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Sommaire

1. Problématique du *waqf* au Sénégal : entre l’enseignement du concept et sa pratique
Djim DRAME 7
2. The Impacts of the “Colonial French Only-Policy” on L2-French Reading Comprehension for Wolof Learners of L2-French in Senegal
Moustapha FALL..... 27
3. Hardy : défenseur de la condition de la femme victorienne
Ndèye Nogoye GUEYE 57
4. De la notion de fonctionnalité à partir de l’exemple des associations d’orpailleurs au Sénégal
Bakary DOUCOURE..... 73
5. Remembering Alex La Guma’s Polemics: Resilience and Expectations in The “Rainbow” Nation
Kouadio Lambert N’GUESSAN..... 91
6. Déconstruire le dispositif protocolaire du discours amoureux, décentrer l’émotionnel masculin dans la poésie Labéenne
Diokel SARR..... 113
7. Re-Designing and Re-Assessing Curriculum in the Department of English of Université de Lomé: A Case Study of the American Studies Section
Koffitsè Ekélékana Isidore Guelly..... 135
8. L’écriture du génocide des Tutsi du Rwanda, un récit de soi à une dimension collective
Aïda Gueye 147

9. La koïnèisation et la dynamique du gengbè à Lomé
Essenam Kodjo Kadza KOMLA 165
10. RÉCIT CHRÉTIEN ET CRÉATION LITTÉRAIRE DANS LE
ROMAN FRANÇAIS DU XX^{ème} SIÈCLE ET LE ROMAN
COLONIAL AFRICAIN : L'EXEMPLE DE *LA FIN DE LA NUIT*
(1935) DE FRANÇOIS MAURIAC, *JOURNAL D'UN CURÉ DE*
CAMPAGNE (1936) DE GEORGES BERNANOS ET *LE PAUVRE*
CHRIST DE BOMBA (1956) DE MONGO BETI
Alioune SOW 187

The Impacts of the “Colonial French Only-Policy” on L2-French Reading Comprehension for Wolof Learners of L2-French in Senegal

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Abstract

This paper investigates the development of reading comprehension in second language (L2) French in the absence of reading comprehension skills in first language (L1) Wolof. Two groups of school children participated. While Arabic-Wolof children develop early literacy skills in Arabic, prior to learning French, non-Arabic-Wolof children enter school with little or no exposure to the printed word. Although a writing system has recently been developed in the Wolof language, the language is not used for instruction. Thus, children are raised to only listen and speak in Wolof and, later on, learn to read and write in L2 French in school. Of interest to this investigation is that the absence of literacy in the mother tongue appears to hinder children’s L2 reading comprehension. That is, the non-Arabic-Wolof children who acquire no literacy skills in either Wolof or Arabic, prior to learning French, were outperformed by the Arabic-Wolof children who develop early literacy skills in Arabic. Combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, the data were collected through a reading comprehension task, and a questionnaire, as well as through semi-structured interviews.

Findings of this study show that the absence of early literacy skills in L1 Wolof or L3 Arabic affects the non-Arabic-Wolof children’s L2 French reading comprehension at school. When presented with the tasks of reading in French at the end of their first year of schooling, the non-Arabic-Wolof children performed less successfully than the Arabic-Wolof children who had developed early literacy skills in Arabic. A questionnaire and semi-structured interviews conducted with participants further confirmed that early literacy skills developed at home or in the Qur’anic school have a significant impact on reading skills in L2 French at school. That is, the Arabic-Wolof children, whose parents helped them with early decoding and reading at home, appeared to develop stronger reading skills at school.

Keywords: reading comprehension, Wolof, French, cross-linguistic transfer, literacy gap, Wolof-children

Résumé

Ce travail étudie le développement de la compréhension écrite lecture en français, langue seconde (L2) avec l'absence de compétence de base en compréhension écrite dans la langue maternelle (L1), Wolof. Ont participé à cette étude deux groupes d'écoliers sénégalais. Un premier groupe d'écoliers avec de solide compétence en compréhension écrite en arabe et un deuxième groupe d'écoliers sans compétence en compréhension écrite. Même si un système d'écriture en wolof existe déjà au Sénégal, le wolof, comme langue maternelle pour ces deux groupes d'écoliers, n'est pas le principal médium d'instruction dans les écoles élémentaires sénégalaises. Sous ce rapport, tous les deux groupes d'écoliers apprennent seulement à écouter et à parler dans leur langue maternelle chez eux et n'apprennent à lire et à écrire en français qu'une fois admis à l'école française.

L'importance d'une telle situation linguistique compréhension écrite démontre que l'absence de scolarisation en langue maternelle a des impacts négatifs sur l'apprentissage de la compréhension écrite en langue seconde, français. En d'autres termes, les écoliers non-scolarisés en wolof ou en arabe ont été devancés pas les autres écoliers qui ont des prérequis en compréhension écrite en arabe avant d'apprendre le français. Les données qui ont été recueillies sur le terrain, à travers une batterie de tâches en compréhension écrite et sous forme d'interviews semi-structurées, ont été analysées sur la base de méthodologie à la fois quantitative et qualitative. Les résultats de cette étude ont démontré que l'absence des prérequis en compréhension écrite en langue maternelle (L1) ou en arabe (L3) a eu des impacts négatifs sur l'acquisition en compréhension écrite pour le groupe d'écoliers non-scolarisés en wolof ou en arabe. En d'autres termes, quand ce dernier a subi un test de compréhension écrite en français, nous avons pu constater qu'il a été largement devancé par l'autre groupe scolarisé en arabe avec des prérequis compréhension écrite en arabe. En sus, les interviews qui ont été administrées aux deux groupes ont confirmé que les prérequis en compréhension écrite à la maison ont été de solides tremplins pour le groupe scolarisé en compréhension écrite en arabe pour ce qui concerne leur apprentissage de la compréhension écrite en français à l'école.

