

Mother tongue-based multilingual education: A new direction for Timor-Leste

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The selection of the medium of instruction is one of the most challenging and contentious decisions facing education policymakers, since it has such far-reaching effects and implications. Controversy over the role and status of languages in the East Timorese school curriculum has dominated debates about educational quality since independence. This chapter opens with an overview of the current challenges facing education planners in Timor-Leste. We briefly review the language situation and go on to describe the current educational policy context, identifying some recent legislative and policy initiatives which have bearing on the use of languages in education. Recently, a new policy approach has been advocated in the mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) policy for Timor-Leste. A national debate on this policy was launched in February 2011. Whilst we stress that at the time of writing its recommendations have not been officially endorsed by the government, MTB-MLE pilot projects will begin in a small number of pre and primary schools in 2012. We explain what is meant by MTB-MLE and discuss why it presents an exciting opportunity for educational development in Timor-Leste.

Current challenges in the East Timorese school system

Despite improvements in educational provision since independence, Timor-Leste still faces challenges to the achievement of education for all (EFA). A great many children still miss the opportunity for early learning and primary education: At present, only 11% of children attend pre-school (TLSDP 2011, 16) and according to the 2010 Census, net primary school enrolment is only 70.8%³. Although the current mean youth literacy rate⁴ of 79.1%⁵ represents an improvement on previous years, the fact that so many young people remain illiterate does not bode well for their educational prospects and their ability to build secure economic futures or become active, well informed, citizens.

Three persistent challenges to EFA are low enrolment, grade repetition and high dropout, particularly in the later primary grades. Statistics show that at least 70% of students do not reach Grade 6, let alone complete primary education (MOE 2009, 23). Most dropouts occur before Grade 2, with Grade 9 enrolments standing at less than a quarter of those in Grade 1. High grade repetition results in overcrowding and overage children in early grades. Dropout and repetition increase the costs, reduce the consistency and compromise the effectiveness of children's education. Low student retention can be attributed to a number of causes including long distances between home and school, parental concerns about safety, especially for girls, inadequate water and hygienic facilities in schools, financial barriers and low levels of parental education, literacy and understanding. However, it is increasingly recognised that the use of a second or foreign language for instruction plays a major role in educational underachievement, poor literacy development and early dropout (see, e.g. Benson 2004, 2005; Chimbutane 2011; Ouane 2003). Numerous studies show that school attendance and retention figures improve and academic performance is enhanced when L1s are used as languages of instruction (see, e.g. Ball 2010; Cummins 2000, 2001; UNESCO 1953, 1990, 2007a, 2007b).

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³ UNESCO 2008 indices show that net primary enrolment is lower than all other countries in the region; e.g. Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia, 97%; Indonesia, 98%; Philippines, 92%; Cambodia, 89%; and Laos, 82%, http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=125&IF_Language=eng&BR_Fact=NE_FST&BR_Region=40515, viewed 11 May 2011.

⁴ The percentage of the population between the ages of 15 and 24 who can read or write in any of the languages recognised in the Constitution.

⁵ <http://dne.mof.gov.tl/published/2010%20and%202011%20Publications/Census%20Summary%20English/English%20Census%20Summary%202011.pdf>.

Linguistic diversity in Timor-Leste: A complex multilingual situation

The multilingual language situation has generated much debate over the use of languages for instructional purposes. The 2002 Constitution conferred co-official status on Portuguese and Tetum, also adopting Indonesian and English as working languages. Tetum and the vernaculars were given the status of national languages, to be protected and valued by the State. Portuguese, Indonesian and English are spoken as additional/foreign languages in Timor-Leste. Tetum-Praça is spoken as a first language in Dili and as a second language throughout much of the country. Several other varieties of Tetum are also used as first languages in different parts of the country. In addition, some 30 national language varieties⁶ are used in East Timorese homes; indeed, many families and communities use more than one. This complex multilingual situation explains, at least in part, why the use of Portuguese as the language of formal instruction has been perceived as the most practical solution. Although teachers have always made pragmatic use of first languages in the classroom⁷, there has been no tradition of bi or multilingual education in formal schooling in Timor-Leste. In the absence of any such experience, it has been difficult to reach consensus on the relationship between the constitutional and indigenous languages in the curriculum.

