

MOBILISING AND DISABLING THE DESIRE FOR EMPOWERMENT: ENGLISH AND THE TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENCE IN EAST TIMOR

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ABSTRACT

East Timor, Southeast Asia's newest nation, has a centuries long history of colonial intervention and indigenous resistance, and a remarkable heritage of indigenous and colonial languages. Following the vote for independence from Indonesia, the development of East Timor's language policy was central to the emergence of a national identity. At this time, English was the language used by the United Nations Transitional Administration, international aid agencies and businesses, generating a strong demand for English language teaching supplied by expatriate Australians. Although Timorese students and Australian language teachers saw English as a means and goal of development, this paper suggests that rather than promoting empowerment, the orthodox practices of English language teaching more often replicated colonial relations that devalued local social, cultural and linguistic knowledge and practices.

INTRODUCTION

East Timor's rich linguistic history has been affected by centuries of colonial intervention and occupation, with Portuguese, Indonesian and more recently English introduced as the languages of external influence. Against these external linguistic influences, a strong body of some 15 Timorese languages has been maintained, with one of these, Tetum, being used as a lingua franca amongst the different linguistic groups. Following the 1999 vote for independence from Indonesia, East Timor's language policy was a topic of vigorous debate reflecting the struggle of various groups to participate in the development of a new national identity. At this time, English was the language used by the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), by the large number of international aid organisations and by expatriate businesses, all of which comprised a new international 'invasion'. The wave of English speaking internationals had an impact on the debate over language policy, and on the perceptions and expectations of language students and teachers.

Drawing on a larger research project concerned with English language teaching in East Timor, this paper explores the role and context of English language and English language teaching in East Timor during the nation's transition to independence between 2000 and 2002. The first part of the paper outlines the colonial and linguistic history of East Timor, and discusses the language policy choices to be made as East Timor approached independence. The second part presents two components of data collected in the larger research study. These components explore the ways in which English was seen by Timorese tertiary students and Australian language teachers as a means and goal of empowerment, connection, and development; and how the practices of English language teaching were used to either enhance or immobilise those goals.

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COLONIAL AND LINGUISTIC HISTORY

The early history of Western intervention in East Timor dates from the 16th century and continues for some 450 years, during which Portugal traded with and then attempted to rule East Timor in a colonial endeavour marked by exploitation and neglect, and by ongoing resistance and rebellion on the part of the Timorese (Taylor 1999, p.9). Despite the centuries of Portuguese economic and strategic interest, only a small proportion of the population became familiar with Portuguese language, which was used as a medium of instruction in a limited number of Catholic missionary schools from the mid 18th century. It was the movement of missionaries across the linguistically diverse country in the last quarter of the 19th century that was instrumental in the seminal development and spread of an emerging *lingua franca*, based on a creolised form of Tetum, one of the indigenous languages originally spoken around the capital Dili. Since this form of Tetum was used as a common language for the Portuguese colonisers and the indigenous population, Tetum absorbed many elements of the Portuguese language.

During World War II, the location of Timor, less than 500 km from Australia, meant that the island became a battleground for fighting between Australian and Japanese troops, at great cost to the Timorese. Although the Portuguese returned at the end of the war, opposition to colonial rule was growing. This was evident in the resistance to the education system, in which the imposition of colonial content, and the use of Portuguese as the language of instruction, meant that 95 percent of the population remained illiterate even in the 1970s (Hajek 2000; UNDP 2002). From the mid 1960s, however, the colonial rulers allowed a small Timorese urban elite to study in tertiary institutions in Portugal before returning to East Timor to take up posts in government administration. With this education, they became increasingly frustrated with the inequalities of colonialism (Taylor 1991), and joined with their rural-based compatriots to push for decolonisation, promoting the use of Tetum as a “new language of independence” (Taylor 1999, p.42). To develop the status of the indigenous language they encouraged local level literacy campaigns on a Freirean model in the brief period from 1974 to 1976 (Hill 2002; Lutz 1991).

