

Becoming a Nation of Readers in Timor-Leste

Benjamim de Araújo e Corte-Real and Sjaak Kroon¹

Introduction

These proceedings of the *Communicating New Research on Timor-Leste* Conference contain three contributions that report on the projects that are part of an ongoing interdisciplinary research programme “Becoming a nation of readers in Timor-Leste: Language policy and adult literacy development in a multilingual context”. The programme has been funded by the Netherlands Science Foundation NWO/WOTRO Science for Global Development for four years, with funding commencing April 2009². The research is being conducted by researchers from a consortium of universities and institutions in The Netherlands, Timor-Leste and The United Kingdom (see the contributions by Boon and Kurvers; Cabral and Martin-Jones; Da Conceição Sávio, Kurvers, Van Engelenhoven and Kroon). Here, we present a general introduction to the programme, its background, its constituent projects and the status quo.

Investigating literacy in Timor-Leste

Multilingual Timor-Leste is a new nation and a developing country. After gaining independence in 2002, the country still faces major challenges related to economic development, unemployment and poverty. Literacy rates are low: it is estimated that only about half of the adult population is able to read and write. The United Nations Development Program reported adult literacy rates of 56.3% for males and 43.9% for females, mainly as a result of lack of primary education (UNDP 2006). According to the 2004 National Population Census, in seven out of thirteen districts, above 30% of the inhabitants between age 15 and 34 cannot read and write and in four other districts 20%. Curtain (2006), in a national youth survey for UNICEF Timor-Leste, estimated one third of the young people to be functionally illiterate. Timor-Leste therefore provides extraordinary challenges and possibilities for literacy research in a developmental context, ultimately aiming at the improvement of adult literacy rates, the emancipation of its citizens and the country’s development.

Research on literacy development in Timor-Leste has to take account of the country’s multilingual composition and language policy. Timor-Leste has sixteen languages and a large number of dialects (Hull 2004). From 1550-1975, when Timor-Leste was colonized by Portugal, Portuguese was the official language. Immediately after its self-declared independence in 1975, Timor-Leste was occupied by Indonesia. Indonesian became the official language during the 24-year-long occupation until 1999. After independence in 2002, Timor-Leste opted for Portuguese and Tetun as the country’s official languages, and for another fifteen national languages to be valued and developed by the state. Research on literacy development in Timor-Leste also needs to consider the various institutional actors involved. First the Government and the Ministry of Education have, since independence, been confronted with adult literacy challenges regarding languages, materials, methodologies and implementation. Soon after independence, the Government started to reduce illiteracy and enhance educational enrolment. In 2005-2006 the Ministry of Education and the UNDP (Boon 2007) in cooperation with local stakeholders and literacy teachers from various districts developed and piloted literacy materials in Tetun and Portuguese. These materials were based on topics considered relevant for development (prevention of diseases, reproductive health, agriculture, citizenship, human rights, hygiene, environment) and their methodology combined a social-functional approach with a phonics-based one in order to introduce the alphabetic principle (Byrne 1998). Besides this, 260 adult-literacy teachers were trained in a UNDP-project in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and UNICEF

¹ Benjamim de Araújo e Corte-Real is affiliated to the Instituto Nacional de Linguística at UNTL in Dili, Timor-Leste and Sjaak Kroon is affiliated to Tilburg University, The Netherlands.

² NWO/WOTRO file number W 01.65.315.00

(Boon 2007), and in 2007-2008 literacy programmes in Tetun and Portuguese were implemented nation-wide. In 2006-2007 the government also introduced a nation-wide Cuban adult-literacy programme, initially in Brazilian-Portuguese and then, soon after, in Tetun. The Instituto Nacional de Linguística (INL) in Dili, with Leiden University, recently started the development of a literacy programme in Fataluku. Furthermore, a number of local and international organisations and NGOs, such as Oxfam Hong Kong, World Vision, Timor Aid, Fundação Cristal, Fundação Xanana Gusmão, GFFTL, Fundação Comunidade ba Futuru and Fundasaun Buka Matenek, are involved in combining adult literacy with social and economic development.

