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THE EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG TIMORESE ASSISTANT TEACHERS IN USING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: A BASIS FOR EDUCATION POLICY

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ABSTRACT

Learning English in Timor-Leste, a young country in the Expanding Circle of the world's English usage, whose citizens speak multiple languages, poses diversified challenges that may be reduced through amendments to the educational curriculum in the country. Therefore, this article delved into the experiences of Timorese assistant teachers in a faith-based international school in Dili, Timor-Leste, as they acquire and use English. The lack of existing literature prompted the conduct of this qualitative case study, which involved a sample of eight assistant teachers. Four of the assistant teachers' advisers were also interviewed for triangulation. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The results showed that the participants had only been exposed to English from middle school, which resulted in their encountering various language challenges. These challenges included interacting with individuals with limited English proficiency, grappling with complex English terminology, and facing abrupt cognitive impediments. Notwithstanding these challenges, they exhibited coping strategies to surmount language barriers, including enrolling in English courses, seeking counsel from more knowledgeable individuals, engaging in informal English conversations, reading English literature, viewing English videos, and employing Google Translate. Moreover, they expressed their plans to engage in self-help practices and attend courses to improve their English language skills. Therefore, the study recommends refurbishing the country's education policies through the inclusion of English subjects in the primary school curriculum and strengthening their undergraduate programmes on English language and literature.

Keywords: assistant teachers; education policy; world's English usage; expanding circle; basic education curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Learning a new language bears with it numerous challenges. Learning English as a second or foreign language is laborious for many individuals, especially those who already speak multiple languages. This dilemma is common among English language learners in countries that are part of the Expanding Circle of the world's English usage (Zhang, 2021). Individuals who use English as their fourth or fifth language, specifically those in the expanding circle, often notice these challenges more prominently (Wang, 2021).

Language acquisition has been a well-researched topic throughout the years. Language, as explained by Wojcik et al. (2017), is a systematic form of communication exclusive to human usage. According to their study, scaffolding, "perceptual primitives, early biases, and cumulative knowledge" (para. 43) play crucial roles in language acquisition. Likewise, developmental and cognitive theorists such as Jean Piaget believe that the environment affects children's innate ability to learn and develop a new language (Broad, 2020). Therefore, it can be asserted that low exposure to an English-speaking environment can lead to inadequate mastery of the language. This theory is in line with Vygotsky's (1978), whose Zone of Proximal Development Theory posited that children could attain greater knowledge and performance in a language-engaging and supportive environment. In this theory, language learners are presumed to possess certain acquisition abilities independently or with the help of a more knowledgeable person (i.e., a language instructor]. This acquisition is expected to be applied across multiple disciplines.

The present study uses these ideas to investigate the issues faced by assistant teachers at a faith-based international school in Dili, Timor-Leste. This study also examined the coping techniques people used to confront their issues. The results of this research aim to provide a foundation for education policymakers and curriculum creators in the nation to reassess their current rules for basic education

and create a more contextual and personalised curriculum that addresses the requirements of Timorese learners.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

English in Asia

Wilang and Duy (2021) claimed that the prevalence of multilingualism in diverse societies in this part of the concentric system of the world's English usage can be related to globalisation. At present, different communities recognise and embrace multilingualism as a common aspect of public life, particularly in terms of economics, education, and individual interactions.

The model of concentric circles, proposed by Kachru et al. (1985), offers a framework for understanding the emergence of the world's English usage. Kachru et al. (1985) posited that the world's English usage can be classified into three concentric circles: the inner circle where native English speakers belong; the outer circle where English-speaking nations adopt English as a second language; and the expanding circle where English is not an official language but is studied as a foreign language.

