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# French Language Instruction in The Gambia: An Analysis of the Current Situation

Jen Dickson

The information technology sector has greatly contributed to the transformation of our world into a globalized system. As more developments are made, goods and services are increasingly traded among different countries. Economically, globalization offers a lot to study—international policy, environmental effects, and macro and micro economies to name a few. However, it is the spillover of cultural interactions that arise as a result of economic interactions that I find most interesting. International meetings, easier mobility between nations, increased tourism, and multinational corporations are some of the types of circumstances that bring together people from different cultural backgrounds. In order to be successful, these interactions require a mutual understanding of cultural differences as well as the ability to communicate with one another. Language study is one way to acquire an ability that will help reach these goals. By learning a foreign language, the number and kinds of people with whom a person can communicate expands. Whether the basis for communication is an employer-employee interaction, a familial relationship, a political interest, or simply personal enrichment, knowing a foreign language facilitates smoother exchanges and allows a person to more effectively participate in our globalized world. As a French student and speaker I have had the opportunity to participate in situations and meet

people I otherwise would not have been able to. This has shown me the value of knowing a foreign language, French or otherwise, and I am interested to see how other people and countries involve themselves in the same process.

### Methodology

The Gambia is an anglophone country surrounded by a francophone country, Senegal. Gambia's official language is English, and the second official foreign language taught in schools is French. Due to The Gambia's cultural, political and economic closeness to former French colonies where French remains the official language, and as a French speaker myself, I wanted to research the current status of French language and French speakers in The Gambia. To carry out this research, I chose to study the availability and quality of French language instruction in The Gambia. I used surveys and interviews to gather a lot of my information. Some of the institutions I visited to conduct interviews and distribute surveys were St. Augustine's, St. Joseph's and Gambia Senior Secondary Schools, Marina International School, Gambia College, Projet d'Appui à la Diffusion à l'Enseignement du Français (PADEF) and the Alliance Franco-Gambienne. I prepared a packet of three questionnaires, the first about the desire to learn French, the second concerning attitudes towards French and French-speaking people, and the third dealing with reasons why studying French would be important. I modeled these surveys after those of Professor Leon James, (University of Hawaii), Foreign Language Attitude Questionnaire ([www.soc.hawaii.edu/leonj](http://www.soc.hawaii.edu/leonj)). To adapt them to my research, I substituted Gambian for Canadian, and French-speaking West Africa for France. These modifications made them relevant to people living in The Gambia. After making the changes, I administered a pretest to a small group of sixteen- and-seventeen-year-old boys. This assured me that the questions were clear, and gave me an idea of how long they would take to fill out. A total of 43 people, students, adults, Gambians and others,



*Jen relaxes by the seaside at Laybato after the first week of Mandinka language lessons.*

answered the surveys. I used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program to compile the data and to observe frequencies among answers to each question. From these results, I was able to draw conclusions about people's opinions relating to French. In the next three sections, I present different teachers' and students' perspectives about French in the Gambian school system. From the teacher's point of view, I discuss both their training process and some of the challenges they face as French teachers. As for the students, I pursue the reasons a typical student may or may not choose to study French in school.

## Training French Teachers

Concerning the availability of French language instruction in The Gambia, I decided the first and best place to look would be the Gambian school system. While other organizations, such as the Alliance Franco-Gambienne and the Ecole Française, also offer French experiences, fewer people have access to them for financial and other reasons. To start my research I visited Gambia College in Brikama, one of the tertiary educational institutions in The Gambia. After meeting with Momodou Tangara, head of the French Department, and Pierre Gomez, a French lecturer, I was able to get a feel for how the teacher-training program works. The French section of Gambia College was established in 1990. Prior to September 1999, teachers were recruited every other year and trained for only two years. Since then, teachers have been recruited annually, and spend an extra third year as a student teacher before earning their HTC (Higher Teaching Certificate). The goals of the HTC program are to master the French language, to know the principal rules governing the French language, to effectively teach the French language, and to know the diverse Francophone cultures (HTC French Course Syllabus 2000: 1). Overall, its aim is to prepare students to be effective French teachers.