Issues in multilingual literacy research

Although literacy has been one of the priorities for developing countries since UNESCO's establishment in 1945, nearly all fundamental research on the acquisition and teaching of literacy has been carried out in developed countries with children (Morais and Kolinsky 1995; Kurvers 2002). Although things are rapidly changing now, theory-building on literacy acquisition has long been dominated by research on acquiring the Latin alphabet in highly literate monolingual western societies in the context of formal education, and in mainly institutional bureaucratic environments (Purcell-Gates 1999). This, however, only partially covers the contexts in which people become readers and writers (Wagner 2004). In many countries literacy is acquired in a second language, in multilingual contexts, in different scripts, outside compulsory education, e.g. in adult literacy centres, by adults who learn to read and write for the first time in their life (Van de Craats, Kurvers and Young-Scholten 2006). Literacy teaching practices in many non-Western countries are moreover often deeply rooted in local, ideological and religious traditions. Simply introducing western models of adult education therefore often proves to be inadequate (Malan 1996; Prinsloo and Breier 1996; Street 2001; Asfaha, Kurvers and Kroon 2008). There is only limited knowledge about the spread and type of (literacy) education and training programmes in the non-formal sector in developing countries. And, although language and literacy policies of developing nations can have a profound influence on public life (health, work, civic society), not much is known yet about how people value these policies and what the impact is on their readiness to get involved in literacy programmes (Hailemariam 2002).

Comparative research into first and second-language literacy acquisition of adults in such contexts and into the cultural factors that influence the characteristics, behaviour and thinking of adult learners is only just beginning (Wagner 1993). The new insights into literacy acquisition and language and literacy policies in multilingual contexts that will be gained in our project will contribute to filling these research gaps and add to theory and knowledge building that is relevant for developing countries e.g. in improving literacy manuals, teaching methods, and teacher training, in linking classroom practice to the world beyond the classroom, in understanding the value and significance of literacy in different languages and in optimising literacy acquisition processes.

Programme background

Taking the parameters of Timor-Leste's national language policy as a starting point, our programme consists of three related projects:

1. A historical study of provision for adult literacy and discourses regarding literacy in Timor-Leste from 1974-2002, including oral history interviews with key actors and library and archival research (Estêvão Cabral).
2. A study of current adult literacy programmes in Tetun, including of a nation-wide literacy survey on the values, relevance and effectiveness of these programmes and sociolinguistic-ethnographic case studies on becoming and being literate in Tetun (Danielle Boon).
3. A study of Fataluku, including a language policy study, a survey of language and literacy uses and attitudes and a sociolinguistic-ethnographic case study investigating the development of Fataluku from an oral endangered language to a language of literacy (Edegar da Conceição Sávio and Aone van Engelenhoven).

The programme has scientific and developmental objectives. Its scientific objective is to provide new knowledge and insights regarding adult literacy teaching, acquisition and use in the historical-cultural language policy context of Timor-Leste (and comparable settings) where multilingualism, colonial history and (recent) independence go together with poverty and high illiteracy rates. Its developmental objective is to contribute to applying this knowledge in literacy programmes in Timor-Leste (and comparable multilingual settings) where adults are learning to read and write in a first, second or third language. The programme's findings will be made available for empirically informed decisions on literacy policies, for improving the quality of literacy curricula, manuals, teaching materials and methods and for contributing to more effective literacy acquisition processes in relation to social developmental issues. We also hope to contribute to the capacity building of literacy teachers, teacher trainers and evaluation specialists. The aims fit with Timor-Leste's language policy and with a number of recent United Nations' initiatives for literacy improvement and poverty reduction (such as the UN's Literacy Decade 2003-2012).

Local stakeholders of the programme are the Timor-Leste government, especially the Ministry of Education and its National Directorate for Recurrent Education, a number of national foundations and NGOs (Cristal, Xanana Gusmão, Buka Matenek, GFFTL, Timor Aid) and international organizations and NGOs (UNICEF, Oxfam Hong Kong) working together on materials development, teacher training and sharing knowledge.