Among the countries in the Expanding Circle of the world's English usage, Al-Mutairi (2019) and Nordquist (2019; 2020) have identified South, East, and Southeast Asian nations. On the other hand, Kirkpatrick (2020) contended in a study that the ten countries comprising ASEAN, including Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, which speak local variations of English and were once British colonies, fall into the outer circle of the concentric model. Contrastingly, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam can be classified as expanding-circle countries. Despite the limitations and differing views on the concentric circles model, Al-Mutairi (2019) contended that it still serves as a prominent foundation for comprehending the fundamentals of the world's English usage and their significant contributions to the expansion and advancements of the English language.

Furthermore, Kirkpatrick (2020) elaborated and clarified in a study that in these expanding-circle countries, English is limited to being taught as a foreign language subject in schools. These countries rely on varieties of English spoken by native speakers as a standard to be emulated by language learners. Furthermore, English does not serve any functional purpose in these countries,

leading to its classification as a foreign language. Therefore, using English in casual and formal dialogues is uncommon in expanding-circle countries (Monfared & Khatib, 2018). The significance of English usage in these nations is inadequately addressed, leading to several obstacles faced by language learners.

Challenges Encountered by English Language Learners in Asia

Many Asians, as non-native English speakers seeking to enhance their communication abilities, face difficulties in the instruction and acquisition of the language. For instance, Rahman et al. (2019) referenced various studies to identify diverse obstacles in English language acquisition in Bangladesh, including inconsistent educational policies regarding language application (Rahman & Pandian, 2018), teaching methodologies and the use of instructional materials (Rahman et al., 2018), and the professional English competence of language instructors (Kahrim & Mohamed, 2019). These issues were evidently linked to the accessibility and equity of English within Bangladesh's education policy. Rahman et al. (2019) referenced Section 153 (2) of the 1972 Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, which states that Bangla has been accorded "higher prestige in all domains of the society, primarily in education, which was not pragmatic at that time since the outcome of the policy was a drop of English proficiency among the learner community" (para. 5).

Leaño et al. (2019) discovered that indigenous English language learners in the Philippines had insufficient English vocabulary, leading to difficulties in reading comprehension and oral communication. They determined that these learners find it challenging to describe their ideas or convey their emotions in English. The researchers identify the "very limited engagement with the English language, most particularly in oral activities" (p. 25) as a contributing factor to the insufficiency of English vocabulary. Bator (2016) asserted that this issue could be related to the difficulty in identifying appropriate vocabulary, which could lead to learners struggling to articulate their ideas effectively. Even if learners are familiar with the term or its definition, they may still use it incorrectly.

Research conducted in Japan among English language teachers (Hasanah & Utami, 2019) identified obstacles to teaching English, including instructional materials that were not customised to the learners' requirements, large class numbers, inadequate learning facilities, and a lack of desire

among the language learners. The results concurred with Demir's (2017) study, which identified three primary impediments in English language teaching: those linked to students, teachers, and institutions. The issues in English language learning and instruction in these countries may also be relevant to other nations within the global context of English usage.

Language Use Educational Policies in Asia

Addressing the identified difficulties would need a meticulously formulated and well-implemented educational policy. The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2022) issued a redesigned English language curriculum for elementary and secondary schools, emphasising communicative skills and the practical application of the language. The 307-page curriculum standards provide a systematic framework for curriculum implementation, including lessons, objectives, sample activities, and expected outcomes.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education of India, in its 2019–2020 annual report, required compulsory instruction of English for Grades 6–8, while designating it as an optional subject for Grades 9 and 10 (Government of India, 2020). In Malaysia, Mohd Don and Abdullah (2019) said that the Ministry of Education reformed its educational policy to enhance English competence. The reform agenda included the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the improvement of teacher training and curriculum development, and the encouragement of increased student interaction with English outside the classroom. The Department of Education in the Philippines required the use of English as the medium of instruction in classrooms beginning in Grade 1. This directive seeks to enhance English language proficiency at all educational levels nationwide (Official Gazette, 2013). Nonetheless, the formulation and implementation of state-mandated policies may provide challenges for some nations. It was noted that there is a discrepancy in Bangladesh's educational policy (Rahman & Pandian, 2018), as referenced in Rahman et al. (2019).