Mr. Tangara emphasized the current desire to increase the number of Gambian French teachers relative to the number of foreign teachers. Whereas many French teachers come from other West African countries like Sierra Leone and Senegal, this past year's group of students consisted of 21 Gambians and one Senegalese. Perhaps this is because the Gambian government subsidized the Gambian students and not the Senegalese student. In general, that same school year (1999-2000), 69% of French teachers in The Gambia were Gambian, and 31% were from other West Africans countries (Huguet & Pénel 2000:15).

Even though these figures are lower than the national average of non-Gambian teachers (36% non-Gambians at the Junior level, 77% at the Senior level (Huguet & Pénel 2000: 16)), they still illustrate the heavy presence of foreign teachers in the Gambian school system.



*Gambian teacher from the Management Development Institute speaks with SMCM students.*

One reason Gambia College would want to recruit more Gambian teachers is for stability. Many non-Gambian teachers are working in The Gambia because of adverse political situations in their home countries. Once political stability is restored, they may return home, leaving their position unfilled. Some students prefer to receive their educational training in The Gambia because the schools are less crowded and more affordable, especially if they consider themselves "Gambian" in order not to pay for their courses. In this case, they may leave as soon as they have completed their training, creating a loss for The Gambia. Another benefit of having more Gambian French teachers is to promote a more comfortable atmosphere in the classroom. Sometimes, foreign teachers encounter problems of integration. For instance, if a teacher from an English-speaking country, like Ghana, with little or no teaching experience and a low level of French training, enters a Gambian classroom, students are likely to reject them because of their accent or lack of enthusiasm as a teacher. This lack of enthusiasm may be the result of personal problems of social adjustment. When teachers from other countries move to The Gambia, it takes time for them to adjust to their new surroundings, and the absence of familial support can make the problem even harder to cope with. If students reject the teacher inside the classroom setting, the teacher may in turn become further demoralized (Senghor 1997:4) and may lose any initiative they

once had of being an effective teacher. Sera Ndao, a French newscaster for GRTS, explained to me in an interview how she tried to get a job teaching French in a public school, but that “It’s difficult for outsiders to get students.”

While the majority of French teachers in The Gambia are Gambian, most of them, Gambian or otherwise, received their education from francophone systems, either totally or partially (see Table 6.1 below).

By providing more opportunities for Gambians to train as French teachers in their own country, it should be easier for more prospective teachers to do so. Training abroad can be expensive and requires leaving one’s home country for an extended

## Challenges That French Teachers Face

Apart from the lack of pedagogical training most French teachers face, they must also deal with a lack of material resources. It is hard to find French documents in The Gambia, particularly those useful in teaching. In some cases, teachers may have materials that aid in teaching French, but they are so far culturally removed that they become irrelevant in the Gambian classroom. Ousmane Senghor cites lessons about the weather and cooking recipes as two examples (Senghor 1997:16). These topics are specific to the culture of France and therefore require an understanding of that particular culture. They do not relate to the Gambian culture, making it difficult for students to learn. In a separate

### Anglophone & Francophone Certificates of Teachers

	Gambian Teachers	Non-Gambian Teachers	Total
Francophone Domain	70%	54.6%	65.2%
Anglophone Domain	30%	45.4%	34.8%

Table 6.1 From Huguet & Pénel 2000:18.

