From Policy to Practice
How Context and Contestation Shape the Implementation of Timor-Leste’s Language Education Curriculum

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Introduction

The teacher waved his finger in front of my face disapprovingly and raised his voice. ‘You people in the Ministry are liars! You keep changing the policy on us! One year you tell us we have to teach in Portuguese, the next year, it’s Tetum. Kids speak Tetum at home already; they don’t need to come to school to learn it!’ This teacher was referring to the new language education policy of teaching primary school students in Timor-Leste’s *lingua franca*, Tetum, rather than the language of the nation’s former colonisers, Portuguese. On my second day of fieldwork in a primary school in Timor-Leste’s capital, Dili, my assumption that teachers would support this new policy was well and truly shattered. The disgruntled teacher had heard from colleagues that I was connected to the Ministry of Education and its Curriculum Reform, and he used the opportunity to convey his dissatisfaction with the new language education policy. He wasn’t alone: at the end of the day, after numerous classroom observations and informal chats with teachers, I scribbled in my notebook, ‘The language policy doesn’t seem very popular.’

This chapter presents a case study of the early stages of the policy-to-practice pathway of Timor-Leste’s new language education policy at the primary school level. The case study is based on ethnographic research conducted in 2016 about how diverse education actors were turning policy into practice through their own work and the contestations and contextual factors that shaped this implementation. The policy in focus is the Curriculum Reform for basic education, the first six of nine years of compulsory schooling in Timor-Leste. The reform is extraordinary in many respects and is described subsequently. But one of its most important features, and certainly its most controversial, is its language education policy. For the first time since Timor-Leste’s independence in 2002, the curriculum requires students to be taught in and to formally study Tetum, one of the nation’s two official languages, throughout primary school. In previous curricula, Portuguese—the little-spoken language of the nation’s former colonisers and Timor-Leste’s other official language—was the predominant language of education, with Tetum fulfilling an ‘auxiliary’ role for translation in the classroom (Taylor-Leech 2011, p. 294), given that very few teachers and almost no students speak proficient Portuguese. However, as the previous anecdote suggests, this new policy has not been universally embraced by the nation’s primary school teachers. While the curriculum reform promotes the use of Tetum in schools to
improve educational outcomes and valorise local culture, many teachers instead see Portuguese as a symbol of good education, national identity and development.

The chapter presents three aspects of this language education curriculum’s pathway from policy to practice: key areas of contestation (debates) over the policy’s rationale and meaning, contextual factors that constrain policy implementation and observations of how these contestations and contextual factors shaped the policy’s early implementation in practice. As such, the chapter adds to the literature a case study about the language education component of Timor-Leste’s most recent curriculum reform, with relevance for policy makers, practitioners and researchers interested in education development in postcolonial, post-conflict, multilingual and developing countries. It also argues for the value of ethnographic methods in elucidating the way that contestations and context act as filters through which policy passes on its way to becoming enacted practice.

In the following section, I present a conceptual framework that draws on relevant literature from the anthropology of international development and comparative and international education. The research context and background are then described, including an overview of the Timorese context, a description of the Curriculum Reform and its language education policy and an outline of the ethnographic research project from which this case study is drawn. Next, the data are presented in the three sections described previously: contestations, contextual factors and early implementation. Finally, conclusions are summarised and future directions for research are outlined.

**Conceptual Framework**

In recent years, policy as a research subject has emerged in various social sciences, including the specific field of anthropology of policy (e.g. Shore & Wright 2003; Shore et al. 2011). Among other objectives, this emergence reflects a broader shift, particularly in anthropology, away from researching only distant, foreign and non-Western cultures towards ‘making the familiar strange’ by researching phenomena in scholars’ home societies and studying powerful people and institutions in various contexts around the world. Here, I summarise the policy-to-practice literature from the anthropology of international development, the anthropology of education and comparative and international education, which provides the key concepts for this chapter’s analysis.

Before exploring what the literature says about how policy functions, it is important to define what policy is. An amorphous term used differently by different authors, policy can describe general trends, principles, learning models and management systems (e.g. Verger et al. 2015), as well as detailed documents that communicate such general policies (e.g. Mosse 2004). Following Mosse (2005, p. 14), this chapter employs a ‘broad conception of policy’ to refer to both the rationale and principles underpinning the Curriculum Reform’s language education policy, as well as the materials through which these are communicated to school actors (e.g. the curriculum and its supplementary lesson-plan books).

The anthropology of international development has thoroughly documented the complex relationship between the creation and implementation of policy in developing-country contexts across a range of sectors (e.g. Mosse 2004; Olivier de Sardan 2005; Crewe & Axelby 2013). This literature has focused attention on the wide array of actors involved in policy creation, including local elites and foreign experts engaged in transnational professional networks and the mediations, compromises and agendas that policies-on-paper represent.

Ample literature from the anthropology of education, and comparative and international education, has documented the policy-to-practice process for educational policies around the world. In regard to education reform, Napier (2003, p. 54) highlighted the importance of recognising in research the very real differences between ‘reform as policy’ and ‘reform as practice’, and several authors have documented the unexpected and unintended consequences of educational policy in practice (e.g. Paine & Zeichner 2012; Shah & Lopes Cardozo 2016; Verger et al. 2015).
translation process that mediates between policy and practice, causing these unintended consequences, has been described in various ways, including as ‘appropriation’ (Vavrus & Bartlett 2012), ‘recontextualization’ (Verger et al. 2015) and ‘(re)creolization’ (Napier 2003), often in reference to the ways that discursive and material contexts shape policy’s locally manifested form (Anderson-Levitt 2003; Vavrus & Bartlett 2012). Olivier de Sardan (2005) has foregrounded the importance of not only processes of translation but active resistance to, and selective implementation of, policies when actors perceive them as being unfair or ‘unimplementable’ (Mosse 2004).