Mots-clé: lecture, wolof, français, transfert, gap en scolarisation, écoliers-wolof

1. Research Context

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 therefore the use of any indigenous languages is prohibited” (Bulletin Administratif des Actes du Gouvernement, 1844, pp. 137–138, as cited in Diallo, 2010, p. 42). With the intent to reinforce the 1826 decree, French West Africa (AOF) organized education in the colonies, effectively expanding the same decree in most French colonies throughout Africa. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that colonial language administrative act 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 colonies (Cissé, 2005; Diallo, 2010; Sall, 2009).

During the French colonial period in Senegal, any formal teaching of the Senegalese vernacular languages was forbidden by the local colonial authorities. The French language was the only Medium of Instruction in schools and the only language spoken in major government offices across the country. School children who “misspoke”, meaning, used their native language in school, were harshly punished and often forced to carry a heavy wooden object for the duration of the school day. After the departure of the French authorities, successive presidents (including the newly elected president) have kept the carbon copy of the French educational policy and planning government despite a series of amendments to address this literacy gap and to alleviate children’s difficulties in reading the French language. Nowadays, Senegal continues to experience a rising rate of illiteracy in Wolof and French and alarming numbers of dropout students, coupled with unprecedented low academic performances at the elementary level. According to the *Direction de la Prévision et des Statistiques*, 67% of the Senegalese under twenty years of age are illiterate in all languages, and 59.6% of them do not read and write in French (Direction de la Prévision et des Statistiques, as cited in Diallo, 2010). It then becomes clear that there is a widening literacy gap between home (mother-tongue) literacy and school

(French) literacy that, if not addressed properly and swiftly by the current authorities, will continue to cause major academic setbacks in the areas of writing and speaking for a vast majority of Wolof learners.

2. Theoretical Framework

For many decades now, educators have suspected the existence of a relationship between L1 and L2. Research and discussions on the linkages between L1 and L2 have led to the Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (DIH) championed by Cummins and later supported by an extensive body of research in the literature (Fall, 2020; Aarts, 1998; Cummins, 1979; Gonzalez, 1977; Verhoeven & Wagner, 1998). 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. While most of the aforementioned studies (Cummins, 2000; Gonzalez, 1979; Cziko, 1978) deal with learners who have already developed their mother tongue before learning another language, little research is available on how individuals who do not read in their mother tongue develop reading skills in a second language. That is, how do school children who are not able to read in their mother tongue could acquire reading skills in a second language successfully? Although questions of this nature may seem irrelevant to many Western communities where school children already develop literacy (*i.e.*; *reading and writing*) in their mother tongue prior to learning a second language, they have become a major source of concern for a vast majority of post-independence African countries, like Senegal, where a foreign language is the dominant medium of instruction in schools to the detriment of the mother tongue.

In this paper, we argue that the absence of reading comprehension skills in L1-Wolof hinders reading skills in L2-French. That is, Wolof children (non-

Arabic) who had neither developed literacy in the mother tongue (Wolof), or bridged that literacy gap in a third language (Arabic), would not perform as well in tasks of L2 French reading comprehension, compared to other Wolof children (Arabic group) who develop a form of early literacy skills in Arabic through Qur'anic schooling. Our study showed that a lack of reading skills in the mother tongue (Wolof) at home (e.g., book sharing, storytelling, parents reading to children) or in Qur'anic school (e.g., daily recitation and reading of the Quran) hinders the acquisition of reading comprehension in L2 French at school. Thus, Arabic Wolof children showed a higher level of reading comprehension skills compared to non-Arabic Wolof children. In other words, non-Arabic children, because of their lack of early reading skills in Wolof and Arabic, were not able to transfer any reading skills to the L2 French reading comprehension task.

3. Literature Review

3.1. L1-Reading Development and Second Language Learning

A considerable number of studies have discussed reading as an essential component of academic learning. It constitutes a vehicle for acquiring knowledge and becoming an informed member of one's community. Because reading involves complex interactions between different cognitive components (i.e., word recognition, decoding and encoding, metalinguistic awareness, phonological awareness and comprehension), it is a complex mental activity that requires readers to be equipped with these components in order to understand and extract meaning from a text. L2 reading, then, is not an isolated activity in the sense that readers must develop and bring to the reading task the skills required to decode a text and understand its meaning accordingly (Pratt & Garton, 1989). In their study on the impact of L1 oral proficiency on L2 reading comprehension, Gough and Tunmers (1986) offered the first models to explicitly show the crucial importance of decoding skills in reading comprehension. For example, in their Simple View of Reading (SVR), Reading Comprehension (RC) is understood as the product of Decoding (D) and Listening Comprehension (LC), therefore $RC = D \times LC$ (Gough & Tuner, 1986). Their research outcomes have demonstrated that the development of basic decoding skills is necessary in the process of

understanding a text. They laid out a strong theoretical foundation which links successful L2 reading comprehension with strong decoding skills and their work has inspired many researchers to further study L2 reading development and its components.

Additionally, Adams's (1990) work on reading further builds on the claim that strong decoding skills improve reading comprehension. Like Gough and Tunmers, Adams considers reading to be driven by the visual recognition of individual letters and sound systems and the mapping of these letters with sounds into something meaningful. In her individual letter-sound correspondence theory, Adams suggests that readers must recognize which language elements are encoded in the language system and precisely deduce how these elements are encoded. Adams suggests that students must appreciate the alphabetic principle to become proficient readers. In other words, they must acquire a sense of the correspondence between letters and sounds upon which the alphabetic principle is based (Adams, 1990).

Adams's extensive work on reading highlights the importance of developing decoding skills and further provides strong evidence that children who encounter reading difficulties at school are those who experienced a lack of early exposure to environmental print or poor reading skills at home. This view is shared by Koda (1994) whose work on second language reading provides strong evidence regarding the correlation between reading comprehension and decoding skills. In her analysis of the interaction between text and reader, Koda establishes three major levels: decoding, text-information building, and situation-model construction.

