

## Learning Tetun as a *malae*

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### The challenge

Since East Timor separated from Indonesia in 1999, numerous foreigners (known in Tetun as *malae*) have come to this fledgling nation to live and work. One of their immediate challenges is language. The educated Timorese with whom most foreigners work did their schooling and started their working lives in either Portuguese (prior to 1975) or Indonesian (after that time). Since 1999, the language of work and public life has increasingly shifted to Tetun, and in some sectors Portuguese. Unfortunately, a large proportion of foreigners coming to work in East Timor speak none of these three languages of public life.

Yet many come with a strong desire to communicate with Timorese, not only in their private lives but also in their work, to encourage, to train, to coordinate, to promote various ideas, and to understand their new friends and colleagues. Some have colleagues with sufficient English to communicate well. Some attend a few weeks of Tetun courses – or receive no training at all – and are then let loose in a Tetun-speaking environment to struggle on their own.

In this article we will look briefly at what levels of language proficiency learners should aim at, discuss the common experience of hitting a ‘plateau’ in language learning, and give recommendations on how the Tetun skills of foreigners can be improved.

The observations below are based on over four years of teaching intensive Tetun courses and testing Tetun language proficiency at Dili Institute of Technology, at all levels from beginner to advanced. The courses are conducted by three full-time teachers, with oversight by the author. There are of course also other providers of Tetun tuition, including Timor Aid and various private tutors within East Timor, as well as course providers in Australia, Portugal and Indonesia. We have not checked how closely their observations match our own.

### Language proficiency levels

How much Tetun does one need to be able to work effectively in that language? The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has developed a scale of spoken competence which can be applied to any language, and which provides useful guidelines (1986). It has four major levels, labelled ‘novice’, ‘intermediate’, ‘advanced’ and ‘superior’. Each level takes much longer to reach than the level below.

The novice (beginner) level starts at zero. In our experience of teaching intensive courses for twenty hours per week, most beginner students pass the novice stage after about three weeks of serious effort.

The intermediate level is described by ACTFL as ‘survival’. At the beginning of this level, speakers can hold simple conversations on predictable familiar topics related to daily activities. For instance, they can do simple shopping, or tell someone where they will go tomorrow. They can be understood by sympathetic listeners accustomed to dealing with foreigners. They speak in discrete sentences, or link their sentences with a small range of connectors such as ‘and’ or ‘then’.

The next major level up is advanced, which ACTFL characterises as ‘limited working proficiency’. We do not have enough experience to know how long it takes to reach this level of Tetun with intensive learning, but do know that it is well over three months. I did not reach this in over three months of full-time language learning for my PhD in Tetun Terik, even though I lived within the community. Nor did Peace Corps volunteers reach it during three months of living with local families and attending daily Tetun courses.

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At the beginning of advanced level, speakers can tell stories, compare, explain and discuss. If an unexpected complication arises, such as arriving late for an important meeting, they have enough language to deal with it. They can speak on topics of personal and general interest, in most informal settings and some formal ones, and can be understood without difficulty, even by people who are not accustomed to foreigners. In terms of grammar, they handle basic constructions accurately most of the time, and manage some more complex constructions as well. They are comfortable enough in the language to be able to link their sentences into paragraphs.

The highest level in the ACTFL scale is 'superior'. At this level, a person can discuss a wide range of issues extensively, including abstract topics and hypothetical situations, and can link their ideas throughout an extended speech. They can carry themselves in most formal and informal settings. Although at first they still make some errors, these virtually never interfere with communication or distract the native speaker from the message. This is the level to which foreigners who work in Tetun need to aspire. Indeed, it is the level we expect of non-native English speakers who work in high-level jobs in English-speaking environments.

### **Language learning plateau**

Based on our experience to date, very few foreigners reach an advanced level of Tetun, let alone a superior level. Instead, it is common to see a rapid and encouraging increase in language proficiency in the early stages of language learning, followed by a halt in progress.<sup>2</sup> For Tetun, this 'plateau' occurs at about Intermediate Mid level (that is, half-way through the Intermediate stage). At this stage, even if the person works hard at learning, there is little discernible progress. If they continue to make a conscious effort, then after a while progress will resume. If not, they may end up stuck permanently in this level.

While a learner is on this plateau, they may continue to advance in the passive skills of reading and listening, but not in the productive skills of speaking or writing, and can actually lose basic structures and vocabulary.

Below we briefly look at four areas of language which can stagnate, namely vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and naturalness.

### **Vocabulary plateau**

In terms of vocabulary, a striking feature of many speakers stuck on the Tetun learning plateau is that they overuse Portuguese loans. For instance, they use *diferente* 'different', but not the much more common Tetun term *oin seluk* (lit. 'other type/face').

During this stage, speakers fail to acquire advanced vocabulary. In particular they usually fail to acquire a good range of Tetun verbs. For instance, they know *lori* 'bring, carry', but cannot distinguish various modes of carrying, such as *tutur* 'carry on head', *haklilin* 'carry under the arm by a strap over one shoulder', *hasaan* 'carry on the shoulder', and *leba* 'carry suspended from a pole over the shoulder'.

Another area of difficulty is collocations, that is, knowing which words typically go together. This takes years to learn in any language. For example, do you 'run' a meeting (as in English), or make one 'walk' (as in Tetun *halao enkontru*)?

