



Title of Project:

'Seidauk sai hanesan ami nia mehi' – A Study of Lecturers'
Responses to Multilingualism in Higher Education in Timor-Leste

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TIRF Research Topic Investigated:

Language Planning and Policy

Final Report

Motivation for the Research

Lecturers in higher education institutions in Timor-Leste (aka East Timor) are faced with a daunting challenge: how to work within a mixture of linguistic and communicative resources for the academic and professional transformation of their plurilingual students amid an intensely complex and conflicted language policy environment. These lecturers are under competing pressures to adopt different monolingual teaching practices, despite the multilingual reality in classrooms. They must routinely select from among the two “co-official” (Tetum and Portuguese) and two “working” (Indonesian and English) languages for the diverse range of academic and vocational communication work that they need to do. Pressure from the government and many nationalist voices in Timor-Leste is to abandon the use of Indonesian in all tertiary classrooms, though it is the language that many lecturers have themselves studied in and the language of many teaching and learning resources, and to comply with an educational decree dictating that Portuguese should be the sole medium of instruction for all post-primary education (RDTL, 2008; Taylor-Leech, 2013).

At the same time, some private higher education institutions in Timor-Leste are in the process of implementing English medium of instruction policies for specific faculties oriented to strategic industries, notably Petroleum Studies and Tourism (Williams-van Klinken, 2014). This is in response to growing demand for English-speaking graduates in these and other industries in the young developing nation, mirroring micro- and macro-level discourses that point to English as the language of regional and global job markets (Williams, 2010; Duchêne & Heller, 2012), in addition to its status as the international language of scientific and academic research (Lillis & Curry, 2010). Meanwhile, recent research suggests that Tetum is likely to be the strongest language for those students who are entering tertiary education now (Godinho, et. al., 2012), though most will have experienced primary and secondary schooling in a mixture of all four languages, with some use of local indigenous languages in academic domains also possible (Quinn, 2013).



Having identified this complicated sociolinguistic setting as a particularly challenging context for the delivery of higher education, I took an exploratory approach to this research project. My aim was to understand the linguistic views, choices, and practices of lecturers working in higher education as they relate to four different industries. Through this close-up study of practitioners in higher education, I hoped to contribute new perspectives on issues of language planning and workforce development in multilingual, developing contexts. This research was also aimed at showing how the historical, institutional, and cultural settings of lecturers' work as vocational educators shape and constrain their practices, as well as how they are being reconfigured in those practices.

Research Questions

The following two central research questions (RQs) drove this study:

1. How do lecturers in development-related disciplines in Timor-Leste conceptualize the communication skills and resources needed by their students to succeed at university and to find work in their respective industries?
2. What kinds of teaching strategies and multilingual communication practices do these lecturers engage in to support their students in developing these skills and resources?

Research Methodology

This study drew on a mixture of ethnographic research methods, including focus groups, interviews, and passive classroom observations (with the use of an observation tool), to collect rich and diverse qualitative data from lecturer participants in different disciplinary areas and different institutional settings. The intention was not to gather generalizable data but, rather, to get a broad indication of the range of issues, challenges, discourses and ideologies at play in Timorese higher education in relation to the teaching of multilingual academic and professional communication skills in development-related industries. With this intention in mind, I recruited lecturers for participation in the project via direct contact with the following three Timorese higher education institutions (note that pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' anonymity):

1. National University (NU), a large, public university located in the centre of the Timorese capital, Dili;
2. Timor Technical College (TTC), a large, private technical institute located on the outskirts of Dili;
3. Rural Coffee Institute (RCI), a small, private agriculture institute focussed on coffee production located outside Dili in a remote, rural district.

Participant recruitment was limited to lecturers in faculties and departments in four industry areas closely connected to Timor's national development: Agriculture (at NU and RCI), Petroleum Studies (at TTC), Tourism (at TTC), and Community Development Studies (at NU). The main phase of data collection occurred during a three-month visit to Timor-Leste in 2015. Thanks to funding provided by TIRF under the DDG award program, a shorter, return visit to Timor-Leste in February 2017 allowed for follow-up interviews, as well as for checking understandings and interpretations of data with participants.

Data gathered from the focus groups and interviews was analysed via a combination of content and discourse analysis. This was complemented by analysis of the results of observations of lecturers' teaching methods and communication practices in classroom and supervised fieldwork settings, as well as of relevant institutional and faculty documents (curricula, course outlines, lesson plans, sample teaching resources, sample student assignments, etc.).