In this chapter, the main filters through which policy passes on its way to practice are context and contestation. These have both been firmly established in the comparative and international education literature—under a variety of terminology—as key moulders of policy implementation: for example, Vavrus and Bartlett (2012) referred to ‘social and material contexts of teaching’, while Napier (2003, p. 52) wrote of ‘internal realities and contextual factors’. Contextual factors vary according to each situation and environment; in this chapter, they include material resources, communication practices and teacher qualifications. Contestations emerge from actors’ ‘epistemological diversity’ (Vavrus & Bartlett 2012) and ‘voice’ (Juffermans & Van der Aa 2013) in response to, or dialogue with, official policy. They are the conflicts and tensions that result from differences in actors’ political beliefs, ideological positions, personal histories and experiences and ideas about what ‘schooling is for and what it should entail, what [. . .] learning requires, what knowledge is worth knowing, and [. . .] what good teaching is’ (Paine & Zeichner 2012, p. 577).

Research Background and Context

Overview of Timor-Leste

The young nation of Timor-Leste (East Timor) in South-East Asia has a population of 1.2 million people. Centuries of Portuguese colonisation were followed almost immediately by a quarter-century of brutal Indonesian military occupation—a dark period of history in which Timor-Leste lost roughly a third of its population through violence and starvation (CAVR Report 2006). Thanks to a persistent guerrilla resistance, diplomatic envoys overseas and growing international pressure, a referendum was held in 1999, in which the Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia. The Indonesian withdrawal was devastating: in the education sector alone, approximately 95 per cent of Timorese schools were destroyed (Millo & Barnett 2004, p. 722; see also Taylor-Leech 2011), and a significant portion of the nation’s predominately Indonesian teaching force left the country (Nicolai 2004). After two years of United Nations administration, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste was established in 2002. Fifteen years since independence, Timor-Leste is an economically oil dependent and overwhelmingly young nation, with approximately 40 per cent of the population under 14 years of age. Timor-Leste is one of Asia’s poorest countries and in 2016 was ranked 133 out of 188 countries in the Human Development Index (Human Development Report 2016). With limited local industry and high rates of unemployment, education is often pointed to as a crucial sector for the country’s development.

Education in Timor-Leste

Prior to independence, education in Timor-Leste was characterised by ‘colonial epistemologies’ (Shah & Lopes Cardozo 2016, p. 4) that served the ends of occupying foreign powers. Access to schooling during Portuguese colonialism was limited to an elite who were trained to perpetuate the colony (Millo & Barnett 2004; Nicolai 2004; Shah 2012). Schooling during the Indonesian occupation reached many more people but aimed to spread a pan-Indonesian nationalism, pancasila, and quell the Timorese resistance (Millo & Barnett 2004; Nicolai 2004; Shah 2012). The languages of
instruction during these eras were Portuguese and Indonesian, respectively. Following the destructive Indonesian withdrawal, the United Nations administration (1999–2002) relied heavily on foreign expertise to rebuild the education system and focused on reconstructing infrastructure, recruiting teachers and enrolling students (Millo & Barnett 2004; Nicolai 2004, p. 20). Complex questions of language and curriculum were left for the independent national government to solve (Millo & Barnett 2004, p. 729).

The ‘divisive issue’ of language (Nicolai 2004, p. 21), however, was not easily solved once power was in Timorese hands. At the time of independence, 80 per cent of the population spoke the lingua franca, Tetum, but the language did not yet have a standardised orthography. Forty per cent of Timorese spoke Indonesian, with many having been schooled in it during the occupation, but its continued use in schools was politically unthinkable. Despite a mere 6 per cent of Timorese self-reporting fluency in Portuguese (Shah 2012, p. 35), it was chosen as the language of education for its apparent linguistic robustness and connection to Timorese history (Taylor-Leech 2011; Shah 2012). Consequently, independent Timor-Leste’s first curriculum retained a heavily foreign flavour: it was funded by UNICEF, written in Portuguese by foreign consultants (Beck 2008, p. 6; Quinn 2013, p. 185; Shah 2012, p. 34) and minimally contextualised to the Timorese context. Tetum was relegated to ‘auxiliary language’ status (Taylor-Leech 2008, 2011).

In the first decade of independence, education made significant quantifiable progress. Schools were rebuilt across the country, enrolments reached near-universal levels and recruitment drives and large-scale training rebuilt the teaching force (Taylor-Leech 2011; Nicolai 2004, p. 20; Millo & Barnett 2004, p. 730). However, the quality of schooling continued to flounder. A 2010 World Bank study found that ‘more than 70% of students at the end of Grade 1 could not read a single word of the simple text passage they were asked to read’ (Amorim et al. 2010, p. 2; see also Taylor-Leech 2011). Ministry of Education statistics revealed that most teachers did not meet the minimum qualification requirements (RDTL 2011, p. 21; Taylor-Leech 2011, p. 293), and there was widespread agreement that teachers generally did not master the content they were teaching nor the Portuguese language they were meant to teach it in.

Curriculum Reform

In response to these ongoing challenges, in 2013, the Ministry of Education initiated the Curriculum Reform for the first and second cycles of basic education (the six grades of primary school). The curriculum is designed around three main pillars:

1. the shift from Portuguese to Tetum as the main language of instruction
2. the localisation of the curriculum’s content
3. the institutionalisation of child-centred and active-learning pedagogy.

In line with the Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030, the curriculum aims to create a uniquely Timorese education system that will enable young citizens to contribute to the country’s development and competitiveness in the global economy while learning about their own culture and history (RDTL 2011, p. 16). Starting in mid-2013, a multinational team produced not only curricula for eight disciplines, but also scripted lesson plans, textbooks (including Tetum and Portuguese literacy resources), reading books, posters, other classroom materials and even a literacy program broadcast on national television. Phased implementation introduced the curriculum incrementally in 2015 (Grades 1 and 2), 2016 (Grades 3 and 4) and 2017 (Grades 5 and 6) to all public schools nationwide. The Ministry managed and funded the reform, with support from international donors like Australian Aid and UNICEF mainly for logistical elements, including printing and distribution of materials.
Localisation is a key objective of the new curriculum (RDTL 2015a) and takes two main forms. First, local content including Timorese history, cultural traditions, geography, music and arts is taught, with the objective ‘to strengthen [students’] Timorese identity and values’ and encourage children to be ‘proud of [their] ancestors and [...] traditional culture and traditional belief systems’ (see also RDTL 2015a, article 7.1). Second, local materials and examples are used in line with the curriculum’s pedagogy of child-centred, active learning with relevance to students’ daily lives (RDTL 2015a, article 7.3, 9.3, 16.2c). For example, students add and subtract using market shopping scenarios (mathematics), they construct a model of the solar system using local fruits (natural science) and they conduct research on their family members’ daily routines (health).

