

Language Policy, Power, and Identity: Tetun in Higher Education Practices in Timor-Leste

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Abstract

Language policy in multilingual postcolonial societies is closely connected to issues of power, identity, and linguistic hierarchy. In Timor-Leste, where Tetun and Portuguese are recognized as co-official languages, higher education represents an important domain in which tensions between national identity and academic authority are negotiated. This study examines how language policy shapes the use and positioning of Tetun within higher education, focusing on the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL). Using a qualitative case study design supported by descriptive quantitative data, the study draws on semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations involving students and academic staff. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of language use, attitudes, and institutional practices. The findings show that Tetun functions primarily as a language of social interaction and symbolic national identity, while Portuguese dominates formal academic domains and English supports research and international engagement. Despite strong emotional attachment to Tetun, its limited academic resources and institutional support restrict its development as a language of scholarship. The study concludes that strengthening Tetun's academic role requires inclusive language planning, institutional commitment, and the development of Tetun-based academic resources.

Keywords: Higher education practices, Language identity, Language policy, Language power.

1. Introduction

Timor-Leste is a multilingual nation whose linguistic landscape has been shaped by a long history of colonialism, resistance, and post-independence nation-building (Butcher et al., 2015). Following independence in 2002, the government adopted Tetun and Portuguese as the country's official languages, while recognizing numerous local languages as part of its cultural heritage (Ramos-horta, 2012). This bilingual policy was designed to serve dual purposes: Tetun as a symbol of national identity and social unity, and Portuguese as a language of historical continuity and international engagement (Taylor-Leech, 2012). However, the implementation of this policy has generated complex linguistic hierarchies, particularly within formal domains such as higher education.

In practice, a persistent imbalance exists between the symbolic recognition of Tetun and its functional use in academic contexts. While Tetun functions as the most widely spoken lingua franca and a marker of national identity, Portuguese continues to dominate institutional communication, academic writing, and classroom instruction in universities. English, meanwhile, is increasingly used for research dissemination and access to global knowledge. (Wu & Zhang, 2023; Taylor-leech, 2009, 2007). This hierarchy places Tetun in a marginal position within higher education, limiting its role as a language of knowledge production despite its official status. Such conditions raise critical questions concerning linguistic equity, power relations, and the role of higher education in sustaining national languages in postcolonial societies.

Higher education plays a strategic role in language maintenance and development, as universities function not only as sites of knowledge transmission but also as institutions that legitimize linguistic authority and prestige (Rozenvalde, 2025). When a national language is excluded from academic domains, its capacity to function as a medium of intellectual discourse and scientific expression is constrained (Cummins, 2021; Huszka et al., 2024). In the case of Timor-Leste, the limited academic development of Tetun reflects broader tensions between national identity formation and the perceived demands of educational modernization and global competitiveness.

Previous studies on Tetun have examined its historical development, sociolinguistic status, and role in public and governmental domains. Scholars have highlighted Tetun's importance in post-independence identity construction while also noting the continued institutional dominance of Portuguese (Taylor-Leech, 2012). However, relatively little attention has been given to how language policy is enacted within higher education institutions and how students and academic staff negotiate language choice, power, and identity in everyday

academic practices. This gap is particularly significant given the central role of universities in shaping future elites and language ideologies.

This study addresses this gap by examining the implementation of language policy and the positioning of Tetun within higher education in Timor-Leste, with a focus on the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL). Specifically, the study aims to explore: (1) the extent to which Tetun is used in academic communication and instruction, (2) the institutional and sociolinguistic factors influencing language choice among students and academic staff, and (3) how language policy intersects with power relations and identity formation in university contexts. By situating Tetun within broader debates on language policy, power, and identity, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how national languages are negotiated and sustained within higher education in multilingual, postcolonial settings.

2. Literature Review

Research on language maintenance and shift in multilingual societies has consistently emphasized the role of political authority, institutional support, and educational policy in shaping linguistic hierarchies. In postcolonial contexts, language policy often reflects competing agendas of nation-building, identity formation, and global integration (Makoni et al., 2023). Higher education, in particular, functions as a critical domain where linguistic power is negotiated and legitimized through instructional practices, academic publishing, and institutional norms (Gayton et al., 2025).

In the context of Timor-Leste, previous studies have examined the historical and sociolinguistic development of Tetun as it evolved from a regional lingua franca into a national language following independence (Ramos-horta, 2012; Taylor-leech, 2007). Hajek (2010) demonstrate that language planning in Timor-Leste has been deeply influenced by colonial legacies, resulting in a complex linguistic ecology in which Portuguese retains institutional prestige despite Tetun's widespread use. Taylor-Leech (2012) further argues that language choice in Timor-Leste is closely tied to identity politics and discourses of nation-building, positioning Tetun as a symbol of resistance and unity while Portuguese is associated with state authority and elite education.

