school children to develop strong, listening, speaking decoding, reading skills transferable to the acquisition of French.

“The use of the foreign languages,” Diop writes, “is a serious obstacle in the education of the young Africans; an education in foreign languages is a waste of time because it forces learners to make double effort to assimilate the meaning of words and then, through a second intellectual effort, to capture the reality exposed by the words” (Diop, 1946, p.38). Diop's bold ideas in repudiating any formal education grounded in any given European languages may have helped stir a strong national sentiment toward using Wolof and across the country today, but his dream of seeing an “African Renaissance” built on a stronger development of African languages throughout the schools has been slow in becoming a reality in Senegal. Nevertheless, the linguistic vernacular theoretical framework that he laid out years ago might have survived the test of time, because two decades after his passing, it has resurfaced. His call for the teaching of national languages in elementary schools in Senegal has been resurrected by UNESCO experts who, having major legitimate concerns over stagnant illiteracy rates in developing countries, urged many African countries like Senegal to support education in their own national languages:

It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child to read is his mother tongue. Psychologically, the system of meaningful signs works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar medium. (UNESCO, 1953, p.11)

In response to the UNESCO report and the strong political pressure pioneered by Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal took the unprecedented step of ratifying a constitutional amendment in 1971. The amendment recognizes six major languages as the national languages of the country. Its decree no.72-862 stipulates the following:

As long as we, the Senegalese people, continue to teach our children a foreign language regardless of the language, without teaching them first their mother tongue, our people will remain alienated. It is of crucial and urgent importance that the Senegalese people start teaching their national languages (Senegalese Constitutional Amendment of 1971, as cited in Diallo, 2010, p. 3)

School Children at the Crossfire between Home Illiteracy and School Literacy in Senegal

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Dr. Moustapha FALL

Conclusion

Given the carbon copy of the French colonial system that is prevalent in all schools in Senegal, Senegal has no concrete language policy and planning that would tackle the issue of partial literacy in the national languages and reduce the high rate of student dropouts or low performance in French. Most significantly, the national languages are still not used as a medium of instruction in schools across Senegal. As many tend to believe, the issue of partial literacy and the issue of students' low academic performance in French are NOT separate issues; they are the two faces of the same coin. In that regard, addressing the issue of the low academic performance in Senegal necessarily entails tackling the issue of partial literacy in the national languages (mother tongues) because the absence of literacy in the mother tongue invariably hinders learning in any foreign language. Future empirical research should seriously address this issue of literacy in foreign language without a firm basis on literacy in the mother tongue in Senegal. More quantitative data should be brought forward to further demonstrate that students with a minimum exposure to literacy education in their mother tongue will mostly enhance literacy in a foreign language. In that respect, the re- introduction of the national languages in the Senegalese educational system becomes an urgent necessity as the only way out of the systematic academic crisis in which droves of children are trapped today. Most significantly, introducing the national languages in the Senegalese school curriculum is one of the first steps in the process of a linguistic decolonization and the establishment of rigorous language policy and planning. Despite the wind of linguistic decolonization that swept through several African states in the early 1960s, Senegal has failed to bring radical language changes. Thus, the process of eradication of the French Only policy and planning and vestiges of colonialism creating a long-lasting partial literacy has been very difficult to achieve. Given the deep ties of the African leaders to the language and culture of their formal colonial authorities, many African leaders and politicians were led to believe that an abrupt separation from the *Métropole* would cause major socio-economic setbacks. Among the West countries of Africa, Senegal offers the gloomiest picture given that, French is the only language that is used as a medium of instruction in school even though most of the Senegalese people are partially literate in their mother tongue, Wolof. Since our first volume on the issue of partial literacy is the only ones currently available, more quantitative data in more former French colonial countries African should be brought forward to investigate the partial literacy. In that respect, teaching

Horizons Littéraires
Revue du Centre de Recherches sur la Critique Littéraire Africaine
N° 8 - Décembre - 2024

methodology ingrained in the Senegalese national languages become an urgent necessity as the only way out of the systematic academic crisis in which droves of school are trapped today. Most significantly, introducing the national languages in the Senegalese school curriculum is one of the first steps in the process of a linguistic decolonization and the establishment of rigorous language policy and planning.

Hopefully, the newly elected government of Senegal led by President, Diomaye Faye should take the issue of partial literacy more seriously, as this is a major threat for academic success, and strive to come up with a clear vision and roadmap for the future and the implementation of the major language reforms. Those language reforms were designed to help young schoolchildren to begin their schooling in the mother tongue Wolof as this is the case of many schoolchildren in Nigeria, Ghana and many other Anglophone African countries.

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School Children at the Crossfire between Home Illiteracy and School Literacy in Senegal

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Dr. Moustapha FALL

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