The moves towards decolonisation were quashed with the Indonesian invasion and the annexation of East Timor as an Indonesian territory in 1975. As a key element in a process of ‘Indonesianisation’, the education system was overhauled and massively expanded. Bahasa Indonesia became the language of instruction, and the written language of an entire generation of East Timorese. Meanwhile, Portuguese and Tetum became the secret languages of resistance, fostered in the Catholic church, but seldom understood by the Indonesian administration.

With the end of the cold war, the fall of the Suharto regime, and a realignment of global economic and political forces, conditions became favourable to East Timor winning independence in the late 1990s. The results of the referendum in which an overwhelming majority of Timorese voted for independence provoked a wave of pro-Jakarta militia violence, and the destruction of much of the new nation’s infrastructure. In response to the chaotic conditions that followed the withdrawal of Indonesian governance, the United Nations mobilised an international peace-keeping force, and established a Transitional Administration which oversaw an influx of foreign aid organisations and businesses keen to contribute to, and participate in, the processes of reconstruction and development. East Timor had suddenly moved from being a closed

territory, with little connection to the outside world, to becoming a country awash with international diplomats and soldiers, foreign aid workers, activists and journalists from around the globe. The Transitional Administration eventually gave way to full independence for East Timor in May 2002.

LANGUAGE CHOICES FOR INDEPENDENCE

As national identity is so integrally tied to national languages, many models for a language policy in East Timor were proposed and hotly debated during this transition period. These ranged from models that promoted a single language, either Portuguese, English or Tetum, as the sole official language, to models that recommended a multilingual pattern combining one or more ‘world languages’ with one or more of the 15 indigenous languages that had survived Portuguese and Indonesian colonisation. Naturally, many Timorese wanted a shift away from the use of the Indonesian language, but some suggested this was the one thing of value left by the Indonesian colonisers, as a significant language for trade and strategic defence relations within the region. Each of the proposed models had staunch supporters whose arguments reflected a particular set of cultural or economic interests.

On the one hand, an older generation of educated, Portuguese-speaking Timorese, returning from exile to hold political positions of power in the new government, preferred the reintroduction of Portuguese as the official language, despite the fact that only a small percentage of the Timorese population were fluent in the language (Leach 2002, p.144). Some scholars suggested that Portuguese would give East Timor a distinctive Latin flavour, and also help to defend the new nation from becoming an English-speaking, cultural satellite of Australia (Hull 2002). On the other hand, a younger generation, educated in Indonesian, feared that having Portuguese as the language of state would make them linguistic outsiders, and argued that Tetum, spoken by over 90 percent of the population, was a more equitable choice as the official national language. One of the difficulties, however, was that although Tetum was widely spoken, it was only just becoming a standardised written language.

Meanwhile, the wave of foreign influence in the transitional period was accompanied by an increase in the use of, and demand for English as a common language of communication. Not only did the United Nations adopt English as its official language for the transitional period, to the dismay of many East Timorese seeking employment (Hajek 2000), but also the majority of international aid agencies used English as a common language, and preferred to employ English-speaking local staff (Brunnstrom 2003). This reinforced a perception that English was the new language of necessity and could provide access to desirable economic and cultural rewards. In turn, these desires generated a demand for English language training, particularly amongst the younger generation, despite the Timorese leaders’ nomination of Portuguese as the official language.

In 2002, East Timor’s new constitution granted Portuguese and Tetum co-official status, while English and Indonesian were to be instrumental, working languages, but with no official status. Both anecdotal and quantitative research in recent years has, however, confirmed two important points. First, that many young East Timorese felt disadvantaged by the choice of Portuguese as the sole international language of the state

(Leach 2002, 2003); and second, that there continues to be a strong, widespread desire for English language learning.

In the remaining sections of this paper, I explore selections of empirical data collected as part of a larger study of English language teaching in the context of international development in East Timor.