English in Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste, a country in Southeast Asia that can be considered a part of the Expanding Circle of the world's English usage, is among the nations that employ multiple languages, including Tetum (the

national language), Bahasa Indonesia (the alternative language), and Portuguese (the official language). Accordingly, Macalister and Akoyt (2023) affirmed that when Timor-Leste gained independence in 2002, they faced the task of deciding on a language policy. This decision was crucial because of a population of approximately one million and a diverse linguistic landscape consisting of sixteen local dialects and three foreign languages (Portuguese, Bahasa Indonesia, and English).

Section 13 of the Constitution of Timor-Leste recognises Tetum and Portuguese as the official languages for classroom instruction (Constituent Assembly, 2002; da Costa Cabral, 2020). Therefore, the use of English in academic settings and official documents is mandated. The Decree Law No. 4/2015 of Timor-Leste asserts that the “recognition of the use of children’s first language, when necessary, has the potential to ensure access to education on an equal basis” (p. 1). Furthermore, Section 7 asserts that citizens must “recognise and value the languages of the country and the way communication is done between people to understand the political, social, and economic systems of the country and its rights, freedoms, and duties within the framework of a democratic society” (p. 3). Article 11 Section 2 explicitly asserts that “the curriculum will be implemented in order to guarantee, through a linguistic progression from Tetum to Portuguese, that, at the end of the second cycle, students have a solid literacy base in the two official languages” (p. 4). The 11-page memorandum from the Journal of the Republic [of Timor-Leste] (2015) did not include English as an alternate language of instruction in education. To this effect, acquiring proficiency in English has posed difficulties for Timorese individuals, particularly for those whose occupations require them to communicate in English regularly.

The current state of education policy in the nation indicates that the amended Education Sector Plan (2020–2024) mandates that residents should have the opportunity to learn English as an additional language. Consequently, the strategic action plans include the following initiatives: (a) professionals must complete their education in either Bahasa Indonesia or English; (b) educators should improve their instruction in pertinent languages beyond Portuguese and Tetum; (c) educational institutions must uphold their proficiency in both Bahasa Indonesia and English; and (d) students in primary school must not only achieve a strong command of their official languages but also acquire a fundamental understanding of English.

Timorese assistant teachers at a faith-based international school in Dili face a common challenge: acquiring and using the English language. As assistant teachers in an educational institution where English is the official language for communication and instruction, they support the advisers in classroom management. This includes giving instructions, offering academic support, and communicating with parents from diverse racial backgrounds. Furthermore, due to Timor-Leste's relatively young age and the absence of English as an official language, there is a dearth of available literature on the experiences of assistant teachers in international schools with English usage. Research in the country's English-language educational policies is also limited. Therefore, the present study was undertaken to address these knowledge gaps. This study was designed to accomplish the following objectives:

- (1) Identify how Timorese assistant teachers navigate formal and informal communication settings.
- (2) Determine the strategies that Timorese assistant teachers plan to use to enhance their English language proficiency.
- (3) Suggest education policy amendments to improve English language literacy in the country.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employed a case study research method. Debout (2016) defined a qualitative case study as a method that explores a complex phenomenon by identifying and examining the various factors that interact with one another. It is typically used for qualitative social research that involves a detailed study in a natural setting (Priya, 2020). The case observed in the current study is based on an actual situation and focuses on the challenges Timorese assistant teachers face in a faith-based international school in Dili, Timor-Leste. It also includes the coping strategies they employed to address those challenges.

To gather data, all assistant teachers ($n = 8$) from kindergarten to Grade 3 were interviewed using a combination of focus group discussion (FGD) and an individual interview, employing a total sampling approach. Given that there are just eight assistant teachers at the school, the researchers opted to include all of them. Despite being selected using a total sampling approach, inclusion criteria were also established. The inclusion criteria include: (a) being a natural-born Timorese; (b) having a minimum of one year of experience in an international work setting; (c) employment in a faith-based organisation; and (d) possessing at least a senior high school diploma.

