

Language-in-education Policy in Timor-Leste.

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Linguistically, Timor-Leste is a rich and diverse nation. Most East Timorese people speak at least three languages, including Tetum, Indonesian, Portuguese, and English, depending on their age and level of education. Remarkably, Portuguese is spoken by little more than 10 per cent of the population, even though it's one of the country's official languages.

Current policy frameworks, especially the Basic Education Act, mandate the use of Tetum and Portuguese as languages of instruction in schools. The policy has been primarily guided by the provisions for language use prescribed in the constitution.

A number of studies have been conducted to evaluate the current language of instruction practices. The results show that most students and teachers find it difficult to communicate using official languages inside and outside the classroom, resulting in high repetition and drop-out and poor educational outcomes. In order to address this issue, the government, which is committed to promoting universal education, is exploring the use of mother tongues at the pre-primary level and within the first years of primary education. The Ministry of Education demonstrated this commitment by mandating the National Education Commission to form a Language in Education Working Group. Inaugurated in April 2010, the working group has been tasked with preparing and designing a language-in-education policy for Timor-Leste.

The draft policy advocates the use of mother tongue at the pre-primary level, with initial literacy taught in mother tongue and scaffolded by Tetum. It recommends a transition to the use of Portuguese as a language of instruction by Grade 5.

It is believed that the new language-in-education policy can support the Timor-Leste government in achieving the educational and cultural goals it has set for itself through its National Strategic Development Plan 2010-2030, and in meeting its international commitments to building an education system which is accessible to all.