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN EAST TIMOR

The data used in this paper is drawn from a two phase research project. The first phase comprised an ethnographic study of my own classroom at the National University of East Timor, where I was teaching for a period of two months in 2000. The university students in my class were learning English language and computer skills as part of an educational aid project in the interim period before the University officially reopened later that year. Apart from my own observations and field notes, the ethnographic data collected at this stage, and discussed in the present paper, included samples of student writing, mostly in the form of journal entries on topics of the students' choice.

The second phase of the study involved a series of semi-structured interviews and collection of correspondence from 10 Australian English language teachers who had also taught in East Timor in short term development aid projects (ranging from one month to 12 months in duration), either at the university or at a teacher training college, during the years 2000-2002. The interviews, conducted in Australia in 2002, sought participants' accounts of their teaching practices and experiences as development workers in East Timor.

In what follows, I discuss extracts from the writings of three university students, and from interviews with five teachers. All students and teachers are referred to by pseudonyms. Four of the teachers, Ann, Fay, Dana and Carol, had taught English at the university, while Kate had taught English and language teaching methodology at a teacher training college.

STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' VIEWS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE

I turn now to an exploration of several of the students' and teachers' views on English language, the expectations attached to English language teaching, and the role that English was expected to perform in providing access to social and economic opportunities. On the whole, the views of teachers and students expressed the 'powerful mythologies' that surround English as an international language (Kachru 1996). According to these views, proficiency in English was not an end in itself but, rather, English promised "instrumental benefits" of economic, political and social advancement for those who could use the language (Toh 2003, p.551). It seemed that few took seriously Phillipson's (1992) warnings that the supposed benefits flowing from English language might be greatly inflated, and that the rise of English language may usher in or sustain the harmful effects of cultural and linguistic imperialism.

One specific effect of the strong demand for English was an equally strong demand for English language teachers. The gap left by the withdrawal of teachers from Indonesia in 1999 was readily filled by language teachers from English speaking countries,

especially Australia. In the terms used by international development, these teachers became the ‘change agents’, the consultants and ‘experts’ in the language teaching process (Savage 1997), despite having relatively little knowledge and experience of the social, cultural and political context of East Timor.

From the perspective of the teachers in my study, their students’ strong desire to learn English was linked to the perceived role of the language in improving life chances, and forging connections to ‘other places’ and possibilities in a wider world. In effect, English represented the possibility of *‘the way out of here, a way to a better life’* (Teacher, Ann:19). More specifically, English also represented a desire for access to particular means of economic improvement: *‘students wanted scholarships to study in Australia or a job with the UN, ‘though they were well below being able to do those things, they saw English as a connection with the wider world’* (Teacher, Fay:17). Another teacher saw the influence on her students of the vast United Nations and international aid presence in East Timor at the time:

I think it's very important for them [to learn English], 'cause they saw for themselves that all the UN from all those countries, everybody spoke English. And I think to have them only speaking Portuguese and Tetum makes them remote in the area that they live in. I think they need English as well, and they do too (Teacher, Carol:15).

The students also expressed strong views about the power of English and its importance in the new era of independence. Like many Timorese across the country, the young adult students in my own classes were highly political: they had been involved in the resistance struggle, and were keen to participate in building the new nation. They had been educated in Indonesian but, after the referendum, had used their powers of political persuasion in lobbying the United Nations to supply English language training during the transitional period. These students wrote of their own desires in a way that reflected the common expectations and aspirations attached to English. In the eyes of students, English could offer specific connections to an international world of education, industry and business. These views echoed widely held notions about the necessity for a global language, and for East Timor to be supported by global connections, now that the shackles of oppression and enforced isolation had been thrown off: *‘After Timor Loro Sae got freedom on August 30 1999, English language is very important because Timor can't live self. This is important to make decision [about] anything’* (Student, Fatima). Put succinctly by one student, Angelo, *‘all person must learn English because English is keys in the world’*, and the evidence for this belief was apparent in the immediate context of transitional East Timor, where English was the language of a wealthy international community and, hence, a magnetic language of power. The students’ pragmatic response to the English speaking community was clearly stated:

Now in Timor country many people which come from all country, where now they lived in Timor. East Timor people want to speak with people which from abroad must now speak English because majority they can't speak Tetum language (Student, John).

