



LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION COUNTRY PROFILE

Liberia

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ABBREVIATIONS

AED	Academy for Educational Development
AQE	Accelerated Quality Education for Liberian Children
CODE	Canadian Organization for Development through Education
EGIDS	Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale
EGR	Early Grade Reading
EMIS	Education Management Information System
L1	First Language
L2	Second (or additional) Language
LEAP	Liberian Education Advancement Project
LEARN	Liberia Empowerment through Attendance, Reading, and Nutrition
LOI	Language of Instruction
LTP	Liberia Teacher Training Program
MOE	Ministry of Education
RCT	Randomized Control Trial
REEP-A	Research for Effective Education Programming–Africa
RTTI	Rural Teacher Training Institute
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture

INTRODUCTION

Enhancing reading skills in the early grades is a key education priority for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Despite some improvements in access and learning in sub-Saharan Africa, literacy levels in the early grades remain low, and progress has been slow. Efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the early grades have led to an increased focus on the role of the language of instruction (LOI). Recent research has demonstrated that mismatches between the LOI and the language that students and teachers speak and understand best, can hamper effective teaching and learning (University Research Co., 2019). Thus, it is critical to understand the LOI policy and linguistic context of a country when trying to design programs to improve literacy and learning outcomes.

Currently, USAID supports **Early Grade Reading (EGR) initiatives in 19 countries across sub-Saharan Africa**. Many policies in these countries have recently shifted toward adopting the mother tongue as the language for initial literacy acquisition, and then transitioning to a second or additional language, such as a regional, national, or international language, as the subsequent LOI.

Government policies and strategies related to teachers and LOI reflect country priorities, approaches, and objectives for early grade literacy. During the design-phase of donor-funded reading programs, decisions are made regarding the manner and extent to which national policies are incorporated into project design, and when alternative approaches or additional elements need to be considered. However, government policies on LOI, and other information relevant for informing design, are often difficult to find and are not easily accessible.

The LOI country profiles aim to address this need. The profiles will allow the USAID Africa Bureau, USAID Missions, and partner organizations to quickly understand the country's linguistic and policy context in order to design an approach that most effectively helps improve EGR outcomes. These profiles, designed for 18 of the countries with current or upcoming USAID EGR initiatives, aim to clearly and succinctly describe and illustrate the country's linguistic landscape and official LOI policy. This country profile in particular provides information on language policy and practice in Liberia.



LINGUISTIC CONTEXT

According to SIL International's *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, there are 31 established languages in Liberia (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2020). Of these, 27 are indigenous and four are non-indigenous. Further; two are institutional, 18 are developing, and eight are vigorous while two are in trouble and one is dying. For more information on how languages are categorized on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS), please see Table 1.

The official language of Liberia is English, which is spoken by 2.57 million Liberians out of a total population of 4.81 million (Eberhard et al., 2020). There are 74,000 Liberians who speak English as their first language (L1), and 2.5 million who speak it as a second language (L2).

The language of wider communication is called Liberian English, a unique form of English also known as Liberian Pidgin English or Liberian Kreyol. Liberian English was developed by the first group of Americo-Liberians who migrated to Liberia in the nineteenth century after their release from enslavement in the United States. Liberian English evolved from standard English and adopted elements of both French and the West African languages spoken nearby. There are 1.6 million Liberian English speakers across the country, with 113,000 L1 speakers and 1.5 million L2 speakers (Eberhard et al., 2020).

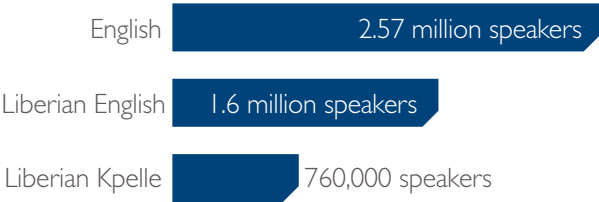
Other widely spoken languages include Liberian Kpelle (760,000 users), Bassa (655,300 users), Maan (390,000 users), and Klao (354,000 users). For more detailed information on the geographic dispersion of indigenous languages in Liberia, see Figure 2.