On the first level of decoding, the reader is required to have word attack skills, whereby information is extracted from the text; on the second level of a text-information building, where extracted ideas are integrated to uncover meaning from the text; and the third level a situation-model construction, where the amalgamated text information is synthesized with prior knowledge (Koda, 2004). Koda's text-reader interaction aims to show the integrative nature of these competency groups, but most significantly, it emphasizes the skill components associated with reading comprehension.

3.2. Research Evidence on L1- Reading Skills Transfer to L2- Reading Comprehension

Modiano's (1968) research on the Mexican Mayan-Spanish in Chiapas was one of the first among many studies to provide solid evidence of L1 reading skills transferred to L2. His study, which compares the reading skills of Mexican-Spanish children who received instruction in their mother tongue (Spanish) to other Mexican Spanish children who received no mother tongue instruction in Spanish, is illustrative. Modiano concludes that Mexican Spanish children who develop strong literacy skills in their mother tongue, (Spanish) prior to learning English scored significantly higher in English than Mexican Spanish children who do not develop strong literacy skills in Spanish prior to learning English. Modiano's (1968) study supports both the UNESCO report of 1953, and Cummins' Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 1979).

González's (1986) research further supports Modiano's (1968) findings. He demonstrated that a strong relationship exists between English and Spanish reading skills among Spanish-speaking grade six students in the United States. His study focused on two groups of grade-six children attending a bilingual program, who were compared on the basis of measures related to both English and Spanish language skills. The first group was composed of thirty students born in Mexico who attended school there for at least two years before immigrating to the United States. The second group was composed of thirty-eight children who were born in Mexico, but who had immigrated to the United States before beginning school. González (1986) found that Mexican-schooled children performed significantly higher on both Spanish and English reading tasks compared to the US-schooled group (Gonzalez, 1986, 1989). González (1986) shows clear evidence that, those Mexican children who develop strong reading skills in their L1 Spanish, score higher in L2 reading than Mexican children who develop their L1 Spanish to a lesser extent.

Recent research on the interdependence hypothesis supports the studies of Modiano (1968) and González (1986, 1989). For example, Verhoeven and Aarts' (1998) studies, involving children in Turkey, examined the

relationships between school-centered literacy and functional literacy in the L1 and L2 of 188 Turkish-speaking children in their first year of Dutch secondary school. The average length of residence of the children in Turkey was about ten years. Additionally, a sample of 140 Dutch-L1 and 276 Turkish-L1 students in Turkey participated in the study. The functional literacy instrument used was a text from a letter, an article, or a passage in a newspaper, that both groups could relate to because these items could be found in both Turkey and the Netherlands. Their research in both schools concluded that the literacy level in Turkish has an effect on the literacy level in Dutch. Verhoeven and Aarts also contributed further evidence to support the view of interdependency between L1 and L2 literacy skills, and the possibility of cross linguistic transfer of skills from L1 Turkish to L2 Dutch.

Equally important is Wagner's (1998) study of Arabic-speaking and Berber-speaking children. His research, a five-year longitudinal study of literacy acquisition in Moroccan primary school children, aimed to find out whether the early development of reading skills in the L1 makes a difference in children who learn a second language (French). In addressing the question of whether Berber- and Arabic-speaking children achieve different levels of Arabic literacy skills in primary school, Wagner (1998) demonstrates that children who are monolingual speakers of Moroccan Arabic, and are learning to read Standard Arabic, performed better than Berber-monolingual children just beginning to acquire Arabic literacy. He suggests that the advantage that Arabic-monolingual children have over the Berber-monolingual children in the early stages of literacy acquisition has to do with similarity and transfer from spoken Moroccan Arabic to written Standard Arabic (Wagner, 1998). One significant element in Wagner's (1998) analysis of French-literacy acquisition is that children who perform better in their first literacy—whether Arabic or Berber—perform better in the L2 French regardless of whether this first literacy is in a second language (as is the case for Moroccan Arabic speakers) or a third language (as is the case for Berber speakers).

Wagner's (1998) study demonstrates that literacy in a second language depends in important ways on first literacy acquisition. Again, this idea is consistent with Cummins' interdependence hypothesis. What is striking about Wagner's (1998) longitudinal study, however, is that it not only indicates that

there is a relationship between first language Arabic and second language French, but also that literacy acquired in either L1 or L2 increases over time. Studies of this nature have been noticeably absent in the literature, as most studies simply administer predictive measures at the time the L2 study begins, and then follow their participants' learning over a short period of time, as opposed to an extended period of time.

Sparks, Patton, Gunschow and Humbach (2009) contribute a missing piece to Wagner's longitudinal study of the relationship between early first language reading skills, and second language reading proficiency. Their research focuses on fifty-four children who were followed over an extended ten-year period beginning in first grade and continuing through high school. The purpose of this study was to measure L2 proficiency in many areas (i.e., word decoding, writing, spelling, reading comprehension, and listening). The reading comprehension consisted of a multiple-choice test and a short paragraph. Results showed that children's L1 reading skills in the first grade were strongly correlated with their L2 reading comprehension. These findings suggest the possibility of cross-linguistic transfer of reading skills from L1 to L2 (Sparks et al., 2009). Thus, a thorough examination of the impact(s) of mother tongue literacy on second language learning in the literature has shown clear evidence of an intrinsically positive relationship between literacy skills in the mother tongue and second language literacy skills through various channels of language transfer.

4. The Present Study

In a comparative study of two groups of Wolof-children in Senegal, who are all partially literate in their mother tongue, Wolof, we have investigated the extent to which the absence of reading comprehension skills in Wolof could hinder the development of the L2 reading comprehension skills in French. Whereas a group of Wolof children (hereafter Arabic-children) in Gaindé Fatma elementary school in Touba bridge the literacy gap by developing their first literacy in Arabic (Arabic is officially ranked as a third language after French in Senegal), another group of Wolof children (hereafter non-Arabic children) in Daroukhane in Dakar has no literacy in either their mother tongue Wolof or the third language Arabic. In other words, the non-Arabic-Wolof

children who belong to the latter group approach the task of learning French language having little instruction or no previous training in encoding or decoding the written form of any language. More precisely, children of Muslim families have the possibility of accessing the Arabic language while learning the Quran in Qur'anic schooling known as Daara.

