

Empowering young voices: designing didactic tools for early childhood Mambae literacy in Timor-Leste

Abstract

This paper presents a critical examination of a grassroots initiative to design didactic tools aimed at supporting early childhood literacy in Mambae, one of the indigenous languages spoken in Timor-Leste. Positioned within a sociopolitical landscape where Portuguese and Tetum dominate formal education, Mambae and other minority languages often face systemic marginalization. This linguistic hierarchy contributes to early educational disparities and threatens intergenerational language transmission. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and participatory design methodologies, the project collaborates with local educators, caregivers, and storytellers to develop culturally grounded literacy materials. These include illustrated storybooks, oral storytelling activities, and visual aids that reflect Mambae cultural knowledge and linguistic structures. By embedding language learning within familiar cultural contexts, the initiative supports both linguistic competence and cultural affirmation in young learners. Framed through the lens of translanguaging and critical language pedagogy, the paper investigates how these tools function not only as educational resources but also as acts of resistance against dominant language ideologies. The work challenges deficit-based narratives about indigenous languages and illustrates how early childhood education can serve as a transformative space for empowerment and sociolinguistic equity. Findings offer insights into the implications of minority language literacy for broader discourses on decolonial education and language justice. The presentation will share practical strategies and community feedback, highlighting both challenges and successes in designing for linguistic inclusivity in post-colonial educational systems.