Analysis of collected data for this research project thus involved close attention to both content and form in the utterances of individual lecturer-participants, as well as attentiveness to the wider disciplinary, institutional and socio-political discourses to which these utterances contributed. This approach was anchored in an understanding of lecturers' performative roles in the planning of disciplinary communication and the construction of disciplinary knowledge, and a related recognition of the discursive power of their statements about language and communication in tertiary settings.

Summary of Findings

In pursuit of answers to the aforementioned research questions, this study produced a wide range of qualitative empirical data that illustrate and instantiate the diverse and conflict-ridden nature of lecturers' responses to multilingualism in higher education in Timor-Leste. I conclude that sharper attention is needed to the specificities and nuances of the diversity of linguistic and semiotic forms that are manifested, their socially ascribed functions in different contexts, as well as the various justifications – especially ideological ones – by which differentiations are made. In providing this attention ethnographically with a focus on the beliefs and practices of tertiary educators, this research has laid bare the diversity of multilingual arrangements evident in Timorese higher education. It has also uncovered institutional and disciplinary ties to particular language discourses, highlighted the iterative, performative roles of lecturers as planners of professional expertise as well as of language, and sought to identify patterns and propose explanations for these phenomena.

A combination of fine-grained sociolinguistic and discourse analysis revealed spectacular diversity in the locally valued and enacted forms and arrangements of multilingualism in higher education spaces in Timor-Leste. The results of this research detail the specificities of this variation at multiple sociolinguistic scales of analysis: the different industry areas case-studied, the different faculties, departments and institutions where data was collected, and the classrooms of different individual lecturers. Different 'visions of industry' held by individual lecturers are productive of different beliefs about the communicative worlds into which graduates will be entering. Different beliefs about the relative affordances and constraints of the four official and working languages of Timor-Leste (Tetum, Portuguese, English and Indonesian) are productive of different perspectives on the preparedness of students for tertiary study. Lecturers' own unique plurilingual repertoires, borne of unique, individual educational and biographical trajectories, combine with the material constraints of available teaching and learning resources to limit the multilingual communication possibilities in classrooms. There are, however, powerful examples of lecturers' significant creative and agentive abilities towards the transfer of expert knowledge in and through a mixture of semiotic forms.

This study, thus, highlights both the hugely challenging position in which lecturers in higher education in Timor-Leste are placed – at the meeting point of diverse and often conflicting pressures – and their role as change agents in the discursive construction of multilingual communication for different fields. Lecturers' beliefs and practices with regard to multilingual communication are demonstrated to be influenced by a range of competing



pragmatic considerations and discursive forces, as well as being themselves productive of particular norms of professional and vocational communication and particular constructions of expert knowledge.

Implications

The findings of this study bear many significant lessons and implications for policy-makers and practitioners working in language and higher education in Timor-Leste, as well as for those involved in workforce and industry development in the country. Due to space constraints, I will focus here on just a few key implications for understanding and working with the complex context of Timorese multilingual higher education within a post-colonial, national development setting.

Implications for language policy and planning in Timor-Leste

This study has highlighted the need to give more institutional recognition and support for independent efforts made by individual lecturers to develop Tetum for academic use in their areas of expertise, as well as for pragmatic use in their industry. For instance, there is a need for increased consultation and collaboration between faculties and language support programs towards the development of teaching and learning resources in Tetum. Such collaboration will assist in avoiding situations of intra-institutional language policy conflicts, as was evident at TTC where a trilingual glossary for tourism subjects was produced translating “service” as *serbi*, while tourism lecturers at the same institution use *atendimentu* as the spoken Tetum translation in their classrooms. In general, an approach to the development and intellectualization of Tetum is needed where the expertise and contributions of multiple stakeholders are valued, including those who are not traditionally understood as “language experts.”

Findings from this study show that such efforts towards the intellectualization of Tetum and the normalization of mixed multilingual classroom practices are significantly constrained by monolingual discourses and institutional practices that reinforce the dominance of Portuguese, Indonesian, and especially English in higher education. English in particular is seen to be vital for participation in key strategic industries in Timor-Leste. Discourses about English as the global language of the Petroleum and Tourism industries act as powerful centripetal forces on lecturers’ conceptualisations of the communication skills and resources needed by graduates in these industries. Indonesian and Tetum are also identified as needed for work in both the Tourism and Petroleum industries, yet the importance attributed to these languages by lecturers in these fields is significantly overshadowed by the perceived importance of English. Meanwhile, Portuguese continues to have a significant place in Timorese tertiary classrooms as it enters into the plurilingual repertoires of lecturers who have studied in Portuguese and/or who subscribe to nationalist discourses that favor its use. These competing trends are both reinforced and challenged by different faculty and institutional language policies, language program design and curricula, and professional development training for lecturers.