Prior to initiating the study, the researchers sought approval from the school administrator and obtained consent from all participants. Their involvement is voluntary, and there is no financial compensation involved. The participants were informed that the data would remain confidential and used only for academic and research purposes. All videos were deleted after the research concluded.

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants.

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of the Participants*

Participant Code	Age	Sex	Educational Background	Languages Spoken	Grade Levels Assisted
Assistant 1	37	F	BS Computer Engineering Graduate	Makasae (Dialect), Fataluku (Dialect), Tetum, Bahasa Indonesia, English,	Kinder B

Assistant 2	29	F	Senior School Graduate	High	Portuguese Fataluku, Tetum, Bahasa Indonesia, English, Portuguese	Grade 2 A
Assistant 3	31	M	BS Nursing Undergraduate		Tetum, Bahasa Indonesia, Portuguese, English	Grade 3 A
Assistant 4	26	F	Finance Management (in progress)		Fataluku, Tetum, Bahasa Indonesia, English, Portuguese	Grade 2 B
Assistant 5	27	F	General Management (in progress)		Makasae, Tetum, Bahasa Indonesia, English, Portuguese	Grade 1 A
Assistant 6	39	F	Senior School Graduate	High	Fataluku, Tetum, Bahasa Indonesia, English, Portuguese	Kinder A
Assistant 7	35	F	Finance Management (in progress)		Fataluku, Tetum, Bahasa Indonesia, English	Grade 3 B
Assistant 8	30	F	General Management (in progress)		Makasae, Tetum, Portuguese, English, Bahasa Indonesia	Grade 1 B

Note: The spoken languages are arranged from the most used language to the least.

The interviews took place at a convenient time and location for the participants. The FGD lasted an hour and four minutes, while the individual interview consumed thirty-six minutes and forty seconds. To ensure the data's reliability, four of the assistant teachers' advisers were also asked questions for triangulation purposes. Furthermore, follow-up interviews and specific verifications from participants were conducted to ensure the accuracy and rigour of the collected data. All ambiguous statements and

assertions were clarified with the participants. They were further enquired whether the transcription and interpretation accurately reflected the meaning of their remarks.

The data was then analysed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) thematic analysis. Mile's and Huberman's thematic analysis has four primary steps: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion or verification of findings. The researchers first gathered data via focus group discussions and interviews. Subsequently, the video-recorded interviews were transcribed, and clarifications were obtained via participant verification. The data was further consolidated by categorising the raw transcripts into clusters, which were ultimately refined into themes. A matrix was then constructed to organise and compress the data (see tables 2–4 in the findings and discussion). The verbatim responses were ultimately evaluated and analysed to derive findings and identify specific themes and patterns that addressed the study's objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Timorese assistant teachers shared their experiences in using English in informal and formal settings. They discussed how they learned English, their struggles, and their solutions. They also mentioned their plans to enhance their English language skills.

Shared experiences among Timorese assistant teachers' usage of English in formal and informal communications

Exposure to English: Based on their demographic profile, all assistant teacher participants have completed high school education. Additionally, one of the assistant teachers, Assistant 1, has obtained a college degree in computer engineering. During the interview, most assistant teachers, specifically Assistants 4, 5, 7, and 8, were still pursuing their college education. Assistant 3 took five semesters in BSc Nursing but could not graduate, while Assistants 2 and 6 could not attend college because of financial constraints.