Language-in-education planning: Recent key initiatives

The role of education in nation building has been a key theme in planning documents since independence. Ministry of Education (MOE or Ministry) documents state consistently that education plays a central role in building a sense of citizenship and respect for the East Timorese cultural heritage. Over time, however, there has been a shift in emphasis. Recent documents addressing the educational challenges we have mentioned, perceive the need to improve educational quality as part of a strategy for promoting social inclusion. In 2008 an important piece of legislation was passed which reformed the structure of the education system. The Basic Education Act (MOE 2008) guarantees all citizens access to 9 years' compulsory, free basic education, divided into three cycles. Basic education is then followed by 3 years of secondary education. The new system also prioritises the expansion and enhancement of pre-school provision. Educational reform and the new emphasis on social inclusion have prompted a reappraisal of language-in-education policy.

The Basic Education Act marks a significant change in perspective on the languages of instruction. Whereas in previous documents Portuguese took priority and Tetum held the status of an auxiliary language, Article 8 establishes that the teaching languages of the East Timorese education system are Tetum and Portuguese (MOE 2008). In June 2011, the Council of Ministers also approved plans for the teaching of both languages as subjects in the curriculum. According to the approved timetable model, the teaching of Tetum as a subject takes priority between years 1 and 3 (3-4 periods a week) while the teaching of Portuguese takes up more curriculum time (5 periods a week) in years 7 through 9. English, as the designated first foreign language, may be introduced in years 5, 6 or 7 according to the capacity of the school (RCDEB 2010, 20-21). In this system all subject-based assessment is in Portuguese.

The Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan is a package of strategic social policies that include educational development planning for 2011-2030. Two statements in this plan have such important implications for language-in-education that they are quoted here in full. The first declares:

To improve access to education, and build a solid foundation for future literacy and numeracy in both Portuguese and Tetum, local languages will be employed as languages of teaching and learning in the first years of basic education, providing a smooth transition to the acquisition of Timor-

⁶ Estimates of their number differ according to ways of classifying languages and dialects (Bowden & Hajek 2007, 265) and how their speakers perceive them. Ethnologue (Gordon 2005) lists 19 languages, while Hull (1998) identifies 16 languages with dialectal variations. The 2004 Population Census listed 32 indigenous language varieties mentioned by respondents (National Bureau of Statistics 2006, 80). For detailed overviews of the language situation, see also Hajek 2000; Hull 1998; Taylor-Leech 2009, 2011; Thomaz, 1981.

⁷ For more detailed discussions of teachers' language practices in East Timorese primary classrooms see Quinn 2007, 2008, 2010.

Leste's official languages, in accordance with the recommendations of the mother tongue-based multilingual education policy for Timor-Leste (TLSDP 2011, 16)

The second statement acknowledges that children who do not speak the official language(s) at home can be disadvantaged by their use in schools, declaring:

Given the diversity of national and local languages in Timor-Leste, the National Education Commission has initiated studies on mother tongue-based multilingual education for Timor-Leste. These studies aim to ensure that children are not disadvantaged and that all have equal access to an education, providing a smooth initial transition to the acquisition of Timor-Leste's official languages (TLSDP 2011, 25).

These statements mark a turning point in perceptions of the use local languages in education. Both statements accurately present mother tongue-based multilingual education as the best means to ensure a smooth transition to the learning of the official languages. In what follows we explain what is meant by MTB-MLE and we summarise the policy recommendations for Timor-Leste.

Mother tongues and mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE)

The term mother tongue (*lian inan* in Tetum, *língua materna* in Portuguese) is widely used to describe the language(s) one speaks in the home and/or community. The term is problematic because many multilinguals may consider several languages to be their mother tongues, particularly in the linguistically diverse countries of the South (Benson 2010). The United Nations defines a mother tongue or first language (L1) as the language one has (a) learned first; (b) identifies with or is identified by others; (c) knows best; and (d) uses most (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; UNESCO 2003, 15). A useful definition of L1 for educational purposes is that it is a language one speaks and understands competently enough to learn academic content at the appropriate age level (Kosonen & Young 2009). This definition allows for the fact that although children may use one language at home, they may also speak another community language well enough to understand it at school.