Despite the pervasiveness of these expectations amongst students, a few of the Australian teachers were more sceptical about the ability of English to fulfil its promise of economic advancement. One teacher acknowledged her students’ belief in English as a means of development, but was wary that these beliefs might be illusory:

They just seem to feel like, if they can speak English then their future is just that bit better, it opens more opportunities and more doors for them in terms of employment, but it can also be a bit of a dream too, to think: 'if I can speak English then, yeah, I can do anything' (Teacher, Dana:7-8).

The note of caution voiced by Dana, and her feeling that the promise of English might be unrealistic, was rarely expressed; however, while the dreams attached to English showed high expectations, the daily conditions of life in East Timor at this time told a different story. During the transition to independence, most of the local population continued to live in poverty and suffer from poor health. Unemployment amongst the Timorese community remained high, there were few opportunities for Timorese to work with the English speaking development community, and those jobs that did exist were for drivers, domestic servants, cleaners and so on, remunerated at a fraction of the rate paid to foreign workers (Sword-Gusmao 2003; O'Kane 2001). As critics observed, the aid community had effected a 'territorial invasion', leading the reconstruction, occupying all the best houses (Hanlon 2001), taking over the best administrative buildings (Sword-Gusmao 2003), and crossing the land in hundreds of white four-wheel-drive vehicles (O'Kane 2001). Moreover, the presence of a relatively large group of well-paid expatriate workers produced a dual economy (Hill 2001), and divided the nation into 'two worlds' (C. Taylor 2000).

MOBILISING AND DISABLING THE DESIRE FOR LOCAL EMPOWERMENT

I now turn to a consideration of how English language teaching practices could work to sustain or challenge these inequalities of economic and political power between the English speaking international community and the newly independent East Timorese community, by either mobilising or impeding opportunities for students' empowerment through language learning. For brevity, I will illustrate these contrasting practices by drawing on the accounts of just two teachers who expressed these contrasting approaches.

The first teacher, Kate, had extensive experience in English language teaching in both second and foreign language contexts. In her assignment in East Timor, she was responsible for teaching English and language teaching methodology in a teacher education college. Her students were practising high school teachers or administrators, most of whom were teaching through the medium of Bahasa Indonesia, which represented their third or fourth language. In the future they would be expected to teach in Portuguese, with English language being taught as a foreign language in later years of high school.

Although my discussion here focuses on the practices and views articulated by one of the expatriate English language teachers, I am arguing here that they represent a generalised and widespread set of conventions within English language teaching, rather than the individual, personal approach of a specific teacher.

Kate believed her English language lessons would help to progress the Timorese teachers in her class from a condition she perceived as the '*Dark Ages*' of educational beliefs and practices. Describing Timorese teaching methods as '*very rigid, old fashioned, chalk and talk*', Kate presented her own language teaching methodologies as more advanced than those previously experienced or utilised by her students. Kate's

approach to structuring lessons involved cutting ties with what she perceived as the negative influences and effects of a local context, in favour of introducing an imported package of methods and content that bore little relation to local conditions. As a consequence, Kate's practices represented a model of English language as an imposed technical instrument, a fixed standard with its own internal rules and purposes, rather than a new language for grappling with real life concerns in the immediate social and political context.

