Treat your home tongue as if it’s the only one

The best way to learn English is by being proficient in one’s mother language, writes Eran Williams.

QUESTION: which of the 11 South African official languages is the most important? Answer: Yours. Don’t get me wrong; English is great.

If you thought I was going to say “English,” think again. It is widely used, is rich in vocabulary, history and variety, and is pretty much agreed to be, at this moment, the international language of power and prestige.

But English is the native language of fewer than 10% of South Africans and so it has to take a back seat (or at least the passenger seat) for the vast majority here.

So, why does a former English teacher and a man employed by the US government to encourage and enhance the teaching of English in Southern Africa promote indigenous languages? Simply because the best way to learn English is through proficiency in one’s mother tongue.

From an educator’s standpoint, students’ ability to internalise and manipulate concepts in their mother language is the foundation for all successful learning.

If that foundation is not strong, the most fundamental learning tool is weakened. Your language is how you learn.

In my work with education in 15 countries in Africa I often run into misconceptions about language.

Often, when I ask people how many languages they know, they don’t even count the African languages they speak, assuming those are inferior to Indo-European languages.

English teachers often assume that the multilingualism which the vast majority of African students bring to the classroom is a handicap.

They point to “language interference” rather than consider the benefits of metalinguistic awareness that multilingualism brings.

Even among the university crowd in South Africa, I often hear the misconception that most of the official languages are not fit for the university.

The most crippling of all misunderstandings about language that I routinely encounter is the idea that one must declare all-or-nothing allegiance to a single tongue. This dualistic approach to language learning often leads to the individual renouncing their mother language.

In Rwanda, for example, in their zeal to adopt English as a language that will link their country to the region and the world, the government argued for starting with English instruction from first grade and including Kinyarwanda only as a subject, not as a language of instruction.

In a country where more than 90% of the population speaks Kinyarwanda, this all-or-nothing idea of language is not only limiting, it is dangerous. It threatens the life of the mother language.

In addition, by limiting the use and teaching of language,
learners are being denied the advantages of multilingualism.
Why not have both, the international and the domestic language? And more. Africa is the most linguistically diverse continent on the planet, its people the most multilingual.

That is a great natural resource that should be exploited.
Sure, it is important to have a common language, but so is it important to have an uncommon one. Language is identity. We use it to distinguish ourselves.

Why else would every teen-generation come up with its own language?
You get a glimpse of the possibilities on the soaps. The code switching that takes place on Generations shows the advantages of knowing many languages and knowing when to use them.
If you can use English in your takeover of an advertising company and then return home to your husband who has amnesia and whisper to him ho tla loka (everything’s going to be OK), then you have mastered all the language of your world.
Real linguistic power isn’t so much in any one language as it is in the ability to use fully the language(s) that you have. And that ability comes best from literacy and proficiency in one’s native tongue.
The South African government is often criticised for not doing enough to support all the official languages. Certainly in the schools there is a real danger that home language instruction, even in grades 1-3 may be neglected. But the government can’t make language thrive; only people can do that.
Look at it this way: declaring 11 official languages was an incredibly ambitious and inclusive gesture. The government is affirming that your language is important. Now it is up to you to be inspired by that gesture and cultivate your language: use it, write it, sing it, text it, dream it, teach it.
In this linguistically gifted

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nation the symphony of language will drown out a stadium of vuvuzelas.
Language is in your hands, it is a democracy. So hug your mother language today and never let go.
There is no more important language in the world.
Williams is regional English language officer at the US Diplomatic Mission to South Africa.