

Language and Learning in East Timorese Primary Classrooms

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This PhD thesis is the only existing study specifically focusing on language in East-Timorese classrooms. The aim is to provide the basis for policies. Many people in policy-making positions and general commentators think they know what's happening in classrooms, but they don't in fact as little close analysis exists. The study aimed to observe the patterns of language use in the classroom and what the motivations for using particular languages are.

There are more than 16 languages in East Timor. Portuguese language came to East Timor through colonization. It became the language of the elite, centered around Dilli, for about 400 years. It was also the language of the government, who chose Tetum as the local contact language. Then, Indonesian introduced with occupation in 1975. They had a good implementation policy, though Portuguese was outlawed and schools teaching them were shut. People who went to school in that period still tend to use Indonesian as their academic language. Portuguese survived as a language of rebellion. English only came into the mix in 1999, with the presence of the UN and NGOs. It has come with a lot of status.

In schools, the language of instruction has been Portuguese with Tetum as an auxiliary language, though this policy has changed in the last 2 years. In the home, parents don't always know the Portuguese that children are supposed to learn at school. Further, the problems in the classroom may be not only language related, but also teaching/learning methodology-related.

In the classrooms observed, there is no standardized way of teaching. Students hardly ever speak, and if they do, it is in a choral form—repeating what the teacher says and saying yes or no. Among teachers, there is an idea of teaching as a formal presentation done in Portuguese. Most disciplining and berating happens in Tetum, giving it a negative connotation in the classroom. Ideas are introduced in Portuguese and then finished up in Tetum to move things along. The register of Portuguese used is formal, whereas the Tetum register is more quotidian. There is little overlap in registers. Things are written down in Portuguese on the board, then explained in Tetum, so when the students go home, they can't understand what they copied down and in most cases, parents can't help them. As for methodology, often teachers repeat the question until someone guessed the answer and then the teacher says, "Yes!" There is little by the way of helping students arrive at the answers. Students aren't choosing the language and not really creating any language, as there is a lot of finishing off the teacher's sentences. Students aren't initiating language, and in the rare instances they do, it's in Tetum.

The study shows that teachers are compliant when it comes to national policy and can prove to be valuable in implementing state policies. On the other hand, more policy is needed vis-à-vis goals for learning, literacy and goals for each language. There is also a need for new inservice models to help teachers understand language and learning as well as the importance of student participation.