



THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION: A Case Study from Timor-Leste

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of the Game-Based Learning (GBL) approach in improving young learners' vocabulary skills. The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Darul Amin Palangka Raya, involving 25 seventh-grade students selected through purposive sampling. A quantitative research method with an experimental group design was employed. The instrument used was a vocabulary test consisting of 15 questions covering five topics: Greetings, Colours, Counting, Telling Time, and Simple Present Tense. Students' performance was measured through a pre-test and a post-test. The results showed a significant improvement in students' vocabulary achievement after the implementation of the Game-Based Learning approach, with the average score increasing from 66.92 to 87.12. Statistical analysis, including the t-test and Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test, confirmed the effectiveness of the treatment. These findings suggest that Game-Based Learning is an effective and engaging method for enhancing vocabulary acquisition among young learners. The study supports the integration of game-based strategies as a meaningful and enjoyable alternative to traditional vocabulary instruction in English language learning.

Keywords: *Key words: Language Policy, Multilingual Education, Teacher Agency, Code-Switching, Timor-Leste*

I INTRODUCTION

Timor-Leste has a long history as a multilingual country, shaped by colonialism and cultural interaction. For over 450 years, it was under Portuguese rule, making Portuguese the language of administration and education. Additionally, Tetun, an Austronesian language, has long served as a lingua franca among the region's various ethnic groups. After gaining independence in 2002, Timor-Leste was faced with the challenge of establishing a national identity that reflected its linguistic diversity. Though

around 35 dialects are spoken by various ethnic groups, Portuguese and Tetum were designated the country's official languages to ensure historical continuity and effective communication.

Timor-Leste's official language policy aims to preserve cultural heritage while improving access to education and governance. Portuguese continues to be used in administration and higher education, while Tetum is more widely used in everyday communication and the media. The government also recognizes the importance of Indonesian and English as working languages, given the historical and economic ties with neighboring countries. Efforts to preserve Tetun continue through education and official publications, while Portuguese remains a symbol of national identity that connects Timor-Leste to the Portuguese-speaking community around the world.

Most studies on language policy in Timor-Leste focus on the big picture, such as policy planning, national implementation, and the policy's impact on cultural identity and social development. These studies often highlight the contributions of Portuguese and Tetun language policies to educational development and state administration. However, little attention has been given to the direct experiences of teachers implementing these policies in the classroom. Teachers play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between policy and learning practices. They face challenges such as limited resources, diverse language competencies, and students with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

The lack of research on teachers' experiences has led to a limited understanding of the challenges they face and the strategies they use to adapt language policies within everyday educational contexts. Without a deep understanding of teachers' roles, policies often appear top-down and fail to consider the needs and realities on the ground. Studies that place greater emphasis on teachers' perspectives can help develop educational strategies that are more responsive to local conditions, ensuring that language policies are not only effective in theory but also in the practical implementation within schools across Timor-Leste.

This study aims to explore teachers' perceptions, strategies, challenges, and responses in implementing language policies within the classroom environment. By highlighting educators' firsthand experiences, the research seeks to understand how they navigate the use of Portuguese and Tetun and the extent to which these policies

support or hinder the learning process. Additionally, the study strives to identify adaptive strategies teachers employ to overcome obstacles, such as limited resources, variations in students' language proficiency levels, and access to appropriate teaching materials. The findings of this study are expected to provide insights for policymakers and academics in designing educational approaches that are more responsive and grounded in classroom realities.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language Policy in Education in Postcolonial/Multilingual Countries

Language policy in education in postcolonial and multilingual countries often seeks to balance colonial heritage with local needs. Many former colonial territories retain the colonial language as an official language or medium of instruction, while efforts are made to preserve local languages through multilingual policies. For instance, a UNESCO report on multilingual education highlights that first-language-based approaches can accelerate learning and enhance educational inclusivity. These policies aim to ensure that students can learn in a language they understand well, ultimately improving academic outcomes and increasing their participation in the education system.

However, significant challenges remain in the implementation of multilingual education policies. Recent studies indicate that many students in multilingual countries struggle because the language of instruction used in schools differs from the language they speak at home. This discrepancy can lead to gaps in comprehension and academic achievement.

Additionally, resource limitations—such as the shortage of teachers proficient in multiple languages and the lack of learning materials available in local languages—pose major obstacles to policy implementation. Therefore, a more flexible and community-based approach is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of language policies in education.

The implementation strategies of multilingual education policies in schools have also become a focus of recent research. A case study on multilingual policy in boarding schools suggests that the use of two languages in the learning environment can enhance the quality of education but also presents challenges for both students and teachers.

