
[The USAID Mali Selected Integrated Reading Activity: Teaching reading and writing in the national language](#)

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Mother tongue instruction

Language and education

Quality of education

Mali is facing an early learning crisis

In 2015, the findings from the [Early Grade Reading Assessment study](#), conducted in three regions of Mali (Koulikoro, Sikasso and Ségou) revealed that 66% of 2nd grade students were unable to read a single word correctly in Bamanankan, and 70% in French, depending on the chosen language of instruction. Only 2% of pupils achieved the minimum standard, as defined by the Malian Ministry of Education, of 31 words a minute read correctly. In 2015, Mali also adopted a new two-year sectoral strategy (2015-2016), the [Programme Intérimaire de Relance du Secteur de l'Éducation et de la Formation Professionnelle \(PIRSEF\)](#). Its priority for primary education was to address high failure and drop-out rates, and improve pupils' results in reading-writing, mathematics and science.

Studies have shown that early learning conducted in the mother tongue has a positive impact on linguistic skills in that language, academic achievement in other subjects, and on learning a second language. While Mali has pioneered the introduction of French/national language bilingual education, no less than ten national languages are spoken in the country with Bamanankan being the most widespread: 46% of Malians speak it as their mother tongue, and 82% use it on a daily basis.

Improving pupils' early learning by teaching in the national Bamanankan language

Addressing the challenge of quality of education for all means that it is essential to use national languages in schools, especially in the context of increasing access to primary education in rural areas. That is why, in February 2016, USAID, in partnership with [the Malian Ministry of National Education](#), launched [USAID/Mali SIRA](#).



The project is intended to support the improvement of reading-writing in Bamanankan for pupils in the 1st and 2nd grades of primary education in public schools, community schools and one teacher schools in the District of Bamako, and in the regions of Koulikoro, Ségou and Sikasso where Bamanankan is widely spoken. The project is implemented by the [Education Development Center \(EDC\)](#) and its partners: [Save The Children](#), [Œuvre Malienne d'Aide à l'Enfance au Sahel \(OMAES\)](#), [School to School \(STS\) International](#), Institut pour l'Éducation Populaire and [Cowater Sogema](#).

Instruction in the mother tongue cannot overcome pupils' learning difficulties alone. It must be accompanied by effective teaching methods and adapted learning tools. Teachers in the target schools are trained in a learning-to-read approach based on phonemic awareness, word decoding and understanding, rather than relying on the traditional methods of memorisation through repetition. Similarly, a range of educational tools have been designed including a manual in Bamanankan and a rhyming song alphabet primer. When students learn in their mother tongue it adds a playful dimension, which arouses the pupils' interest and helps them feel more at ease in the learning environment, as well as encouraging them to participate more actively in the classroom.

Mobilising resources for schools and early learning

To strengthen parents' involvement in their children's schooling, and to combat high drop-out rates and educational failure, community facilitators and volunteers carry out awareness-raising activities within communities and households. They raise parents' awareness about the importance of starting their children's education in a language they understand, educating their daughters, and getting involved in their children's learning by giving them as much support as possible at home. The facilitators organize after-school activities, such as reading-writing games with the children to improve their learning. Space and time for dialogue has also been created for the parents and the teachers.

Parents are directly involved in assessing the school's performance via a performance report or a [school report card](#). This tool fosters dialogue within the school community: notably, the parents help design a school improvement plan based on the results of their assessment.

To address the lack of a literate environment, create an interest in and enthusiasm for reading among children, and to establish a culture of reading, in 2017, the project implemented 42 Yeelenk?

partner communities (community reading-writing areas outside schools) or community library. Hosted and run by two community volunteers, Yeelenk?n? provide children and their parents with a range of reading materials and educational reading-writing games. The volunteers also make home visits to raise the awareness of parents on the themes of the Communication Campaign for Change in Social Behaviour. In 2018, 70 new Yeelenk?n? are to be established and this number will increase gradually each year thanks to a public-private partnership.

Assessing the impact of early learning in the national language

The project's civil society assessment tool is managed by a Malian partner, OMAES, which adapted the citizen assessment [B??kunko](#) to meet the requirements of the project, i.e. improving reading-writing skills in Bamanankan in lower grade classes. In 2017, a sample of 1st grade pupils - 43% of whom were girls - had their reading in Bamanankan assessed in five areas: the names/sounds of letters of the alphabet, syllabic reading, reading simple words and phrases, and the oral comprehension of a text. 61% of pupils knew the letters of the alphabet, 29% could read syllables, and 33% were able to orally understand a text. Their ability to read simple words and phrases is usually low after one year of schooling i.e. with a test pass rate of 14% and 9% respectively. The results of the assessment for the 2017-2018 school year will be published shortly.

While the teachers taking part in the 2009 EGRA study estimated that pupils needed two years to learn the alphabet, the SIRA project makes it possible for pupils to learn all the letters of the alphabet in three months, and start reading in the first grade. The use of the mother tongue as the language of instruction and the adoption of new teaching practices and materials by teachers, combined with the community-based approach promoted by the SIRA project, seem to be producing incontestable results.

Moreover, the EGRA mid-term results show that the number of students attaining the Malian standard of so many correctly read words in one minute has tripled, and in the region of Sikasso it has more than quadrupled. In 2015, not one pupil could read more than 30 words per minute in Bamanankan in the Sikasso region, today this figure has risen to 13.1%.

At the same time, STS International, in collaboration with the Department of Pedagogical Research and Assessment at the National Institute of Pedagogy, is implementing a training programme aimed at strengthening the capacity of managers to implement the EGRA assessment tool at local and regional levels at the end of the project. The training covers all aspects of test design and administration, data collection and analysis, and the dissemination of the assessment results. The first phase of the EGRA assessment is underway in the Ségou region.

STS also assesses parents' knowledge, practices, and attitudes towards reading in the project's target regions in order to develop tools and training courses to support children's reading-writing practice at home.

7,500 1st and 2nd grade primary school teachers, and about 4,000 school principals were trained in 2016 and 2017 enabling almost 300,000 pupils to benefit from the teaching method promoted by the USAID/Mali SIRA project. Given the spectacular results of the pupils, there has been strong ownership among parents and teachers involved in the project, which has sparked considerable interest from the nearby villages in the beneficiary schools.

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