More recent studies have focused on language maintenance and policy outcomes in post-independence Timor-Leste. Ross (2017) highlight that the sustainability of Tetun is strongly linked to state-driven language policy and public domain usage, yet they note ongoing challenges in expanding Tetun's functional domains. Narawaty & Nugroho (2023) similarly observed that although Tetun has gained prominence in everyday communication, its development as a language of formal education and scholarship remains limited. These findings suggest a persistent gap between the symbolic status of Tetun and its functional capacity in higher-level institutional settings.

Despite this growing body of research, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of higher education as a site of linguistic negotiation in Timor-Leste. Existing studies tend to focus on primary education, public administration, or community language use, leaving university-level practices underexplored. As universities play a crucial role in legitimizing linguistic authority and shaping future language ideologies, examining language policy implementation in higher education is essential for understanding the long-term prospects of Tetun as an academic language. This study addresses this gap by foregrounding the experiences and perceptions of students and academic staff within a university context, thereby extending existing scholarship on language policy and maintenance in Timor-Leste.

This study is grounded primarily in Fishman's (1991) theory of Language Maintenance and Shift (LMLS) and Holmes & Wilson's (2022) sociolinguistic framework of language choice and identity. Fishman's model emphasizes that the sustainability of a language depends not only on its symbolic recognition but also on its functional use across social domains, particularly education. From this perspective, higher education represents a critical domain in which institutional support, language planning, and policy implementation determine whether a language can function as a medium of knowledge production.

Holmes & Wilson's framework complements Fishman's approach by highlighting the relationship between language choice, social identity, and power relations. Language use, according to Holmes, reflects speakers' negotiation of belonging, authority, and social positioning within specific contexts. In academic institutions, language choice is rarely neutral; it is shaped by perceptions of prestige, legitimacy, and access to resources. Applying this framework allows the study to examine how students and lecturers navigate linguistic hierarchies by aligning themselves with languages perceived as academically and economically valuable, while simultaneously maintaining emotional attachment to Tetun as a marker of national identity.

Building on these theoretical foundations, the study adopts a conceptual perspective that links three interrelated dimensions: (1) language policy and institutional power, which shape official language hierarchies and educational practices; (2) language use and perception, encompassing everyday linguistic choices and attitudes within academic settings; and (3) identity and linguistic empowerment, referring to the symbolic and affective meanings attached to Tetun in relation to nationhood and self-representation. This integrated framework enables a systematic analysis of how language policy is enacted in higher education and how Tetun's position is negotiated between symbolic legitimacy and functional marginalization.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to examine how language policy is implemented and negotiated within higher education in Timor-Leste. A case study approach is particularly appropriate for exploring complex sociolinguistic phenomena—such as language policy, power relations, and identity formation—within a bounded institutional context. As argued by Creswell & Creswell (2018), qualitative case studies allow researchers to capture participants' perspectives and lived experiences while situating these within broader sociopolitical and institutional structures. In this study, the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL) serves as the focal case, as it represents the country's largest public higher education institution and plays a central role in implementing national language policy.

Although the study is primarily qualitative in orientation, limited quantitative data were incorporated to support and contextualize the qualitative findings. This combination enables a more comprehensive understanding of language use patterns and attitudes without positioning the study as a full mixed-methods design.

3.2. Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL), located in Dili. UNTL was selected due to its institutional significance and its direct engagement with national language policy in teaching, administration, and academic communication. Participants included university lecturers, administrators, and undergraduate students from various academic disciplines.

Data were collected from a purposive sample of participants who were directly involved in academic activities and language use within the university. Lecturers and administrators were selected based on their roles in teaching and policy implementation, while students were selected to represent diverse academic backgrounds and levels of study. This sampling strategy was intended to capture a range of perspectives on language use, policy, and identity within the institutional context.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using three primary instruments: semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with lecturers, administrators, and students to explore their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes regarding language policy implementation and language choice in academic settings. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to elaborate on issues of power, identity, and institutional practice while ensuring consistency across interviews.

Questionnaires were distributed to a broader group of students to obtain descriptive quantitative data on language use patterns, preferences, and perceptions. The questionnaire data served a supporting role, providing contextual background and reinforcing themes identified through qualitative analysis. In addition, non-participant classroom observations were conducted to document actual language practices during teaching and learning activities, allowing for comparison between reported attitudes and observed behavior.

