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# THE BIDIMENSIONAL UTILITY OF ENGLISH IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: INDIVIDUAL BENEFITS AND COLLECTIVE FUNCTIONS

By

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## **Résumé**

*Cette étude analyse l'utilité bidimensionnelle de l'anglais en République démocratique du Congo, entendue comme l'articulation entre les bénéfices individuels et les fonctions collectives de cette langue. Dans un environnement constitutionnellement francophone et structurellement multilingue, l'anglais ne possède ni le statut de langue officielle ni celui de langue nationale. Sa visibilité progresse néanmoins dans l'enseignement, la recherche, les organisations internationales, les entreprises, la communication numérique, la publicité et certaines productions culturelles. L'article soutient que cette progression ne doit pas être confondue avec une preuve automatique de mobilité sociale ou de développement.*

*La recherche adopte une démarche qualitative, documentaire et analytique. Elle mobilise la littérature citée par l'auteur et soumet à une lecture critique une enquête exploratoire de 2020 dont le manuscrit initial ne précise pas l'échantillon. Les résultats montrent que l'anglais peut élargir, au niveau individuel, l'accès aux ressources scientifiques, à certaines possibilités professionnelles et aux réseaux transnationaux. Au niveau collectif, il peut soutenir la coopération régionale, l'internationalisation universitaire et les échanges économiques. Ces avantages demeurent conditionnels : ils dépendent de la qualité de la formation, de l'égalité d'accès et de l'articulation avec le français et les langues nationales. L'étude recommande donc une politique multilingue additive, fondée sur des programmes contextualisés, la formation des enseignants et une évaluation empirique des besoins, plutôt qu'une officialisation insuffisamment étayée.*

**Mots-clés :** anglais ; utilité bidimensionnelle ; multilinguisme ; politique linguistique ; enseignement ; République démocratique du Congo.

## **Abstract**

*This study examines the bidimensional utility of English in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, understood as the relationship between individual benefits and collective functions. The country is constitutionally Francophone and structurally multilingual; English is neither an official nor a national language. Yet its visibility has increased in education, research, international organisations, business, digital communication, advertising and some forms of cultural production. The article argues that this growing visibility should not be treated as automatic evidence of social mobility or national development.*

*The study follows a qualitative, documentary and analytical approach. It draws on the literature cited by the author and critically revisits a 2020 exploratory inquiry*

*whose sample is not specified in the initial manuscript. The findings suggest that, at the individual level, English may expand access to scientific resources, selected employment opportunities and transnational networks. At the collective level, it may support regional cooperation, university internationalisation and economic exchange. These benefits remain conditional upon training quality, equitable access and coordination with French and the national languages. The article therefore recommends an additive multilingual policy based on contextualised curricula, teacher development and empirical needs assessment, rather than an insufficiently substantiated move towards official-language status.*

**Keywords:** English; bidimensional utility; multilingualism; language policy; education; Democratic Republic of the Congo.

## INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is characterised by extensive linguistic diversity. Article 1 of the Constitution identifies French as the official language and Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba as national languages, while requiring the State to promote them without discrimination and protect the country's other languages as part of its cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup> English does not possess either of these constitutional statuses. It is generally taught and used as a foreign language, although its presence has become more visible in selected social, educational and economic domains.

This visibility is connected with the DRC's location among several countries where English or Swahili-English bilingual repertoires are important, the presence of international organisations and companies, digital communication, scientific publishing and cross-border mobility. Previous scholarship has described English as rising within a predominantly Francophone Congolese environment.<sup>2</sup> Other studies have identified its symbolic and communicative use in Lingala popular music<sup>3</sup> and in the advertising landscape of Lubumbashi.<sup>4</sup> These observations justify a closer analysis, but they do not by themselves establish that English is widely mastered or that it should become an official language.

The central question is therefore: in what ways does English provide individual and collective utility in the DRC, and under what conditions can language policy support that utility without weakening French or the national languages? The article advances the hypothesis that English has a bidimensional value. It may increase individual access to knowledge,

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1 Constitution de la République démocratique du Congo du 18 février 2006, telle que modifiée par la loi n° 11/002 du 20 janvier 2011, art. 1er.

2 M. F. BUHENDWA, « Multilingualism in DRC: English Rising in a Predominantly Francophone Environment », *Revue des langues vivantes et communication*, vol. 6, n° 1, 2010, p. 78-106.

