Kerry Taylor-Leech

ORCID.org/0000-0002-6840-6838

Abstract

This chapter shows how the colonial and post-colonial experiences of a recently independent nation influence contemporary perceptions of multilingualism in language education planning. A mother-tongue pilot project in Timor-Leste provides an illustrative case. The chapter outlines the policy developments that preceded the project and sketches the complex interactions among the disparate actors involved. In taking stock of the project’s setbacks, threats, and challenges and considering its prospects, the chapter suggests that it is the accruing injuries of coloniality that lead many social actors to regard Indigenous languages as unfit or not yet ready for use in the modern curriculum. The story of the pilot project offers insights into the discourses that influence language policy debates and the kinds of historical and contextual conditions that influence perspectives on multilingualism in southern settings.

Introduction and background

In 2013, the Timorese Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport implemented a mother-tongue pilot project in three municipalities with large communities of Indigenous language speakers.
In Timor-Leste, the term ‘mother tongues’ (*lian-inan* in Tetun) is used to refer to the 20+ Indigenous languages accorded the constitutional status of national languages at independence in 2002. The project commenced in the Pre-Primary Year and by 2016 had been extended to Grades 1, 2 and 3. The Ministry extended it to Grade 4 in 2017 and to Grade 6 in 2018.

Known in Tetun as *Edukasaun Multilingue Bazia Lian-Inan* or EMBLI (literally, Multilingual Education in Mother Tongues), this modest project was initially funded by a network of non-government organizations that were responsible for its advocacy, monitoring, and evaluation. Although modest in size, its goals were ambitious and provoked strong reactions in some quarters, many of them out of all proportion to the reality of its scale and reach. This chapter reflects on these responses, examines their origins and suggests what they represent. The EMBLI story offers insights into the discourses that influence postcolonial language policy debates and the kinds of historical and contextual conditions that influence perspectives on multilingualism in southern settings.

To place EMBLI and the Timorese language debate in their sociolinguistic context, we need to understand the post-independence language situation. The three censuses since independence reveal a highly multilingual society with varying degrees of individual plurilingualism. Forced population displacement, mobility and urban drift have resulted in linguistically highly diverse communities – but some rural and remote parts of the country are still predominantly monolingual, and it is not unusual for a single local variety to be spoken in a village or hamlet. Extrapolating from the 2015 census, we can identify a typical postcolonial situation in which only a minority of people are proficient in the official languages: In 2015, 30.8% of people were literate (i.e. spoke, read and wrote) in Portuguese, 36.6% in Indonesian and 15.6 % in English. In contrast, 62.5% were literate in Tetun-Dili (UNICEF and UNFPA
Tetun-Dili, also known as Tetun-Prasa or Town-Tetun, is one of several varieties of Tetun (including Tetun-Terik and Tetun-Belu). At independence Tetun-Dili was declared to be the co-official language with Portuguese and is known in its standardized, written form as Official Tetun. While this variety of Tetun has spread exponentially, it is by no means spoken everywhere and for most people it is a second language. According to Williams van Klinken and Williams (2015), no more than 36.6% of people speak it as a first language (L1). The other Indigenous language groups are much smaller: Mambae speakers constitute 12.5% of the population, Makasae 9.7%, Tetun-Terik 6%, Baikenu and Kemak 5.9%, Bunak 5.3%, and the remainder less than 4%.

