

Babel  
By Woody M. Collins  
Congo Helping Hands, Inc.  
April 21, 2007

And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." Genesis 11:6-7

I am quite adept at catching a taxi from the center of Kananga to north side of the city. It is a mere 3 miles but in the heat of the day and with the crowded streets and side ways, it is easier to ride in a taxi. And it costs less than 75 cents for the round trip. Dr. Bernard asked me, how I get by using the taxi with a little knowledge of French and almost no knowledge of Tshiluba. I told him it was simple. Taxis going to north side leave at one point have only one route, so you only have to remind the driver when you want to get out. Just about any word will remind him! And riding back to the center of the Kananga is easier because you stay in taxi until it turns around to go back to the north side again. He laughed at me and said Congo is like the aftermath of Babel.

Here's what Wikipedia, the online free encyclopedia, says about languages in the Congo. "There are an estimated total of 242 languages spoken in the Congo. Out of these, only four have the status of national languages: Kongo, Lingala, Tshiluba and Swahili. French is the official language of the country. It is meant to be an ethnically neutral language, to ease communication between all the different ethnic groups of the Congo. When the country was a Belgian colony, the four national languages were already used in primary schools, which make the country one of the few to have had literacy in local languages during the occupation by Europeans."

From my perspective, language and literacy in the Congo is a BIG problem and go together. Only 67 percent of the population (male - 76 percent and female - 55 percent) age 15 and over can read and write French or one of the national languages. To be really effective, one should know at least three languages, one of the national

languages, French, and a local tribal language. In our village of Bulape, you will hear three languages spoken to varying degrees. Everyone speaks the tribal language of Tshikete and it is spoken most of the time. Also, almost everyone speaks some Tshiluba. But I estimate, only 25 to 50 percent of the men and only 5 to 10 percent of the women may speak some French. The tragedy is almost all of the school textbooks are produced in French. And I have only seen a hand full of books in Tshiluba. In summary, you learn to read and write French when you go to school. We are committed to get and keep more children especially girls in school. Then the literacy rate will improve as more people learn to speak and write French. As a minimum, a good knowledge of French is necessary for use of the internet and its vast amount resources, and to be effective both nationally and internationally. Finally, the ability to speak and write English opens even bigger doors to opportunities.

Thanks for your continued prayers and support. With your help, we provided French textbooks to the teachers and students in the Bulape schools. If you would like to know more about any of our education programs, please contact me. Together, we can make a difference.

PS: Dr. Bernard wanted to know the third major spoken language in the United States after English and Spanish; Arabic, Italian, German, or French? I was clueless!

Blessings,

Woody M. Collins  
President  
Congo Helping Hands  
"Strengthening the Heart of Africa"

(317) 698-7643 USA  
(243) 812813597 DR Congo

[WMCollins@CongoHelpingHands.org](mailto:WMCollins@CongoHelpingHands.org)  
[www.CongoHelpingHands.org](http://www.CongoHelpingHands.org)