3 L. A. KASANGA, « Crossing in Popular Music in D.R. Congo: The Mixing of English in Lingala Lyrics », *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 31, n° 1, 2019, p. 89-105, DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2018.1478722.

4 L. A. KASANGA, « English in Advertising in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo », *World Englishes*, vol. 38, n° 3, 2019, p. 561-575, DOI: 10.1111/weng.12424.

employment and mobility, while also serving collective functions in research, international cooperation and selected economic sectors. However, these benefits are neither automatic nor equally distributed.

The study has three objectives. First, it clarifies the concept of bidimensional utility. Second, it analyses the individual and collective functions attributed to English in the Congolese context. Third, it formulates policy recommendations consistent with multilingualism and educational equity. The argument is deliberately conditional: English proficiency can be an enabling resource, but its effects depend on teaching quality, socioeconomic position, institutional demand and access to opportunities.

## **I. LINGUISTIC, CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **1.1. THE CONSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC SETTING**

French performs nationwide official functions in legislation, public administration, much of formal education and interprovincial communication. The four national languages have strong regional and cross-regional roles, while many other Congolese languages structure family, local and cultural life. This configuration is not a simple hierarchy in which one language replaces another. Individuals often move between languages according to the setting, interlocutor, purpose and expected social meaning.

English enters this multilingual repertoire as a foreign language with specialised and unequal uses. It may be encountered in universities, international institutions, private language centres, churches, music, advertising, tourism, border trade and digital media. Its social visibility is greater than its formal legal status. A rigorous analysis must therefore distinguish status, visibility, proficiency and actual use. A language can be prestigious without being widely mastered, and it can be useful in a narrow sector without becoming necessary for all citizens.

### **1.2. THE CONCEPT OF BIDIMENSIONAL UTILITY**

In this article, utility does not mean that a language has an intrinsic economic value independent of social conditions. It refers to the practical opportunities and functions associated with the ability to use that language in particular contexts. Individual utility concerns benefits that may accrue to a learner or speaker: access to information, education, professional interaction, mobility, cultural participation and personal satisfaction. Collective utility concerns functions that may benefit institutions or communities: scientific cooperation, cross-border communication, international negotiation, knowledge circulation and economic exchange.

The two dimensions interact. When universities train researchers to read and publish in English, individual competence may strengthen institutional

visibility. When employers require English, collective internationalisation may create individual incentives to learn. Yet the relationship can also produce inequality. Learners with access to qualified teachers, digital resources and private courses are better positioned to convert English into opportunity. A public policy must therefore assess both aggregate benefits and distributional effects.

### **1.3. METHOD, CORPUS AND LIMITATIONS**

The research uses a qualitative, documentary and analytical method. It examines the constitutional language framework, the Congolese studies cited in the initial manuscript, and the author's observations concerning language learning, employment, education and public preferences. The documentary corpus is limited but relevant to an exploratory conceptual article. The analysis does not measure national proficiency, labour-market returns or the number of English-learning centres.

The initial manuscript also refers to a 2020 study entitled *English as a Second Official Foreign Language in the D.R. Congo: A Response to Globalization*.<sup>5</sup> It reports that almost 99 per cent of respondents answered positively when asked whether they liked English. Essential methodological information is absent: sample size, participant profile, sampling method, place of administration, instrument and raw data.<sup>6</sup> The figure is therefore retained only as an indication reported by the author; it cannot be generalised to the Congolese population or used as evidence for constitutional reform.

## **II. THE INDIVIDUAL UTILITY OF ENGLISH**

### **2.1. ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESOURCES**

English may expand access to textbooks, journals, databases, online courses and scientific communities in fields where a substantial part of current publication occurs in that language. This function is particularly relevant to university students, researchers and professionals who interact with international literature. The benefit is not that knowledge exists only in English, but that English adds an important channel to resources already available through French and other languages.