The main way in which the curriculum is transmitted to teachers is through the scripted lesson plans and other classroom materials produced by the curriculum reform team and distributed to schools nationwide. However, the distribution of materials has not always kept pace with the implementation schedule, and alternative access to the curriculum is limited. At the time of writing, an incomplete set of curriculum materials was available for download on the Ministry of Education website, including some lesson plans, mathematics and literacy exercise books, reading books and posters. Beyond this raw content, no information about the curriculum’s objectives, principles or structure is provided on the website.

Various professional development strategies are designed to support teachers’ implementation of the new curriculum. The scripted lesson plans are intended to be teachers’ ‘bible in the classroom’ (RDTL 2015b, p. 1) and to help them enact the new pedagogy and curriculum content. At the start of each trimester (three times per year), teachers attend a week-long teacher-training program, which is implemented through a ‘cascade’ model, reaching from the national teacher-training institute, INFORDEPE, down to the local school level. Finally, a five-year nationwide Professional Learning and Mentoring Program, which aims to provide schools in every district with leadership training and classroom mentoring, began in April 2016 with the support of the Australian aid program. In the data presentation later in this chapter, I provide further illustration of how these issues and other contextual factors in schools emerged in the contestations over the new curriculum through the experiences and perspectives of my research participants.

The Curriculum Reform’s Language Education Policy

The Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (RDTL 2002) names Tetum and Portuguese as the country’s two official languages (article 13.1), Tetum and all other local languages as national languages to ‘be valued and developed by the State’ (article 13.2) and Indonesian and English as working languages (article 159). Tetum and Portuguese share official-language status but different linguistic realities in Timor-Leste: in the 2015 Timor-Leste census, 30.6 per cent of Timorese list Tetum Prasa as their mother tongue and a further 51 per cent listed it as their second or third language; the numbers for Portuguese were just 0.1 per cent and 6 per cent, respectively (RDTL 2015c). In total, therefore, more than 80 per cent of Timorese reported speaking Tetum, while fewer than 10 per cent reported speaking Portuguese. Portuguese remains the language of government and laws, whereas Tetum is the language of daily life and functions as a _lingua franca_ between the country’s many other local languages. In the education sector, as noted previously, Portuguese was the main language of education since independence, while Tetum was treated as an ‘auxiliary language’. Education policy changed over time to include Tetum and Portuguese as both languages of instruction and subjects; however, the government’s clear preference for Portuguese and the provision of exclusively Portuguese language education materials led to a ‘de facto language policy’ (Quinn 2013, p. 183) of Portuguese-only instruction. It is important to note, however, that, in practice, very few teachers are proficient in Portuguese and instead readily use Tetum in the classroom, despite significant government investment in Portuguese language training for teachers (Quinn 2013, p. 184).
In a significant break with previous curricula, the Curriculum Reform’s language education policy designates Tetum as the main language of instruction for basic education and provides a systematic approach for teaching Tetum Literacy for the first time. In the first four grades, students learn Tetum Literacy and are taught all other subjects in Tetum. Portuguese is taught as a foreign language (Portuguese Literacy) and occupies an increasing amount of space in the timetable, increasing from 25 minutes per week in Grade 1 to 150 minutes per week in Grade 4. Correspondingly, Tetum Literacy is reduced from 400 minutes per week in Grade 1 to 250 minutes per week in Grade 4. In Grades 5 and 6, both Portuguese and Tetum are languages of instruction for all other subjects, and Tetum Literacy and Portuguese Literacy are taught in equal measure, each for 200 minutes per week. Beyond recognising ‘the multilingual and multicultural reality of Timor-Leste’ (RDTL 2015a), the stated objective of the language education policy is to gradually transition from Tetum to Portuguese in a way that ensures that, at the end of primary school, ‘students possess a solid literacy base in the two official languages’ (RDTL 2015a, article 11.2, 14.3) before they transition to secondary school, which remains in Portuguese on paper, though not necessarily in practice.7 The Curriculum Reform’s language policy is premised on international research that shows that students’ literacy is best developed in a language they already understand (Ball 2011; Bender et al. 2005; Pinnock 2009; Smits et al. 2008; Walter & Dekker 2011), as well as on local research (mentioned previously) showing that Portuguese language education in Timor-Leste has been ineffective (Amorim et al. 2010).

Research Description

This chapter presents one aspect of an ethnographic research project about educational ideologies, policy and practice around the Curriculum Reform (see Ogden 2017). My own involvement with the Timorese education sector started in 2011, when I moved to Timor-Leste to work with a non-government organisation whose programs included secondary school teacher training. From 2014 to 2017, I was a consultant for the Curriculum Reform, continuing my work remotely after moving to Europe in 2015. That experience spurred my academic interest in the reform and had various influences on my research. The dialogue between my research and work yielded many insights but also made it difficult to get intellectual distance from either endeavour (Mosse 2006; Olivier de Sardan 2005). My contacts in the education sector, and particularly the Ministry of Education, enabled access to research sites and participants but also raised suspicion among some respondents who were confused by or wary of my dual role.

I conducted two months of ethnographic fieldwork (January to February 2016) in Timor-Leste’s capital, Dili, just as Grades 3 and 4 were starting to use the new curriculum for the first time. My research was based in two main sites: the Ministry of Education’s Curriculum Reform office and a mid-sized, urban primary school with 1200 students and 27 teachers. Supplementary research sites included two other primary schools, also in Dili, where I made one-off half-day research visits, and interviewees’ homes and offices. I did not observe schools outside of Dili in any of the country’s other 12 and largely rural districts. I used qualitative, ethnographic research methods for ‘their ability to [. . .] examine how policies are made and contested at various levels by a more diverse range of policy actors’ (Bartlett & Vavrus 2014, p. 140). I conducted:

- participant observation at the reform office and school
- interviews with 37 educational actors, including ministry officials, reform staff, school directors and teachers, and donor representatives (see Appendix 1)
- nineteen observations of Grades 2 and 3 classrooms (see Appendix 2)
- document analysis of government and reform materials
- twenty-four hours of audiovisual recordings.
Data collection continued beyond the fieldwork period, thanks to a return visit to Timor-Leste, my ongoing work for the reform and online contact with some respondents. The research was conducted in Tetum, English and Portuguese, and I transcribed and translated to English, where necessary, all research data.