period of time. Scholarships can be difficult to find, and in some cases individual financial restrictions prevent future teachers from studying or training in francophone countries. Given these limitations, if The Gambia wishes to improve the quality of French language instruction, it is in everyone’s best interest to make teacher-training courses for French teachers more accessible. For example, PADEF offers a new master’s program (Diplôme d’Etudes Approfondies) to current French teachers in The Gambia as a locally affordable measure to further their command of French. The benefit of this program is that it gives Gambians access to an opportunity to continue their French studies without going abroad. Higher qualified teachers can enrich the academic environment in the classroom, benefiting both teachers and students. However, as a former French teacher pointed out to me during an interview, the disadvantage is that foreigners may see this as a chance to earn a cheap master’s, then leave The Gambia to look for a job with a higher salary. Although foreigners who come to study in The Gambia pose a greater risk to the stability of the teacher population than Gambians do, the scarcity of educational resources in The Gambia may be more of a concern than how likely foreign teachers are to stay in The Gambia.

document that focuses on the creation of a resource center for French teachers, Senghor brings up the point that neither The Gambia National Library nor the Alliance Franco-Gambienne provides pedagogical resources for French teachers (Senghor 2000:2). Teachers have virtually no access to multimedia tools to make learning more varied and interesting for their students.

In response to both the unmet demand for teacher-training and to the scarce amount of resources French teachers possess, PADEF has taken the initiative to create a resource center for those involved in teaching and learning French as well as in training French teachers. They hope that this center will furnish untrained teachers with the means to self-train, help French teachers overcome the lack of authentic French documents, and provide them with a number of multimedia tools (Senghor 2000:12). Equipped with a stronger foundation, teachers will be more likely to both fulfill their expected role as teachers and to motivate students to actively learn French.

Additional complications also exist for French teachers in Gambian schools. Oftentimes, school administrators, or the superiors of French teachers, do not speak French. In this type of situation, French teachers are unregulated, or even worse, unsupported. While this might not affect trained,

experienced teachers, those without pedagogical training may not know how to properly conduct a class, at the expense of the students. In a sense, there is a lack of incentive to help students effectively learn if teachers are not regulated. Former St. Augustine's Senior Secondary School French teacher Ebrima Mbaye stated that he never prepared his classes beforehand. Instead, he would decide in class what he was going to teach. His superior had total confidence in him because "he didn't have a choice, because he didn't speak French and couldn't control my work," (Senghor 1997: 6). Choosing a teaching method is also more challenging for French teachers than for teachers of other subjects. Traditional methods of teaching, such as memorization and repetition, do not apply to the communicative approach of teaching French, a method that stresses orality and cultural appreciation. This situation is doubly complex, considering students are used to more formal, written methods of instruction, and teachers lack training and materials for an oral approach.

### Teachers' Opinions about Students

During my interviews with teachers and administrators, I asked them to comment on the trends of student enrollment and interest in French classes over the years. Interestingly enough, I received a variety of answers. One view was that students are not motivated to learn French, even though they are capable of learning it. K.S. Koroma, French teacher at St. Augustine's Senior Secondary School, believes that technology brings English, rather than French, closer to The Gambia. Influences from the United States and the United Kingdom, through the media, music and otherwise, persuade students to concentrate more on English than on French. "They think English will enable them to go places," says Mr. Koroma. However, he also says students can easily learn French because they already know French words from Wolof and Mandinka, and The Gambia is geographically close to many French-speaking countries. Another opinion was that technology brings French closer to The Gambia. Television programs, movies and radio segments were named as technological sources of exposure to French.



*Gambian students usually speak several languages, and learning French provides them with another cultural and possible employment skill.*

Mrs. Lydia A. Forster, Vice Principal at Gambia Senior Secondary School, commented that students notice job advertisements that request a working knowledge of French. She believes this motivates students to study French. Mrs. Etta Gibril, French teacher at Marina International School, also commented that some of her students told her they secured a job because they could speak French.

### How Students Choose French: Incentives and Obstacles

The next part of my research took me to three senior secondary schools (Gambia High, St. Joseph's, and St. Augustine's) and one private school (Marina International School) to talk with students about learning French in the Gambian school system. They were all willing to help me with my project by answering a packet of questionnaires I prepared, in addition to general questions I asked. In turn, they also asked me questions about what it was like to be a student in America, and how I liked The Gambia.

