



ENGLISH AS A LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION IN EAST TIMOR

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Abstract

East Timor's rich linguistic diversity demands a careful choice of instructional language when developing an educational curriculum. Both the cultural-historical importance of Tetum and Portuguese as the young nation's two official languages and the benefits of English language competence (such as improved employability, international connectivity, and access to educational material) need consideration. BETTER asserts that through embedding English to become the primary instructional language in its curriculum, provides Timorese students with a future proof education solution. Learning in a unified language will allow students to be more creative and critically think while also ensuring improved opportunities to prepare for the future, bridge cultural and regional boundaries, and open many doors. Hence, BETTER's approach to curriculum development emphasizes gradually increased use of English as an instructional language while preserving Tetum for cultural and religious subjects and Portuguese as a standalone subject.

Introduction

East Timor is a culturally diverse and multi-lingual society, with over sixteen languages in addition to two official ones – Portuguese and Tetum. Hence, when determining educational languages of instruction, it is essential to carefully consider how such diversity affects a student's learning experience. Generally, children should be taught in a language that they understand and provides them opportunities for a promising career and high quality of life (UNESCO, 2016). As such, the educational language of instruction must maximise the quality of education delivery, student potential, and opportunity, while also preserving Timorese students' cultural and linguistic diversity. Although estimates vary, the 2015 East Timor census indicated that about three quarters of the population are literate in Tetum, whereas Portuguese, English, and Bahasa Indonesian are each understood by one third of the population (UNFPA, 2018).

Opportunities & Challenges for English-Based Instruction

As a global language, plenty of educational material is available in English, making it a useful language for instruction and curriculum development. Further, English literacy provides students with pathways into vocational training and higher education around the world, including East Timor's closest neighbour, Australia. As a result, English is the de-facto language of choice for many Timorese people and educators alongside Portuguese, in which many teachers are poorly educated (Macalister, 2016). Furthermore, many Timorese students prefer English to Portuguese as they view it as a language of the future.

At the same time, East Timor's indigenous languages, notably Tetum, are an integral part of the country's cultural and linguistic identity and should be preserved as such. Moreover, adopting Portuguese as an official language played an important role in shaping the young nation's identity after officially declaring its independence from Indonesian occupation in 2002, prior to which the use of Portuguese was banned, and only Indonesian was allowed. However, despite the importance of Portuguese in shaping the country's identity, Caffery (2016) argues that the importance and usefulness of Bahasa Indonesia is undervalued, while perceptions of Portuguese are overvalued. In any case, East Timor's constitution recognises English and Bahasa Indonesia as working languages, while Tetum and Portuguese are used in official government documents and courts (JSMP, 2004; Ramos-Horta, 2012). Furthermore, Portuguese is also the official language used in national exams upon students reaching senior school and so it is an important language within the country.

Despite education policy focusing on Portuguese, English is prevalent in many public spaces, and private English courses are quite common. Among Timorese parents and students, there is a strong feeling that English has more practical use than Portuguese, which has only recently been declared an official language to reflect the preferences of political leadership educated during East Timor's time as a Portuguese colony (Macalister, 2016). Hence, despite current education policy favouring Portuguese, both English and Bahasa Indonesia have practical applications within the region.

In particular, due to existing prospects within the region, a range of opportunities exists for those who can speak English. Trilateral discussions between East Timor, Indonesia, and Australia (TIA Growth Triangle), indicate a need for economic diversification within the region focusing on trade, tourism, and connectivity (Rogers & Hollis, 2019). As Indonesia and Australia demonstrate healthy portions of economic activity and GDP within the region, further developing cooperative languages would provide additional opportunities for students. Additionally, implementing a language policy supporting English language development within East Timor would foster healthier bi-lateral relations with Australia and promote long-term economic development.

Meanwhile, in East Timor, English has proven to help students find work and further their education. Many university students report finding jobs before completing their studies due to their English skills, as the economy relies heavily on trade with neighbouring countries, which mostly conduct business

in English (Curtain et al., 2013). As such, English proficiency is often associated with an improved quality of life.

As East Timor is Australia's closest neighbour, Australia offers Timorese students an exciting opportunity to study abroad within its education system. Notably, the Northern Territory Government currently seeks to attract people to live, study, and work in the state by offering free English classes in East Timor (Everingham, 2016). The prospect of increased relations between East Timor and the Northern Territory reinforces the notion of English language education being a crucial factor in East Timor's long-term economic development, prosperity, and educational advancement.

Despite its many benefits, some challenges must also be considered when choosing English as an instructional language. While Tetum is an official language that forms a significant part of their cultural and religious identity, it is not a sufficiently built-out language. Therefore, complex concepts such as those found in mathematics and science are difficult to articulate. Additionally, although English proficiency is often associated with increased quality of life, it is imperative to respect and preserve the cultural identity of students to prevent them from feeling alienated. Due to East Timor's past as a Portuguese colony, people are sensitive to foreign cultural influences, such as those that come with adopting a foreign language (Alfafrhan, 2016). One needs to look no further than Australia, where many Indigenous Australian languages have diminished due to colonial settlers enforcing an English language policy in schooling in the twentieth century (Oliver et al., 2017). It is imperative to learn from such historical mistakes and apply the lessons learned to East Timor to preserve its cultural integrity.

BETTER's Approach to Selection of Instructional Languages

Hence, while endorsing English as an instructional language, BETTER is mindful of the challenges that come with foreign language instruction. As such, we endorse the respectful preservation of Tetum as a language of instruction for subjects related to East Timor's culture and religion. This approach is especially important in the first years of primary schooling, where children cannot yet be expected to be fluent in multiple languages and quality of education is vital. BETTER's curriculum will promote the use of English as an instructional language alongside Tetum, while reserving Portuguese as a language subject. Such a pluralist approach to language instruction could have synergistic

effects, as speaking multiple languages has many advantages for students' mobility, cultural sensitivity, and cognitive development (Antoniou, 2019).

Moreover, BETTER is also mindful that it not only matters what is taught, but also how it is taught. Cultural responsiveness urges us to include educational resources that align with the students' diverse cultural values. Due to the different cultural and linguistic groups that come together in a Timorese classroom, BETTER's method of instruction emphasises equity, diversity, and inclusion to ensure every student can realise their potential while preserving their unique cultural identity.

However, BETTER recognises that languages spoken at home will usually take a dominant role, and as such, will introduce plans to include parents and the broader community in learning English. BETTER acknowledges the need to develop opportunities for students to practice their English outside of school and enable them to have sufficient confidence to do so. BETTER firmly believes that English as an instructional language provides an opportunity for such equitable, diverse, and inclusive education by enabling Timorese students and the community to learn together in a language that bridges cultural boundaries, prepares them for the future, and opens many doors.

Conclusion

Incorporating English as an instructional language can have economic, development, and connectivity benefits for East Timor, and therefore should be implemented more widely in the educational curriculum. While these benefits may lead to increased quality of life, the cultural and linguistic diversity of Timorese students must be preserved in this process. As such, BETTER's bespoke curriculum will include English as an instructional language, combined with Tetum to preserve cultural and religious identity and Portuguese as a standalone language subject.

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