**Data**

**Contestations**

As noted previously, my research revealed that not all education actors agreed with the new policy. Along the chain from policy to practice, different actors bring their own ideologies, experiences, knowledge and agendas to bear on the policy’s implementation. Here, I outline respondents’ positions on three central areas of contestation—or debates—around the language education policy, the contextual factors of actors’ working environments and observations of early policy implementation. While respondents’ views were diverse among both Curriculum Reform staff (‘reform actors’) and school directors and teachers (‘school actors’), general patterns could be identified from the data and are presented subsequently.

**Debate 1: Pedagogical Approaches**

The most obvious and important question about the Curriculum Reform’s language education policy is whether it will be pedagogically effective in improving students’ literacy and overall academic performance. School actors generally were unsupportive of Tetum’s new prominent role: the majority of school interviewees expressed concern about the reduction of Portuguese in the new curriculum and wanted Portuguese to be retained in the curriculum. Conversely, all reform staff supported the policy change. Two main themes emerged to explain these different views: first, epistemological differences, with reform actors emphasising scientific evidence and school actors emphasising personal experience, and second, methodological differences, with reform actors favouring language progression and school actors advocating language immersion.

Evidence from international research projects documenting the success of similar policies in other countries was central to reform actors’ support for the new language education policy. Some reform staff contrasted their evidence-based approach with what they characterised as the ‘myths’ underpinning former curricula and ‘old-fashioned’ educational beliefs and attitudes, including those of many of the school teachers responsible for implementing the new curriculum (see also Heugh 2000). One international reform consultant stated, ‘[T]hat’s one of the things we’re doing in this curriculum: uncovering all of those myths, and showing that we have to teach Tetum in school [and] teach Portuguese in school. They’re both official languages, and the kids need to know how to speak, listen, read, and write in both languages, efficiently and correctly.’

A Timorese reform consultant emphasised the scientific claim to truth of the reform’s position by stating that school teachers ‘don’t understand the nature of children’ and that ‘a lot of research shows’ that the progression plan is the best policy option. Teachers seconded to the reform also presented the same logic. One stated, ‘At first, I didn’t really agree with this [progression plan]. But then I saw the reality, and I saw that it has to be this way.’ In contrast, school actors referred to their own direct experience in justifying their position on the language education policy. Older teachers in particular recalled their own education in Portuguese or Indonesian as proof that schooling in a language different to students’ home languages can be effective. One school director described her disagreement with the Curriculum Reform’s language policy communicated at teacher-training programs: ‘The teachers who have followed training said that, because kids speak Tetum at home, learning [in] a different language in the classroom confuses them. I don’t agree. We Timorese, from when we were small, […] only spoke Portuguese in school.’
Disagreements occurred about whether Tetum or Portuguese was the better language of instruction for all school subjects; there were also disputes about the most effective methods for teaching the languages themselves. Reform actors emphasised the importance of implementing the language-progression plan carefully in order to build students’ literacy foundations in Tetum and prepare them for secondary schooling in Portuguese. School actors, on the other hand, favoured immersion by teaching all subjects in Portuguese from the start of primary schooling. This is partly because school actors received incomplete and contradictory information about the new policy (see ‘Contextual Factors’ later in this chapter), but also because they drew on their own educational backgrounds. One school teacher, who went to school during Portuguese times and worked as a teacher during the Indonesian occupation, represented this view by stating that students ‘speak Tetum at home, they speak Tetum at the market. They don’t need to learn it in school. But they do need to learn Portuguese, because Portuguese is a strong language’. Indeed, the preferred language education approaches among school actors are not based purely on notions of pedagogical effectiveness but also relate to language development discourses that place languages in a hierarchy of development, sophistication and value.

Debate 2: Language Development Discourses

This debate revolves around the question of whether the Tetum language is ‘developed’ enough to be the primary language of instruction in schools. Overall, school actors argued that it is not and reform actors argued that it is. The debate revolves around technical aspects, including vocabulary, orthography and grammar, as well as broader issues of the ‘colonial epistemologies’ (Shah & Lopes Cardozo 2016) embedded in schooling that delegitimise and devalue local knowledge, including language. Ironically, reform actors sometimes unconsciously reinforced these ideas, in contradiction with their articulated positions. These elements are each described here.

As described earlier, several school actors expressed concern about Tetum replacing Portuguese as the primary language of instruction in the new curriculum, similar to Taylor-Leech’s findings (2008, p. 162). A common reason for this view is a perception that Tetum is less developed than Portuguese, a view that was perpetuated in previous education policy, which marked Tetum as adequate to be only an auxiliary language to Portuguese in the classroom (Taylor-Leech 2011, p. 294). This view relates to negative perceptions of Tetum’s vocabulary, grammar and orthography. While not strictly a creole, Tetum—like many of the world’s languages—includes a significant proportion of loan words in its vocabulary, particularly from Portuguese—for example, ‘educação’ is ‘edukasaun’—but also increasingly from English—for example, Tetum’s ‘akontabilidade’ comes from ‘accountability’ in English, not ‘contabilidade’ [‘accountancy’] in Portuguese. Such loan words generally relate to technical, governmental and legal terminology, as well as development-industry jargon, and reflect the relatively recent arrival of these words and their respective industries to Timor-Leste.

The relative simplicity of Tetum grammar also feeds a perception that Portuguese is more sophisticated and developed than Tetum. For example, while a single Portuguese verb can have more than 50 forms, each Tetum verb has only one, with tenses, subjects and moods indicated by additional words. The simplicity of certain features in Tetum is often rendered as invisibility: one school teacher explained that Portuguese is a more appropriate language of instruction because ‘Tetum doesn’t have verbs yet’—a view that one reform actor reported also having heard from teachers—and another claimed had been fostered by similar statements by politicians.