It is worth pointing out that prior to colonization in the middle of the seventeenth century in Senegal, Islam started to take root in the sub-Saharan areas of West Africa like Senegal (Diagne, 2004). With that rapid growth of Islamic states, a large number of Islamic literacy centers (Daaras) were established in Senegal and in several West African countries (Diallo, 2012). Many practicing Muslim families in Senegal view it as a spiritual duty to initiate their children to the Quran. By doing so, they encourage children to develop literacy skills in the Arabic language prior to learning French. In these Qur'anic schools, children are introduced to the knowledge of the Arabic language through the Quran as teachers spend several hours reading and reciting selected excerpts of the Qur'anic text to children. In contrast to this aforementioned group, the non-Arabic-Wolof group come from a minority of non-practicing Muslim families who do not require their children to study the Qur'anic text. As a result, children in the non-Arabic-Wolof group lack the experience of receiving oral and written input in Arabic. Unlike the Arabic children whose parents promote literacy prior to French instruction, parents from non-Arabic-Wolof children encourage their children to develop their first literacy skills directly in the French language. That is, non-Arabic-Wolof children have a first encounter with the written word in a formal instructional context (i.e., the French school), in the French language (not in Arabic), and having little or no previous experience processing the written form of any language.

4.1. Research Methodology

4.1.1. Population sample

Sixty Wolof student learners of L2 French were recruited from grade 1 classes at two elementary schools in Senegal (i.e.; *Gaindé Fatma elementary school in Touba and Daroukhane B elementary school in Dakar*). Wolof children in

these two school districts have different experiences prior to learning L2 French. That is, Wolof children recruited from Gaindé Fatma elementary school in Touba primary receive an early pre-schooling education in the Arabic before they learn L2 French. For this group of Wolof children in Touba, early exposure to language first begins with Wolof, then Arabic and lastly with French. Conversely, the group of children recruited from Daroukhane B school district developed no form of preliteracy in Arabic or in any language prior to learning French. For this group of children in Dakar, early exposure to language first begins with Wolof, then French, and may or may not be followed with Arabic in their subsequent years of schooling.

4.1.1.1. Arabic-Wolof Children Population Sample

Thirty Arabic-Wolof children were recruited from one elementary school of roughly 615 students, 110 of whom were enrolled in their first year. 63 % (N=19) of the total were girls, and 37 % (N=11) were boys, and their ages ranged from 5 to 6 years old ($M= 5.8$, $SD=2.3$). Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis; therefore, they were not paid to participate in this study. The investigator sought permission from parents to have their children participate in the study. With this aim, the investigator had the parents sign Assent Forms in which they clearly learned about the objectives of the study, the tasks and the procedure. The information was clearly spelled out in written form and explained to participants orally in French and in their native language Wolof. In other words, children were taught through lecturing activities during which they repeated after the instructor and reproduced in writing what they heard. It is worth noting that most teachers in this school do not use the target language (French) to teach children all the time. Instead, teachers oftentimes mixed the Wolof language with French during lectures. Moreover, children were not severely punished in most cases compared to children in the non-Arabic group at Daroukhane B elementary school.

The majority of the teachers at Gaindé Fatma elementary school do not punish their students for failing to speak the French language in the classroom. Interestingly though, at the Qur'anic school these children may receive corporal punishment for failing to recite the sacred text correctly and accurately. The idea is that Quran is considered by Muslims as a holy book

where God directly communicated with the whole of mankind, one should never make an error while reading or reciting it (Kane, 1962, p.4).

This corporal punishment we witnessed in many Qur'anic schools in Touba was considered by many Qur'anic teachers to be an effective method of teaching. For the majority of these Qur'anic teachers, this corporal punishment helped children read and recite the Quran correctly and accurately. This has a major implication for our research in that this teaching method perhaps had significant impact on how Arabic-Wolof children approached the tasks of decoding and reading a French text. As discussion of our research findings will show later, it appears that these Arabic-Wolof children somehow internalized this sense of correctness and accuracy very early on and applied them when presented with tasks of decoding and reading a French text at school.

4.1.1.2. Arabic-Wolof Parent Population Sample

Thirty Arabic Wolof parents were selected in Touba to participate in this study, and they were also the parents of the thirty Arabic Wolof children recruited from Gaindé Fatma elementary school in Touba. From these 30 parents, 80% (N=24) were female and 20% (N=6) were male. The average age for females was 25 and the average for males was 38 years of age. These Arabic parents were recruited on a voluntary basis; therefore, they were not paid to participate in this study. Instead, they were asked to fill out consent forms in which the nature and objective of the research were clearly spelled out in both French and English and subsequently translated into their native language Wolof. In other words, the parents received all the information about the research in their Wolof native language. Furthermore, all Arabic parents were given ample time (8 days) to decide whether they would like to participate in this research or not. Those who accepted were required to sign the consent form and return it to the Gaindé Fatma school district within eight days. As mentioned earlier, parents attended an information session together with their children. It is important to reiterate that the meeting was held in Wolof and parents were allowed to ask questions or request more clarifications. It is worth reminding that the Arabic parents were invited to participate in this research because they provided us with useful information

about their children's general literacy experience of reading at home and literacy experience of reading with others. These two aspects will most likely give us further evidence on children's overall reading and decoding skills at school as the results of the tasks will show later.

After receiving consent from these thirty Arabic parents, we further investigated information about their socio-economic status and religious background. More precisely, it was important to note that the overwhelming majority of these female parents declared being stay-home mothers, with only 10% of them involved in business such as trading, sewing and street commerce. All males (20%), on the other hand, declared having low-paying jobs, but managed to raise a family and provide their household with food and other needs. All parents were Muslim and had learnt the Quran since an early age and prayed five times a day. In addition, they participated in all religious activities conducted in the city of Touba. An overwhelming majority of parents communicated the sense of religious belonging and total allegiance to the religious leader of the city of Touba. Most significantly, more than 97 % of these parents declared fulfilling their religious duty by providing their children with preliteracy in the Quran and encouraging them to pray five times a day and recite the Quran at home.

