Since 2000, Mauritania has been under a modern bilingual education system, with all children being taught in both French and Arabic. Although expected to teach in both languages, a significant percentage of teachers face challenges with the second language which is most often French.

To facilitate the acquisition of French language by marginalized children and adolescents, UNICEF Mauritania partnered with Akelius Foundation to provide access to Akelius Digital French Course – an innovative digital learning application that works online and offline – which aims to:

- Enable out-of-school children and young people to improve acquisition of the French language, and to acquire a sufficient level of French to enter formal schooling.
- Strengthen innovative teaching practices such as use of ICT and blended approaches.

The pilot and the implementation phase of the digital learning application took place in two learning centers: the Language Training & Strengthening Centre (CREL), a university-based organization and one of the main actors in language learning in Mauritania located in the Tevragn Zeina district in Nouakchott; and Assistance Education (AED), an NGO that works with vulnerable and out-of-school children in Nouakchott’s Arafat district.

After a successful project pilot in 2019, during which the application was contextualized and tested for A1 level (beginner – elementary) users with 26 teachers, a second phase 2-year phase (2020-2022) is underway which includes expansion of the use of the application through institutionalization in the formal education sector with the Ministry of Education and through partnerships with civil society organizations.
The Akelius Digital French Course is currently the only operational digital learning program in Mauritania and it has great potential for scale up. However, one of the main obstacles to scale is the limited reach and high cost of the internet as well as low levels of digital literacy. Given these challenges, an offline version of the course was developed for young people to use in learning centers.

RESULTS
Since June 2019, over 1,100 adolescents and young adults (49 per cent girls and 51 per cent boys) have strengthened their skills in French using the Akelius digital learning application.

The Akelius team, with support from Lebanese non-profit Ana Aqra Association (that also supported an Akelius pilot in Lebanon) trained 26 teachers and teaching assistants at CREL and AED on child-centred pedagogy, interactive teaching approaches, blended teaching and learning approaches, and use of technology to strengthen language teaching.

Lastly, the Akelius project equipped the CREL with quality pedagogical/learning content as well as a modern digital environment (IT lab, dedicated IT room and safe storage). As a result, the pedagogical centre for the professional development of teachers has been enhanced for the benefit of all CREL teachers and their students.

LESSONS LEARNED
• **Enable scope for platform re-design:** Utilizing user feedback during the first year of the project, the e-learning application was redesigned in Year 2 to be more user friendly and adaptable to different levels of users.

• **Offline functions in poor connectivity settings:** Slow internet connections hampered the use of the online application. As a result, an offline version was used in the centers. However, there is a need to pursue the support to the functioning the platform in providing updated learning and teaching content to fully optimize the application for usage in low connectivity settings, and thus enable the usage of high-quality interactive content.

• **Teacher training:** To ensure the application is used effectively, an online training and guidance manuals for teachers on integrating technology in lessons was implemented.

• **Increase in the number of hours:** In the first year of implementation, 4 class hours per week was found to be insufficient for learners. In the second year of implementation, the number of class hours increased from 4 to 6 hours per week at the CREL and up to 12 hours per week in AED.

NEXT STEPS
Beyond 2022, the vision is for the digital French language platform to be expanded in Mauritania and beyond in the West and Central Africa region with additional civil society partners. In Mauritania, its institutionalization in the formal education sector with the Ministry of Education will be initiated, to contribute to an improvement of the quality of teaching and overall pedagogical environment. The project will also serve as an entry point for the development of a national e-learning strategy steered by UNICEF with its main partners in the education sector such as Agence Française de Développement (AFD), World Bank, and others. It aims at supporting access to digital learning to 2000 children and adolescents (50 per cent of girls) and improving skills in digital teaching for 100 teachers and 60 supervisory staff as direct beneficiaries. Approximately 1,000 community members, mostly parents, will be indirect beneficiaries.

Cost effectiveness: Akelius Foundation contributed a total of US $837,861 for the implementation of the project. These funds have enabled the purchase of tablets, headphones and charging cases. They have also covered the costs of teacher training. After the project ends in 2022, both centers will continue to benefit from the use of the equipment and the language course to further improve children's skills.

For more information, please contact:
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