For people who interpret a long and robust literary tradition as a sign of a developed and sophisticated language, Tetum’s relatively recent transition from being a spoken to a written language signals its lack of development. One teacher argued that Tetum does not belong in schools because it is a language that children speak at the market and at home, whereas Portuguese is a ‘strong language’ that should be taught in school. A school director commented that one cannot write ‘scientifically’
in Tetum, complicating the language’s role in education.\textsuperscript{22} This perspective has a clear precedent, having long been perpetuated by foreign powers and the contemporary international community in Timor-Leste. But even locally, independent Timorese governments have done little to prioritise the development of a Tetum literary culture. For example, the opening ceremony for the construction of Timor-Leste’s first national library took place in August 2017, a full 15 years after independence.

In contrast, all interviewed reform actors stated that Tetum is indeed a viable language of instruction. Many were familiar with the arguments against using Tetum in schools, but emphasised that people’s knowledge of Tetum grammar and orthography is insufficiently developed, rather than the language itself. One Timorese reform consultant lamented that the National Linguistics Institute (INL) has not effectively disseminated the official orthography it published in 2002.\textsuperscript{23} The emergence of competing, alternative orthographies developed by nongovernmental educational institutions, linguists and even by the National Parliament in 2017 also perpetuates the notion that Tetum lacks a standardised writing system. The same consultant commented that Tetum’s official invisibility in previous curricula—including the lack of formal teaching resources for Tetum Literacy (Quinn 2013)—has reinforced the idea that is not a developed language.\textsuperscript{24} This point highlights a chicken-and-egg scenario whereby people feel Tetum needs to be more developed before being used in schools, but teaching it in schools would help to widely disseminate its formal grammar and standardised orthography, thus increasing people’s perception of the language as developed.

However, despite the Curriculum Reform’s fierce defence of Tetum, certain practices and attitudes within the team sometimes undermined this position.\textsuperscript{25} For example, international consultants were not required to speak Tetum, although most did have extensive in-country experience and spoke the language fluently. This sometimes led to English becoming the dominant language in small teams, reinforcing Tetum’s role as an auxiliary language. Also, the Tetum Literacy materials were initially developed by a renowned linguist who had extensive international experience but did not speak Tetum. This decision resulted in the early production of incorrect materials, which Tetum linguists were later required to correct, and reinforced a perception that experts with no knowledge of Tetum were better placed than linguistically trained native Tetum speakers to teach the language.

As one international reform consultant remarked, ‘Of course it [Tetum] is a real language, but if we don’t do this [Curriculum Reform] properly, it’s just going to add fuel to that fire’ around Tetum’s role in the new language education policy.\textsuperscript{26} As Taylor-Leech (2008, p. 162) pointed out in regard to language policy in previous Timorese curricula, ‘[s]elf-effacing attitudes towards Tetum […] run the risk of reducing the official status of Tetum to symbolic status only’. As we see in the third and final area of contestation, even the symbolic status of Tetum is not unrivalled, with Portuguese also claiming a foothold in the nation’s history, identity and self-presentation on the global stage.

\textit{Debate 3: Symbolic Value}

As mentioned previously, many school actors would like Portuguese to remain the main language of education in Timor-Leste, despite many teachers not being proficient in the language themselves. One way to understand this apparent contradiction is by exploring the symbolic value of languages, including their connections to identity, history, culture and social status. The symbolic value of language has not gone unnoticed in the literature on education in Timor-Leste (e.g. Taylor-Leech 2008; Quinn 2013). In fact, Quinn (2013, p. 180) argues that ‘[l]anguage discussions are framed more generally within discourses of nationalism and unity rather than education and pedagogy’, making this third area of contestation a pertinent one to conclude this section. Here, the debate is organised around two main orientations: internal (domestic)—regarding collective national identity and individual status within Timor-Leste—and external (international)—claiming Timor-Leste’s distinctiveness, but also its membership, in the global community.
The internal orientation addresses the symbolic value of language on collective and individual levels. Portuguese was seen by some school actors as part of Timor-Leste’s collective national identity, despite—or sometimes because of—Portugal’s centuries-long colonisation of Timor-Leste. This perception contrasts with earlier studies (e.g. Taylor-Leech 2008) that did not find this association. These Portuguese connections to national identity were made by reference to the use of Portuguese as a code language for the resistance movement during the Indonesian occupation, Portuguese’s status as an official language in the Constitution and the legacy of centuries of Portuguese colonisation, perhaps now viewed more favourably in comparison to the brutal Indonesian occupation that succeeded it. Indeed, the roles that the Portuguese language took on after colonisation ‘transformed the symbolic value of the language from that of a code solely associated with the Portuguese colonial order’ (Cabral & Martin-Jones 2008 in Taylor-Leech 2011, p. 291) to one that reflected Timorese national identity, history and self-determination. Conversely, no school actors mentioned Tetum’s place in Timorese national identity when asked to explain their educational language preferences. However, the symbolic value of Tetum was important to many reform actors (consistent with Taylor-Leech 2008, p. 158).28 In the new curriculum itself, students are taught that both Tetum and Portuguese are official languages in the nation’s Constitution and part of national history and identity, with different roles in Timor-Leste’s past and present.29

On an individual level, Tetum and Portuguese enjoy significantly different symbolic value as markers of status and privilege. For centuries, Portuguese colonial schooling provided access to the elite and citizenship privileges to its students, often themselves from local elite families (Taylor-Leech 2008, pp. 154–157). Today, the symbolic value of the Portuguese language retains the imprint of this colonial system and is still seen as a marker of good education, as well as a useful skill for gaining secure employment in the civil service. Tetum was not mentioned by any interviewees as a ticket to social status of privileges but was rather referred to as a language of the people, with connotations of low education and manual work.30

The external orientation of language’s symbolic value addresses both a desire to be distinctive from regional neighbours and to claim membership of international groups, a dynamic Quinn (2013, p. 181) describes as exhibiting the ‘tensions [. . .] between establishing a particular and distinct national identity and becoming part of a globalised world’. Interestingly, Portuguese is seen as the vehicle for linguistically achieving this simultaneous distinctiveness and membership. The fact that Tetum is spoken exclusively in Timor-Leste was only mentioned as an argument against its use in schools, rather than as a distinctive marker of the nation on the global stage.31 Portuguese is viewed not only as symbolically important for Timor-Leste’s international presence, but also of practical use in the international arena. In contrast to previous scholarship, which argued Portuguese was not seen as ‘a useful commodity for participation in the global knowledge economy’ (Kingsbury & Leach 2007 in Shah 2012, p. 35), some actors in my study argued that Portuguese is important because of the access to overseas educational and employment opportunities it could provide to students.32 One teacher mixed Portuguese with Tetum to articulate this position:

