**SENEGAL**

**Decline of French among university students**

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|  | The proficiency of many Senegalese students in French, the colonial language, is declining and the use of local languages – especially Wolof – is becoming more common on campus and in lectures. But there is disagreement over whether the decline is due to poor teaching, the fault of students, government reforms, or overcrowding and poor facilities.These are findings of a newspaper inquiry by Gaustin Diatta in [*Le Soleil*](http://www.lesoleil.sn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=42058:difficultes-delocution-darticulation--lecole-perd-son-francais-&catid=78:a-la-une&Itemid=255) of Dakar, following interviews with students and lecturers at the University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar, or UCAD, the country’s leading university. At UCAD, national languages – especially Wolof, the most commonly spoken language in Senegal – were used socially on campus and sometimes in lecture halls. “French is often marginalised by the students,” wrote Diatta. **What the students say**Abdoulaye Barro, a student in the faculty of economics and management, blamed the fall in the level of French on bad training of teachers who were ill-equipped to provide a quality education to school children. The training period should be lengthened, he said. But Oumar Traoré, a student in the faculty of arts and human sciences who admitted he did not speak French well and replied to*Le Soleil’s* questions in Wolof, believed students should make more effort to master French. “Before, I used to say that the teachers were not well trained. But it’s the opposite. It’s the students who are not up to standard – starting with me.” He admitted that even in lectures students only expressed themselves in Wolof, and said many students could not speak for two minutes without introducing Wolof or another national language. “In private institutions the students speak French fluently. Why not [public university] students? It’s shameful!”Mamadou Lamine Pouye, a masters student in modern humanities, also fumbled with his words and made mistakes such as getting genders wrong, reported Diatta. Pouye said: “We leave university with no qualifications. Sometimes the teachers speak in Wolof to explain certain concepts to us. Speaking French is a question of habit. Students must teach themselves. Diplomas no longer count; it’s proficiency in French that counts.” Aloune Badara Bèye, a physics and chemistry student, said the level of French had fallen in his faculty, and he urged his fellow students to read a lot. “I’m scientific and I read every day to improve my French,” he told *Le Soleil*. It was necessary for students to master French before they arrived at university, he said; but during his conversation with Diatta, except for one sentence, he too spoke in Wolof. An unidentified female student in the faculty of law and politics rejected the idea of lengthening schoolteachers’ training, but thought students should be constantly conscientious. “I don’t speak French very well, but I keep doing my best to improve my level. I know that one day I shall be required to express myself before an audience.” One problem, she said, was socialising on campus. “When you can handle French well by rolling your ‘Rs’ they say you’re boasting. That’s intimidating and makes us feel rubbish. I don’t like reading, but I go to the university library when I feel the need.”**What the teachers say**Teachers gave various analyses as to why students’ standards in French had fallen. Most of those interviewed agreed the level was “very weak”, and none was indifferent to the problem, wrote Diatta.Oumar Dia, a professor of philosophy, blamed educational reform which had switched from an ‘elite’ to a ‘mass’ system without support measures. “The present generations of students have been educated by volunteers and temporary workers who are neither trained nor motivated. The fall in the level evident today is a logical consequence of this development,” he said. Reading had been sidelined, but it was vital for educating students and provided a solid general culture and critical mind, allowing students to adapt within a world of constant change, said Dia. To improve standards for higher education students, teachers must be properly trained, and the proper value of education and teachers recognised.Mahy Diaw, a lecturer in the faculty of sciences, agreed that teachers were badly trained, and that the examination system was not selective as it used to be. French was trivialised from a young age. Students could no longer distinguish between the sounds ‘S’ and ‘Ch’, and ‘J’ and ‘Z’, and had great difficulty in pronunciation. Even some teachers spoke French badly, he said.  But Seydi Ababacar Ndiaye, secretary-general of SAES, the higher education teachers’ union, denied there was a decline in students’ standards, and blamed their lack of success on overcrowding and lack of amenities. “How can one follow a course in a lecture hall with more than 1,000 places, without a sound system and under lighting that is dim, if it exists at all?” he asked. He admitted that students no longer read, and that “Google reigns as the absolute master of the lazy character”.Professor Mamadou Limine Ndiaye of the Ecole Supérieure Polytechnique of UCAD agreed that an excessive number of students could have a negative impact on the quality of teaching, wrote Diatta. “UCAD has at least 90,000 students [and] 1,300 teachers. To raise the level of students, the state must realign the courses in all the universities and adjust teaching techniques according to present realities,” said Ndiaye.He said that primary and secondary schoolteachers were increasingly less well trained because too many were volunteers and temporary staff, and the decline in students’ standards in French and other subjects was apparent. “There are masters students who cannot compose three sentences without making faults. They always speak in Wolof for fear of being corrected,” he said. UCAD law professors, assessor Mayatta Ndiaye and dean Mamadou Badji, said universities had difficulty in completing the curriculum within the academic year, which had been reduced to 30 weeks. Also, students arrived at university insufficiently prepared.“At university, one cannot educate students who are not able to conjugate a verb in the present tense. We are going to help the best to become part of the elite,” said Ndiaye.Badji said students had major shortcomings, and difficulties expressing themselves in French because they no longer read. “The student is the operator of his own education. He must not expect the teacher to do everything. Those who are unprepared cannot succeed at university.”The state and the university authorities could not do everything for students, said Badji. “The state must look after a reasonable number of individuals,” he said. Ndiaye said the new ‘LMD’ – licence-master-doctorat – system, based on the Bologna process of three, five and eight years’ higher education, was designed to promote student success but it could not cater for everyone. \* *This article is drawn from local media.*University World News*cannot vouch for the accuracy of the original reports.* |