

The impact of policy on language and learning: the experience of teachers

Marie Quinn

This paper reflects on the impact of educational policies on the experience of teachers in Timor-Leste and teachers' ability to make decisions in regard to language and learning. Early national goals identified education as a priority (ETPC 2002), influenced by the global pressures of commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (UN 2010), particularly centred on universal primary education and Education for All policy (UNESCO 2000). These have formed a basis for the nation's educational policies since 2002. The current strategic plan for Timorese education identifies the national vision:

In 2025 the population of Timor-Leste will be educated, knowledgeable and qualified to live a long and productive life, respectful of peace, family and positive traditional values. All individuals will have the same opportunities to access to a quality education that will allow them to participate in the economical, social and political development process, ensuring social equity and national unity (ME 2011, 10).

Alongside general education goals has run the government's Language in Education (LiE) policy. Such policies exist where "the state takes over the task of socialisation from families" (Spolsky, 2004, 46), socialising children into the uses of official languages – this case, Portuguese and Tetum – through the provision of education to the young. LiE policies are concerned with the distribution of power and opportunity through the provision and access to various languages through schooling. This discussion looks at how these policies in Timor-Leste have been identified and managed, shaping teachers' and, ultimately, students' experiences of learning.

To focus on the experience of the classroom, Davis' (1994) framework for analyzing policy through the lenses of *policy intent*, *policy implementation* and *policy experience* will be used, with the focus on this last element to track the influences on classroom experience. An earlier discussion of LiE policy in Timor-Leste articulating language and learning goals (Quinn 2007) will be referenced as a detailed discussion of *intent* and *implementation*.

Policy intent

The earlier survey (Quinn 2007) noted that the government of Timor-Leste, through its educational agency, the Ministry of Education (ME)¹, defined policy intent through a number of documents produced after independence. In terms of LiE, however, the policy was confused, suggesting that education sought to 'speed up the reintroduction of the official languages – Portuguese and Tetum – at schools' (MECYS 2004a, 5) while also directing that 'the implementation of Portuguese will have precedence' (MECYS 2004a, 8), reducing Tetum to merely a symbolic language, rather than one that would enact curriculum goals (Taylor-Leech 2009).

Since 2007, the place of particular languages has shifted within educational documents, significantly strengthening the place of Tetum. *The Base Law for Education* (Law 14/2008), states: 'The teaching languages of the Timorese education system are Tetum and Portuguese' (Article 8). The influence of recent work by the National Education Commission (KNE) in regard to the use of the multiple first languages (or mother tongues) that exist in the country is appearing within policy, seen in the Council of Minister press release concerning the third phase of the National Curriculum: 'In addition to the official languages, the diploma also stresses the importance of making use of the national languages' (RDTL 2011).

¹ This ministry has undergone several name changes since 2002: Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (MECYS), Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) and the current Ministry of Education (ME). These names will be reflected in the document references, but ME will be used throughout to denote the ministry itself.

This statement supports the aim of the KNE's comprehensive strategic plan to implement first languages into Timorese schools (KNE 2011).

Policy implementation

Early ME documents identified various goals in terms of implementation: to 'Emphasise development of both languages in the context of practical day to day life situation' and 'ensure the effective mastery of both the national languages, both oral and written skills' (MECYS 2004b, 27). However, little activity has occurred to realise these goals, with training for teachers centred on learning the Portuguese language in formal and academic modes (see Shah 2011). Despite the place of Tetum within policy documents, little support has been provided for Tetum language training with the large-scale Tetum training of 2005 not repeated.

The 2007 discussion (Quinn 2007) also noted the lack of understanding of the language and literacy – and bilingual/biliteracy – needs of students. The distinction between language needs and literacy needs, in either of the schooling languages, has not yet been addressed, with no further advice as to how the 'both oral and written skills' will be interpreted. Currently, few written resources in either language exist in schools and rarely in bilingual modes, particularly with the demise of the *Lafaek* magazine in 2010, the only language resource widely available in the country that also served wider community literacy needs (Heyward 2005).

A similar situation exists for teaching resources: the goal to 'develop didactic materials either in Portuguese or in Tetum' (MECYS 2004a, 8) has been realised only in some curriculum areas (largely mathematics, Portuguese language, Estudo do Meio/social sciences) and not across all year levels. Few resources have been dedicated to creating comprehensive sets of materials in any language to support both language and general learning. While the National Curriculum guides for all subjects were delivered to teachers in late 2007, with a strong focus within the training on using bilingual approaches to assist students to access curriculum content², further training and support beyond the two-day orientation has not been offered across the system for all teachers. While curriculum support materials were originally produced in both official languages, subsequent teachers' guides for subjects have also only been produced in Portuguese, adding to the difficulty in teachers understanding how to enact the curriculum.