We have to learn Portuguese to get to know the world. [. . .] Tetum is only spoken in Timor, but if we go to other countries, we have to use Portuguese. Or English. [. . .] We have to learn many languages, because ‘saber muitas línguas é ter muitos amigos’: ‘if you know many languages, you have many friends’. Languages are like a window to see out onto the world. With many languages, anyone can be your friend.33

The hope that the Portuguese language can provide overseas opportunities to Timorese students is shared by both school and reform actors, who recognise the limitations of a nascent national higher education sector and a struggling local labour market. However, school actors use this position to argue against the new language education policy. This is partly because of a misconception
among some school actors that Tetum is replacing Portuguese entirely in the curriculum. This misconception arose due to the curriculum’s phased implementation, which did not reveal the curriculum for Grades 5 and 6, in which Portuguese features more prominently, until the third year of implementation. For example, teachers who had only seen Grade 1 lesson plans were shocked to find that students were taught Portuguese Literacy for only five minutes per day. However, this misconception of the structure of the curriculum was compounded by the Ministry of Education’s poor communication of the reform’s rationale and directives to schools—one of the contextual factors addressed in the following section.

**Contextual Factors**

These contestations between reform and school actors are the result of their different personal backgrounds and the varied contextual factors of their working environments (Vavrus & Bartlett 2012; Shah & Lopes Cardozo 2016). These contextual factors shape school actors’ ideas and understandings but also their very ability to implement policy. In this section, three contextual factors are described briefly: (mis)communication, curriculum materials and teacher qualifications. These contextual factors compounded what was already an inherently difficult process of policy change. Like the angry teacher who confronted me in the staffroom, a sense of resentment and confusion over the change in language education policy was expressed by school actors who perceived the change as wasting the significant time and energy they had invested in learning Portuguese. One school director described how teachers were ‘a bit sad, you know? They were running around [trying to learn Portuguese] and then, all of a sudden, Tetum appears. . . . We don’t really know why all of a sudden everything has changed to Tetum’. As noted previously, the new curriculum has not changed ‘everything’ to Tetum, but rather has shifted the strategy for achieving student fluency in both official languages to a progression methodology that slowly introduces Portuguese. However, this misperception about the policy change was almost universal among school respondents and points to a significant challenge for the implementation of the Curriculum Reform: miscommunication of its language education policy.

Confusion about, and the inconsistent communication of, policies is a consistent finding of educational policy research (Quinn 2013; Taylor-Leech 2011; Heugh 2000; Pinnock 2009). Three short examples of miscommunication of the Curriculum Reform follow. First, week-long teacher-training programs each trimester were intended to inform teachers about the rationale, content and pedagogy of the new curriculum. However, both school actors and reform actors had complaints about the training program. School actors said the training programs were too short and not well attended. Reform actors complained that the cascade training model—whereby training is disseminated through layers of trainers, with one individual training a group of individuals who in turn each train another group—distorted and diluted information about the Curriculum Reform, like a game of Telephone, often resulting in inaccurate and incomplete understandings of the policy (see also Napier 2003, p. 52). Second, a number of school actors, particularly directors who felt responsible for clarifying the policy to their own teachers, complained about the mixed messages received about the new curriculum through the media and Ministry of Education officials. A selection of newspaper headlines around the time of my fieldwork attests to the confusing picture painted of education policy in the media: ‘It’s a “patriotic duty” to learn Portuguese in Timor-Leste, says the Minister of Education’ (9 June 2016, Timor Agora); ‘Ministry of Education maintains old curriculum’ (10 January 2016, Timor Post) and ‘Students who speak Tetum will be fined 1 dollar’ (13 July 2016, Timor Post). Regarding government officials, one director commented that:

>The Minister [of Education], at the opening of the school year of 2016, said that all teachers **must** use Portuguese to teach in the classroom, as is consecrated in the Constitution. [. . .] On
the contrary, at the opening of the training course last year, [...] the Vice Minister [of Education] apparently said that Portuguese will disappear.37,38

Third, the uneven distribution of curriculum materials to schools also contributed to the miscommunication of policy. School actors39 commonly complained that curriculum materials were often delivered late and incomplete—a problem that reform actors40 readily, and regretfully, acknowledged. The very nature of the materials was also problematic. The key tool provided to teachers for implementing the new curriculum is lesson-plan books, with a detailed script for every lesson, including dialogue, exercises, materials and preparation. A single 50-minute lesson can require an eight-page lesson plan, and the books can reach 800 pages for one trimester. While school actors did not generally complain about these lesson plans, many were not using them or only cursorily consulting them during class rather than preparing them before teaching as intended.41 Some reform and Ministry of Education actors expressed concern about this method of disseminating the curriculum: while it was intended to provide a type of in-service training for teachers, they noted that Timor-Leste’s ‘oral culture’ made it difficult or even unlikely for teachers to read and comprehend the content.42

Even when teachers could read the lesson-plan books, low rates of teacher qualification meant they did not necessarily master the content adequately to teach it. A government publication from 2011 noted that ‘[m]ore than 75% of teachers [were] not qualified to the levels required by law’ (RDTL 2011, p. 21). My classroom observations included several examples of teachers not having mastered the content they were teaching, including Grade 2 and 3 basic Portuguese Literacy exercises.43

Early Implementation

The school actors’ perspectives on the debates described previously, in conjunction with the contextual factors of their working environments, serve as a funnel through which the new language education policy is filtered on its way from policy to practice. Here, I present three main findings regarding the enactment of the Curriculum Reform’s language education policy in the early stages of its implementation.

First, teachers resist the new policy and enact their own language preferences through their allocation of time to subjects. Due to another contextual factor—the overcrowding of urban schools—many schools split the school day into two or more shifts, meaning the official timetable could not be fully covered. In my sample of 19 observations of Grade 2 and 3 classrooms, teachers displayed a clear preference for Portuguese over Tetum: Portuguese Literacy was taught five times (or in 26 per cent of observations), while Tetum Literacy was taught six times (or in 32 per cent of observations), despite occupying 10 and 25 per cent of the official timetable, respectively.