Several proposed strategies to address these challenges include continuous teacher training, the provision of more diverse learning materials, and active parental involvement in supporting language learning at home. Regular evaluation of these policies is also necessary to ensure that the approaches applied genuinely benefit students.

Overall, language policies in education in postcolonial and multilingual countries must take historical, social, and economic aspects into account. Approaches that prioritize students' first language can enhance learning effectiveness and reduce educational disparities. However, the success of these policies largely depends on adequate resource support, teacher training, and community involvement in the educational process. Through ongoing research and evaluation, language policies in education can continue to evolve to meet the needs of students in multilingual environments. If you're interested in reading more, you can access the sources I used through the following links: UNESCO, Green Network, and *Journal on Education*.

2.2 The Role of Teachers as Policy Implementation Actors

Teachers as Mediators Between Policy and Practice

In multilingual and postcolonial settings such as Timor-Leste, teachers serve as critical mediators between national policy frameworks and localized classroom realities. Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) emphasize that educators are not merely implementers of policy but interpreters who actively reshape its meaning within their school contexts. This study builds on this framework by showing how teachers in Timor-Leste adapt official language policies (centered on Portuguese and Tetun) to better suit students' linguistic backgrounds. Spolsky (2003) contributes a sociolinguistic perspective, noting that policy often overlooks on-the-ground language practices. By demonstrating that teachers modify instructional approaches due to students' limited Portuguese proficiency, this study reinforces Johnson's (2009) claim that educators enact policy through everyday decisions shaped by pedagogical knowledge and situational demands.

Strategic Adaptation and Agency in Multilingual Settings

This study findings affirm that teachers in Timor-Leste regularly engage in adaptive practices, including code-mixing, simultaneous translation, and the strategic

use of mother tongue instruction. Zúñiga, Henderson, and Palmer (2018) describe such actions as micro-level language planning—instances where teachers exercise agency to maintain equity and engagement. This directly parallels our study’s documentation of informal instructional strategies that enhance learning for linguistically diverse students. Baldauf (2008) frames teacher-led adaptations as essential responses to top-down policies that lack contextual relevance. By highlighting these efforts, our study offers empirical validation for Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech’s (2020) argument that policy must account for teachers’ lived experiences to support sustainable multilingual education.

The Need for Sustained Support and Collaborative Reform

Viennet and Pont (2017) argue that successful policy implementation depends on teacher capacity, support, and inclusion in reform processes. Our study supports this by showing how inadequate Portuguese training and limited resources in Timor-Leste hinder teachers’ ability to apply policy effectively. The work of Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik (2014) contributes a narrative inquiry lens, advocating for the recognition of teachers’ voices in shaping policy design. Our data—drawn from classroom observations and interviews—demonstrate that when teachers lack involvement in policy formulation, they experience disconnection and resort to improvised solutions. These findings contribute to the broader discourse by positioning teachers not just as responders to policy but as potential co-authors of reform.

Multilingual Education and Policy Gaps

UNESCO (2025) underscores the value of sustained home-language instruction in improving student outcomes and reducing attrition. Our study reflects this, showing how teachers in Timor-Leste supplement Portuguese instruction with Tetun and local languages to enhance comprehension. By documenting this linguistic adjustment, our research fills a gap in the literature: while global policy recommends multilingual strategies, empirical evidence of implementation in postcolonial classroom settings remains limited. This alignment illustrates how Timor-Leste’s challenges resonate with global patterns, reinforcing the call for context-sensitive multilingual policy that supports both equity and identity preservation.

Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development

Tao and Liyanage (2020) point to the need for multilingual teacher education programs that address cultural complexity and ethical dilemmas. Our findings reveal that many Timorese teachers lack such preparation, often receiving limited or generic training that does not account for classroom diversity. Chandel (2023) advances the notion of linguistic equity, which our study supports by showing that teacher capacity directly impacts student access to quality education. Through this lens, our research contributes to growing scholarship that emphasizes professional development as a cornerstone of equitable multilingual education policy implementation.

Policy Reform and Community Engagement

The critiques offered by Mahto (2025) of India's NEP 2020 highlight how policy success depends on community participation and localized strategies. This insight parallels our findings, where educators in Timor-Leste employ bottom-up adaptations to meet student needs, often with minimal policy guidance. UNESCO's advocacy brief (2025) promotes community-based multilingual education—an approach our study supports by showcasing teachers' role in contextualizing instruction through cultural relevance and local language use. Together, these references substantiate our conclusion that policy must be flexible, responsive, and co-designed with educators to succeed in linguistically complex settings.