The assistant teachers acknowledged that their formal introduction to the English language began during middle school. While Tetum, Bahasa Indonesia, and Portuguese were the mediums of

instruction in their local schools, English was taught as a subject once or twice a week. Assistant 4 disclosed, *“For me, it was primary. When I was in Grades 5 and 6, there were missionaries that came from Sri Lanka...they taught us English once a week for Grades 5 and 6...for two years.”*

This late exposure to English may be the result of the country’s constitutional mandate (Constituent Assembly, 2002), wherein it was declared that Tetum and Portuguese will be the official languages in the country. Moreover, the latest preschool and primary school curriculum in Timor-Leste, as amended by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2016 and 2017, included this fundamental change in Section 3:

Tetum is taught as the principal language for literacy (reading and writing) in grades 1 and 2, whereas Portuguese is taught only in oral form throughout these grades. Beginning in grade 3, reading skills are systematically and explicitly transitioned to Portuguese, with the language of instruction progressively increasing until attaining bilingual competency by the conclusion of grade 6. This modification is based on extensive research about language acquisition, academic achievement, and the linguistic context in Timor-Leste. The 2015 Census indicates that 30% of Timorese children aged 5–9 use Tetum Praca as their first language, but less than 0.1% communicate in Portuguese (La’o Hamutuk, 2018).

This finding suggests that English, as a nation in the Expanding Circle of the world’s English usage, is not prioritised as a language to be learned or used in academic institutions. This result aligns with Monfared and Khatib’s (2018), arguing that in the Expanding Circle of the world’s English usage, it is uncommon to use English in formal and informal conversations. As a result, the assistant teachers did not perceive its relevance in their daily communication until they were exposed to a work environment where English is the primary language of instruction and communication.

The outcome contradicts the original purpose of Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development Theory (1978), which emphasises the interaction between the social environment and language learning. Despite the participant’s little previous knowledge of English, they cannot progress beyond the zone of proximal growth without the assistance of a competent individual.

Challenges encountered in using English: The Timorese assistant teachers faced several challenges when using English, including (a) communicating with parents who cannot speak English,

(b) interacting with parents, students, and teachers who are more proficient in English, and (c) encountering complex English terminologies or sudden mental blocks. Table 2 presents the challenges encountered by the assistant teachers.

Table 2. *Challenges Encountered by the Participants*

Participant Code	Challenges Encountered
Assistant 1	“When parents talk fast, I’m not understand” (interacting with parents, students, and teachers who are more proficient in English) “Some parents not speak English...very difficult” (communicating with parents who cannot speak English)
Assistant 2	“Difficult sometimes to talk to parents not speaking Tetun, Bahasa, and also English” (communicating with parents who cannot speak English)
Assistant 3	“I’m always ask why others can talk to foreign, me cannot.” (complex English terminologies or sudden mental blocks)
Assistant 4	“Sometimes, students know more English...they the one that explain to me or their classmate.” (interacting with parents, students, and teachers who are more proficient in English)
Assistant 5	“The students come to me and ask ‘teacher, what is this?, how I can do this?’, sometimes I also don’t know.” (complex English terminologies)
Assistant 6	“When times some teachers speak I cannot understand, I ask local teacher explain.” (interacting with parents, students, and teachers who are more proficient in English)
Assistant 7	“Sometimes we not understand the announcement in WhatsApp group” (complex English terminologies)
Assistant 8	“When we speak English, sometimes we really want to say the word in English, but suddenly we don’t know it” (mental block)

These challenges are also observed by the advisers of the classes. The advisers of Kinder A and Grade 2 B observed that their assistant teachers struggled to express their thoughts and ideas due to pronunciation issues and *“limited vocabulary, which made it difficult for them to construct grammatically correct and fluent sentences”* (Kinder A adviser). The Grade 1 B adviser also thinks that lack of vocabulary affects the assistant teachers’ ability to express themselves. On the other hand, the Kinder B adviser mentioned that she often hears her assistant using reversed English, which is influenced by their local language patterns, e.g., *“name what (naran mak saida)”* instead of *“what is your name?”*. The Kinder B adviser also noted that when she asked her assistant to narrate the Bible story of the day, the assistant teacher would occasionally translate certain words into Tetum if she could not express them in English.