Of the 26 students I surveyed, 92% who knew someone who could speak French (either a parent, teacher or friend) said that person influenced their choice to study French. When asked whether or not they felt their parents encouraged them to study French, 90% of the students agreed. Eighty-four-percent of them agreed that their parents stressed the importance that French will have for them when they

leave high school. While these results would seem encouraging, many people I interviewed and most of the documents I referred to, indicate the contrary. Regarding parent involvement, Senghor thinks they could do more to facilitate the learning of French. He says, "It's rare that parents care about what grade their student gets in French" (Senghor 1997:11), but are very concerned about what grades they get in subjects like English, science and math. He suggests that in order for parents to impress upon their children the importance of learning French, they should encourage them to listen to French programs on the radio, to read and write letters in French, and to maintain good relations with their Senegalese counterparts. Parents could also emphasize the practical importance of knowing French by referring to the growing number of francophone companies in The Gambia, like Elf and Gamtel. These seem like valid suggestions, especially considering that 96% of the students I surveyed agreed that knowing French will be useful in getting a good job, and 77% agreed that studying French is important to them so they can make good friends more easily among French-speaking people.

Apart from a few private schools that offer French at the primary level, such as Mrs. Ndow's and Marina International, students first learn French in grade 7. After primary school, students move on to junior secondary school for three years. During these years, French is taught two periods a week, required for grades 7 and 8, and then optional in grade 9. Prior to the 1994 school year, when junior secondary school was "upper basic," students were required to take French for three years, three periods a week, throughout forms 1, 2 and 3. The requirements of the new system, combined with the fact that the school year is closer to 35 weeks long than the official 39 weeks, drastically reduced the number of hours of French instruction. Given the assumption that an average class and corresponding textbook consists of 100 hours of instruction per year (Huguet & Pénel

2000:37), an even bigger loss is incurred. The table below illustrates total teaching hours and deficits for the possible schedules.

An hour and ten minutes of instruction per week is not sufficient for a foreign language class. In order for the communicative approach to learning French to be successful, and the goal of 100 hours of teaching time to be fulfilled, students would need at least four periods a week over 39 weeks to regularly practice their skills. Poor quality of teaching coupled with insufficient class time further exacerbates the conditions of French classes and may discourage students even more from continuing to study French.

The numbers show that not a lot of students continue to choose French as one of their electives since the new system of 1994/1995 was launched. In fact, the total number of grade 9 students has increased by 48.2% in the last five years, while the number of grade 9 students taking French has decreased by 12.43% (Huguet, Pénel 2000:8). Clearly, there must be something, or several things, persuading students to take courses other than French. One reason is they simply do not see the value in knowing French. The Gambia does not attract as many French tourists as German and Swedish, so there is little motivation to learn French in order to communicate with tourists. If there were French tourists, perhaps students, or Gambians in general, would be intrigued by their culture and language, possibly even aspiring to go to France someday. While it is true that The Gambia is surrounded by francophone Senegal and is neighbors with many other French-speaking West African countries, French is not the preferred means of communication among the majority of people. The presence of several widely spoken African languages, Mandinka and Wolof for example, allows citizens of different countries to communicate in languages other than the official languages of French and English. Therefore, one could argue that it is not necessary to know French to travel, or even work, in a country like

**Number of Hours of Teaching in the Upper Basic Cycle**

Teaching Time	2 Periods, 35 minutes each		3 Periods, 35 minutes each	
	# Teaching Hours per Year	# Deficit Hours per Year	# Teaching Hours per Year	# Deficit Hours per Year
39 weeks	45h 30m	54h 30m	68h 15m	31h 45m
35 weeks	41h	59h	61h 15m	38h 45m

Table 6.2 From Huguet & Pénel 2000: 39.