4.1.1.3. Non-Arabic Wolof Children Population Sample

The non-Arabic-Wolof students who were recruited from Daroukhane B public elementary school were composed of thirty children from a student population of 570. From the thirty students recruited, 56 % (N=17) were girls, 44% (N=13) were boys. Their ages ranged from 5 to 6 years old ($M= 5.4$, $SD=2.2$). These participants were recruited on a voluntary basis as well; therefore, they were not paid to participate in this research. Instead, they were asked to fill out and sign consent forms before they could participate in the research. That is, through the consent form the investigator sought consent from parents themselves to participate in the research and allow their children to participate in it, as well. In those consent forms, the objectives of the research's tasks and the procedure to execute the tasks were clearly spelled out in written form, and explained to participants orally in French and in their native language Wolof. All parents were given ample time (8 days) to decide

whether they would like to participate in this research or not. Those who wanted to be involved in the research were required to sign consent forms and return them to Daroukhane B school district within eight days. Moreover, these parents were invited to a meeting during which the nature and objectives of this research, as well as the ethical standards and safety procedures were further explained at length. The meeting was held in Wolof and French, and children and their parents were allowed to seek clarification on something about the research that they did not understand.

4.1.1.4. Non-Arabic Wolof Parent Population Sample

Thirty non-Arabic-Wolof parents were selected in Dakar to participate in this research, and they were parents to the thirty non-Arabic, children recruited from Daroukhane B elementary school in Dakar. From the 30 parents recruited, 56% (N=17) were female and 44% (N=13) were male; the mean age for the males was 29 and that for women was 36 years. Those non-Arabic-Wolof parents were recruited on a voluntary basis. They were asked to fill out consent forms in which the nature and objectives of the research were clearly spelled out in both French and English and subsequently translated into their native language Wolof. Those who wanted to be involved in the research were required to sign the consent forms and return them to Daroukhane B school district within eight days. Moreover, all non-Arabic-Wolof parents were invited to a meeting during which the nature and objectives of this research, as well as the ethical standard safety procedures were further explained at length. The meeting was held in Wolof and French, and those parents were encouraged to ask questions on something they did not understand about the research. They were also invited to participate in this research because they provided us with useful information about their children's general literacy experience of reading at home and literacy experience of reading with others.

After receiving consent from those thirty non-Arabic-Wolof parents to participate in this research, we further directed our focus on them to find out more about who they were and what their socio-economic status was as it was done with the Arabic-Wolof parents described earlier. For example, we found out that while a minority of those female (39%) parents declared being stay-at-home mothers, only 61% declared having some kind of job in the public

sector. While 49% confirmed not having regular employment, 51% of male parents declared having a job in the public sector. There were 10 parents who declared following the Christian faith, while 20 parents were Muslims (15 non-practicing Muslim, 5 practicing Muslim).

The non-Arabic-Wolof children might lack exposure to L2 Arabic through the consistent reading, memorization and recitation of the Quran. However, they have their parents' interest and support for their learning of the French language. That is, there is a positive attitude toward French which is known to enhance motivation and willingness to speak a new language. This parental attitude contrasts with what was observed with the Arabic parents discussed earlier. That is, most of the Arabic-Wolof parents in Touba taught their children to solely follow Islam, and subsequently encouraged them to read and write the Qur'anic text at home. That was not the case of the non-Arabic-Wolof parents who encouraged reading and writing in French rather than in Arabic. This sharp difference between these two groups of parents was expected as their environmental education had a major influence on how they prioritized the language education of their children. For example, the majority of the inhabitants of Dakar have been assimilated into the culture and language of France. Therefore, having a good command of the French language and speaking it well is synonymous with belonging to a certain elite. In fact, in most cases parents would continue to communicate to their children in the French language at home or mix French with other national languages they are competent speaking (i.e., Wolof, Serere, Pulaar).

4.2. Instrument

We administered a reading comprehension text to evaluate children's reading comprehension about the end of school year in Senegal. The objective of this task was to test Arabic and non-Arabic students' reading comprehension skills by assessing if they were able to read a basic short French reading text, understand it well and answer multiple-choice-questions related to the topic. The reading comprehension task consisted of three main sequences: a brief initial sequence of events in which the narrator introduces the festivities planned for the end of the school year in an instructor's classroom; a second short sequence of events in which students, before leaving the classroom,

should clean up their desks and put away their books, and a third sequence of events in which both students and parents are invited to a ceremony where the students are given gifts to mark the end of the school year. Each of those sequences described above was illustrated with a set of pictures that describe very accurately what each sequence was about. For example, with respect to the first sequence, colored images of a teacher surrounded by students in the classroom were inserted through the reading text. With respect to the second scene, colored images of students cleaning up their desks and putting them away were inserted through the text. With respect to the third sequence, colored images of the school principal distributing prizes to students and parents were inserted at the end of the reading passage as well to mark the end of the school year festivities.

The use of images to further illustrate the central theme of reading comprehension was important in that task because it provided children with further contextual cues to understand the text better. Additionally, most of key vocabulary concepts (i.e., *balayer la classe* [sweep the classroom]; *installer* [to set up], *souhaiter* [to wish], *féliciter* [to congratulate] we thought may be difficult for children to grasp were written on the board and explained by the examiner.