Second, beyond the official literacy subjects, Portuguese remained deeply embedded in the school culture, emphasising how difficult it is for a policy to address all aspects of the implementation context. Teachers and students used Portuguese during lessons of other subjects44 (all of which should be taught in Tetum for the observed grades in the new curriculum), reflecting the linguistic mixing that occurs in daily life in Timor-Leste. For example, during a mathematics lesson, a teacher wrote ‘10’ on the blackboard and asked her students to call out what number it was. ‘Dez!’ some yelled in Portuguese. ‘What is it in Tetum?’ the teacher asked. ‘Sepuluh!’ the students responded. ‘No, that’s Indonesian.’ Finally, some students arrived at the correct answer: ‘Sanulu!’ Portuguese remained a prominent feature of the school’s aesthetic backdrop, with classroom posters, charts and bookcases filled with Portuguese-language materials. Rituals like the line-up to enter class and the prayer that started and finished the school day also remained in Portuguese.

Third, due to incomplete material provisions, low teacher qualifications and poor policy communication, many teachers were not carefully following the language-progression methodologies...
prescribed by the new curriculum. Teachers did not always have their own lesson-plan book, inhibiting their ability to either prepare lessons or consult lesson plans while teaching. Teachers sometimes expanded the vocabulary of Portuguese Literacy exercises that used a strict methodology, Total Physical Response, unaware of the policy’s position that the methodology is only effective if strictly followed to slowly accumulate vocabulary. While teachers liked to use Portuguese, their own technical knowledge of Portuguese grammar was often below the level of the basic grammar exercises they were teaching, and I observed students repeating and copying down incorrectly conjugated regular verbs.45

Conclusion

The Timor-Leste Curriculum Reform was initiated in 2013 and was progressively implemented between 2015 and 2017, becoming the official curriculum for all primary schools nationwide. The reform’s language education policy represented a bold and unprecedented step to pursue the government’s goal of creating an education system that would improve student literacy and academic performance while being ‘tailored to reflect the unique history, culture and heritage of Timor-Leste’ (RDTL 2011, p. 16). Reversing the longstanding policy of treating Tetum as an auxiliary language to Portuguese, Tetum Literacy is being formally taught and used as the primary language of instruction for the first time. Despite its laudable intentions, this language education curriculum’s pathway from policy to practice has been fraught with resistance and obstacles, shaped by contestations and context. Reform and school actors hold different understandings and opinions of the pedagogical effectiveness, linguistic development, and symbolic value of Portuguese and Tetum, which frame their reception of—or receptiveness to—the new policy. The contextual factors defining the school environment and reform’s implementation—including miscommunication, material resources and teacher qualifications—constrain teachers’ abilities and willingness to implement the policy as intended by its creators. The result is an implementation that resists, reinterprets and sometimes contradicts the language education curriculum’s methods and rationale. Observations of Grade 2 and 3 classes in the early stages of implementation reveal that teachers favour Portuguese Literacy in their allocation of class time; that Portuguese remains embedded in the school culture through rituals, visual materials and language mixing; and that language-progression methodologies remain largely unrecognised and unused in classroom practice.

It is important to note that the findings of this research provide just one perspective on the reception and early implementation of the Curriculum Reform’s language education policy, based on short-term, small-scale ethnographic fieldwork in the urban capital, Dili. Its limitations point to valuable areas for future inquiry, including longitudinal perspectives, the reception of the new curriculum in rural schools outside of the nation’s capital and the views of other actors, including donors, parents and the very students the reform is intended to benefit.

But there are a number of lessons we can take away from this glimpse of Timor-Leste’s new language education curriculum. First, what may appear to be a commonsense policy represents a context- (and often culture-) specific logic, not a universal one. At the start of the chapter, I noted my surprise when I discovered on fieldwork that teachers were not universally supportive of the new directive to teach in Tetum, which I had assumed they would be, given their generally low levels of Portuguese proficiency. It is important for policy makers and practitioners to articulate and question the assumptions that inform policy making, as well as to engage in broad consultation and dialogue with actors across the education spectrum, including local voices that may not favour localised solutions. This leads to the second lesson: that ‘[l]anguage policy debates are always about more than language’ (Taylor-Leech 2008, p. 153). Language policy is both political and personal, touching questions of history, culture and national identity, as well as individual experience, opinion and status. The specific constellation of these factors in Timor-Leste mean that the
little-used, poorly spoken language of the nation’s former colonisers has come to represent good education, national identity and global membership to a significant number of its teachers. This is a reality that the Curriculum Reform will have to deeply engage with through ongoing professional development and public information campaigns if it wishes to build a similar role for Tetum in Timor-Leste’s education system (Bender et al. 2005; Heugh 2000; Pinnock 2009). Third, this chapter confirms what anthropologists of international development and education have long known: a policy in practice is always a policy transformed (Anderson-Levitt 2003; Napier 2003; Shah & Lopes Cardozo 2016; Vavrus & Bartlett 2012). While all education actors in Timor-Leste share the same goal of creating a quality education system, they hold significantly different ideas on what constitutes a quality education and how this goal should be achieved (Mosse 2005). In a country like Timor-Leste, with a complex and bruising history, a struggling local economy, a burgeoning youth population and a legacy of colonial education, getting education right is a daunting but urgent challenge. The centrality of language makes the task of designing and implementing effective language education policies a crucial part of that challenge but a difficult thing to achieve considering the various practical and symbolic roles that language plays in this multilingual country.

Ethnographic research is uniquely placed to contribute such insights to language education scholarship. By delving into the lived experience and inner worlds of education actors, and by comparing what people say (in interviews) with what they do (in observations), ethnography can complement policy analysis and quantitative scholarship by enriching understandings of the multifaceted meanings and implications of language education curricula in policy and in practice.