While Kate spoke of '*joint ownership*' and '*negotiation*' of language lessons with the local teachers in her class, she described much of her own teaching in terms of a one way flow of expertise, seeing herself as '*modelling, demonstrating*' and '*setting up systems*' to amend the deficiencies she saw in local practices (K:9). Most of her lessons were based on an Australian school textbook from the 1980s, and although it was designed for upper primary aged children in a migrant (second language) rather than foreign language context, she felt it was '*fabulous*' since it '*was right at their level*' (K:6). A children's picture book of '*Waltzing Matilda*' formed the basis of another lesson she described as particularly successful because '*everybody all over the world knows the Waltzing Matilda tune*' (K:14), suggesting a somewhat inflated belief in Australia's sense of self importance in the Southeast Asian region. The teachers in her class had a mixed response to this lesson, seeing it as either irrelevant to their subject matter, or unworkable with a large class. At the same time, Kate was orienting her classes towards preparation for the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) examination, which was seen as offering '*proper qualifications [and] something of substance*' (K:5), despite the fact that students had no access to the actual examination, and little opportunity to benefit from this type of training.

On the other hand, influences from the local cultural context were seen as a contamination of the proper running of the classroom, and of the '*proper standards*' of English language usage. Part of the '*problem*', according to Kate, was that the teachers in her class were overly '*conscious of status*' and '*respect*', and this caused difficulties, for example, in the transfer of local forms of address into English usage. Her response on hearing her students using '*Signor or Signora, with the first name*', and addressing each other as '*'Mister' Miguel, and 'Mister' Carlos*', was to think, '*that's really weird and I'm thinking, it's wrong, from an English speaking perspective, 'cause you then get the people who put 'Dear Mr. Jim Jones*'. Rather than accepting this pattern of usage as a sign of politeness, and a simple adaptation to local culture and practice (see Hajek 2000), it became a source of frustration. Kate explained in class that this form of address was '*a big faux pas*' and that it '*doesn't work in English*', but was unable to eradicate the habit:

They don't understand that you use the Mister with the surname, so that, you know, they're such sweet people that nobody would ever say 'this is wrong'. So we would call them by their first names [without a title], but they would call us and everybody else, with putting a 'Mister' or a 'Sister' or whatever in front of it [as a sign of respect.] I don't mind doing it, as long as they're not going to have a carry over to the English (K:12).

A further frustration in relation to the influence of local conditions arose for Kate in response to her students' engagements in and commitments in the outside world. As one of their language learning tasks in IELTS preparation, Kate had her students '*do a pie graph of their typical day*', which revealed the nature and extent of their daily activities and obligations: '*God, this guy had visiting the sick and praying and leading the family*

in prayers and [laughs] and all these different things and I'm thinking Holy Moly!' (K:20). The Timorese teachers, going about their daily lives, seemed to articulate in their graphs a different set of priorities that conflicted with what the expatriate teacher saw to be the necessities of English language learning and which caused occasional lateness and absences from class. Expressing annoyance that the demands of religious duties and celebrations thereby interrupted the progress and achievements of the English program, Kate exclaimed: *'it's like argh! are we ever going to get this class started?!'* (K:6).

By insisting on adherence to specific, imported English language teaching practices, texts and standards, Kate attempted to maintain her status as the 'expert', and the source of external authority, while at the same time resisting engagement with the practices and cultural politics of Timorese life. The priority placed on first world educational practice, and monolingual patterns of English language use modelled by the expatriate teacher sustained the implicit hierarchy that devalued local knowledge and discouraged local appropriations; while the priority placed on class time, at the expense of obligations elsewhere, denoted a subtle denigration of cultural practices that were seen to conflict with the rigor of a valuable, first world education.

By contrast, another teacher, Carol, took the concerns of the local context as a starting point for language teaching and learning and, in doing so, engaged students in the continuing struggle for empowerment. As a member of an expatriate project team, Carol taught an English language class at the University of East Timor. Her students were drawn from a variety of faculties and were awaiting the official reopening and commencement of teaching in the new academic year. In many instances Carol moved outside the classroom in which she held authority, to explore the surrounding environment, an environment where the students were the experts. For Carol, an important aspect of the students' learning English was their development of skills to take part in the rebuilding of the country, a task that was once again being undertaken by external forces, such as the United Nations: *'My aim was to equip them with English language, and give them the confidence to participate in the UN governing and reconstruction of their country, to know what was happening and to seek correct information'* (C:6).