Table 1. Assessing Language Vitality: EGIDS Scale

Institutional	The language is used by institutions beyond the home and community
Developing	The language is in vigorous use and with literature in a standardized form
Vigorous	The language is not standardized but it is used among all generations
In Trouble	Intergenerational transmission is breaking down
Dying	Only fluent users, if any, are middle-aged or older
Extinct	The language is not used

Source: SIL International, n.d. For more information, please see: www.ethnologue.com/about/language-info

Most widely-spoken languages in Liberia

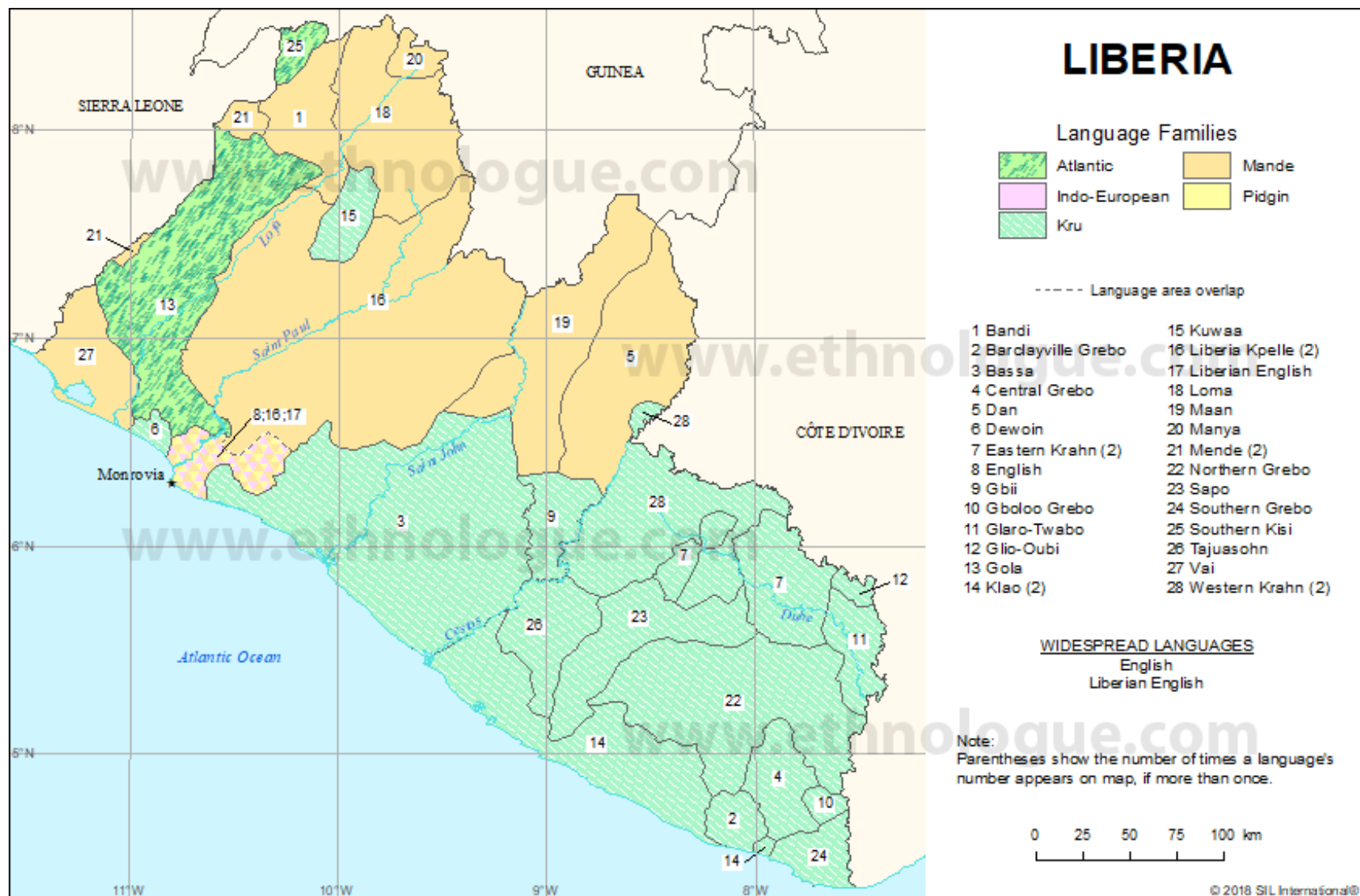


Source: Eberhard et al., 2020

Figure 1. Map of Liberia



Figure 2. Mapping of Indigenous Languages in Liberia



Source: Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). (2020). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Twenty-third edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>.