Senegal. This belief can be supported by the fact that, currently, many Senegalese migrate to The Gambia to find work. Apart from employment reasons, students would be even less motivated to learn French if their parents felt that it was of no benefit to them.

The different timetables that schools offer play a significant role when students determine what classes to take. There are a large number of courses offered to students each year, about 15 in junior secondary schools and 30 in senior secondary schools. As new subjects are added, students are given more choices to compete with French. This means they must choose their courses carefully, and often find conflicts in their schedules. For example, a student wishing to pursue a social science track in senior secondary school by taking courses like accounting would find that these classes conflict with the time slots for French classes. At Gambia Senior Secondary School, the administration found the crowded timetable was such a problem that they added a ninth period to get the French students back. Mrs. Forster, vice principal, said the best French students were often the science students, the very ones who were unable to take French because of scheduling conflicts. They also moved technical drawing classes to the weekend so those students could take French.

Another factor that affects which classes students choose are end-of-the-year exams. The final exam for grade 9 is called the JSSCE (Junior Secondary School Certificate Examination). In addition to the core subjects of English, math and sciences, students may elect to take exams for optional subjects as well. For each exam, a grade of 1 to 9 is awarded. Only grades 1

to 6 count as “success,” whereas grades 7 to 8 count as “pass”, and grade 9 counts as “fail.” For ninth graders, only the two best exam grades for elective subjects are calculated into the final JSSCE grade, regardless of how many exams a student takes. The final exam for grade 12, the WASSCE (West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination), is graded the same way, but the three or four best exam grades for elective subjects are considered (Huguet & Pénel 2000:21). It is therefore in students’ best interest to take only the exams they feel they will earn credit for. Given the fact that the rate of failure for French exams is usually over 50%, it “is not among the recommended subjects for success” (Huguet & Pénel 2000:30). The graph below shows the rates of success, pass, and fail of the grade 9 JSSCE over the past five years (Huguet & Pénel 2000:27). It is important to remember that only students who have a grade of “success” will be able to count the French exam into their final JSSCE grade. The overwhelming rate of failure is undoubtedly discouraging to students studying French, but the fact that most western universities do not accept the WASSCE as high school completion causes students to lose even more confidence in these exams (Gomez 2000).

Even if a student, at either the junior or senior secondary level, appreciated the value of knowing French, and was able to fit it into their schedule, and maybe even wanted to take the final exam, there is still the issue of low quality, uncaptivating teaching to dissuade them from taking French. As Sera Ndao put it, “Students don’t want to learn French because