In principle, MTB-MLE programs enable learners to begin their education in the language they know best. Learners are gradually introduced to additional (official) languages and learning to communicate in these languages. The most effective programs develop both multilingualism and multiliteracy (Cummins 2009) by building on L1 oral and literate competence, while teaching additional language(s) (Benson 2010, 329). These programs are known as strong or additive MTB-MLE programs. In strong MTB-MLE programs, learners use their L1 for early learning and literacy development. Teachers help develop their academic vocabulary in the additional school language(s) so they can understand and talk about more abstract concepts (Thomas & Collier 2002). As learners gain competence in the additional language(s), teachers begin using them for teaching curriculum content (UNESCO 2007a, 2007b). In this approach, learners are better able to achieve grade-level subject competence because teachers use their L1, along with the additional school language(s), to help them understand academic concepts.

Increasing evidence from countries of the South shows that MTB-MLE programs improve educational participation and outcomes (See, e.g., Bolivia—Hornberger & Swineheart 2012, López 2001; China—Geary and Pan 2001; Guinea-Bissau, Cambodia, Ethiopia and Mozambique—Benson 2010; Papua New Guinea—Easton 2003; Pickford 2005; Philippines—Dekker and Young 2005, Malone 2005; Young 2002, 2003; Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Philippines—Middleborg 2005, Thomas 2002, Kosonen and Young 2009). The strongest forms of MTB-MLE show the best results. Strong MTB-MLE programs maintain L1s throughout the primary years. For instance, studies in Ethiopia and the Philippines provide longitudinal evidence that maintaining L1s in the curriculum for as long as possible improves literacy and numeracy outcomes (Alidou, Boly, Brock-Utne, Diallo, Heugh and Wolff 2006; Benson 2010; Heugh 2010; Heugh, Benson, Bogale, and Yohannes 2007; Nolasco 2009; Walter and Dekker 2008). In the new MTB-MLE guidelines Timor-Leste can boast some of the most ambitious proposals in Southeast Asia to date to guide education policy development. We now turn our attention to these proposals.

The MTB-MLE policy recommendations for Timor-Leste

In 2009 the MOE requested the National Education Commission (NEC), the Ministry's key advisory body, to develop a policy on language use in schools taking into account international best practice in multilingual settings. In early 2010, the Ministry mandated the NEC to form a language-in-education working group to prepare language policy guidelines and planning strategies with a focus on pre-primary education and compulsory basic education. In consultation with international specialists, this working group produced the MTB-MLE policy for Timor-Leste.

The MTB-MLE policy recommends using L1s for initial instruction with the gradual introduction of Tetum and Portuguese and the later addition of Indonesian and English while maintaining the L1s in the system for as long as possible. The sequence of languages in the MTB-MLE policy document reflects the order in which they are generally acquired by East Timorese children and has nothing to do with a language hierarchy. Mother tongues are defined as the home languages of learners or L1s, even where there are two or more home languages because the teaching focus is on the language the learner knows best (NEC 2010a, 9). This could also include a language spoken widely in the local community. Tetum is considered the L2 for most children, although it is acknowledged that Tetum should be regarded as L1 for teaching purposes in some communities; Portuguese is regarded as L3, English as L4 and Indonesian as L5. English and Indonesian are not prioritised until the third cycle of basic education, where it is recommended that English is introduced as a compulsory subject in Grade 7. Recognising Indonesian as an important regional language, the guidelines keep Indonesian in the system rather than phasing it out, as earlier policy stipulates; instead they recommend the introduction of Indonesian as an elective in the first year of secondary education (i.e. Grade 10).