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION POLICY

In the Education Reform Act of 2011, the Ministry of Education (MOE) declared English to be the primary LOI for all grades (MOE, 2011). The Act also mandated the teaching of French as a subject for all secondary students. Despite all instruction taking place in English, many students speak a local language as their mother tongue and are not familiar with English upon entering the education system (IBIS, 2013). In fact, in a survey of 62 schools in Grand Bassa County, 47 of 62 school principals reported that their students do not speak English when starting primary school (Mitterhofer, 2015).

The Act also allows for a local language to be used as the LOI at the basic education level (Grades 1-9). County School Boards are responsible for determining the local language used, based upon the languages spoken in that region (MOE, 2016b). However, the Act does not specify in which grades a local language can be used as the LOI, and whether a local language is to be used alongside English or in place of English. In addition, Sign Language is not officially recognized within the LOI policy. However, the MOE enacted the Inclusive Education Policy in 2019 which highlights the importance of ensuring students who are deaf or hard of hearing receive education in their native language (MOE, 2018).

The Education Reform Act of 2011 also called for the establishment of a Center for Curriculum Development and Research, which would be responsible for developing curriculum and instructional materials for all schools, including, if sought, local language curricula. In 2019, the MOE revised the national curriculum for all grades. Draft forms of the curricula are available on the MOE's website.¹ The revised primary curriculum shifts to a competency-based approach and includes French as a subject, which was previously only required for secondary students. The revised curriculum does not appear to include local language instruction.

There is a large presence of private education providers in Liberia, with almost 49% of all primary school students enrolled in private primary schools (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020). Education Management Information System (EMIS) data from the MOE revealed that more than 90% of primary schools in Liberia utilize the national curriculum and, thus, utilize English as the medium of instruction (HALI Access Network, n.d.).

¹ For more information on the draft national curriculum, see: <http://moe-liberia.org/national-curriculum/>

CLASS TIME

The Education Reform Act of 2011 implemented a 9-3-4 structure, in which students receive nine years of basic education (six years of primary followed by three years of lower secondary education), three years of upper secondary education or technical/vocational education, and then four years of university education.

The school year for primary students consists of 200 days of instruction, divided into two semesters (MOE, 2016a). The school day lasts 5 hours and is divided into six, 45-minute instructional periods (MOE, 2016a). The instructional periods cover the seven subjects outlined in the revised, competency-based national curriculum. For more information on the subjects taught in primary school, please see Table 2.

It is unclear how widely the revised curriculum is being implemented. As of May 2020, teachers had not received training on the new curriculum and new teaching and learning materials that align to the curriculum had not yet been developed (MOE, 2020). School closures due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic have further hampered implementation of the revised curriculum (MOE, 2020).

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING CURRICULUM FOR LITERACY

The MOE's Bureau for Teacher Education oversees all pre-service and in-service teacher education in Liberia. This includes the activities of three Rural Teacher Training Institutions (RTTIs), which focus solely on teacher education, as well as several colleges and universities that offer teacher education and education administration programs (MOE, 2016a).

To become a primary school teacher in Liberia, candidates must, at a minimum, have completed upper secondary school and earned a Grade C Teaching Certificate (MOE, 2011). C Certificates are earned through a one-year training at one of the three RTTIs across Liberia (MOE, 2016b). The curriculum for the C Certificate focuses on five main subjects: foundations of education, teaching content, pedagogy, child development, and teaching practice (ZRTTI, 2019). The foundations of education component includes training on basic literacy and numeracy skills development (ZRTTI, 2019).

Despite these requirements, many teachers do not meet these qualifications. Data from the MOE revealed that, as of 2015, only about 51% of teachers in Liberia held the minimum teaching qualifications for the grade in which they teach. In primary schools, only 62.3% of teachers were found to hold the correct teaching qualifications (MOE, 2016a).