The development of The Competency Framework for Teachers (ME c2010) has identified competencies in Portuguese and Tetum "in all language modes (speaking, listening, reading, writing)", providing an impetus to orient the training to assist teachers to reach competency levels in terms of the LiE policy. However, this framework has not been implemented to orient training or evaluation.

Teacher experience

While these policies outline intent and implementation, the question remains about how teachers are making decisions specifically about language use in the classroom. This was the basis for data collected during 2006 from Timorese classrooms. This research captured the classroom talk during ten lessons and teachers' subsequent reflection on their own practice as shown in the video recordings of the lesson. Teachers commented on their own decision-making within the teaching moment. While this data was gathered from a limited number of sites – five schools and eight different teachers, in various settings of upper primary – the data provides insights into how teachers draw upon both policy and their own understandings of the community and classroom environments to make LiE judgments.

² The author was employed by UNICEF and situated within the ME to coordinate and write all training material for the National Curriculum distribution to teachers in Grades 3 – 6 in October/November 2007. All training materials were rendered in the two national languages and trainers were free to choose the language most effective in each setting. Grades 1 and 2 materials had been distributed in previous years.

The influence of National Goals

Teachers expressed strong support for what they perceived was the national LiE policy. Teachers could articulate the place of Portuguese and Tetum within the Constitution as their reason for using these languages in the classroom, but at times echoed the ME's emphasis on Portuguese over Tetum as classroom languages.

Yes, it [teaching/learning Tetum] is important. This is an approved language as national language and Portuguese as official language. It is indeed important for the students.

Artur, Baucau rural

...according to the onstitution Portuguese is now as the official language with Tetum, so I teach and use both of them.

Alexandre, Lautem town

Rather than using the languages equally, Margarida explained the allocation of languages in the classroom:

Because in the curriculum, children should know Portuguese at around 75%, and Tetum 25%.

Margarida, Dili

This percentage breakdown – used by other teachers in differing amounts – can be traced back to the implementation document (MECYS 2004b, 17) that stipulated the number of hours the languages as curriculum subject were to be taught. While this was not designed to orient language use in the classroom *per se*, this particular message has prevailed in teachers' minds³ and is widely understood as a pattern of languages that students should know.

This allocation of languages was reflected in the analysis of overall classroom talk, across all lessons observed and all speakers. Portuguese was used for 64% of the words spoken, Tetum for 34%. Thus, while teachers' comments suggested the importance of both languages, Portuguese took precedence over Tetum.

The differing status of languages is further shown through closer analysis of language function in the classroom. Most of the talk (67%) was used for presenting curriculum content and of this, Portuguese was used primarily for presenting in formal modes with Tetum used for the explanatory talk. However, for other classroom functions of managing the classroom and interpersonal talk, Tetum had precedence, particularly – and sadly – for the functions of telling students that they were mistaken or insulting/berating students. This is discussed below in looking at classroom language use. What is salient here is that the actual practice of “both languages” is not “equal” and has consequences for the way these languages function in the classroom.

Community factors

In attempting to enact the policy of using Portuguese in the classroom, teachers were aware of the language context of their students and the various languages in the community and that this was the general experience in all communities.

Some speak Makasae, some Naueti, some Waimu'a and some only speak Tetum at home. Here we have about three or four languages that people use at home.... I think Makasae is the biggest, because here the majority are Makasae children.

Guilhermina, Baucau urban

This all, not only these in this school, it's everywhere around Timor. I recognise that the children only learn Portuguese in the class but outside they do not speak it.... In the community they use language depending on the language in the family.

³ This was a common misunderstanding of teachers and Ministry staff in personal communication while working with the National Curriculum distribution, with the hours of instruction quoted as the hours of language use.

Marta, Baucau urban

Since it is common for teachers to belong to the same language group as their students, these first languages provide a resource to assist students to make new curriculum meanings. This principle is at the heart of the Mother Tongue-Based Education policy (KNE 2011), to access learning in the shared language of students and teachers. However, teachers in the 2006 sample showed resistance to the use of these languages:

In Baucau, here our school does not use Makasae. Tetum (is used) because now Tetum is the official language with Portuguese so we prohibit speaking Makasae. Tetum is spoken for all learning.
Marta, Baucau urban

This “prohibition” on the use of first languages was echoed by many teachers and similar sentiments are found in other settings. Shameen (2004) reported that Fijian teachers identified English-only over local languages as the appropriate choice for classrooms and Brunei teachers reported feeling “uneasy” or “guilty” using unsanctioned local languages (Martin 1996, 139). What are deemed as appropriate languages for schooling in Timor-Leste is reflected in teacher practice, and, as members of the community, the values of the wider community. Indeed, Alexandre suggested the view of the weakness of Tetum:

For them here, Tetum is passive. But our language is still poor, so we need to teach things with Portuguese.
Alexandre, Lautem town

This view of Tetum as a language unable to sustain the functions of academic and public life formed the basis for early language debates as Timor-Leste moved toward independence (see Eccles, 2000, versus da Silva 1999, Herrera c. 2004).