2.3 Previous Research on Language Policy in Timor-Leste

Scholarly inquiry into language policy in Timor-Leste has been substantial, with key contributions from researchers such as Kerry Taylor-Leech. In his seminal study, Taylor-Leech (2011) traces the evolution of language policy following independence, focusing on the designation of Portuguese and Tetun as official languages. His work highlights both the sociocultural and educational consequences of this decision and explores how citizens engage with language in everyday contexts. Notably, Taylor-Leech advocates for a rights-based framework in policy formulation to promote educational inclusivity and long-term sustainability.

Complementing this perspective, Savio (2016) presents an in-depth examination of Fataluku, a regional language spoken in Lautém. Her study delves into the

sociolinguistic resilience of Fataluku, emphasizing how local communities continue to preserve and transmit their language despite official policies that prioritize Portuguese and Tetun. The research offers valuable insights into grassroots language maintenance through both daily communication and informal educational practices.

Further investigations have explored language dynamics and shifts in the region. Narawaty and Nugroho (2021) analyze the changing roles of Tetun, Portuguese, and Indonesian, illustrating how Tetun has gained prominence in media and everyday discourse, whereas Portuguese retains its status as the official language. Their study also points to the erosion of local languages under the influence of dominant regional and global languages, reinforcing the urgency of preservation efforts.

More recently, Tans, Medah, Jama, Tualaka, and Balukh (2023) examined the implementation of language learning policies in Timor-Leste, specifically addressing the inclusion of Tetun, Portuguese, English, and Indonesian as compulsory subjects within the education system. Employing a descriptive qualitative methodology that incorporates interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, the study identifies significant obstacles in policy execution. These include a shortage of qualified educators, inadequate infrastructure, and limited teaching resources. The authors call for more targeted governmental support—particularly in the areas of teacher training and resource provision—to ensure equitable and effective language learning across schools.

2.4 Policy Implementation Theory

Educational policy implementation is commonly examined through two primary theoretical lenses: the Top-down and Bottom-up approaches. The Top-down model assumes that policies are developed by central authorities—such as government agencies—and then executed by institutions and professionals at lower levels. This approach relies on clearly defined goals, sufficient resources, and compliance from implementers. Its strength lies in consistency and centralized control, but it often overlooks the complexity of local contexts.

In contrast, the Bottom-up approach highlights the role of local actors—such as teachers, administrators, and communities—in shaping how policies are applied in practice. It recognizes that successful implementation depends on the capacity of field-

level personnel to adapt policies to specific needs and challenges they encounter. While this model offers greater responsiveness, it may lead to fragmented outcomes if coordination and oversight are lacking. Increasingly, researchers advocate for a hybrid approach, combining elements of both models. Such integration promotes mutual understanding between policy designers and implementers, resulting in more realistic and effective solutions. Studies suggest that relying solely on Top-down strategies can produce gaps between policy intentions and outcomes, while Bottom-up efforts—although contextually sensitive—require broader frameworks to maintain coherence and equity across different regions.

III METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how primary and secondary school teachers in Timor-Leste implement language policies in multilingual classrooms. A qualitative design was selected to capture the depth and complexity of teachers' lived experiences, as well as the socio-cultural dynamics that shape language use in education. As Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2020) emphasize, qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring meaning, context, and process in social settings. It is ideal for understanding how educators navigate policy in linguistically diverse environments.

Participants were purposively selected from key districts such as Dili and Baucau to ensure they had direct experience with the use of Portuguese and Tetun in instructional settings. Purposive sampling allows researchers to focus on individuals who are especially knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This strategy supports the goal of obtaining rich, relevant data from those most affected by language policy decisions.

Data collection involved triangulation through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis (e.g., lesson plans and textbooks). Triangulation enhances credibility by combining multiple sources and methods to validate findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, following a structured process of coding, categorizing, and clustering themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach enables researchers to identify patterns and meanings across qualitative data while remaining grounded in participants' perspectives. The use of

verbatim quotations further supports transparency and authenticity in presenting findings (Eldh, Årestedt, & Berterö, 2020).

By applying these methodological principles, the study offers a robust framework for understanding the challenges and strategies teachers employ in implementing language policy—contributing to both scholarly discourse and practical policy development in multilingual education.

IV RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Classroom Realities: Teachers' Struggles in Enacting Policy

One of the most persistent challenges for educators in Timor-Leste is limited proficiency in Portuguese, the country's official language of instruction. Although Portuguese holds constitutional status, many teachers—especially in primary and secondary schools—are more fluent in Tetun or local languages, making classroom communication difficult (Quinn, 2013; Macalister, 2016). This linguistic gap is compounded by the lack of targeted professional development programs to support Portuguese language acquisition among teachers (Tans et al., 2023). This study reinforces this finding, revealing that teachers often rely on code-switching and real-time translation to bridge comprehension gaps, especially when teaching monolingual Portuguese texts.