The use of multiple data sources reflects a strategy of methodological triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

3.4. Data Analysis

All interview data were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) : familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Coding focused on recurring patterns related to language hierarchy, institutional policy, identity, academic access, and perceptions of linguistic legitimacy.

NVivo software was used to assist in organizing, coding, and managing the qualitative data systematically. Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize general trends in language use and attitudes. These quantitative findings were not analyzed inferentially but were used to contextualize and support the qualitative interpretations.

3.5. Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Data triangulation across interviews, questionnaires, and observations helped strengthen the credibility of the findings. Prolonged engagement with the research site allowed the researcher to develop contextual understanding and build rapport with participants. In addition, analytic transparency was maintained through systematic coding procedures and careful documentation of analytic decisions.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants' identities were anonymized to protect confidentiality, and all data were used solely for academic research purposes.

4. Results

4.1. Patterns of Language Use in Academic and Social Contexts

The findings reveal clear patterns in the use of Tetun, Portuguese, and English among students and academic staff at the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL). Tetun is predominantly used in informal interactions, including peer discussions, group work outside formal instruction, and everyday social communication on campus. In contrast, Portuguese remains the primary language for formal academic activities such as lectures, assessments, official documents, and administrative communication. English appears occasionally, particularly in the use of textbooks, research articles, and technical materials, especially in science- and internationally oriented disciplines.

Despite its limited role in formal academic settings, Tetun maintains a strong presence as a language of interpersonal communication and social solidarity. Classroom observations indicate that Tetun is often used to clarify complex concepts informally or to facilitate peer understanding, especially when students encounter difficulties with Portuguese. This pattern highlights the functional complementarity of languages in practice, even when institutional norms prioritize a single medium of instruction.

4.2. Institutional Policy and Linguistic Hierarchies

Institutional language policy emerges as a central factor shaping linguistic hierarchies within the university. Although Tetun holds official status at the national level, university regulations and instructional practices continue to privilege Portuguese as the primary academic language. This preference is reinforced through curriculum design, assessment requirements, and the availability of academic resources, most of which are produced in Portuguese or English.

Lecturers' linguistic backgrounds and professional training further contribute to this hierarchy. Many academic staff members were educated in Portuguese-medium systems and therefore perceive Portuguese as more suitable for academic instruction and scholarly communication. As a result, Tetun is often viewed as inappropriate or insufficiently developed for complex academic discourse, despite its widespread use among students. This perception reinforces institutional norms that marginalize Tetun within formal academic domains.

4.3. Language Attitudes and Identity Construction

The findings also reveal a complex relationship between language attitudes and identity among students. Participants consistently express pride in Tetun as a marker of national identity, cultural heritage, and collective belonging. Tetun is widely perceived as a symbol of independence and social cohesion, reflecting its historical role in resistance and nation-building. This emotional attachment strengthens its continued use in informal and social domains within the university.

At the same time, students demonstrate pragmatic attitudes toward language choice in academic contexts. Portuguese and English are perceived as languages of academic success, professional mobility, and international access. Consequently, students often prioritize these languages in formal learning situations, even when they experience difficulties using them. This pragmatic orientation reflects an awareness of broader socioeconomic and institutional pressures that shape linguistic behavior in higher education.

4.4. Factors Influencing the Maintenance of Tetun in Higher Education

Several interrelated factors influence the maintenance and marginalization of Tetun within the university context. First, institutional policy and curriculum design restrict the formal use of Tetun in teaching and assessment. Second, the limited availability of Tetun-based academic materials constrains its development as a language of scholarship. Third, lecturers' language competencies and pedagogical practices shape students' exposure to and perceptions of Tetun in academic settings. Fourth, students' language attitudes reflect a tension between symbolic loyalty to Tetun and instrumental reliance on Portuguese and English. Finally, peer interaction and social networks play a key role in sustaining Tetun as a language of solidarity and everyday communication on campus.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Tetun remains a vibrant language of identity and social interaction but faces significant challenges in achieving full functional integration within higher education. Its continued maintenance depends not only on emotional attachment but also on structural support, language planning, and institutional commitment to expanding its academic domains.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex relationship between language policy and linguistic practice in higher education in Timor-Leste. Although Tetun and Portuguese are officially recognized as co-official languages, the implementation of language policy within the university context reveals a clear functional imbalance. Portuguese continues to dominate as the primary medium of instruction, assessment, and academic documentation, while Tetun remains largely confined to informal communication. This divergence between policy recognition and institutional practice underscores the limitations of symbolic language policy in the absence of sustained structural and academic support (Gayton et al., 2025; Rozenvalde, 2025).