Further Reading


Notes

1. Interviewee 2 (13 January 2016); Interviewee 19 (3 February 2016).
2. Interviewees 7 and 12, respectively.
3. www.moe.gov.tl/?q=node/257, accessed 7 November 2017. It should be noted that the pool of available curriculum resources was seemingly complete at the time of publication.
4. Tetum Prasa is the Dili version of Tetum that has become the nation’s lingua franca, distinct from Tetum Terik, a local language from which Tetum Prasa originates.
5. However, also in government, Portuguese is the official language on paper more than in practice. While all laws are written in Portuguese (and no government service or program exists to produce official Tetum translations), much of the day-to-day business of government by both elected officials and bureaucrats is conducted in Tetum. A news article on 13 July 2017 reported that several members of Parliament were not participating actively in Tuesday ‘Portuguese-only’ plenary sessions at Parliament because of their lack of facility in the language, affecting their ability to represent their constituents. (www.thediliweekly.com/en/news/capital/14575-portuguese-language-major-obstacle-for-mp-s-intervention-in-parliament, accessed 7 November 2017).
7. Political pressure resulted in the transition from Tetum to Portuguese being completed by the end of Grade 6 in the new curriculum, despite the advice of linguists on the reform team and international research that advises students should be taught in their home language for at least the first eight or nine years of schooling (Ball 2011, p. 6; Pinnock 2009, p. 8; Interviewees 13 [18 January 2016] and 11 [8 January 2016]).

8. Interviewees are referenced in footnotes throughout the text using the interviewee numbers as listed in Appendix 1. Where an interviewee gave more than one interview, the date of the referenced interview is also included.

9. Reform actors include teachers, who were seconded to the Curriculum Reform team for a year or two; national consultants, who were Timorese nationals, often with overseas higher education and experience in the international development industry; and international consultants, who were foreign—mostly American, Australian and Portuguese—subject specialists and project managers.

10. Interviewees 22, 23 (field notes 22 January and 16 February 2016), 27 (11 February 2016), 31, 32, 33 and 34.

11. Interviewees 4, 11 (8 January 2016), 13 (18 January 2016), 18, 20, 21 and 36. Only one of these interviewees mentioned specific countries when referring to such evidence and best practices (interviewee 11: Vietnam, Thailand and The Philippines); none mentioned specific research studies. However, an internal Ministry of Education document outlining the justification for the Curriculum Reform for high-level government officials refers to language education programs that provided precedent for the Curriculum Reform’s approach (and references for these) in South Africa and Namibia (Heugh 2002), Bangladesh (Pinnock 2009), Mali (Bender et al. 2005), Vietnam (UNICEF 2015) and The Philippines (Walter & Dekker 2011). The case studies provided also include China, for which no references were provided, and Guinea Bissau, the description of which was based on the personal experience of two unnamed teachers who had worked in Guinea Bissau before Timor-Leste. Reference to international evidence is also made in the ‘opening words’ from the Vice Minister of Education in the lesson plan books provided to teachers (e.g. RDTL 2015b, p. 1).

12. Interviewee 11 (8 January 2016).


15. Interviewees 27 (18 February 2016) and 33.

16. Interviewee 33.

17. Interviewee 27 (18 February 2016).

18. Interviewee 34.


22. Interviewee 23 (16 February 2016).

23. Interviewee 1 (29 February 2016).


25. I am grateful to an interviewee from the reform team for drawing my attention to this point.


27. Interviewees 23 (field notes 22 January 2016), 32 and 34.

28. Interviewees 11 (12 February 2016), 14 and 15. Interestingly, only international reform consultants made this point. Almost all national reform staff (including teachers and consultants) mentioned localisation as an objective of the Curriculum Reform, but language did not feature among the elements they listed as being part of this localisation (e.g. history, culture, local materials). The change in language in the new curriculum was discussed by national reform actors exclusively in pedagogical terms, that is, that students would learn more effectively in Tetum because they already speak the language.


30. Interviewees 27 (18 February 2016) and 32.

31. Interviewee 27 (18 February 2016).

32. Interviewees 8, 27 (18 February 2016) and 33.

33. Interviewee 27 (18 February 2016).

34. Interviewee 33.

35. Interviewees 28 and 23 (22 January 2016).

36. Interviewees 2, 3, 4, 14, 17, 18 from the Curriculum Reform team and a Ministry of Education advisor, interviewee 19 (3 February 2016).

37. Interviewee 23 (video recording, 22 January 2016).

38. The Vice Minister of Education at the time, Dulce Soares de Jesus, the member of government who initiated the Curriculum Reform, advocated that students should be literate in both official languages. In
an interview for this research, she stated, ‘I want to say that, for us Timorese, there is no question about language. Because Tetum and Portuguese are the official languages of Timor-Leste as consecrated in the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste. So, like it or not, Timorese need to learn these two languages properly.’ (Interview, 25 February 2016)

39. Interviewees 23 (21 January 2016), 24 (field notes, 4 February 2016), 31 and in conversation with an un-interviewed teacher (field notes 21 January 2016). I was asked by school actors at my focal school to use my connections with the reform team to obtain extra copies of lesson-plan books for them, which I did.

40. Interviewees 2, 4, 7, 8, 12, 17 and 19 (3 February 2016). This issue was also mentioned in two reform team staff meetings I attended (field notes 18 and 25 January 2016) and in an interview with a donor (Interviewee 37).

41. A group of four Grade 1 teachers at the focal school proved the exception to the rule: they convened in the staffroom each day after their morning classes to prepare the following day’s lesson using the new curriculum’s lesson-plan books.

42. Interviewees 13 (18 January 2016), 14, 18 and 20.

43. These observations included a Grade 3 math lesson on basic fractions (observation 4; see Ogden 2017, p. 58 for a full description) and several Portuguese Literacy lessons: observations 3, 7, 10 and 16.

44. Observations 2, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14 and 15.

45. Observations 10 and 16.

46. Anecdotally, I heard a number of times that teachers in rural schools were more receptive to the new curriculum. Reasons given for this were that rural teachers are more isolated than their counterparts in the capital and hence more grateful for any assistance in the way of materials and training and that the smaller class sizes in rural schools were more conducive to the implementation of the new curriculum’s child-centred pedagogy.

References


Ball, J 2011, ‘Enhancing learning of children from diverse language backgrounds: Mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education in the early years’, Paper commissioned for UNESCO.


Laura J. Ogden


RDTL (Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste) 2002, Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (English version), Constituent Assembly, Dili.


RDTL 2015b, Klase 1, Períodu 1, Planu Lisaun ba Diziplina sira (Grade 1, Period 1. Lesson Plans for Disciplines), Government of Timor-Leste, Dili.


## Appendix 1

### Interviews

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<td>12-Feb</td>
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## Appendix 2

### Classroom observations

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