In light of the nation's colonial history and the struggle against Indonesian occupation, the new constitution designated Portuguese as one of the official languages, alongside Tetum. English, being their fourth or fifth language depending upon the existence of a local dialect, is not an official language. Rather, it is predominantly learned by the locals as a supplementary language if they: (a) seek to enhance written and verbal communication (Assistants 1 and 2); (b) intend to pursue employment in an international corporation or institution (Assistant 3); or (c) aspire to study at an academic institution abroad that employs English as the medium of instruction (Assistant 8).

This result indicates that the assistant teachers' communication abilities are affected due to English not being their country's primary or secondary language. Depending on the individual they converse with or the specific situation they find themselves in, their English proficiency is tested. The findings align with Bator's (2016) assertion that this issue may stem from the difficulty in selecting the appropriate words, resulting in an individual's incapacity to articulate their views. These findings are also in line with the argument made by Maia et al. (2022) in their study, suggesting that Tetum speakers may encounter challenges when translating from Tetum to English as a foreign language. One specific difficulty arises from the fact that English has tenses, while Tetum does not. As the patterns of English and Tetum differ, constructing grammatically accurate statements has become a challenge for the participants.

Coping strategies to overcome their challenges: To address the challenges encountered, the assistant teachers have implemented diverse self-directed learning strategies, including: (a) enrolling in English courses; (b) consulting individuals with greater proficiency in English; (c) engaging in informal English conversations; (d) reading English literature; (e) viewing English tutorial videos; and (f) employing Google Translate. Table 3 illustrates the coping strategies used by assistant teachers to address their issues in using English.

Table 3. *Coping Strategies of the Participants*

Participant Code	Coping Strategies
Assistant 1	"I talk my son in English and read English book" (engaging in informal English conversations; reading English literature)

Assistant 2	“We talk English to our daughter” (engaging in informal English conversations) “also watch YouTube” (viewing English tutorial videos)
Assistant 3	“I also use Google Translate” (employing Google Translate) “watch YouTube, ya” (viewing English tutorial videos)
Assistant 4	“For me, I always ask parents to say it in a way that I understand” (consulting individuals with greater proficiency in English) “We use English at home when we talk to our daughter” (engaging in informal English conversations)
Assistant 5	“After class, I get a book and I read loud and I say [to my adviser teacher], Teacher listen to me, correct me.” (consulting individuals with greater proficiency in English)
Assistant 6	“I ask another teacher to help explain...sometimes students” (consulting individuals with greater proficiency in English)
Assistant 7	“I ask ‘Boy’ (not the real name) listen to me read and tell the correct word” (consulting individuals with greater proficiency in English)
Assistant 8	“I like read English Bible and other English book” (reading English literature) “I use Google Translate” (employing Google Translate)

To help her assistant teacher with her English language skills, Kinder B and Grade 1 B advisers always provide opportunities for their assistant teachers to teach in class. Meanwhile, the Grade 2 B adviser executes an “English Only Please” rule in her classroom, while the Kinder A adviser mentioned, *“Introducing new words and correcting the sentence given are some of the methods I use to help them, as well as teaching them the correct pronunciation of a word.”*

The results revealed that the participants faced difficulties using English in formal and informal conversations. However, they made efforts to overcome these challenges by employing various methods. For instance, participants who had to teach children ($n = 4$) tried their best to communicate in English with their students. Additionally, it was observed that using Google Translate and seeking assistance from individuals with greater proficiency in English were common strategies employed by the participants to resolve their language difficulties.

Citizens in the Expanding Circle of the world’s English usage are susceptible to committing various grammatical and conversational errors when using English (Al-Mutairi, 2019; Kirkpatrick, 2020). However, they endeavour to use their talents by constructively confronting their problems rather than become stagnant in the acquisition of a fourth or fifth language. The participants deemed improving their English language skills necessary because of its relevance to their current work.

Plans to Improve Their English Language Skills

The Timorese assistant teacher participants also discussed their strategies for enhancing their English language proficiency. These strategies include (a) engaging in self-help practices and (b) attending English courses.