From the perspective of Fishman's (1991) theory of Language Maintenance and Shift, the findings demonstrate that official status alone is insufficient to secure the long-term vitality of a language within higher-level domains. Fishman emphasizes that institutional integration, particularly in education, is essential for functional language maintenance. In the case of Tetun, its restricted role in higher education limits its capacity to develop as a language of knowledge production and scholarly discourse (Sudarmanto et al., 2025). While Tetun is successfully maintained in everyday communication and intergroup interaction, its exclusion from formal academic domains suggests a pattern of partial maintenance rather than full functional expansion (Ramos-horta, 2012; Sudarmanto et al., 2023; Taylor-leech, 2007).

The findings also align closely with Holmes and Wilson (2022) sociolinguistic framework, which views language choice as a reflection of social identity and power relations. Students' and lecturers' preference for Portuguese and English in academic contexts reflects the perceived prestige and instrumental value of these languages within institutional and global hierarchies. At the same time, the continued use of Tetun in informal settings indicates its strong symbolic value as a marker of national identity and social solidarity. This dual pattern illustrates how individuals navigate competing linguistic identities by balancing emotional attachment to the national language with pragmatic considerations related to academic success and socioeconomic mobility.

The marginalization of Tetun in higher education further reflects broader postcolonial dynamics in which former colonial and global languages retain dominance in elite domains. Similar patterns have been observed in other multilingual postcolonial societies, where indigenous or national languages are celebrated symbolically but remain underdeveloped as academic languages. In this sense, the case of Tetun contributes to a wider comparative understanding of how language policy, power, and ideology intersect in higher education. The findings suggest that linguistic inequality in academic institutions is not merely a matter of individual preference but is deeply embedded in institutional structures, resource allocation, and historical legacies.

Importantly, this study demonstrates that higher education functions as a key site of linguistic legitimization. Universities do not merely reflect language policy; they actively shape language ideologies by defining which languages are considered appropriate for knowledge production. The limited academic presence of Tetun reinforces perceptions of its inadequacy for scholarly purposes, thereby perpetuating its marginalization. Addressing this imbalance requires moving beyond symbolic recognition toward deliberate language planning measures, including curriculum reform, academic resource development, and lecturer training.

Overall, the discussion highlights that the future of Tetun in higher education hinges on its transition from a language of identity to a language of academic practice. This transformation requires institutional commitment and policy coherence to ensure that national identity, linguistic equity, and educational aspirations are not positioned as

mutually exclusive goals. By situating Tetun within both national and global sociolinguistic debates, this study advances theoretical discussions on language maintenance, power, and identity in postcolonial higher education contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the intersection of language policy, power, and identity in higher education in Timor-Leste, with a particular focus on the positioning of Tetun within academic practices at the National University of Timor-Leste. The findings indicate that while Tetun holds strong symbolic significance as a marker of national identity and social cohesion, its functional role in higher education remains limited. Portuguese continues to dominate formal academic domains, and English plays an increasingly important role in research and global engagement, positioning Tetun primarily as a language of informal interaction rather than academic knowledge production.

The study highlights a clear disjunction between official language policy and institutional practice. Although Tetun is formally recognized as a national and official language, the absence of systematic academic support—such as standardized instructional materials, scholarly publications, and Tetun-medium curricula—constrains its development within higher education. This situation reflects broader postcolonial dynamics in which linguistic prestige and academic authority remain closely tied to colonial and global languages.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need for more inclusive and coherent language planning in higher education. Strengthening the academic role of Tetun requires institutional commitment to the development of Tetun-based academic resources, the integration of bilingual instructional models, and professional development programs that support lecturers in multilingual teaching practices. Rather than positioning Tetun and Portuguese as competing languages, higher education policy should promote complementary multilingualism that recognizes both national identity and academic mobility.

This study also acknowledges several limitations. The research was conducted at a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across the higher education sector in Timor-Leste. In addition, while the qualitative approach provided in-depth insights into language practices and attitudes, future research could benefit from larger-scale quantitative or comparative studies involving multiple institutions and disciplines. Longitudinal research would also be valuable in assessing how ongoing language policy reforms influence the academic status of Tetun over time.

In conclusion, the sustainability of Tetun in higher education depends on transforming symbolic recognition into practical empowerment. Universities play a pivotal role in this process by legitimizing languages as vehicles of knowledge and intellectual authority. A sustained commitment to inclusive language policy, institutional support, and academic resource development will be essential to ensuring that Tetun can function not only as a language of identity but also as a language of scholarship in Timor-Leste's evolving higher education landscape.

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