



USAID

DU PEUPLE AMÉRICAIN

SUCCESS STORY

NEW LITERACY TECHNIQUES ENGAGE STUDENTS

Today, students actively participate in the classroom and have opportunity to improve their reading- writing capacity.



Photo: USAID/Mali SIRA

2nd grade ECOM Fadjiguila

“ This is the first time that any of my children is able to write in second grade”

- Traoré Mariam Barry.

June 2018 — The school environment for many young Malian children is not conducive to learning to read. Overcrowded classrooms; poorly trained and poorly paid teachers; lack of books, materials and space; no electricity; very little access to preschool; and no books at home are only a few of the obstacles children have to face.

In first grade, students sit for long hours in intense heat on a bench with two or three friends, required to stay silent and to listen to a language they most likely do not understand. In most classrooms, French is the language of instruction, but most children do not speak French when they enter school.

Many parents are resistant to their children being educated in a national language, fearing that it will retard their learning of French. But the parents are unaware of research demonstrating that children who learn to read in a language they understand, acquire a solid foundation for learning a second language.

To compound the problem, the traditional way of teaching in most schools is through memorization and repetition. Many children become discouraged and drop out early on, before acquiring the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic.

This was the challenging situation USAID-funded programs faced in 2008. A 2009 assessment showed that between 83 percent and 95 percent of 2,820 second grade children, tested in one of six languages (French, Arabic and four national languages), could not read a single word of a simple second grade text. A USAID-funded program called PHARE (*Programme Harmonisé d'Appui au Renforcement de l'Éducation*) introduced an adapted version of balanced literacy but was interrupted by a coup and the following year by war.

Since 2016, USAID's Selective Integrated Reading Activity (SIRA) project, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, has been building on this previous program and continues to train teachers in balanced literacy.

Balanced literacy in Mali is a complete program of reading and writing, producing text as opposed to calligraphy, that “balances” decoding and comprehension, reading and writing activities, children's needs and curriculum requirements, discovery and direct teaching as well as serious games and individual work. This approach enables children to acquire all the skills they need to develop as fluent, autonomous readers and writers.

During the first two months of first grade, children quickly learn the letter names and sounds of the alphabet through learning games, songs and rhymes. They have fun manipulating sounds inside words, use language in meaningful interactions, and increase their vocabulary through a thematic approach.

In the majority of communities where the project intervenes, Bamanankan is the dominant language. Fadjiguila is a community school located in a working-class neighborhood of Bamako. In 2017, the USAID project started training teachers in literacy techniques and decodable words (words that can be deciphered using phonics). The project distributed teaching materials and

monitored the implementation of the new techniques in the classrooms. With first and second grade classes of 128 students each; the school proves that quality instruction is still possible even with the high number of students. This is made possible through a strong command of the alphabet, the ability to produce basic words, and good performance in reading and writing in Bamanankan. French is introduced as an oral exercise for 25 percent of classroom time in second grade.

Mamadou Tangara, the school's principal, noted that the project is making a real difference to the school: "I appreciate the rigorous monitoring work of this project, which is crucial for our students' performance and success."

"Modibo is my fifth child and the only one who attends a SIRA school. This is the first time that any of my children is able to write in second grade. Modibo writes his first and last name and any other name. Thanks to the SIRA support, he has already mastered the multiplication table. I am very proud of him," said Traoré Mariam Barry.

Some of the techniques used are class news, where children generate sentences based on their daily life experiences to teach encoding and decoding; guided reading to teach comprehension and vocabulary; and guided writing to teach writing skills.

More and more teachers are feeling empowered by these new teaching strategies and a sense of professionalism have begun to emerge. Along with the changes in the classroom, a community awareness campaign helps parents understand the advantages of starting their young children in a language they understand. Parents are comforted to know that learning in the Bamanankan language actually helps their children learn French later on. The commitment to bilingual education has never been an issue for Tangara, who has been eager to implement each technique developed by the USAID project. "I appreciate the SIRA approach," he says, "because students learn by playing. Reading and writing are the most important skills children can develop."

"The SIRA approach is the only solution to address reading-writing problems," says second grade teacher Diakaridia Diarra. "I like the fact that children first learn letters, names and sounds. This really helps lay a solid foundation because the child understands everything and is engaged. Today, I am so proud of my students, and I hope other schools will also benefit from this innovative and effective approach."

The Fadjiguila school successfully maintains a high recruitment rate. Parents in neighboring schools have heard about the difference in student learning. Many have taken their children out of other schools and enrolled them in the Fadjiguila school.

Mamou Coulibaly, another parent, adds: "My nieces, Mariam in grade 2 and Habi in grade 1, are both attending Fadjiguila community school. At home, they spend their time studying their lessons and they always have fun while they learn. Teaching early grade reading in Bambara [Bamanankan] is good for our children."

The SIRA project, which runs from 2016 to 2021, works to improve reading and writing instruction in the national language of Bamanankan in first and second grades in nearly 4,000 schools in the regions of Koulikoro, Sikasso, Ségou and the district of Bamako. So far, more than 264,000 students have benefited from this teaching approach.