**Timescales and the structure of this chapter**

Language policy and planning processes everywhere have to be seen in their historical context to be fully understood, and, in southern settings, a *longue durée* perspective is essential if we are to understand how coloniality reaches into the present in tangible and intangible ways. But it is also worth differentiating between the short-, medium-, and long-term timescales over which policy and planning take place (see Lee & Wallerstein, 2012). Drawing on Braudel’s notions of the *longue* and *courte durée*, Blommaert (1999: 425) observes that over time there are long periods of stasis, interrupted by critical junctures during which language becomes the target of active management or intervention. At such times, ideologies are mobilized and shaped into shared social narratives. In the process, the history and identity of a speech community are discursively constructed (see also Stroud, 1999). If we view language policies as cultural constructs situated in particular discursive time and space (Hult, 2010: 14), a temporal view allows us to zoom in and out of the contexts in which these discourses circulate, and to understand their influences.
Informed by these perspectives, this chapter is organized along two timescales. The influence of Portuguese colonial ideologies over the *longue durée* is essential to understanding the dramatic shifts that took place in language policy trajectories during these timescales. The first timescale, which was intersected by several shorter phases of policymaking, traces Timorese language education policy discourses back to their origins in the first unilateral declaration of independence in 1975. It shows how critical junctures in the country’s colonial and postcolonial experiences have shaped language policy development and the interactions among the disparate actors involved. The second timescale covers the shorter, still unfolding story of the pilot. It shows how policy can be actively or passively subverted and how pilots can gradually be relegated to the margins.

**Critical policy junctures**

Nowhere are the legacies of colonialism more evident than in language policy decisions and their consequences. We can look to history to explain the attachments held by many older Timorese to the Portuguese language. Forty-eight years of Portuguese Estado Novo (1926–1974) colonial policy and the so-called civilizing mission established a social layer of assimilated Timorese known in Portuguese as *assimilados*. By 1974, Portuguese had long been the language of the colonial administration and the *assimilados*. It is to this history that the affiliation of the Timorese to the Portuguese language is often attributed.

But to speak of assimilationist colonial ideologies in deterministic ways is to negate the capacity of formerly colonized peoples to forge their own futures and their ability to use languages as resources for their own purposes. Let us rewind to the critical juncture of 1974
when decolonization was being prepared for in Portuguese Timor. While there were significant differences between the three Timorese political parties, they unanimously supported the choice of Portuguese as the official language (Jolliffe, 1978: Appendix A). The leading party, Fretilin (Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente or Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) also advocated the ‘research and study’ of Tetun and the national languages (p. 335).

Following the liberation of other Portuguese colonies, the decolonization process in Timor-Leste began in 1974 but was abruptly halted in 1975 by the Indonesian invasion, a critical juncture which saw the start of new timescale and the rapid reconfiguration of the linguistic hierarchy. Over the next twenty-four years, the public use of Portuguese was forbidden, and Indonesian was imposed as the official language of schooling. In this situation, a generation of Indonesian-speaking Timorese grew up, many of whom actively participated in the resistance to occupation and came of political age in the period known as the Indonesian era reformasi (reformation era). During this time, Tetun-Dili came to acquire greater prestige and significance due to its widening use as a contact language by forcibly dispersed communities, its use alongside Portuguese by the Resistance, its use by Fretilin in its literacy campaign, and its adoption by the Catholic Church (see Leach, 2016) in the liturgies (for an account of Portuguese and Tetun literacy during the resistance years, see Cabral and Martin-Jones, 2008). As the occupation wore on, Tetun also acquired symbolic value in the face of repression, cultural domination, and widespread human rights abuse. Portuguese was used by the Resistance on the home and international fronts, particularly with the former Portuguese colonies in Africa, who supported its cause. These associations were to resonate through the subsequent longue durée to shape the constitutional provisions for language at the restoration of independence (see Leach, 2002).
Let us now fast forward to 1999, another critical juncture that followed the UN-sponsored referendum in which the Timorese were invited to accept or reject autonomy within Indonesia. As is well known, an overwhelming majority voted in favour of independence. In the wake of the extreme violence and destruction that accompanied the Indonesians’ departure, the country was placed under a UN Transitional Administration, which held full state power until the handover to the Timorese in 2002. Following a brief popular consultation, the Constitutional Assembly compromised on its earlier intent to adopt Portuguese as the official language and Tetun as the national language, and declared them co-official, with Tetun enjoying dual status as a national language; English and Indonesian were given the status of working languages and the Indigenous languages the status of national languages. The Constitution also guaranteed that the national languages would be developed and protected by the state (Section 13.16). Privileged ties were established with Portuguese-speaking countries (Section 8.3). This decision had a history that can be traced back to discussions in the national resistance movement in its preparations for independence in the 1990s. But there were many Timorese, especially young people, who felt that these provisions represented the views of the political elite, older Portuguese-speaking nationalists in general, and Fretilin in particular (Leach, 2016; 2019).