In addition to language barriers, resource limitations significantly hinder instructional quality. Many schools lack essential infrastructure, including textbooks, standardized materials, and digital tools (Quinn, 2013; Tans et al., 2023). Teachers in our study reported having to create their own materials or adapt existing ones to meet students' needs—an effort that reflects both dedication and systemic gaps in institutional support. These findings align with broader research showing that insufficient resources and facilities are common obstacles in implementing multilingual education policies effectively.

Another critical issue is the misalignment between curriculum content and students' cultural contexts. Portuguese-based curricula often overlook the lived experiences and linguistic realities of Timorese learners, reducing engagement and comprehension (Taylor-Leech, 2011; Cabral, 2020). This study highlights how teachers respond by integrating Tetun and local references into lessons, using experiential

methods to make learning more relevant. This adaptive practice echoes findings from linguistic ethnographic research, which show that teachers play a vital role in negotiating language ideologies and reshaping policy through everyday classroom interactions (Cabral, 2020).

Beyond linguistic and material constraints, teachers also face ideological pressures related to language status and identity. In Timor-Leste, Portuguese is often perceived as a language of prestige and power, while Tetun and local languages are viewed as less academically legitimate (Cabral, 2020; Quinn, 2013). This perception influences classroom dynamics, where teachers may feel compelled to prioritize Portuguese even when students struggle to understand it. This study reveals that this tension creates emotional and professional stress for educators, who must balance policy expectations with their commitment to student learning. The symbolic weight of Portuguese as a postcolonial identity marker further complicates its pedagogical use, especially in rural areas where Tetun and indigenous languages dominate daily communication.

Moreover, teachers operate within a fragmented support system, where policy directives are not always accompanied by clear implementation guidelines. As highlighted in your findings and supported by Tans et al. (2023), many educators report receiving minimal orientation on how to integrate multiple languages into their teaching. This lack of clarity leads to inconsistent practices across schools and districts. Teachers often rely on informal peer collaboration or personal initiative to navigate multilingual instruction, which, while resourceful, underscores the absence of systemic scaffolding. These conditions point to the need for more coherent and participatory policy frameworks—ones that recognize teachers not just as implementers, but as co-designers of language education in Timor-Leste.

4.2 Classroom Adaptation Strategies in Multilingual Education

In order to respond to the complexities of implementing official language policies, teachers in Timor-Leste have developed a range of adaptive practices to support student learning across diverse linguistic contexts. One frequently used strategy is code-mixing, where educators blend Portuguese and Tetun during instruction. This approach allows for clearer communication of difficult concepts, ensuring that students better understand lesson content. Code-mixing is especially prevalent when teachers are

navigating heterogeneous classrooms, and it serves as a practical tool for promoting student comprehension without abandoning official curricular requirements.

Another widely employed technique is simultaneous translation, in which teachers present instructional material in Portuguese and immediately translate it into Tetun or students' mother tongues. This strategy is particularly beneficial for learners who are still developing proficiency in the official language, as it minimizes comprehension gaps and facilitates more inclusive learning environments. Simultaneous translation also reflects teachers' efforts to reconcile policy demands with the linguistic realities of their classrooms, ensuring that all students remain actively engaged in the learning process.

A third significant approach involves the intentional use of the mother tongue, especially during early education. Many teachers recognize that using familiar languages helps learners grasp foundational knowledge before gradually transitioning to Portuguese or Tetun. This strategy not only supports cognitive development but also affirms students' cultural identities. Research underscores that mother tongue-based instruction contributes to stronger academic outcomes and accelerates acquisition of second languages (UNESCO, 2025). In Timor-Leste, this localized strategy is increasingly recognized as a practical method for bridging the gap between top-down language policies and everyday classroom practice, reinforcing the importance of linguistic relevance and pedagogical flexibility.

4.3 Perspectives on Policy in Timor-Leste

Teachers' views on language policy in Timor-Leste reveal a mix of support and concern. On one hand, many teachers agree that using Portuguese and Tetun as official languages is important for national development, strengthening identity, and improving academic standards (Taylor-Leech, 2011). They understand that Portuguese, in particular, is seen as a language of opportunity, offering students access to higher education and international networks (Macalister, 2016). From this perspective, the policy reflects the government's goal to align education with broader social and political aspirations.