The reading comprehension was measured by seven multiple choice questions, generally asking children (1) to identify the narrator and other main characters in the text, (2) extract useful information on how the end of the year ceremony is held and (3) assess the outcomes of the ceremony of the end of the school year. In addition to those multiple-choice questions, three open-ended questions were also given to the children to give them the opportunity to voice their opinions and general impressions on the theme of the reading comprehension. It was expected that children in the Arabic and Non-Arabic groups would understand the reading comprehension test that we administered to them because during the first year of their schooling, both Arabic and non-Arabic students were presented with a range of reading materials in the classroom. In other words, by the time they finished their first year of schooling, they were expected to decode a short reading text and understand its general meaning and some of its specific meanings. In that regard, based on the reading materials that those children were exposed to

throughout the school year, there was clear evidence that both Arabic and non-Arabic-Wolof were well equipped to approach our reading comprehension task. As explained earlier, the Ministry of National Education of Senegal (MEN) mandates all elementary school teachers, including those in Gaindé Fatma and Daroukhane B elementary schools, to prepare first grade children across Senegal to develop good reading comprehension skills. Some of the reading comprehension tasks that were used during the school year to enhance children's decoding skills were short reading materials in which children were asked to read attentively and answer multiple choice questions of the following format (a, b, c, d) (more advanced readings would ask children to make inferences by expanding and applying their knowledge of the text to generalized contexts).

The rationale behind the use of those multiple-choice questions in our study, was influenced by the information provided by most Senegalese elementary schools' curriculum, in which it was explained that students are exposed to two forms of testing: multiple choice and true or false questions. We chose the multiple-choice because students were compelled to pay more attention to the selection process as each student was instructed to circle the correct answer among the four alternatives provided to them (a, b, c, d). With the true or false answers, students may not be motivated to engage their critical thinking skills in the selection process because they only have to choose between a forced choice of two alternatives (true or false), and the choice of one alternative over the other is more likely to be purely at random. It is worth noting that the reading comprehension text was chosen to ensure that students were exposed to a familiar cultural theme. Parents and teachers in Senegal usually mark the end of the school year by giving gifts to their students. Therefore, having the children read a passage that talks about classroom items and the end of the school year—a happy and celebratory occasion—encourages engagement. That text was chosen to fit first year Arabic and Non-Arabic students' comprehension level. All the verbs were conjugated in the present tense and the content and the lexical vocabulary were within the students' ability. According to the elementary school curriculum where the children were tested, first year students should be able to read 300 words and conjugate first group verbs and irregular verbs in the present tense (i.e., *aller*,

être, avoir) by the end of the school year. They should also know the definite and indefinite articles as those concepts are taught in the first three weeks of the school year. The reading comprehension text contained 128 words in total (see table 1 for more details on the lexical content of reading comprehension).

Table 1. Lexical content of French reading passage presented to participants.

ER verbs	IR verbs	RE verbs	Irregular verbs	Articles/de/indefinis
10	1	0	2(aller/être)	23 def/ 3 indefinites

We chose this reading comprehension instrument to test Arabic and non-Arabic groups' reading skills because children's success in reading comprehension largely depends on how successful they were in both decoding skills. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, reading comprehension is one of the most important tasks used across fields (e.g., psychology, sociolinguistics, neuro-linguistics) to assess a variety of skills in children and adults alike. In the field of Second Language Acquisition, and specifically in psycholinguistics, comprehension is thought to involve a complex web of interactions between different cognitive components such as word recognition, phonological awareness, and decoding skills (Adams, 1990).

Difficulty in comprehension tasks may show early difficulty in phonological awareness and decoding skills; therefore, comprehension tasks have been extensively used in prior studies to measure both children's and adults' knowledge of a language and their cognitive development (Adams, 1990; Garton & Pratt, 1989; McBride-Chang, 2004). Although a total absence of comprehending a reading passage may be associated with dyslexia or cognitive reading impairment in both children and adults. Difficulties in early reading or comprehending are mostly attributed to early difficulties in

decoding skills or word recognition (Adams, 1990; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Garton & Pratt, 1989; McBride-Chang, 2004).

4.3. Procedure

4.3.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

In the quantitative data analysis, we used an ANOVA statistical test to gather a reading comprehension task. ANOVA has been widely used in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as a tool for the analysis of a variety of types of second language acquisition data (Cunnings, 2012). Because of the double function that ANOVA can play in the statistical techniques to report results of the mean scores within groups and between groups, we believe that ANOVA is the most effective method to provide differences between means of many variables (i.e., gender and group) in this research. Although there are two ways to report p-values (0, 01 or 0.05), we used an alpha level of 0.05 (i.e., a criterion for measuring the probability of supporting or rejecting the null hypothesis) and we reported the degrees of freedom (i.e., the F-value, and the p-value) associated with the alpha level of 0.05.

4.3.1.1. Likert Scale

While gathering data from children to quantify their answers from a questionnaire, we devised a Likert scale as described earlier. It is worth reminding that the Likert scale measurement method has been widely used in the literature, as it allows respondents subjected to a task using this format to make a definite choice answer rather than to choose neutral or intermediate positions on a given scale. In the case of this research, the Likert scale allowed us to ask each of our participants (Arabic and non-Arabic- Wolof Children) to choose one of the five statements (i.e., *always, often, sometimes, seldom, never*) that best describes how frequently they are being read to at home by their parents and others such as teachers, friends or siblings. In other words, with respect to the theme of literacy experience through reading at home, each participant was asked to tell us how often he or she plays word or letter games or uses books at home. With respect to the theme of literacy experience through reading with others, each participant was asked to tell us how often his or her parents, teachers, friends or siblings read to him or her

4.3.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

In the qualitative data analysis, a semi-structured interview was used to collect information from children's parents who participated in our study. The data collected through the semi-structured interviews were transferred into a database and organized by letter codes (i.e., M for male parent and F for female parent). It is worth reminding that this method of data analysis was not quantifiable; therefore the analysis of results was descriptive. In the following section, we will briefly describe the semi-structured interviews.

4.3.2.1. Semi-structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews administered to parents were used to seek information about parents' attitude toward the French language. These semi-structured interviews often give a depth of information through the use of a series of open-ended questions providing respondents the opportunity to talk freely without any restriction on what they could say or couldn't. By collecting parents' speeches and general views on the French language through open-ended questions in our own research, we hoped to determine if their views could perhaps affect the result tendencies in the tests of decoding and reading comprehension in French. We also believe that parents' views on the French language could be complementary to the questionnaire administered to their children as well. That is, by knowing the language children mostly use with their parents at home, we could certainly determine if this language should be taught at school to avoid a literacy gap between home and school.