The major departure from previous policy lies in the provisions for use of the national languages. The MTB-MLE policy recommends that L1s are used as languages of instruction from pre-primary to the end of Grade 3. Tetum should be used orally by teachers from pre-primary to Grade 1, then used as an instructional language with L1 and taught as a subject from Grades 2 and 3 onwards. Portuguese should be used orally from Grades 1 through 3, then both taught as a subject and used as an instructional language from Grade 4 alongside Tetum (and L1 if possible). Portuguese and Tetum should be the instructional languages in secondary education (NEC 2010a, 18-19).

The MTB-MLE policy recommends the formation of a Council for the Promotion of Mother Tongue for every national language to help linguists and teachers develop orthographies for use in reading and teaching materials. It further proposes that the *Instituto Nacional de Linguística*, the body mandated under the Constitution to preserve and protect the national languages, should co-ordinate the production of orthographies, readers and dictionaries (NEC 2010b, 6-8).

The first MTB-MLE pilot project commences in 2012 in twelve pre-primary and primary schools in Oecusse, Manatuto and Lautem, districts where people communicate widely in the national languages. Teaching assistants who speak the local languages will be employed to support teachers. The pilot will be implemented by the NEC, with the technical support of the Ministry and partner organisations. Children's performance in the demonstration schools will be tracked and compared with student performance in mainstream schools. Feedback will be sought from the local communities on the demonstration schools (NEC 2010b, 12).

Medium to long-term goals include integrating MTB-MLE into teacher training programs, producing MTB-MLE training and curriculum materials in Tetum and Portuguese and revising the basic education curriculum in alignment with MTB-MLE principles (NEC 2010b, 4-5). Long-term goals include expanding MTB-MLE and developing teacher training and materials in as many national languages as possible (NEC 2010b, 5).

Concerns about MTB-MLE

Concerns have been expressed in some quarters about MTB-MLE. One concern is that it undermines the learning of the official languages. This perception often leads people to think that the earlier official languages are introduced into the curriculum, the better. However, there is no sound educational evidence that starting early leads to better learning of additional languages. On the contrary, evidence shows that children whose mother tongues are well developed are able to transfer these skills to additional languages. Research studies show that children taught in the languages they know best also develop numeracy skills better than those who are not (UNESCO 2008). They are also more likely to remain in school and parents are often more willing to send them to school.

Another concern is that MTB-MLE creates social division and threatens national unity. However, successful MTB-MLE programs can promote social inclusion and national integration through their recognition of diverse ethnolinguistic identities (see, e.g. Ouane 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh 2011). Literate and numerate citizens are better equipped to participate in the public life and the political affairs of their country. Moreover, a literate population has better access to information about health, nutrition and wellbeing.⁸ Strong multilingualism and literacy can help break the cycle of underachievement and low education levels, offering a way out of poverty and a pathway towards active citizenship.

An exciting new direction for education

The MTB-MLE policy proposals provide a structured approach to the teaching and use of language in education that can support both learners and teachers. If effectively implemented and extended, the policy has the potential to improve learning and engagement in schooling. By recognising children's right to learn in the language of their home or learning community, teachers can promote social inclusion, instil pride in their pupils' ethnolinguistic identities and build a strong sense of national identity, one which valorises the languages and cultures of all citizens (see, e.g. Ball 2010; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). The MTB-MLE policy recommendations for Timor-Leste offer the best guarantee that schools will produce literate citizens and competent speakers of the official languages while valorising and sustaining the national languages (NEC 2010a, NEC 2010b; Taylor-Leech 2011).

On a final note, we re-emphasise that at, as we write, the MTB-MLE policy is not an accomplished fact. The success of the demonstration schools will be vital in gaining public confidence and convincing the Ministry that investment in MTB-MLE is worthwhile. Experience shows that effective MTB-MLE not only enhances the learning of official languages but also helps increase enrolment and retention, raise educational achievement and involve local communities in the life of the school. If the MTB-MLE policy guidelines are promulgated by the government, Timor-Leste can become an example for others to follow in showing the steps that can be taken towards the achievement of education for all.

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⁸ For an excellent overview of ways in which MTB-MLE can empower communities and give them the tools to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, see SIL International, 2008.

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