In terms of first languages, the only use that teachers would concede for these was as a “last resort”. Rudolfo outlined a hierarchy of the languages available to access the curriculum content.

When they don't get me speaking Portuguese, I would switch to Tetum. If they still don't get Tetum, I must use Fataluku so that they understand what we are teaching and they can learn more.....
Rudolfo, Lautem rural

Thus, teachers made decisions based on the perceived worth of a language as fit for education, balanced with the practical role that a language could play. Throughout these discussions, it should be noted, teachers never articulated any aim to strengthen language skill, of any language. Language was, instead, a means for understanding other content. This has particular implications for classroom use.

Classroom use

In observing teaching practice within classrooms, Portuguese was constructed as the higher status language of formal teaching with Tetum as an aid, reflecting the ME documents of the time. The main strategy that teachers used was translation: starting instruction in Portuguese a number of times before translating into Tetum so that students could access the material.

I use both Tetum and Portuguese to explain so that students understand. Like square I should also say that in Tetum after Portuguese so that students know what is that.
Guilhermina, Baucau town

This strategy ensured that students understood, for example, the dimensions of the square in mathematics. However, teachers displayed little understanding about how concepts might be presented through particular languages or how to build mathematical language in Portuguese or Tetum. This was further complicated by the fact that all blackboard work – the main means for note-taking – was rendered entirely in Portuguese. Thus, Portuguese remained mainly in written modes, Tetum in oral, providing little support to learn either language comprehensively.

What was apparent was that teachers distinguished between “teaching” as an activity using Portuguese and “explaining” as an activity using Tetum.

I use all [both languages], teaching with Portuguese, but explaining with Tetum.
Marta I: Baucau, town

When explaining must open with Tetum so they can begin to think in order to know.
Artur: Baucau, rural

Interestingly, Artur suggested here that by “opening” in Tetum, he wanted students to understand the concept in a familiar language before moving to the unfamiliar. Unfortunately, there was no evidence of this in Artur’s observed lesson: Tetum was used largely for translation of Portuguese.

How teachers make the decisions about when to move into particular languages was largely dependent on teachers’ perceptions of students’ needs. Several teachers explained how they watched and noticed when students did not understand, as Alexandre explained:

... when I taught there were one or two students who did not quite understand when I had used several ways. In this sense we might know that we have to explain them with Tetum.
Alexandre, Lautem town

Using this method requires teachers to be attuned to the students and their language learning, yet teachers were not able to articulate many understandings of how language made meaning in their classrooms. Margarida suggested some degree of student agency in language use:

Because they are the one who ask. They said, I do not understand this question. ... That is why they asked me to explain it in Tetum so that they could understand. ...
Margarida, Dili

However, while Margarida was the only teacher to attempt to make meaning in two languages, providing models of questions and answers in two languages and allowing students to answer using their choice of language, the practice of students requesting a language was never observed in the lesson. She, herself, made all decisions about languages.

The diglossia found in Timorese classrooms is similar to other educational settings, where official, high status languages have been “performed” in particular ways to enact curriculum and “off-stage” languages used for explaining content and other classroom functions (eg. Arthur 1996; Camilleri 1996; Hornberger & Chick 2001; Lo Bianco & Liddicoat 1991; Ndayipfukamiye 1996). However, in these cases, it is usually an official (European) language which is the mandated language of schooling with the unofficial language the shared language of teacher and students. In Timor-Leste, both Portuguese and Tetum are identified in the Constitution and weakly by the ME as co-official languages, yet this strong hierarchy exists and teacher practice re-iterates the relationship between the languages.

One impediment to strengthening Tetum is the *de facto* policy enacted through the provision of materials in Portuguese, orienting teacher practice:

So when most of the materials coming are in Portuguese we need to teach by using Portuguese, and if in Tetum then we can use Tetum. But in the reality the majority of the books are in Portuguese, and therefore, we need to teach with Portuguese.
Alexandre, Lautem town

As with the findings of Shah (this volume), teachers here indicated that they were reliant on what the ME provided to guide teaching. The same reliance can be extended to training: while this remains only about learning Portuguese, it fails to address issues of how to use languages to teach the curriculum content and the official languages themselves.

Conclusion

The data showed that, while teachers agreed with the policies of the government, they were unclear on implementation, seen in the inconsistent ways in which policies were understood and used in various classrooms. In view of current changes to LiE policy, giving more prominence to Tetum in the curriculum, it is difficult to see how teachers will be able to make this change in their practice. The current *National Strategic Plan for Education 2011-2030* (ME 2011, 48) notes that “teachers need further support to fully implement the curriculum”: it is hoped that this will address the considerable support teachers require to understand the place that language plays in creating knowledge and how literacy, and this case, biliteracy, will be fostered. Currently, there is little evidence that teachers are aware of their language practice except as a tool for translating curriculum and translating languages. Rudolfo’s comment on viewing his own lesson and asked about the reasons for language switches indicates little linguistic awareness: “But I didn’t realize that I was speaking Tetum or Portuguese”.