**Cracks in the policy wall**

With the country under UN administration and with more immediate priorities, language-in-education planning only began to take shape after 2000. The newly formed Ministry embarked on phasing out Indonesian and phasing in Portuguese as both language of instruction and as subject. Human resources were scarce and most new teachers hurriedly appointed to replace
the Indonesian teachers who had fled the country were underqualified and inexperienced, with very low levels of Portuguese (MECYS, 2004). Until 2008, the big donors, Portugal, Brazil and UNICEF, and a range of smaller non-government organizations provided in-service teacher education, with the lusophone donors putting their efforts into intensive Portuguese language training (Nicolai, 2004: 101). Almost immediately, cracks in the policy wall became apparent. The post-independence curriculum lacked relevance to Timorese history, culture, and identity, and teachers had difficulty working with its unclear language orientations (Da Costa Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2017; Quinn, 2007; Taylor-Leech, 2011). Portuguese was designated the language of instruction with Tetun to be used only as a ‘pedagogic aid’ (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sports (MECYS), 2004: 11). Teachers’ low proficiency in Portuguese was a constant refrain (e.g. World Bank, 2004), but language ability was only one cause of poor learning outcomes; most primary teachers not only lacked command of Portuguese, but also content knowledge and pedagogical skills (MECYS, 2004). In short, by 2006, not much had moved forward in terms of teaching standards, curriculum quality, or language development in schools and, despite ample funding, teacher education programmes were fragmented, poorly organized, and often duplicated. Competition and lack of trust between Australian and Portuguese donors further reduced the effectiveness of partnerships (MECYS, 2004; Shah, 2011).

Opening agentive spaces for curriculum change

Language differences in Timor-Leste reflect the broader struggle to discursively construct a national identity inclusive of all Timorese citizens. A recent issue of the Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology was devoted to the distinctive features of nationalism in Timor-Leste. In it, a series of papers reflect on the tensions between imaginations of identity founded on
resistance to colonialism and occupation, mobilizing for national development, political affiliations to the postcolonial lusophone world, and a far older cultural identity built on conceptions of place that are deeply connected to Indigenous spirituality and ties to the land (for extended discussions, see Leach, 2019; McWilliam, 2019; Palmer, 2015). These tensions are rooted in the distinct experiences of Portuguese and Indonesian colonialism and eras of resistance, which have contributed to the intergenerational divide over visions of the nation (Leach, 2019: 291). Language preferences are both an expression and a symbol of this divide and the accruing benefits and cultural capital that can flow from individual and societal multilingualism are rarely, if ever, acknowledged.

Fractured, colonially constructed identities contributed to the breakdown in law and order of 2006–2007 when the country descended into interethnic violence. Although, as Scambary (2009: 282) notes, multiple identities were at play, entrenched stereotypes of Easterners (Tet. *Firaku*) and Westerners (Tet. *Kaladi*) were widely mobilized. These labels have racist overtones that are probably pre-colonial in origin but were exacerbated by the Portuguese colonialists (see Kammen, 2010). As Scambary writes, they were easily manipulated by divisive elements as communal violence spiralled out of control. The resurgence of conflict accounts for the understandable preoccupation of many Timorese with constructing national unity, a point to be returned to later.