The programme has been inspired by a social development perspective, by the language policy demands of Timor-Leste, and by the particularities of the country's language and literacy landscape. It also takes account of current theoretical and methodological debates in international literacy research. The three projects have a developmental focus and combine complementary theoretical frameworks and their methodologies: *a socio-cultural framework*, focusing on the societal embedding of literacy and literacy acquisition; *a cognitive-linguistic framework*, focusing on how individuals acquire literacy (i.e. how they get access to the written code); *a multilingual language policy framework*, shedding light on the ramifications of adult literacy policy development, and *a critical historical framework*, providing the historical analysis necessary for understanding contemporary developments.

From a *socio-cultural perspective*, literacy can be conceptualized as social practice, embedded in historically situated and continuously changing religious and socio-cultural traditions (Barton 2001). Recent studies describe literacy as deriving its meaning from the context as much as from the act of reading and writing itself (Banda 2003; Street 2001). Research in multilingual societies with diverse literacy traditions has revealed different meanings of literacy and an interplay of literacy in languages with local and (inter)national status (Fasold 1997; Herbert and Robinson 2001; Martin-Jones and Jones 2000; Prinsloo and Breier 1996). Literacy research in e.g. multilingual Eritrea clearly reveals that literacy practices, values and teaching are also shaped by ethnic, religious and linguistic affiliations (Asfaha, Kurvers and Kroon 2008).

Central to a *cognitive-linguistic perspective* on literacy is the view that, in order to get access to the meaning of print, literacy learners must learn the code that is used in their cultural context to represent speech by visual symbols (Ziegler and Goswami 2006). The process of learning to read is complicated by factors such as familiarity with the (first/second) language, inconsistency of sound-to-symbol mapping (Kurvers 2002), different literacy-acquisition characteristics in adults and children (Van de Craats, Kurvers and Young-Scholten 2006), limited appreciation of the mother-tongue as literacy language for reasons of perceived status or economic value (Coulmas 1984) and teaching and learning practices embedded in historical, ideological and religious traditions.

From a *language policy and historical perspective*, literacy development is seen as changing over time along with social, political, and sociolinguistic processes, the introduction of new language and literacy policies, and the positions and activities of consecutive governmental and non-governmental actors (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997; Ricento 2006; Rogers and Uddin 2005). In post-colonial societies where language and literacy policies are developed and implemented in an arena of competing languages with different levels of linguistic development, use, and public appreciation, theories of status, corpus, acquisition and prestige planning can help analyze historical and contemporary language policy developments, discourses about literacy and their societal impact (Hornberger 2006).

Status quo

At the time of writing the programme is half way through its course. Most of the planned data gathering has been completed and first analyses have been conducted. Preliminary findings have been presented at international conferences and a number of programme-related contributions have been published in journals and books. This does not mean, however, that we did not encounter any challenges in our investigations. In Cabral's historical study into literacy processes in Timor-Leste's history (during the struggle for independence from Portugal in 1974, during the period of Indonesian rule until 1999, and until independence in 2002) it turned out that relevant data from the two latter periods were difficult to access. However, a rich picture is being put together of aspects of the crucial (FRETILIN-inspired) literacy campaign in 1974-1975. In Boon's study that was originally focusing on literacy acquisition in both Tetun and Portuguese, we were confronted with the fact that adult literacy classes in Portuguese stopped mid 2009. The focus of the project therefore became Tetun (as a lingua franca and official language and as a first and second language) and the use of other languages (regional languages and dialects, Indonesian, Portuguese) in Tetun adult literacy classes. In Da Conceição Sávio's study on Fataluku language development and literacy, in view of the absence of Fataluku adult literacy classes, we shifted our focus to Fataluku as a language of instruction or an auxiliary language in adult literacy classes focusing on Tetun as the language of literacy.

Inevitably, the official establishment of Timor Leste's language policy does not necessarily mean that everyone feels and acts the same way in relation to it. The Fataluku study for example showed that Portuguese has a more limited role than expected and that, at the same time, the role of Indonesian is (still) relatively significant. Moreover, our study of current adult literacy education has shown that in this context Tetun has a much stronger position than Portuguese, and that regional languages are widely used for explanation and instruction in the daily interactional routines of classroom life.

