



“Learning a different language may be difficult but can be supported by the knowledge gained from the first language”

My name is **Davy Kalemba**. I am from Zambia. I served in the Ministry of General Education for 20 years in various positions, as a teacher, headteacher, resource centre coordinator responsible for the coordination of in-service training programmes, and as a lecturer in two Universities and one College of Education. I currently work for VVOB in Zambia on the USAID-Let’s Read Project as a Provincial Early Childhood Education Coach.

Out of the several languages spoken in Zambia, I speak English, Kiikaonde, Luvale, Lunda, Bemba, Luchazi, Mbunda, a bit of Nyanja and Silozi. Just imagine over 70 different languages are spoken in Zambia, it wouldn’t be wrong to think that because of this diversity of languages the country would be plunged into ethnic conflicts. But, strangely enough, the country has been a haven of peace since independence in 1964, though with minor pockets of conflicts in isolated places. A contributing factor is Zambia’s official language which happens to be English. With this decision, no particular tribe feels superior to others. Furthermore, the coming together of different people from different tribal backgrounds to the urban area has led to people marrying across tribal lines which was not common in the past.

Multilingualism can be both a problem and a resource. Problems caused by multilingualism can easily be seen at both individual and societal level. Multilingual people living in multilingual areas are daily faced with the questions of which language to use. It is almost impossible to select only one language. Such polyglots usually switch back and forth between the languages. The resulting admixture makes it difficult for outside observers to understand. Therefore, it tends to be considered a bastardised blend of languages. Another challenge multilingual people encounter is individual language loss or the decrease of a language that is less used. A society could gradually experience the death of a language. Multilingualism can threaten nationalism as a common language holds importance in the unity of a nation. The development of a sense of a nation could be more difficult for a multilingual state like Zambia.

But fortunately, there are a lot of advantages, particularly in education. Multilingualism creates cultural awareness, enhances appreciation of local languages, reinforces adjustment in society and enhances cross-cultural communication skills. Also, multilingualism provides a competitive edge in today’s job market. Besides the academic and professional credentials, employers also look for fluency in the desired languages as an added advantage. Therefore, being multilingual is a plus to any job seeker in this millennium. This can only be realised if multilingualism is enshrined in the school curriculum. A study conducted by the American Council of Education (ACE) says that it is important to speak multiple languages to compete successfully in the global economy.

Encouraging the use of indigenous languages in education besides the national and official languages enhances multilingualism. And that is why Zambia is implementing a multilingualism approach in the education system since 2013. Education is, moreover, the most effective through mother tongue instructions. Learning a different language may be difficult but can be supported by the knowledge gained from the first language.