The violence of 2006–2007 precipitated a political crisis leading to the election of a new coalition government. One of its first acts was to restructure the education system and accelerate the introduction of a reformed curriculum. The 2008 Basic Education Act guaranteed universal access to nine years’ compulsory, free schooling. Article 8 established that both Tetun and Portuguese were the languages of education. Article 12 stressed that
primary education should develop children’s knowledge of the constitutional languages, and their appreciation of the identity, history, and culture of the nation.

The passing of the Basic Education Act created agentive space for debate and action on the role of the national languages in schooling. Grasping the opportunity, activists in local non-government organizations worked with development partners to organize a series of conferences on the promotion of the national languages in education and society. UNESCO, UNICEF and Care International organized a conference on bilingual education, which recommended that the Ministry should invest in bilingual education, develop orthographies and literacy resources in national languages, and allow teachers to use them for instruction, (MOE, 2008: 36–38). Debate was fierce at these conferences as intergenerational visions of language, identity, and education clashed, but in retrospect, there can be little doubt that the conferences catalysed a shift in the Ministry’s position on languages of instruction.

Under the auspices of the UNESCO National Education Commission (NATCOM), the key Ministry advisory body, a working group was commissioned to draft a policy on language use in schools that reflected ‘international best practice’ in multilingual settings. In 2009 and 2010, two international missions were invited to advise the working group on how to operationalize the constitutional provisions for language in the school system. Out of these missions, the MTB-MLE Policy and Implementation Plan (NEC, 2010a and b) emerged.

The term ‘international good practice’ also appears in the National Education Strategic Plan for 2011–2015 (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2011: 68, 118) which outlined an ambitious programme of structural, pedagogic, and curricular reform. The reform aimed to build a culturally relevant curriculum through the use of local language and content relevant to Timorese
culture, history and the environment, and by adopting global ‘best practices’ in the form of learner-centred pedagogy and language-progression methodologies (Ogden-Smith, 2017: 51). The Strategic Plan shows acute awareness of the Ministry’s dependence on international partners. The word ‘international’ appears throughout the text (at least 108 times) and is repeatedly linked with the word ‘capacity’ (mentioned 167 times) and ‘capacity building’ (mentioned forty-four times). Cabral and Martin-Jones (2018: 138) make an important point about the impact of international agencies such as UNESCO on the governance of education in aid-dependent states, noting how supranational development discourses increasingly overlay more long-standing, local discourses about nation-building. This impact is strongly evident in the Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan for 2011–2030, in which the various sector plans are explicitly aligned with the Millennium Development Goals (mentioned eighteen times). These have, of course, since been replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals, and Timorese agencies are working to their timetable.

**Polarized responses to multilingual education**

These developments bring us to the commencement of a new policy timescale, commencing with the Basic Education Curriculum and the EMBLI pilot. Under the overall management of NATCOM, the EMBLI pilot was organized in the districts of Manatuto (to serve a Galolên-speaking community), Lautém (to serve a Fataluku-speaking community) and Oecusse (to serve a Baikenu-speaking community). The Ministry selected classes in 12 schools in consultation with district education officers and the schools involved. By 2016, some fifty-six teachers and 250 children were involved in the EMBLI schools, which run in parallel with 1,318 Government Schools and thirteen Portuguese-medium CAFÊ (Centros de Aprendizagem e Formação Escolar or Centres of Learning and School Training) schools in each district.
capital. Teaching began in 2013, the same year the reform of the Basic Education Curriculum commenced. Actual implementation of the reformed curriculum began two years later but, in retrospect, the start of EMBLI was not well timed, and led to confusion in the minds of the public between the two initiatives. In what follows, I reflect on the discourses that circulated around the introduction of the EMBLI pilot.