Language policy in practice

We would like to conclude this contribution with presenting an example of the intricacies that often accompany language policy implementation. The example consist of a text that can be seen on the doors of the official car of (among others) the Director of the Instituto Nacional de Linguística (INL) in Dili. The text reads as follows: "KARETA ESTADO".

These two words, meaning "state car", refer to the fact that the car is property of the State, under the management of the Government of Timor-Leste. If we, however, take a closer look at this text it turns out that what, at first sight, seemed to be a simple and easy to understand statement, also has some layers of meaning that shed an interesting light on the process of language 'policing' (Blommaert 2009). Looking at the first letter of the first word ('k' in *kareta*; car) one would think that the word is written in Tetun. There is, however, some counter evidence to this suggestion since in Tetun the spelling should have been *karreta* with double 'r' (as a matter of fact both *kareta* and *karreta* are lusisms, of Portuguese origin; "*kareta*" means grimace, unsweet face; while "*karreta*" means 'car' of simple and small dimensions). So, there is a necessity to keep the correct spelling of double 'r' to the meaning of 'car' (*karreta*) and leave for '*kareta*' the meaning of expression of face of unsweetness and other feelings when its use is sought for.

If we follow the decree-law 1/2004 of April 14, 2004 concerning Tetun orthography, not only "*kareta*" but also "*estado*" (state; br. from Portuguese) is spelled incorrectly since, in Tetun, this word should have been spelled as "*estadu*".

Again, if we have a closer look at the text as a whole, it turns out that the order of words in "*kareta estado*" may be following the rules of *bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian – e.g. '*mobil pemerintah*'). In Tetun, however, this construction is clumsy. In order to express the relationship between *karreta* and *estadu*, Tetun would need to use the possessive *nia*. In correct Tetun, the text on the state-owned cars of all Directors, including the Director of the Instituto Nacional de Linguística who is in charge of 'language policing' in Timor-Leste, should have been *estadu nia karreta*. However, the Ministry of Finance, which owns the cars, apparently failed to have proper advice on the wording and orthographic realization of this statement.

“*Kareta estado*” connotes further the irony normally expressed by “*kafé-estadu*” (two nouns joined by the hyphen in the correct spelling) which is applied to situations of ‘free of charge coffee serving’ at Timorese social gatherings (e.g. funeral related gatherings) where just anybody could be a guest. In this logic, because ‘free of charge’, the car could be claimed by any citizen at any time.

In the following contributions we hope to provide a deeper insight into the challenging endeavor of making Timor-Leste a nation of readers by implementing adult literacy programs in a context that is among other things characterized by an ongoing process of language policy discussion and development.