The educational value of English depends on competence rather than nominal exposure. A course that focuses only on grammar, lacks qualified teachers or provides little opportunity for practice may not produce usable skills. Learners require progressive objectives in listening, speaking, reading and writing, with English for specific purposes adapted to disciplines such as

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<sup>5</sup> B.-P. ASELE OHOTO, *English as a Second Official Foreign Language in the D.R. Congo: A Response to Globalization*, document cité dans le manuscrit initial, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Le manuscrit initial mentionne une réponse positive de près de 99 % à une question ouverte posée en 2020, mais ne fournit ni l'effectif, ni le mode d'échantillonnage, ni le questionnaire complet, ni la base de données. Ce pourcentage ne peut donc être traité comme une estimation représentative de la population congolaise.

law, health, engineering, economics and social sciences. Assessment should measure communicative capacity, not only the reproduction of rules.

## **2.2. EMPLOYMENT, PROFESSIONAL MOBILITY AND NETWORKS**

English can be useful in international organisations, multinational companies, cross-border projects, aviation, tourism, research partnerships and some technology-related activities. In such settings, proficiency may help a candidate understand documents, participate in meetings, communicate with colleagues and access training. The benefit is sector-specific: English does not guarantee employment, and many occupations in the DRC continue to rely primarily on French, national languages or local languages.

The employability argument must consequently avoid causal exaggeration. Employment outcomes also depend on qualifications, experience, professional networks, labour demand and recruitment practices. English is best understood as a complementary competence that can increase the range of positions for which a person is eligible. Policies that advertise English as a direct route out of unemployment risk creating costly expectations that educational institutions cannot satisfy.

## **2.3. PERSONAL IDENTITY, PRESTIGE AND CULTURAL PARTICIPATION**

The initial manuscript emphasises the pleasure and prestige associated with speaking English in public, at church or abroad. Prestige is sociolinguistically significant because it can motivate learning and influence the choice of schools. It may also encourage symbolic uses of English in names, slogans, songs and digital profiles. Kasanga's work on English-Lingala mixing in popular music shows that English may function as a marker of modernity, mobility or stylistic creativity rather than as the language of an entire interaction.

Prestige nevertheless has ambivalent effects. It can support motivation, but it can also turn language competence into a marker of social distinction and marginalise those who lack access to training. A fair educational policy should value multilingual competence and avoid presenting English as evidence of intelligence or modernity. Proficiency in national and local languages remains essential for cultural transmission, public participation and communication with large sections of the population.

# **III. THE COLLECTIVE UTILITY OF ENGLISH**

## **3.1. UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONALISATION AND KNOWLEDGE CIRCULATION**

At the collective level, English can support universities seeking partnerships, conference participation, international publication and access to research networks. Departments may use it to improve the visibility of

Congolese scholarship and to receive students or researchers from different linguistic backgrounds. The appropriate objective is not to replace French as the principal academic language, but to expand the institution's ability to communicate across several scholarly spaces.

A sustainable strategy would combine language training, academic writing support, translation, terminology development and access to documentation. Researchers should be able to publish strong work in French while also communicating selected findings in English. National languages can contribute to dissemination beyond the university and to field research. Collective utility is therefore maximised through linguistic complementarity, not monolingual substitution.

### **3.2. ECONOMIC EXCHANGE AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION**

English is frequently used in international business, development cooperation and regional communication. For Congolese institutions, the ability to negotiate, prepare technical documents and participate in multinational teams can reduce dependence on intermediaries. In border regions, English may complement Swahili and other languages in exchanges with neighbouring countries. The actual language of cooperation, however, varies by partner and sector; no single language is sufficient for all relations.

The presence of English-language advertising in Lubumbashi illustrates one dimension of economic internationalisation.<sup>7</sup> Such visibility may communicate corporate identity, modernity or access to a global market. It does not necessarily indicate that customers conduct transactions in English. Policy analysis should therefore distinguish between symbolic display and functional communication, and between the interests of firms and the language rights of citizens.

### **3.3. DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC ACCESS**

Digital platforms expose users to English interfaces, tutorials, software documentation and professional communities. English competence may facilitate access to some of these resources, but technology also supports translation and multilingual content. Public institutions should not assume that digitalisation requires an English-only model. Services intended for the population must remain accessible in languages people understand, especially when they concern health, justice, elections or public safety.

The collective value of English is strongest where it enlarges institutional capacity without creating a new barrier. Universities, administrations and companies should identify positions in which English is genuinely required, provide training, and avoid arbitrary requirements unrelated to the work. This needs-based approach protects efficiency and equality.

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<sup>7</sup> L. A. KASANGA, « English in Advertising in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo », art. cité, p. 561-575.