The Basic Education Curriculum represents a classic early-exit model of bilingual education. In accordance with the Education Act, it designates Tetun as the initial language of instruction and progresses to the sole use of Portuguese for instruction by Grade 5. In this curriculum, the teaching of Tetun as a subject takes priority between Grades 1 and 3 (three to four periods a week) while the teaching of Portuguese takes up more time in Grades 7 through 9 (five periods a week) (see Cabral, 2013; Taylor-Leech, 2019). An early-exit approach has been found to be ineffectual in enabling students to reach bilingual competence (e.g. Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010; Ouane & Glanz, 2011).

By contrast, when fully implemented, the EMBLI Curriculum will represent a late-exit model of multilingual education. It differs from the Basic Education Curriculum in that the L1s are languages of instruction from Pre-Primary until at least the end of Grade 3, ‘with the long-term goal of using them to support and scaffold Tetun and Portuguese up to Grade 10’, In an important difference from the Basic Education Curriculum, Tetun is used orally from Pre-primary to Grade 1, then used as an instructional language with L1 and taught as a subject from Grades 2 and 3 onwards. Portuguese is used orally from Grades 1 through 3, then taught as a subject and used as an instructional language from Grade 4 alongside Tetun (National Education Commission (NEC), 2010a: Appendix C).
While there were a range of views on the role of Tetun in the Basic Education Curriculum (see Ogden-Smith, 2016), the operational definition of mother tongue in the MTB-MLE Policy caused widespread controversy. The policy defines mother tongues as the home languages or L1s of learners, even where there are two or more languages, ‘because the teaching focus is on the language the learner knows best’ (NEC, 2010a: 9). For teaching purposes, Tetun is treated as L2 for most children, although the policy acknowledges that Tetun should be regarded as L1 for teaching purposes in some communities; Portuguese is designated L3, English, L4 and Indonesian, L5. While this framework was designed purely for teaching purposes, to many onlookers, it seemed to challenge official language policy and, in the eyes of some, the identity of the nation.

A national public debate on EMBLI, opened to coincide with its launch, exposed the political positions and allegiances associated with language policymaking in Timor-Leste. As noted, international donor organizations have been heavily involved in Timorese education since 1999 and, as also noted, EMBLI was initially funded by a network of national and international agencies, known as REPETE 13 (Rede Promosuan ba Edukasuan Multilingue or Network for the Promotion of Multilingual Education). The international members of this network were all anglophone, forming a distinct group from the lusophone educational partnerships, and this might have contributed to the initial polarization of attitudes to EMBLI.

Public debate on both sides exaggerated the benefits and drawbacks of MTB-MLE. Aligning themselves with the rights-based discourse of the UN and Global Partnership for Education on mother tongue (e.g. GEM, 2016), EMBLI supporters extolled its potential to improve educational quality and bring about greater social equality and inclusion. Detractors declaimed that it would create confusion, disunity, and interethnic division. On blogs, social media
Platforms, and in the mass media, a number of people expressed the belief that Tetun and the national languages were not mature or developed enough to use for schooling (see Cabral, 2013; Taylor-Leech, 2013a). Some groupings reacted strongly because they considered that the EMBLI policy framework was deliberately contravening the Constitution. On one occasion, in a theatrical gesture aimed at local media, a representative of the national forum of non-government organizations tore up a copy of the document. Rocks were also thrown at the NATCOM chairperson’s car.

Elements hostile to EMBLI misrepresented and over-estimated its aims and impact. One academic at the national university denounced it as discriminatory because it was ‘exclusively based in schools for poor children’. ‘In my opinion,’ she stated, ‘multilingual education based on mother tongues will simply kill the future of the people’s children’ (https://www.jornaltornado.pt/o-projecto-emblm-em-timor-leste-ira-matar-o-futuro-dos-filhos-do-povo/. My translation from the Portuguese). Another comment on a widely read blog is remarkably similar in tone and attitude to the one discussed by Tupas in this volume. The blog in question is bilingual, written in fluent Portuguese and Tetun:

Will the mother tongues resolve the hunger and poverty of Timorese children?