With this purpose in mind, classroom practice in asking and answering questions prepared students for excursions into institutions where English was used by international agencies as the common language, such as the United Nations administrative offices where students interviewed officials responsible for employment on East Timor's reconstruction projects. These were places that were otherwise inaccessible to the students since, in the climate of militia unrest, they were heavily guarded against 'unofficial' visitors. The excursions were thus aimed at fostering and facilitating a form of empowerment:

It was to give them confidence to enter institutions and make them realise that the country was now theirs ... They were seeing for themselves, because they were hearing rumours, and they hadn't been [inside these places]. They didn't know they were allowed to go to these places, 'cause under Indonesian rule and under Portuguese rule, I guess they were not easily able to go there, they were intimidated by these places (C:10).

An example of Carol's efforts to extend English language teaching towards political engagement can be seen in her students' exploration of the floating hotel *Olympia*, moored in Dili harbour to accommodate United Nations staff. The *Olympia*, perceived as

a site for the display of sexual immorality amongst the international community, had become a focus for one of the issues that concerned students in regard to the influx of foreign agencies.

Amongst the students, yes they did talk about that, they talked about not wanting their women to be like Western women, and that the boat, Olympia, was being used for prostitution. So that's when I thought, well we'd better go down and see for ourselves (C:10).

Although it was a location normally off-limits to Timorese students, the *Olympia* thus became a place for students' and teacher's engagement in, and exploration of, this complex social and political issue. Working with the students' curiosity and concern, and using her expatriate teaching authority to gain access, Carol's class visited the *Olympia*, equipped with questions practiced in the English classroom, as a means of engaging with the specific social and political dilemmas arising from foreign intervention and control.

Carol's teaching practices valued the students' interest in the history and local politics of occupation and authority, and facilitated a productive questioning of local ownership in alienated public spaces now overtaken, in the case of East Timor, by the new global invasion. By generating a more complex, affirming engagement between English language and a multiplicity of activities, priorities and places outside the walls of the classroom, I would argue these teaching practices mobilised the students' desire for empowerment and facilitated engagement with both local and global cultural politics.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, in East Timor during the transition to statehood, English language was seen to hold a promise of empowerment through its perceived ability to forge new connections with the outside world. This world was present in East Timor in the form of international agencies taking responsibility for reconstruction and development, and using English as the new *lingua franca*. Both teachers and students in this climate saw the promises of economic mobility and release from the past as being contingent on learning the new language of power.

The two teachers, Kate and Carol, appear to represent two very different ways of approaching English language teaching in this environment, and offer some insight into the choices and possibilities that English teachers face in development contexts. For the first teacher, Kate, in small ways, and in unremarkable, everyday practices, an authority of foreign control and supposed expertise was maintained through language teaching. The exercise of this external authority devalued local knowledge and practices, and so risked reproducing the colonial relations that East Timor had resisted in its fight for independence.

For the second teacher, Carol, an effort was made to look beyond the technical aspects of language teaching and putative standards of language use, focusing instead on the appropriation of English for the purposes of critical engagement with the world beyond the classroom walls. By orienting her language teaching practices towards social and political conditions, Carol worked together with her students in an effort to ameliorate the imbalance that impeded their empowerment. At the same time, Carol resisted the conventions that keep language teachers in *their* place, *inside* the classroom, and *out* of a wider political context of action.

Transcription conventions

Attribution of quotations

Ann, Fay, Dana, Kate and Carol = teachers' pseudonyms

Fatima, Angelo, John = students' pseudonyms

K, C: refer to the initial letter of the teachers' pseudonym

Numbers refers to transcript page

For example:

(K:9) = Kate, interview transcript page 9.

(C:2) = Carol, interview transcript page 2.

Codes used in interview transcriptions

text - indicates emphasis by the speaker

[*text*] - not stated by interviewee, but inserted by researcher to ensure clarity of grammatical or referential meaning

[text] - includes description of the non-verbal (laughter and gesture)

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