Table 2. National Curriculum for Grades 1 – 6

Subjects
English
Mathematics
General Science
Social Studies
Physical Education
French
Moral and Religious Education

Source: MOE, n.d.

TEACHER LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY/LANGUAGE SPECIFIC TRAINING

Prior to the Education Reform Act of 2011, which implemented a new set of teaching qualifications, many teachers who entered the workforce had not undergone teacher training. Many teachers first took up the role during the country's series of civil wars, between 1989 and 2003, when education and teacher trainings programs were extremely difficult to access (HALI Access Network, n.d.). As such, some of these teachers may not have completed secondary school and lack foundational literacy skills (MOE, 2016a). Even qualified teachers may not have the requisite knowledge of English to teach at the primary level. According to the World Bank, the 2017 MOE Teacher Verification and Testing program, which aimed to verify teacher qualifications and competencies, revealed that 40% of qualified primary school teachers did not possess the minimum required knowledge of English needed to be an effective instructor (World Bank, 2017).

While some teachers may lack knowledge of English, other teachers may have low literacy rates in their mother tongue. For instance, a language mapping assessment of Grand Bassa County revealed that, while 89% of 170 teachers interviewed spoke Bassa as their L1 or L2, only 46% could read Bassa, and 18% could write Bassa (Mitterhofer, 2015). Thus, low literacy rates in local languages may make it difficult to implement local language instruction.

No information could be located on language-specific training for teachers during pre-service or in-service programs.

TEACHER IN-SERVICE

To address the challenge of unqualified teachers, the MOE has instituted an in-service C Certificate program that allows teachers already working in schools to earn their teaching qualification. The in-service program follows the same curriculum as the pre-

service C Certificate program. The training lasts for nine months and includes a six-week onsite training at an RTTI during school holidays followed by eight months of school-based training (MOE, 2016b). The school-based training includes monthly classes on topics in the C Certificate curriculum and mentoring (MOE, 2016b).

Additional opportunities for professional development appear limited. As noted by the MOE in its *Getting to Best Education Sector Plan 2017-2021*, school and district-level education officials often do not have the capacity or resources to conduct professional development activities (MOE, 2016b). Furthermore, between implementing pre-service and in-service C Certificate training, RTTIs have little capacity to conduct additional in-service training (MOE, 2016b).

USAID has supported in-service teacher training through its Liberia Teacher Training Program (LTTP) Phase I and II. In Phase I (2006 - 2010), the Academy for Educational Development (AED)², the Mississippi Consortium for International Development, and the International Rescue Committee worked to strengthen the teacher education and professional development system. This included re-establishing the C Certificate training program at two RTTIs where it had been previously unavailable, developing a new curriculum for pre-service and in-service training, and improving training facilities for teachers (AED, 2010). At the end of the project, 2,383 teachers had earned a C Certificate through the program (AED, 2010).

In LTTP Phase II (2010 – 2015), USAID, in partnership with FHI 360 and RTI International, worked to establish a teacher professional development system and build the capacity of the MOE to manage the system. In particular, the activity focused on improving both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs, with an emphasis on EGR and mathematics instruction (RTI International, 2016). This included model lesson demonstrations, one-on-one coaching sessions, and workshops to improve EGR instruction for teachers in five counties across Liberia (RTI International, 2016).

2 In 2011, Family Health International (FHI) acquired AED and became FHI 360.

USAID READING PROGRAM APPROACH AND ONGOING PROGRAMS

In alignment with the U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education, USAID's programming in Liberia aims to support the needs and priorities of the partner country to ensure that gains from the programming are sustained.

As such, USAID launched **Read Liberia**, a five-year activity (2017- 2022) implemented by RTI International, which aims to improve EGR instruction in Liberia as well as support the development of new EGR policies. In particular, Read Liberia is working to improve the early grade reading skills of 57,600 students in Grades 1 and 2 in 640 schools in six targeted counties: Lofa, Bong, Grand Bassa, Nimba, Margibi, and Montserrado. In addition, the activity will also pilot a model for improving the vocabulary skills of 2,700 kindergarten students in 60 of the 640 schools in which Read Liberia is active (USAID, 2019).

At the school level, Read Liberia provides training and coaching for teachers as well as teaching and learning materials to support EGR instruction (RTI International, 2018). The activity also aims to increase private sector, community, and parental support for reading and improved EGR instruction to ensure that the gains made during the activity are sustained.