I have been incredulously watching the arguments of those in favour of implementing the mother tongue pilot project in three districts of Timor-Leste. These alleged experts argue that due to the high level of failure in the student layer, this project will benefit students. Hilarious, simply hilarious! You are covering the sun with the sieve, aren't you? They are awarding a stupidity certificate to Timorese children, aren't they? (Timor, Ha’u nian doben 8 February 2012. (My translation from the Portuguese). Why would a university academic take the view that teaching in the mother tongues would
destroy the future of Timorese children? Why would a high-level bilingual blogger associate teaching in mother tongues with passing on stupidity? What ideas could lie behind such strong responses? Tupas (this volume) writes insightfully of how the post-colonial discourse of ‘forgetting’ in the Philippines underpinned many people’s inability to accept Filipino as a legitimate language of education. In Timor-Leste, by contrast, I suggest that it is ‘remembering’ that underpins the anger and incredulity with which some people reacted to the idea of using the mother tongues in education (see also Khanam et al., this volume). What is being remembered I suggest are historical affiliations with Portuguese and loyalty to the constitutional language provisions; but they can also be traced to colonial discourses that associate dominant standard languages with modernity and progress and Indigenous languages with backwardness and traditionalism. Added to the ideological mix is the persisting belief that, against all evidence, monolingual instruction in a former colonial language is somehow neutral, egalitarian, and expressive of national unity.

International academics have also shared their thoughts on the introduction of MTB-MLE in Timor-Leste. It would be remiss not to declare my own position, which is in favour of the integration of Indigenous languages into teaching and learning and supportive of EMBLI (Taylor-Leech, 2013a, 2013b). I have followed developments in the pilot since its inception and I have spent extended time with the EMBLI team in the pilot schools. It is on this basis that I lay claim to the right to comment.

Cabral and Martin-Jones’ thought-provoking discussion of EMBLI (2018) makes several penetrating criticisms of the way MTB-MLE discourses were introduced in Timor-Leste. Space precludes an extended discussion, but I would like to briefly engage with one of their points. Reflecting current developments in thinking about bi- and multilingual education, Cabral and
Martin-Jones assert that the EMBLI curriculum adopts a language ‘separation’ approach across different years of the programme (2018: 137). It is true the language teaching sequence in the EMBLI curriculum does not reflect the fluid, heterogeneous way languages are used in daily life. Indeed, a language separation approach is even more apparent in the Basic Education Curriculum. Critiques of language ‘separation’, or ‘parallel monolingualisms’, in formal teaching and calls for a more dynamic ‘translanguaging’ approach based on critical pedagogy are relatively recent. They have come largely from the anglophone north and are based on research in northern teaching contexts (e.g. García & Li, 2014). A lot of these studies are predicated on well-resourced teaching contexts with highly educated, well trained and experienced teachers. This is simply not the case in Timor-Leste. Having seen first-hand the conditions in which teachers and students have to work and the enormity of the challenges they face, I consider EMBLI’s simple and structured approach to language instruction to be a feasible model for inexperienced, teachers with little confidence, working in very low-resource settings (Taylor-Leech, 2011).

In my view, EMBLI’s great strength has been its close engagement with communities in isolated and remote areas where government schools are underfunded, and the needs of rural teachers and children are frequently neglected. EMBLI plays a leading role in producing sustainable teaching resources using readily available materials, and publishing locally authored, high-quality reading resources reflecting Indigenous ways of life and written in Indigenous languages – initiatives surely deserving of the name ‘grassroots literacy’. Regular in-service training carried out in schools rather than the capital city, an emphasis on parental involvement, and the introduction of bilingual teacher aides are further EMBLI innovations that bring communities closer to schools.
Setbacks, threats and challenges