Table 4. *The Participants Plans to Improve Their English Language Skills*

Participant Code	Plans to Improve Their English Language Skills
Assistant 1	“I want to take a time to attend some course.” (attending English courses)
Assistant 2	“I need to read. Sometimes I read book from Ellen G. White...I read some books.” (self-help practices)
Assistant 3	“I have plan maybe next month...I want to buy some headset/earphone...practise listening and speaking...sometimes practise in front of the mirror.” (self-help practices)
Assistant 4	“I want to attend English courses again.” (attending English courses) “I practise English is by reading and watching English. Most of the time we use English at home.” (self-help practices)
Assistant 5	“I need to practise again.” (Self-help practices)
Assistant 6	“I want attend training in English like before.” (attending English courses)
Assistant 7	“I want to every day read a book in the English language...so when I don’t understand, I can write and my friend, Google Translate, give me the meaning of the word.” (self-help practices)
Assistant 8	“I want to practise my English with my husband also.” (self-help practices) “At home, Bahasa Indonesia and Tetun are automatically... but right now, we try English only at home.”(self-help practices)

The outcome may be inferred by the majority of participants choosing self-help practices, which are more pragmatic than enrolling in English courses. This may be a result of financial constraints that the participants are experiencing. These self-help practices included using English at home, practicing with family members, and reading English books readily available in their homes, at church, and in the school library. This result suggests that they do not need to invest significant resources to improve their English, which is why they opt for these practical methods. This result aligns with the findings of Misbah et al. (2017) in a study among 166 Malaysian students, where socioeconomic status [“financial constraints” in the present study] was found to be one of the contributing factors to the difficulty of English language learning.

However, it is also worth noting that three participants expressed their desire to participate in English courses, believing it would provide them with the technical knowledge necessary to improve

their proficiency in the language. During the interviews, Participants 1, 2, 3, and 5 indicated that they had previously enrolled in English courses, which had positively influenced their English communication abilities. Nonetheless, their participation was disrupted by financial constraints and demanding schedules.

This study confirmed that due to the participants' difficulties in learning and using the English language, they are striving to immerse themselves in an English-speaking society, despite limits such as financial constraints. These assistant teachers would have benefitted from scaffolding and mastering the English language through their perceptual primitives, early biases, and cumulative knowledge (Wojcik et al., 2017), along with the support of knowledgeable individuals within a nurturing community (Vygotsky, 1978).

Recommended Education Policy to Improve English Language Literacy in Timor-Leste

The participants' drive to improve their English language proficiency surpasses the obstacles they face. This study advocates for the integration of English into the curriculum for primary schools in order to solidify students' exposure to English and their familiarity with the language at an earlier age. This strategy aims to cultivate the globally competitive inhabitants of Timor-Leste. In addition to their proficient command of Tetum and Portuguese, they will also have the opportunity to further develop their English language skills.

Policymakers and curriculum developers in Timor-Leste believe that the country's future is dependent on the quality of education that school-age children and youth receive. However, La'o Hamutuk (2018) protested that public discussions on the issue of education in the country have been "charged with political rhetoric rather than facts and solid information" (para. 1). Among the objectives of basic education in Timor-Leste is to ensure mastery of the Portuguese and Tetum languages among learners. Furthermore, according to the nation's Ministry of Education (2024), primary schools are required to offer instruction in a first foreign language. This mandate provides liberty to local and international institutions to choose a foreign language to teach. In the case of some assistant teachers, their local primary schools opted for Bahasa Indonesia rather than English. One reason to be inferred is the lack of English language competence of local teachers. Therefore, they opted to teach a language

that they are more fluent in, such as Bahasa Indonesia. Authorities possess the capacity to amend Section 13 of their Constitution to designate English, Tetum, and Portuguese as official languages throughout the nation (Constituent Assembly, 2002; Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, 2002), especially in educational settings.