USAID also launched **Accelerated Quality Education for Liberian Children (AQE)**, a four-year (2017 –2021) activity implemented by Education Development Center, which aims to support 48,000 out-of-school and overage learners in accessing quality educational opportunities in the same six target counties as Read Liberia. In particular, AQE offers learners a streamlined version of primary education, condensing the timeline for completion from six years to three years, and aims to assist the country in institutionalizing programs for accelerated learning (USAID, n.d.).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITHIN USAID PROJECTS

One of Read Liberia's primary objectives is to strengthen community engagement with reading and build support for improved, evidence-based EGR instruction. To accomplish this, the activity supports parent-teacher associations and community-based organizations in setting up spaces designated for reading and trains family and community members in behaviors that can support their student's reading. The activity also utilizes social messaging campaigns to promote behaviors that support students' reading (USAID, 2019).

AQE also works closely with community members to promote education and safe learning environments. The activity has engaged communities through radio programs promoting the importance of education and trainings which help community members become advocates for quality education (USAID, n.d.).

OTHER DONOR FUNDED READING PROGRAMS

Alongside USAID, several other organizations are involved in implementing projects to address literacy and language issues across Liberia, which are described below.

Canadian Organization for Development through Education (CODE) and WE-CARE Foundation's Reading Liberia Program³

In 2020, CODE and the WE-CARE Foundation partnered to launch the Reading Liberia program, a two-year initiative (2020-2022) which aims to improve learning outcomes for 5,000 students in 40 schools across Bomi, Margibi, and Montserrado counties. The program will deliver training and coaching to teachers, librarians, and school management staff on learner-centered approaches to support EGR as well as guidance on developing and maintaining school libraries. The program will also develop and distribute books that align with the primary school curriculum to schools with limited materials (CODE, n.d.).

³ For more information, see: <https://code.ngo/approach/literacy-programs/reading-liberia/>

Liberian Education Advancement Project (LEAP)

In response to low literacy rates and poor learning outcomes in public schools, the MOE initiated LEAP in 2016, a public-private partnership to support school management. LEAP was initially piloted in 93 public primary schools, where management responsibilities were delegated to eight private education providers (Romero and Sandefur, 2019). The MOE paid providers on a per-pupil basis (50 U.S. dollars from the MOE, which is the estimated government expenditure per child in all public schools plus an additional 50 U.S. dollars provided by private philanthropists). The intervention to improve learning outcomes was determined by the individual providers themselves (Romero and Sandefur, 2019). A randomized control trial (RCT) was conducted to evaluate the impact of the pilot program on learning outcomes in the partnership schools. Overall, the RCT found considerable heterogeneity across the eight private education providers in regards to improvements in learning outcomes, access to education, and child safety.⁴ Providers that were found to increase learning outcomes and deliver cost-effective education services had their contracts renewed. The initiative is now in its fifth year of implementation and has expanded to 194 primary schools across Liberia.

⁴ For full results of the RCT, see: <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/beyond-short-term-learning-gains-impact-outsourcing-schools-liberia-after-three-years.pdf>

McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Nutrition's Liberia Empowerment through Attendance, Reading and Nutrition (LEARN)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched the five-year (2017-2022) LEARN activity through its McGovern-Dole International Food for Education mechanism. Implemented by Save the Children in partnership with Mercy Corps and various government stakeholders, the activity aims to improve attendance, attentiveness, and literacy outcomes for students in Grades 1-6 by decreasing short-term hunger and improving students' overall health and nutrition. This includes providing school feeding and take-home rations as well as the provision of teacher training, teaching and learning materials, and the distribution of nutritional supplements and various medications (IMPAQ International, 2018).

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) COVID-19 Response

UNICEF awarded a \$7 million grant to the MOE to address the ongoing challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. This grant aims to support continuity of education for Liberian students by developing distance learning platforms, teaching and learning materials for distance learning, accelerated education programs, and health kits to ensure a safe transition back to schools (Global Partnership for Education, n.d.). The grant will also support the MOE in providing health and psychosocial support to students and school staff during the pandemic (Global Partnership for Education, n.d.).

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