Lecturers’ responses to these diverse, competing pressures are varied and often conflicted in themselves. Indeed, one of the most significant impacts of the intensely complex sociolinguistic setting in which Timorese higher education sits is that it complicates the question of lecturers’ “choices” with regard to language use in academic and disciplinary communication. The extent to which lecturers feel themselves to be constrained in their language and communication practices and the extent to which they feel free to exercise their own creative agency are themselves variable factors. Attentiveness to the varied sources of communicative



diversity and mixing that are productive of the linguistic heterogeneity characterizing Timorese higher education affords a clearer understanding of this work of disciplinary lecturers as “planners” of language, disciplinary knowledge and expertise, and, indeed, the disciplines themselves.

Implications for workforce development in Timor’s strategic industries

Timorese lecturers’ conceptualizations of students’ multilingual communication skills and resources are instrumental in the discursive construction of industry knowledge and expertise, and, by extension, in the construction of what it means to be an expert in a particular field. As tertiary educators, these lecturers are tasked with not only preparing students for work but more specifically with preparing student *voices* for participation in worlds of professional communication beyond graduation. As authors and authorizers of appropriate communication for academic and disciplinary contexts and purposes, lecturers are constantly monitoring and modelling the use of valued language forms for specific discipline-related communicative functions: Tetum for oral explanation, mixed in certain ways with Indonesian or English or Portuguese for technical and abstract vocabulary, with different rules again for written communication. Vocational lecturers in Timor-Leste are thus positioned (within institutional spaces as well as more widely in society at large) in key formative roles in the preparation of the multilingual voices of their students for work in industry.

Local and international development practitioners along with government and private aid agencies invested in developing, post-colonial, multilingual societies like Timor-Leste should find substantial interest here, especially those involved in workforce development. For instance, development practitioners interested in starting a rural livelihoods project in Timor-Leste might assume that university graduates of agriculture or community development studies, as the local educated elite, will be working in rural communities as government extension agents. It would, therefore, be informative for such practitioners to learn the very lecturer-specific ways in which these graduates are being trained in community-centered development paradigms, how their learning incorporates potentially quite different orientations to community consultation and community communication, and the extent to which graduates may be expected to value (or devalue) vulnerable, marginalised, sub-altern voices. It should also be informative for these practitioners to know that lecturers are key stakeholders in what is shaping industry, and that their teaching practices and classroom language choices matter for system-wide change.

Both language planning and workforce development planning activities need to take account of the reality that disciplinary lecturers are directly informing how industries are being shaped as they craft the repertoires, attitudes, and communication habits of their students. Via their direct, value-laden statements to students about the language forms that matter in the workforce, as well as via habitual modelling of disciplinary communication and multilingual translation and transfer of disciplinary knowledge, lecturers are instructing graduates’ visions of workplace communicative contexts and the relationships that characterise them. In so doing, lecturers socialise students into particular normative arrangements of multilingualism in relation to their industry, connected to particular relational and communication pathways to national development. This is occurring even at the level of everyday classroom communication practices, as in the translation of fundamental disciplinary terms, such as “growth” in agriculture, or “service” in tourism.

This view of individual educators as key stakeholders in processes of workforce development challenges a common assumption in the development sector that policy



implementation happens at the institutional level. In development work, stakeholder analysis is a common practice, as it is, of course, essential to understand who is involved in any project, what power dynamics are involved, and how these may be worked from within to make systemic interventions, rather than one-off, non-sustainable changes. Recognizing disciplinary educators as key stakeholders in development policy implementation processes brings in higher education lecturers into considerations of theories of change/change pathways for sustainable, system-wide development. Any design of development-focused interventions, therefore, should not treat institutions as the final change agents but, instead, recognize the influence of individual lecturers' actions as affecting pathways to change.

Lecturers' responses to multilingualism in Timorese higher education matter because they are at the meeting point of competing discursive and material forces. What they think and do in their roles as educators of specialized knowledge influences the emergent workforce for the Agriculture, Petroleum, Tourism, and Community Development industries in Timor-Leste. It is their beliefs and practices that instruct and socialize the voices of graduates going to work in these fields.

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