The introduction of EMBLI and the Basic Education Curriculum reform in the same year created problems for the pilot. Running alongside the long-term project of the Basic Education Curriculum, it has operated on a shoestring budget and on a year-to-year basis since its inception. The early withdrawal of two schools in different districts from EMBLI was a major setback. The first school was in Manatuto district, located on the edge of an urban area where many families are bilingual in Tetun and Galolen, and, therefore, it seems, did not see a strong need for schooling in the mother tongue. Awareness of the impending basic education curriculum reform may also have led the school principal to decide it was not worthwhile committing to EMBLI. The second school was in a Baikenu-speaking district of Oé-cusse, where Tetun is not spoken and Portuguese and Indonesian function as *lingue franche*. According to EMBLI team members, the school showed little enthusiasm for EMBLI from the outset. These scenarios could have been predicted and one wonders how and why the schools were selected. The commencement of the Basic Education Curriculum reform undoubtedly played a part in both schools’ withdrawal and it must be said that the introduction of EMBLI could have been better timed. In its defence, EMBLI was not initially invited to engage in the curriculum reform process and received little information about what was happening (EMBLI team member, personal communication, 2016). Poor communication and lack of inter-agency co-operation thus clearly helped undermine the pilot.

The most significant threat to EMBLI has been politically motivated opposition, often working hand in hand with development partners’ conflicting language agendas. In a situation where anglophone and lusophone donors are investing heavily in different projects, competing priorities arise. Certain influential Timorese political groupings and development partners see EMBLI as working against the reintroduction of Portuguese. The Fretilin and PD (*Partido
*Democrático* or Democratic Party) parties are implacably hostile to MTB-MLE. Hard-line supporters of Portuguese in parliament and middle-range levels of government either passively or actively undermine EMBLI, leaving successive Ministers of Education having to placate both their political masters and international donors. In addition, the recent volatile electoral climate has led to four changes of education minister in as many years, leading to policy unpredictability and short-termism in planning. Challenges also stem from high-level leaders’ lack of engagement with the pilot. National politicians focus on the big picture and rarely visit schools or show much interest in the welfare of rural children. The current prime minister takes the view that the reintroduction of Portuguese should take priority due to the economic opportunities offered by membership of the community of Portuguese-speaking countries.

Opinion among East Timorese linguists is also divided and consequently there is no proactive support for EMBLI from the Institute of Linguistics at the National University. Of equal concern is the development of an elitist hierarchy of schooling consisting of the private fee-paying schools (which by and large teach in English or Portuguese), the CAFÉ schools (Portuguese-medium) at the top, the Government schools (Tetun and Portuguese-medium) in the middle, and the EMBLI schools (L1, Tetun and Portuguese-medium) at the bottom.

**Prospects**

In 2014, a strategic evaluation team (of which I was a member) found that EMBLI was having positive impacts in its schools and catchment areas. The report, which was based on key informant interviews and comparative classroom observations in pilot and Government schools, found that EMBLI’s approach to pedagogy, teacher professional development, building trust and sustaining relationships with rural communities was exemplary. Feedback
from EMBLI families indicated that they endorsed its approach (Caffery et al., 2014). In 2016, an Endline Study provided quantitative evidence that EMBLI children were outperforming children in Government and CAFÉ schools in literacy and numeracy. Children entering Grade 1 from an EMBLI pre-school did particularly well. Student progression was also shown to have improved, with fewer children repeating Grades 1 and 2. These are no small achievements in an under-resourced education system beset with wicked problems.

Yet, EMBLI’s prospects can only be described as uncertain. At present, it is funded solely by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and managed by the Ministry under the remit of Inclusive Education. Decree Laws 3 and 4, passed in 2015, endorsed the Basic Education Curriculum and contained clauses legitimating the use of mother tongues in education (Journal da República, 2015: 7731 and 7736). But EMBLI has powerful enemies. In January 2018, one-day prior to the dissolution of parliament pending an early election, the outgoing Minister and Vice-Minister, both Fretilin appointees, put forward proposals to replace the Tetun teaching periods in the Basic Education Curriculum with Portuguese, and reaffirm it as the dominant language of instruction. When put to the vote, this blatant attempt to derail EMBLI and the Basic Education Curriculum was soundly defeated. In August 2018, the new Government announced that it would continue the EMBLI programme to the end of Grade 6 (http://www.laohamutuk.org/misc/gov8/VIIIGovtProgramEn.pdf).