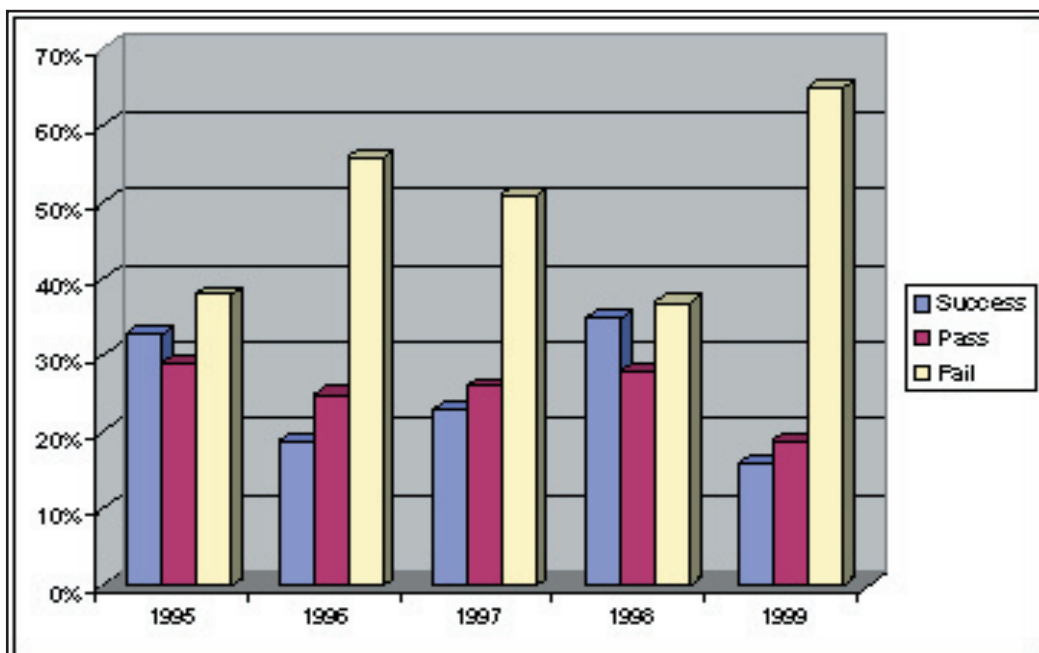


Figure 6.1 National Results of JSSCE French Exam 1995-1999.

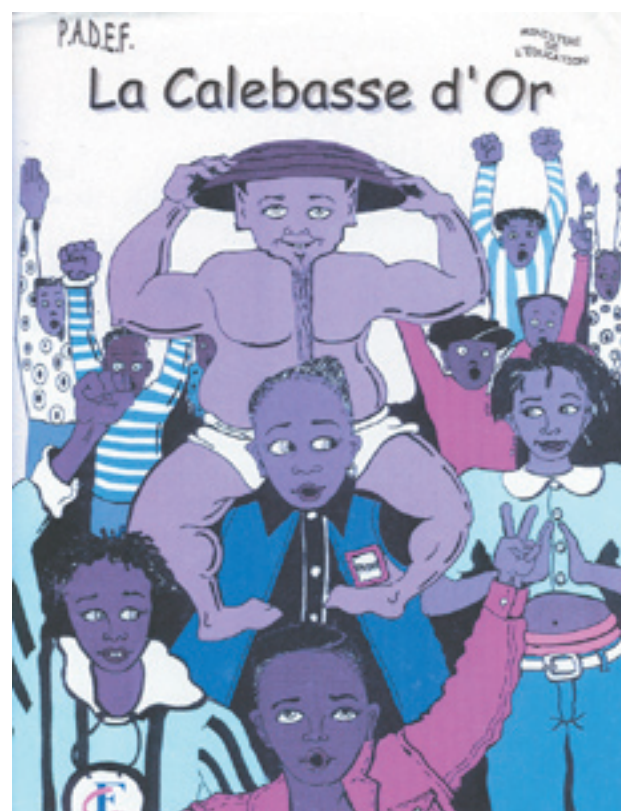
of the teachers.” Teachers with limited pedagogical training or access to multimedia resources may not be familiar with effective methods of teaching. In this case, they may resort to nothing more than written grammar exercises to enforce a specific lesson. Since speaking is a major goal of any language instruction, simply writing words without relating them to real-life situations seems pointless, notably at the junior secondary school level where students first learn French. In response to the need for better teaching methods, PADEF was asked to prepare a teaching syllabus for grades 7, 8 & 9 (Huguet & Pénel 2000: 39). This syllabus stresses the communicative aspect of teaching and learning French rather than such traditional methods as memorization. If students learn how to recognize oral situations, they will be better able to appropriately conjugate, use rules, and select vocabulary (Senghor 1997:15).

Learning grammar through real-life situations, and emphasizing activities that focus on oral and written comprehension effectively capture students’ interests. Cornelius Gomez, former senior secondary school French teacher, explained to me in detail his philosophy of orally engaging students in creative activities that were both practical and interesting. His goal was to move French away from the four walls of the classroom and take advantage of everyday contacts with French, including radio, television, and other French speakers. While in class, Mr. Gomez’s students would dramatize real life situations in French. Whether skits, poetry reading, story narration, or news presentations, these activities succeeded in encouraging students to speak French because they were engaged in what was going on. Mr. Gomez also made it a point to speak to his students in French all time, in and out of class. He claims his former students still greet him in French when they see each other on the street! Mr. Gomez’s example proves that students can begin to like the communicative approach to teaching and learning French, provided they are stimulated to try.