4.3.4. Quantitative Results

4.3.4.1. Arabic and non-Arabic -Wolof Groups

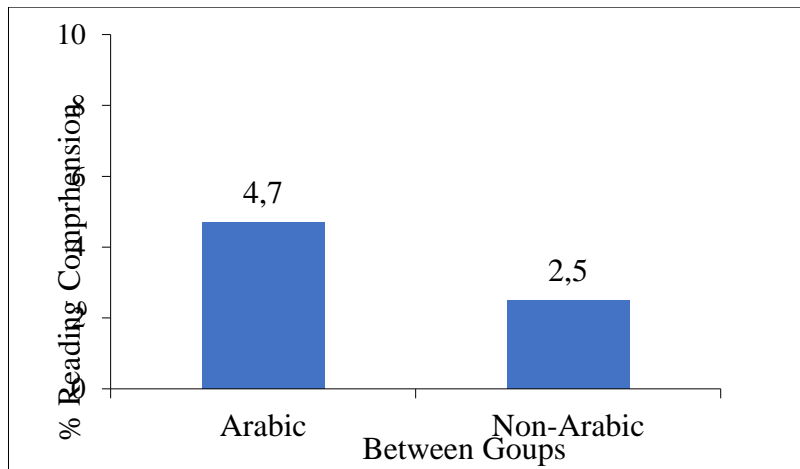


Figure 1 above reports results from the reading comprehension task that tested whether the Arabic-Wolof group would be more able than the non-Arabic-Wolof group to read a short French reading text and understand its meaning.

Based on the reading comprehension task administered to both Arabic and non-Arabic groups, Figure 1 shows a significant difference in mean scores between these two groups. While the Arabic-Wolof group obtained a mean of 4.7 (SD= 2.6) the non-Arabic-Wolof group obtained a mean of 2.5 (SD=1.4). An ANOVA statistical test to compare scores of the two groups confirmed further the significant difference between them, $F(2, 58) = 0.0016153, p < 0.05$. The comparison of the mean difference between girls and boys within group still revealed no significant statistical difference for the Arabic group, $F(2, 28) = 1.651, p > 0.05$ or the Non-Qur'anic group, $F(2, 28) = 2.442, p > 0.05$.

4.3.5. Qualitative Results

4.3.5.1. Literacy Experiences with Others for the non-Arabic-Wolof group

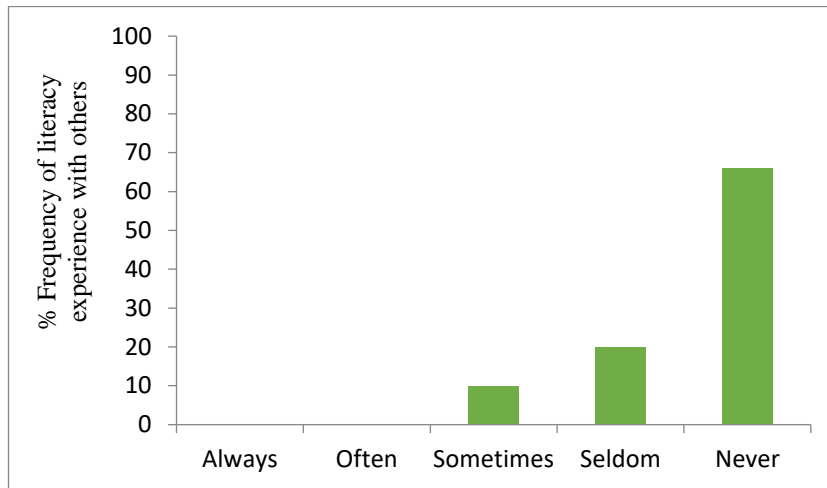


Figure 2 above reports results from the questionnaire conducted with the non-Arabic-Wolof group with respect to literacy experience of reading with others. Similarly, to the Arabic-Wolof group, each child in the non-Arabic group was asked to tell us how often he or she reads with parents at home or with friends, siblings or teachers.

Figure 2 shows that from the two questions collected in the questionnaire on the theme of children's literacy experience of reading with others, a majority of the children in the non-Arabic-Wolof group, 67% (N=20) stated that their parents, friends or siblings *never* read to them. While 17 % (N=5) of them declared that their parents, friends or siblings *seldom* read to them, 10 % (N=3) stated that their parents, friends or siblings *sometimes* read to them. Only 3 % (N=1) of children confirmed that their parents, friends or siblings *often* read to them. One child confirmed to us that his parents, siblings or friends *always* read to him. These findings suggest that the absence of parental intervention to read to these non-Arabic-Wolof children at home greatly impacted their L2 French reading comprehension at school. That is, non-Arabic-Wolof children who *never* or *seldom* spent time reading with their parents at home encountered difficulties when presented with a short reading comprehension

test in French. The findings are also consistent with findings in the ANOVA statistical test scores on L2 French reading comprehension we reported earlier in Figure 1 between the Arabic and the non-Arabic Wolof children. That is, non-Arabic-Wolof children who never got literacy in the Quran or read with parents at home, did not do well when presented with a short reading comprehension text in French.

4.3.5.2. Literacy Experiences with Others for the Arabic-Wolof Group

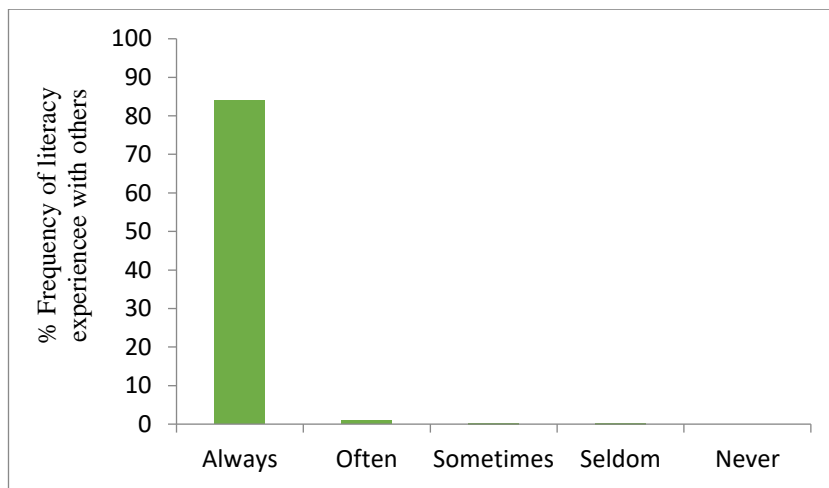


Figure 3 above reports results from the questionnaire conducted with the Arabic-Wolof group with respect to literacy experience of reading with others (i.e., parents, friends or siblings). In this test, each Arabic-Wolof child was asked to tell us how often he or she reads with others.