EMBLI’s transfer to the Ministry seems to operationalize a statement in the National Education Strategic Plan that mother-tongue education is integral to the development of social inclusion policy (MOE, 2011: 134–5 and 137). The fact that EMBLI’s aims align with Sustainable Goal 4 (‘to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’) means the Ministry can showcase EMBLI as one the ways it is pursuing
this goal. For the foreseeable future, it seems that EMBLI is seen primarily as a project to improve social inclusion in the rural areas. In 2018, the Minister of Education stated in an interview that, despite EMBLI’s success, it would not be logistically possible to extend the pilot to other parts of the country (https://www.jornaltornado.pt/entrevista-com-dulce-de-jesus-soares-ministra-da-educacao-de-timor-leste/)

**Closing remarks**

As Blommaert (2006: 240) notes, the actors and influences in the field of language policy are manifold and interact in processes of considerable complexity. Language education planning in multilingual, aid dependent southern settings is a particularly complex discursive space. This chapter has traced Timorese language policy discourses across intersecting timescales at critical historical junctures and discussed the tensions between the disparate actors involved. It has tried to show how long-standing nationalist discourses with their roots in the colonial era and the resistance years sit atop an older identity linked to traditional beliefs and Indigeneity – and are themselves contested. It has discussed how these identities compete for space with the transnational discourses of the Global Partnership for Education and Sustainable Development Goals, and it has suggested that the polarized responses to MTB-MLE reflect the struggle to define an inclusive national identity.

As Domínguez (2017) writes, coloniality is maintained in the self-image of peoples. While the emotive tenor of the debate on MTB-MLE reflects deeper language loyalties and political agendas underlying language policymaking, it suggests that many Timorese still suffer from the ‘accruing injuries of coloniality’ (p. 227) and regard their own languages as unfit or unready for use in the modern curriculum. In a recent example, Da Costa Cabral (2019) shows how two
teachers strove to apply national language education policy but had difficulties in reconciling their everyday lived experience of flexible multilingualism with the highly compartmentalized approaches to the teaching and use of Portuguese and Tetun in the Basic Education Curriculum. She shows how, ten years after independence, coloniality still coloured these teachers’ views of Tetun as inferior in quality and status to Portuguese, a view compounded by the ongoing lack of resources for teaching in and through Tetun.

MTB-MLE is not a miracle cure for the country’s educational or social ills, and EMBLI’s approach does not represent the flexible, dynamic multilingualism many of us would like to see. Nevertheless, I suggest that EMBLI’s contribution has been to provide a glimpse of what a multilingual curriculum pathway could look like in a situation of deep social disadvantage. From this perspective, EMBLI cannot be dismissed as a top-down experiment that was always doomed to fail, but rather lauded as an example of what can be achieved against considerable ideological odds. The EMBLI story is an example of taking ownership, a decolonial exercise of agency on the part of stakeholders: in short, an act of linguistic citizenship, to use Stroud’s construct (2001). We can see the pilot as a first step in exploring how more culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogies might further unfold in Timor-Leste and the making of a space in which more tolerant, dynamic and flexible understandings of southern multilingualisms might be able to emerge.

Acknowledgement

This chapter draws on interviews and observations during an extended field trip with EMBLI in 2016. I warmly thank the EMBLI team for their hospitality. Any mistakes and inaccuracies are my responsibility.
References


Da Costa Cabral, I. (2019) ‘As línguas têm de estar no seu devido lugar’ [Languages have to be in their proper place]: Language ideologies, languagised worlds of schooling and


http://www.tetundit.tl/TimorLang.html