However, teachers also face real difficulties in applying the policy in daily classroom practice. Many students have limited proficiency in Portuguese, and suitable

teaching materials are often unavailable or mismatched with local realities (Cabral, 2020; Tans et al., 2023). Additionally, teachers themselves may lack formal training in Portuguese instruction, which affects how well they can teach using the official language (Quinn, 2013). This research highlights this gap clearly, showing how teachers frequently feel overwhelmed by the expectations of the policy.

To cope with these challenges, teachers develop practical adaptation strategies—such as code-mixing, simultaneous translation, and the use of mother tongue instruction during early grades (Cabral, 2020; UNESCO, 2025). These methods help students understand lesson content more easily and reflect the bottom-up approach to policy implementation (Johnson, 2009). Teachers are not just following policy; they actively adjust it based on what works in their classrooms. This tension between policy ideals and classroom realities shows the need for a more flexible and supportive system—one that acknowledges teachers' agency and encourages collaboration between policymakers and educators.

4.4 Gaps Between Language Policy and Educational Practice

Even though Portuguese and Tetun have been formally designated as the official languages of education in Timor-Leste, their implementation at the school level remains inconsistent and challenging. A key issue is the limited teacher preparation in Portuguese instruction. Many primary and secondary educators continue to navigate this policy shift without sufficient training, resulting in varied levels of language proficiency and reduced instructional effectiveness (Quinn, 2013; Macalister, 2016). This result of study reinforces this concern, revealing that teachers often rely on Tetun or local languages to facilitate comprehension, especially when teaching monolingual Portuguese texts.

Another significant gap lies in the absence of systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. While the government mandates the use of Portuguese and Tetun, there is little evidence of regular assessments to gauge how these policies are enacted in classrooms. Without structured feedback loops, policymakers struggle to identify implementation barriers and respond to the realities faced by educators and learners (Cabral, 2020). Our findings show that in the absence of clear guidance,

teachers adopt varied approaches (some prioritizing Tetun or mother tongue instruction) to ensure students grasp lesson content.

Another major issue affecting the success of language policy is the lack of suitable teaching materials and ongoing support for teachers. Many educators report that the available resources—especially Portuguese textbooks—do not match the local curriculum or reflect students' language backgrounds (Tans et al., 2023). Because of this, teachers often have to adjust or create their own materials, which adds extra pressure to their workload.

This research shows that, in response to these limitations, teachers use practical strategies such as code-mixing and translating lessons into Tetun or students' mother tongues. Although these techniques help students understand better, they are informal solutions that are not officially supported by education policies. This situation highlights a clear gap between what policy requires and what happens in classrooms. It reflects broader ideas from implementation theory, which suggest that combining top-down decisions with input from local teachers—known as a hybrid approach—can lead to more effective policy results (Johnson, 2009; Viennet & Pont, 2017).

V CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study underscores the persistent disconnect between language policy formulation and its implementation in classrooms across Timor-Leste. While the national policy elevates Portuguese and Tetun as official languages of instruction, the realities faced by teachers reveal systemic challenges—including limited proficiency in Portuguese, inadequate training, and a scarcity of culturally relevant teaching materials. These factors hinder consistent and equitable application of the policy, particularly in linguistically diverse and under-resourced regions.

Findings from this research demonstrate that teachers in Timor-Leste play a pivotal role as frontline interpreters of language policy. Faced with limited support and rigid frameworks, they exercise agency through adaptive strategies such as code-mixing, simultaneous translation, and mother tongue instruction. These practices reflect a bottom-up responsiveness that is often overlooked in top-down policy design, yet essential for ensuring inclusive and effective teaching. Grounded in the principles of

implementation theory (Johnson, 2009; Viennet & Pont, 2017), this study highlights the need for hybrid models that balance national directives with local flexibility.

To bridge the gap between policy and practice, several implications emerge. First, teacher training programs must be strengthened to build Portuguese proficiency and multilingual pedagogical skills, tailored to the sociolinguistic contexts of Timor-Leste (Tao & Liyanage, 2020; Chandel, 2023). Second, language policy should allow space for classroom-level adjustments, promoting instructional strategies that respect students' linguistic backgrounds. Finally, teachers must be recognized as key stakeholders in policy design and revision. Their lived experiences offer valuable insights that can guide more responsive, equitable, and sustainable reforms.

By embracing a teacher-centered, context-sensitive approach to language policy, Timor-Leste has the opportunity to transform official guidelines into dynamic tools for learning, identity-building, and cultural preservation. This study not only contributes to the academic discourse on policy implementation in multilingual settings, but also provides a foundation for future reforms that prioritize the voices and realities of educators.

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