Bibliography

- Asfaha, Yonas M, Jeanne Kurvers and Sjaak Kroon 2008, ‘Literacy and script attitudes in multilingual Eritrea’, *Journal of Sociolinguistic*, 12(2): 223-240.
- Banda, Felix 2003, A Survey of literacy practices in black and coloured communities in South Africa: Towards a pedagogy of multiliteracies. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 16(2): 106-129.
- Barton, David 2001, ‘Literacy in everyday contexts’ in Ludo Verhoeven and Catherine E Snow (eds.), *Literacy and motivation: Reading engagement in individuals and groups*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah NJ and London, pp. 33-37.
- Blommaert, Jan 2009, Media, multilingualism and language policing: An introduction, *Language Policy*, 8: 203-207.
- Boon, Danielle 2007, ‘Literacy in Timor-Leste’ in N. Faux (ed), *Low-educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition. Research, Policy and Practice*, The Literacy Institute, Richmond, pp. 165-180.
- Byrne, Brian 1998, *The foundation of literacy: The child’s acquisition of the alphabetical principle*, Psychology Press, Hove East Sussex.
- Coulmas, Florian 1984, *Linguistic minorities and literacy*, Mouton, Berlin.
- Curtain, Richard 2006, Youth survey results, Presentation at Ministry of Education Timor-Leste, 21.2.2006.
- Fasold, Ralph W 1997, ‘Motivations and attitudes influencing vernacular literacy: Four African assessments’ in Andrée Tabouret-Keller, Robert Brock Le Page, Penelope Gardner-Chloros and Gabrielle Varro (eds), *Vernacular literacy: A re-evaluation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 246-270.
- Hailemariam, Chefena 2002, *Language and education in Eritrea. A case study of language diversity, policy and practice*, Aksant Academic Publishers, Amsterdam.
- Herbert, Pat and Clinton Robinson 2001, Another language, another literacy? Practices in Northern Ghana. In Brian V Street (ed), *Literacy and development: ethnographic perspectives*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 121-136.
- Hornberger, Nancy, 2006, ‘Frameworks and models in language policy and planning’ in Thomas Ricento (ed), *An introduction to language policy. Theory and method*, Malden MA, Blackwell Publishing, pp. 24-41.
- Hull, Geoffrey 2004, *The languages of East Timor: Some basic facts*, Instituto Nacional de Linguística, Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa’e, Dili.
- Kaplan, Robert and Richard Baldauf 1997, *Language planning from practice to theory*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon.
- Kurvers, Jeanne 2002, *Met ongeletterde ogen. Kennis van taal en schrift van analfabeten*, Aksant Academic Publishers, Amsterdam.
- Malan, Liezl 1996, ‘Literacy learning and local literacy practice in Bellville South’ in Mastin Prinsloo and Mignon Breier (eds), *The social uses of literacy: theory and practice in contemporary South Africa*, Sached Books and John Benjamins, Bertsam and Amsterdam, pp. 141-155.
- Martin-Jones, Marilyn and Kathryn Jones (eds) 2000, *Multilingual literacies: Reading and writing different worlds*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Morais, José and Régine Kolinsky 1995, ‘The consequences of phonemic awareness’ in Beatrice de Gelder and José Morais (eds), *Speech and Reading. A comparative approach*, Taylor and Francis, Erlbaum UK, pp. 317-338.
- Purcell-Gates, Victoria 1999, ‘Family Literacy’ in Micael Kamil, Peter Mosenthal, David Pearson and Rebecca Barr (eds), *Handbook of Reading Research*, Vol III, Lawrence Erlbaum Ass, Mahwah/London, pp. 853-870.
- Prinsloo, Mastin and Mignon Breier (eds) 1996, *The social uses of literacy: theory and practice in contemporary South Africa*. Bertsam and Amsterdam, Sached Books and John Benjamins.
- Ricento, T. (ed) 2006, *An introduction to language policy: theory and method*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- Rogers Alan and Md Aftab Uddin 2005, ‘Adults learning literacy; Adult learning theory and the provision of literacy classes in the context of developing societies’ in Brian Street (ed), *Literacies across educational contexts; mediating learning and teaching, languages and literacies in policy and practice*, Caslon Publishing, Philadelphia, pp. 235-260.

- Street, Brian 2001, *Literacy and development: Ethnographic perspectives*, Routledge, London.
- UNDP 2006, *The Timor-Leste Human Development Report 2006 "The Path out of Poverty"*, published January 2006, www.undp.Timor-Leste.org, viewed 1 May 2012..
- Van de Craats, Ineke, Jeanne Kurvers and Martha Young-Scholten 2006, 'Research on low-educated second language and literacy acquisition' in Ineke van de Craats and Jeanne Kurvers (eds), *Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition: Proceedings of the Inaugural Symposium. Tilburg 2005*, Netherlands Graduate School of Linguistics, Utrecht, pp.7-23.
- Wagner, Daniel 1993, *Myths and misconceptions in adult literacy: a research and development perspective*. National Center on Adult Literacy, Philadelphia.
- 2004, 'Literacy in time and space: Issues, concepts and definitions' in Terezinha Nunes and Peter Bryant (eds), *Handbook of Children's Literacy*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, pp. 499-510.
- Ziegler, Johannes and Usha Goswami 2000, 'Becoming literate in different languages: Similar problems, different solutions', *Developmental Science*, 9: 429-436.