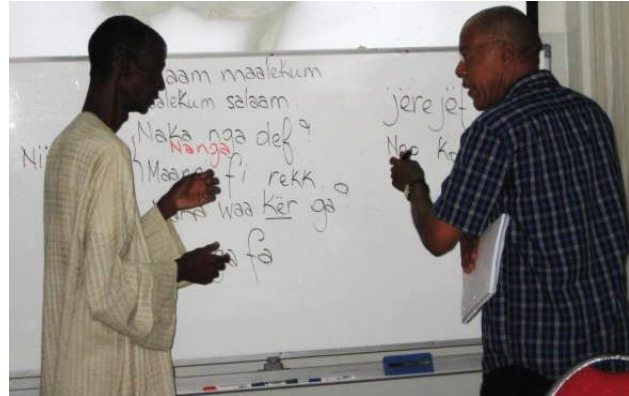


Fulbright Hays GPA Senegal Week Two

Dakar – July 4, 2017

Nanga def!! We are well into our study of Wolof, and I find the language and the culture both intriguing. Our Wolof instructor adds a quiet but disarming sense of humor to his 30 years of experience teaching Wolof to Peace Corps groups, and we immediately feel at ease. The size of our group (13) and perhaps our collective ages (the majority of us well beyond “thirty-something”) give our language class a character of its own. We have been practicing greetings and learning about the importance of social courtesies, lessons punctuated with lots of laughter and exclamations of *baax na!* (it is good) when we manage to enunciate clearly the double vowels without too much of the beginning speaker’s exaggeration or to passably tackle the nasalized and guttural consonants. I appreciate the tips to help remember some of the words. For example, just as I wondered how to remember the Wolof word for “thank you” (*jerejef*), he would say, “And then there’s Mr. Jerry and Mr. Jeff!” Fantastic!!



Bits of grammar are sprinkled throughout the conversational emphasis in the class. I am relieved that learning how to conjugate classes of verbs and apply gender markers to words will not be a part of learning this language. Wolof verbs do not change. There are no adjectives in Wolof, and we learn that even colors are function as verbs. The absence of the “to be” verb reveals a clear parallel to the syntax of black vernacular English, and I begin to wonder how much of Black dialect may have African linguistic roots.

While Wolof is spoken by about 90% of the population in Senegal, it is not recognized as one of the national languages. The national language is French, and French is the language of instruction in the schools. I understand more clearly now what the young Senegalese man who spoke to our group during the pre-departure orientation meant when he said that he grew up speaking Wolof but could not write the language. A French-speaking immigrant from Senegal, he had to quickly learn English once in the US. While we are in Dakar, Senegalese speak Wolof to one another. It is a language that unifies both those who have and have not received formal education. My ear picks up a familiar word here and there from conversations and from the radio playing in the taxis. However, practicing Wolof becomes a more deliberate undertaking once we leave the language class since we are surrounded by French language, and as recognizable foreigners, greeted initially with “*Bonjour, ça va?*” A few of us must reach far into the recesses of our memory to retrieve what was retained from past French lessons in order to reply to these greetings or to read restaurant menus when we dine out.

Until our Wolof vocabulary expands, we accept the welcomed responses to our timidly offered Wolof sentences and wait for the next lesson. We develop a greater appreciation for the effort of the multilinguals who come to the US and are pressured culturally to learn English as quickly as possible and who return at the end of each day—as we are doing—to the comfort of a household that speaks a language that is familiar to them rather than the language they are trying to learn. Language immersion takes on another meaning when we walk in another’s shoes. *Ba suba!* (Until tomorrow!)