The participants also noted that English is not regarded as an important subject in primary and middle schools. English serves as an optional subject in high school, giving students the choice to enrol or skip it. This finding indicates that Timorese individuals are generally unaware of the English language's significance until they are involved in contexts, communities, or educational and professional settings that demand it. In this regard, it is advisable to revise the policy on official languages and the instructional methods in local schools in accordance with the Education Sector Plan 2020–2024. Consequently, the researchers advocate for the incorporation of English as the primary subject in basic education, mandating an equivalent allocation of hours for the study of other core disciplines, such as mathematics. Undergraduate programmes in English language and literature require improvement. This measure will motivate adult learners to pursue formal education rather than register in language courses, where they possess more autonomy in their attendance decisions. Incorporating English as an additional language in primary school and enhancing English language programmes in tertiary education will provide future prospects for Timorese individuals pursuing careers in multicultural or multinational sectors.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that assistant teachers at a faith-based institution in Dili, Timor-Leste, had experienced several obstacles in acquiring English, alongside their original languages (Portuguese and Tetum) and supplementary languages (Bahasa Indonesia and local dialects). The frustration of conversing with an individual who speaks little to no English, the sense of inadequacy when addressing someone deemed more proficient, the strain of comprehending complex English terminologies, and the sudden mental blocks during conversations all signify a lack of proficiency in the English language. This outcome corresponds with the findings of Leañó et al. (2019) that insufficient exposure to the language, particularly in formal education, results in poor proficiency in the language.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that in Timor-Leste, the education curriculum only mandates the learning of Tetum and Portuguese in primary school, with English being introduced in middle school. The evident apprehension regarding the difficulties encountered by the participants may have originated from overarching systemic issues in the nation's language education, including teacher qualifications, resource limitations, students' language backgrounds, socioeconomic obstacles, insufficient exposure to English media, and curriculum deficiencies, most of which were addressed in the Education Sector Plan. On the other hand, the study reveals that learning English at an earlier age would be advantageous for language learners in the Expanding Circle of the world's English usage, as it aids in acquiring and retaining the language. Consequently, the study participants showed a superior command of English in both formal and informal conversations compared to the general population. This was due to their recognition of the importance of learning English in their economic, academic, and social lives, which sparked an increased interest in self-improvement. This outcome corresponds with Demir's (2017) results, indicating that language learning is affected by aspects pertaining to students, teachers, and institutions.

Nonetheless, while advocating for the inclusion of English as a core subject in basic education in Timor-Leste, policymakers and curriculum developers must also acknowledge possible obstacles such as linguistic diversity, given the nation's intricate linguistic landscape comprising various dialects in addition to the two official languages. Resource allocation must be taken into account since the implementation of a new language policy necessitates supplementary resources, including books, instructional materials, facilities, and a budget for teacher training. Timor-Leste is a culture-driven nation; hence, cultural resistance may be another obstacle, particularly if the general population favours local languages and traditions over English. Ultimately, curricular overload could present an additional obstacle. Incorporating English into basic education may lead to a congested curriculum, thereby obstructing students' proficiency in all disciplines.

The limited sample size ($n = 8$), concentrated on a singular educational setting within the nation, warrants attention, for it may have limited the study's generalisability. Consequently, the results may not have reflected the experiences of all language learners and instructors in Timor-Leste. The present study addresses a gap in the literature by offering a comprehensive overview of the language learning

context in Timor-Leste. Consequently, the researchers suggest using the themes identified in this study as variables for quantitative research with a larger sample size to enhance the generalisability of the results. Research on English language acquisition in primary education and its effects on learners may be investigated. This may assist policymakers and curriculum developers in determining and planning future enhancements. Other researchers may investigate the effects of early English training on language learners within the Expanding Circle of the world's English usage. It is recommended to undertake research assessing the competence of local residents in expanding circle nations who have graduated from local schools and are employed in international workplaces and to examine its effect on their job performance. This may provide conclusions that are generalisable throughout Asia.

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