Ultimately, it is the consciousness of language - how language makes meaning, how languages work together and how students can use languages to “participate in the economical (sic), social and political development process” (ME 2010, 10: see Vision, in introduction) - that will be critical for the development of an education system and a nation.

Bibliography

- Arthur, Jo 1996, ‘Code switching and collusion: classroom interaction in Botswana primary schools’, *Linguistics and education*, 8: 17-33.
- Camilleri, Antoinette 1996, ‘Language values and identities: code switching in secondary classrooms in Malta’, *Linguistics and education*, 8: 85- 103.
- da Silva, Gregorio Ferreira 1999, ‘Language as an index of national identity: the case of East Timor’, *Studies in languages and cultures of East Timor*, 2: 8-13.
- Davis, Kathryn Anne 1994, *Language Planning in Multilingual Contexts: policies, communities and schools in Luxemburg*, J. Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- East Timor Planning Commission (ETPC) 2002, *East Timor national development plan*, ETPC, Dili.
- Eccles, Lance 2000, ‘East Timorese language policy and the language policies of other small Pacific nations’, *Studies in languages and cultures of East Timor*, 3: 1-30.
- Herrera, Jennie c. 2004, *Timor and language*, <http://www.Williamshlrc.mq.Ed.u.au/~leccles/easttimor.html>, viewed 14 July 2004.
- Heyward, Mark 2005, *Lafaek as a tool to support education improvements in East Timor, A study conducted under the Fundamental School Quality Project TF 030630*, Care International UK, Dili.
- Hornberger, Nancy & Chick, J. Keith 2001, ‘Co-constructing school safetime: safetalk practices in Peruvian and South African classrooms’, in Heller, Monica & Marilyn Martin-Jones (eds), *Voices of authority: education and linguistic difference*, Ablex Publishing, Connecticut. pp. 31-5.
- Komisaun Nasional Edukasaun (KNE) 2011, *First language first: mother tongue based multilingual education for Timor-Leste implementation plan* <http://pt.scribd.com/doc/49148024/MOTHER-TONGUE-BASED.-MULTILINGUAL-EDUCATION-FOR-TIMOR-LESTE-IMPLEMENTATION%C2%A0PLAN>, viewed 2 March 2011.
- Lo Bianco, Joseph & Liddicoat, Anthony 1991, ‘Language use in classrooms in Western Samoan schools’, *Language and language education*, 1(1): 83-100.
- Martin, Peter 1996, ‘Code-Switching in the primary classroom: one response to the planned and the unplanned language environment in Brunei’, *Journal of multilingual and multicultural development*, 7(2): 128-144.
- Ministry of Education (ME) c. 2010, *Competency framework for teachers in Timor-Leste*, ME, Dili.
- 2011, *The National Education Strategic Plan for the period of 2011-2030*, ME, Dili.
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (MECYS) 2004a, *Education policy document: draft for parliament approval*, MECYS, Dili.
- Ministry of Education (ME) 2008b, *Building our nation through quality Education: National Education Policy 2007 – 2012*, ME, Dili.
- Ndayipfukamiye, Lin 1996, ‘The contradictions of teaching bilingually in post-colonial classrooms: from Nyakatsi to maisons en etage’, *Linguistics and education*, 8: 35-47.
- Quinn, Marie 2007, ‘The challenge of realising language and literacy goals in East Timorese schools’, in Kingsbury,

- Damien & Michael Leach (eds), *East Timor: beyond independence*, Monash University Press, Australia. pp. 251-262
- Republica Democratica Timor Leste (RDTL) 2011, Press Release: Council of Ministers meeting of June 15, 2011, east-timor@lists.riseup.net, viewed 18 June 2011.
- Shah, Ritesh 2011, 'It takes two (or more) to tango? "Partnerships" within the education sector in Timor-Leste', *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* (forthcoming)
- Shameen, Nikhat 2004, 'Language attitudes in multilingual primary schools in Fiji', *Language, culture and curriculum*, 17(2):154-172.
- Spolsky, Bernard 2004, *Language policy*, Cambridge University Press, UK.
- Taylor-Leech, Kerry 2009, 'The language situation in Timor-Leste', in *Current issues in language planning* 10 (1): 1-68.
- United Nations (UN) 2010, *Millennium development goals* <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>, viewed 16 October 2010.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2000, *The Dakar framework, education for all: meeting our collective commitments*, World Education Forum, Dakar, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121147e.pdf>, viewed 16 October 2010.