## **IV. FROM PERCEIVED UTILITY TO LANGUAGE POLICY**

### **4.1. WHY DEMAND DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY JUSTIFY OFFICIAL STATUS**

The proliferation of private language centres and bilingual schools, as observed by the author, suggests a perceived demand for English. It does not indicate how many institutions exist, who attends them, what they teach or what outcomes they produce. Similarly, a favourable attitude towards English does not answer the legal, financial and administrative questions involved in making a language official. Official status creates obligations concerning legislation, public services, courts, education, recruitment and public communication.

Any proposal to change the constitutional status of English would therefore require representative research, cost analysis, consultation and a clear account of its relationship with French and the national languages. The evidence available in this manuscript is sufficient to support better English education, but not to demonstrate the necessity or feasibility of officialisation. This distinction strengthens rather than weakens the central argument: a language can have substantial utility without possessing official status.

### **4.2. AN ADDITIVE MULTILINGUAL APPROACH**

An additive policy seeks to develop English without subtracting from existing linguistic resources. French remains the official language and a major medium of education and administration. National and local languages are indispensable to inclusion, identity and local knowledge. English should be introduced as an additional competence whose intensity varies according to educational level, discipline, region and professional need.

At primary levels, policy must protect comprehension and foundational learning. At secondary and tertiary levels, progressively strengthened English programmes can be aligned with realistic proficiency targets. Universities may develop English for academic and professional purposes, while teacher-training institutions prepare instructors in pedagogy, assessment and the use of digital resources. Curricula should reflect Congolese contexts rather than reproduce imported materials without adaptation.

### **4.3. PRIORITY ACTIONS**

A first priority is to conduct a national needs assessment covering learners, teachers, universities, employers and sectors of international cooperation. A second is to improve teacher preparation and working conditions. A third is to develop contextualised curricula and materials, including discipline-specific modules. A fourth is to support public access

through libraries, language laboratories, radio, educational media and affordable digital resources.

A fifth priority is evaluation. Public authorities and institutions should measure learning outcomes, participation by gender and socioeconomic background, regional inequalities, programme costs and professional uses. Evidence should guide expansion. Incentives for publication, conferences and training may be useful, but they should reward quality and remain open to multilingual scholarship.

## **V. DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS**

The bidimensional framework clarifies why English attracts interest in the DRC. Individual motivations are connected with collective transformations: international organisations create occupational niches; universities participate in global research; digital media increase exposure; advertising and music circulate symbolic forms. The same framework also reveals limits. Benefits are conditional, uneven and sometimes mainly symbolic. English proficiency is one resource among many, not a substitute for professional training, institutional reform or inclusive development.

The study is exploratory. It does not provide nationally representative survey data, proficiency tests, longitudinal evidence or a quantified labour-market analysis. The 2020 preference result cannot be generalised. The number and quality of language centres have not been established. Future research should use a defined sampling frame, describe participant characteristics, validate the questionnaire, compare regions and educational levels, and distinguish attitudes, proficiency and actual use.

A stronger empirical programme could combine a household or student survey with interviews of employers, teachers and policymakers; language tests; curriculum analysis; and observation of workplaces and linguistic landscapes. It could then assess which forms of English competence generate measurable educational or professional benefits, for whom, and at what cost. Such evidence would allow policymakers to choose between targeted programmes and broader reforms.

## **CONCLUSION**

English has a bidimensional utility in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. At the individual level, it may broaden access to scientific resources, selected employment opportunities, mobility and cultural networks. At the collective level, it may strengthen university internationalisation, international cooperation, digital participation and some forms of economic exchange. These functions explain the growing visibility and attractiveness of English in a constitutionally Francophone and socially multilingual country.

The hypothesis is therefore supported in a qualified form. English can be useful, but usefulness is not universal, automatic or evenly distributed. The available material does not establish that English should become a second official language, nor that proficiency alone produces development. It does justify a better-designed policy of English teaching based on needs, quality, equal access and measurable outcomes.

The most defensible policy is additive multilingualism. English should complement French, the four national languages and the country's wider linguistic heritage. By investing in teachers, contextualised curricula, academic support, public resources and rigorous evaluation, the DRC can expand access to international communication without reducing linguistic diversity. The collective value of English will ultimately depend on the institutions that transform language competence into education, cooperation and opportunity.

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