Unfortunately, teachers are not the only ones without sufficient material resources. There are rarely enough textbooks or dictionaries for every student, and schools’ French libraries are so poorly run that students do not know about them or the books are never returned (Senghor 1997:18). In an effort to compensate for the lack of French materials geared towards students, PADEF has created two publications, the newsletter *La Lune* and the comic strip series *Kondorong*. Thirty-five hundred copies of each issue of *La Lune* are distributed free of charge to Junior and senior secondary schools.

It contains news articles, games, and a response section to student letters, all written in a level of French easily understood by students. The *Kondorong* comic books are sold at five dalasis apiece for the benefit of student French clubs.

The results I obtained from the “Desire to Learn French Survey” were somewhat surprising, considering the numerous comments I heard about students not wanting to learn French. Eighty-one percent of students claimed that if French were not



*PADEF provides French reading materials that can help students build their vocabulary.*

taught in their school, they would want to learn it elsewhere, either through private lessons or in everyday situations. Only 8% of the students wanted the amount of French training required for each student to decrease, and 80% wanted it to increase. Based on these results, it seems that there are students who value the knowledge of French. Seventy percent of them thought French should be taught from primary through senior secondary school. Gambia College is entertaining the idea of training French primary school teachers, and I’m sure PADEF will fully support them. Lastly, 92% of the students I surveyed chose “very interesting” in response to how they find studying French, and no one chose “not interesting at all.”

Apparently, students may even like studying French. Maybe what they need are better resources and more qualified teachers to capture their desire.

## Conclusions

Statistics and numbers aside, I was impressed by the number of competent French speakers I came across during my six-week stay in The Gambia. Considering English is the official language, and most Gambians, or West Africans in general, speak more than one other African language, the number of French-speaking people in The Gambia seems even more remarkable. A “typical student” who uses English in school and some other situations outside of school (like talking to American students like me), is probably fluent in Wolof or Mandinka, and may know other African languages. French may be a student’s fourth, fifth, or even sixth language!

The Gambia is a small anglophone country where the opportunity to speak French exists because of the number of Senegalese living in The Gambia and The Gambia’s geographical situation. While The Gambia is fortunate that English, the most widely used language in the world, is their official language, the geographical reality of this small West African country is that French is equally important. The data from my surveys reveal that the interest and motivation to learn French are alive and well in The Gambia. Although I surveyed only a select group of individuals already somehow involved with French, it still proves that Gambians, and non-Gambians living in The Gambia, are aware of the value of learning and knowing French. The school system needs to address the constraints teachers and students face. However, and most importantly, they must not lose sight of the overall worth of fostering an environment where French is highly regarded in The Gambia.

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Mr. Cornelius Gomez, National Museum

Mr. Pierre Gomez, French lecturer at Gambia College

M. Pénel, technical assistant at PADEF

Mr. Ousmane Senghor, French teacher, PADEF

Mr. Momodou Tangara, head of French Department at Gambia College

Mrs. Sera Ndao, French newscaster at GRTS

Mrs. Lydia A. Forster, vice principal; Mr. John S. Coker, French teacher & Mrs. Angela Tuboku-Metzger, French teacher at Gambia Senior Secondary School

Mrs. Ndure, principal, & Mr. Reynolds, French teacher at St. Joseph’s Senior Secondary School

Mr. Charles Mendy, principal, & Mr. K.S. Koroma, French teacher at St. Augustine’s Senior Secondary School

Mrs. Etta Gibril, French teacher at Marina International School

A big thanks to everyone who answered the packet of questionnaires!



*Jen stands near the sign marking the border of Wuli district, Upper River Division, at the far eastern end of The Gambia.*