Figure 3 shows that from the two questions collected in the questionnaire on the theme of children's literacy experience reading with others, 83%(N=26) of children in the Arabic-Wolof group confirmed that their Qur'anic teachers always read to them at the Qur'anic schooling, and their parents read the Quran to them at home as well. While 10 %(N=3) of them declared that their Qur'anic teachers and parents *often* read the Quran to them, 3%(N=1) stated that their Qur'anic teachers and parents *sometimes* read the Quran to them. Only 3 %(N=1) of children confirmed that their Qur'anic teachers and parents *seldom* read to them. No child in the Arabic- Wolof group confirmed to us

that friends or parents *never* read to them. These findings suggest that Arabic-Wolof children who had been exposed to reading with parents at home or with Qur'anic teachers at the Qur'anic school did well in L2 French reading comprehension at school. Once again, these findings support our four and last hypothesis. That is, parental intervention to help children begin reading at home has significant positive impact on children's reading at school. In other words, the Arabic-Wolof children who were helped with reading at home outperformed the non-Arabic-Wolof children who did not receive any help with reading at home. That is, parental involvement through a scaffolding reading mechanism to help children read is perhaps one of the clearest pieces of evidence that, so far, establishes a correlation between early success in reading at home and later success in reading at school (McBride-Chang, 2004; Snow et al., 1998, Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998).

5. Discussions of Results

The results between groups suggest that the Arabic-Wolof group, who already had access to print through the Quran at the Qur'anic school or at home, benefited from this acquired ability when reading a text in French compared to the non-Arabic-Wolof group. That is, the Arabic-Wolof group's early reading skills in the Arabic language (i.e., memorizing and rewriting scripts from the Quran text, working collaboratively with teachers and parents to recite the Quran) were transferred when presented with a reading comprehension test in French. These findings support our hypothesis. That is, the lack of reading skills in Wolof at home or in Arabic hindered the acquisition of reading comprehension in L2 French. In other words, when presented with the same reading comprehension test in French at school, non-Arabic-Wolof students showed lower levels of L2 French reading comprehension compared to Arabic-Wolof student. Our research finding is also consistent with Cummins' work on the interdependence between L1 literacy and L2. More specifically, our research supports Cummins' cross-linguistic transfer hypothesis of L1 reading skills to L2 reading skills (Cummins, 1978, 1983, 1984).

Although the general research discussions above may have suggested that the development of early literacy skills in reading comprehension in the Arabic

language, along with parental involvement in the learning process, might explain the different tendencies we observed between the Arabic-Wolof children and non-Arabic-Wolof children, their parents' overall attitudes toward the French language have also revealed interesting narrative discourses that could not be overlooked in this research to further understand these groups of children. Most significantly, these narratives confirmed the results we collected from the Questionnaire with children. That is, the importance given to the language in which literacy is acquired at home (Arabic) most likely has a considerable impact on the language (French) being learned at school as we could observe it with our Arabic-Wolof group throughout this research. We do believe that the general attitudes parents had toward the French language could not have been overlooked in our research as they might have been among other factors that could impact children's overall learning of the French language.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Pedagogical and Learning Implications

In the light of the aforementioned study, the Republic of Senegal still boasts of the carbon copy of the French colonial system that is prevalent in all schools in Senegal. Most significantly, the national languages are still not used as a Medium Of Instruction in schools across Senegal as of today. As many tend to believe, the issue of illiteracy in the national language 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 rethinking the *Colonial French Only Policy* and tackling the general issue of illiteracy in the national languages (mother tongues) because the absence of literacy in the mother tongue invariably hinders learning in a second language particularly in the area of reading comprehension as our research shows.

Senegal needs to first depart from its colonial language policy to implement a rigorous language education policy grounded in the mother tongue, Wolof. Throughout the semi-structured interviews with parents, we learnt in our research that beneath the linguistic element, there are more underlying

colonial reasons influencing parents to motivate their children to develop early literacy skills in the Arabic language or to go directly to learning French. In contrast with parents, we interviewed at Gaindé Fatma Elementary School in Touba who overwhelmingly (90%) rejected an education based on the French language, parents we interviewed in Daroukhane B Elementary School in Dakar did not completely reject the French language.

We believe that this attitude observed with this particular group of parents at Daroukhane B Elementary School reveals traces of the colonial language policy in which colonial subjects had a high regard for the prestige of the French language as it remained a major force and an indispensable instrument for economic success and socio-professional integration. And yet politics is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to underscore the shortsightedness (on the part of the former colonial authorities and current Senegalese political leaders of making a minority language, French (used by less than 20% of the Senegalese population), the only MOI in schools across Senegal while the majority language, Wolof (used by 80%), is taught as a subject only at university (Diallo, 2010).

In *fine*, we recommend the introduction of the national languages in the Senegalese educational system in order to alleviate 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. In that particular respect, there is an urgent need to begin the process of linguistic decolonization and curb down school failure at least at the elementary level by:

Making it mandatory for all elementary schools to make Wolof the only Medium Of Instruction from preschool to age 9, and introduce French as a school subject later.

Encouraging a massive literacy campaign to foster home literacy in the Senegalese national languages, primarily in Wolof, and producing reading

materials (e.g., textbooks, short stories, fiction) in Wolof or in the other main national languages

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