How much vocabulary does one need to be functional in a language? To my knowledge, no research has been done on Tetun. However, in European languages, a vocabulary of 3000 words is sufficient to read a high percentage of words in an average text, 5000 words allow one to read a short novel for pleasure, while 10000 are required to handle first-year university materials (Richards n.d.).

As a guide, the mini-dictionary *Word-finder* (Williams-van Klinken 2008) includes 4500 Tetun words, nearly all of which are well-known. It excludes thousands of Portuguese loans which are commonly used in the media or for specialist areas but which are not well-known in the wider community.

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the generalisations on language learning plateaus in this article are based on Richards (n.d.). His observations closely reflect my own experience in teaching and learning Tetun.

## Grammar plateau

Tetun grammar is in many ways simple, but for learners this can be deceptive in that the grammar is very different to those of European languages. Speakers still on the plateau usually avoid Tetun structures that have no parallels in their own language. For instance, English and Portuguese do not have a focus marker equivalent to *mak*, so speakers of these languages tend to use it far too little. (An exception is those who misinterpret *mak* as being a verb 'to be', who use it far too much!) Similarly, they tend not to use *tiha* or *ona* to show time relationships. Another common persistent mistake is confusing *ita* 'we (including you)' and *ami* 'we (but not you)'. Speakers at this level usually don't use sequences of two verbs within a single clause, such as *soe sae* 'throw up' (lit. 'throw ascend') or *husik hela* 'leave behind' (lit. 'leave stay').

## Pronunciation plateau

A third area of potential stagnation is pronunciation. Errors that the learner had before reaching the plateau stubbornly persist. Two examples are Australians not pronouncing – or even hearing – final 'r' (so saying /haan bata/ for *haan batar* 'eat corn'), or some Brazilians not handling final 'k' (and so saying /labariki baraki/ for *labarik barak* 'many children').

## Naturalness plateau

A final aspect of language which can fail to develop during the language learning plateau is naturalness.

Speakers at this level know many words, but lack the larger 'chunks' that are needed to sound normal. Examples include the closing formula *Mak nee deit, obrigadu* 'That's all, thank you.', and longer expressions such as *Bele halo nusaa mos ...* 'No matter what...' and *koalia oin ida, hahalok oin seluk* 'say one thing and do another'.

They may also use constructions which are grammatically correct, but not the normal way of saying things. At best, this makes them hard to understand. One example concerns time. In English, it is perfectly normal to say 'Before you eat, wash your hands', which speakers translate as *Molok atu haan, fasi ita nia liman*. In Tetun, it is much more natural to mention the hand-washing first, since that is what happens first. So one would say, *Fasi liman lai mak haan*. (lit. 'wash hands first only.then eat').

Worse than being hard to understand, is when speakers use constructions that are uncommon precisely because they carry specific overtones. A common example is that many English speakers start too many questions with a question word, following the English pattern. So, instead of asking the neutral question *Nee saida?* 'What is this?' (lit. 'this what'), they say *Saida mak nee?* 'What on earth is this?!', using a reversed word order which normally expresses irritation.

## Why the plateau?

Why do language learners hit a plateau? There are a number of reasons. One is simply that this is a natural stage of learning any language. Learners need to switch from intensive learning to consolidating what they have learned, before being able to proceed further.

Other reasons relate to motivation, which is one of the major factors determining success in language learning. Speakers typically reach the plateau at about Intermediate Mid level, which is sufficient for managing everyday life. For many there is then insufficient drive to continue actively learning. A further demotivating factor is that Timorese tolerate a lot of 'foreigner-ese' and 'translation-ese', and very rarely correct foreigners' mistakes. Furthermore, many foreigners are in Timor for relatively short periods of time. It is hard to be motivated to put in all the effort required to further improve when one has only six months left in East Timor, and Tetun is not spoken anywhere else.

Another reason for halting progress is the limited availability of higher level lessons and teaching materials. Due to limited demand, Dili Institute of Technology offers intensive Intermediate High and

Advanced courses only about twice a year. (I am not aware of other organisations offering this level of tuition at all, although some private tutors may.) There is also very little good written Tetun for learners to use as models for their own writing. Since most foreigners come from cultures which emphasise learning through reading, this is a significant disadvantage.

Finally, there are emotional factors. It is common at this stage to feel frustration and anxiety at the lack of progress. This frustration can continue even once a learner starts moving forward again, since progress is much harder to see at higher levels than it was at first.

### **Beyond the plateau**

This Intermediate Mid level of Tetun at which the plateau typically occurs is clearly not enough for in-depth work in Tetun. This has been shown repeatedly during our Intermediate Mid and Intermediate High level Tetun courses. In these, students are often asked to give five-minute ‘lessons’ to their Tetun teachers, on a topic of their own choice. Although students sound fluent, and the teachers are accustomed to foreigner-ese, it is quite common for their teachers to become totally confused as to what the students are trying to tell them.

So, how can Tetun learners proceed past this plateau to a higher level of proficiency?

First of all, they need to resist the temptation to simply give up, keeping in mind that a temporary halt in progress is a normal phase of language learning. It will only become a permanent state if the learner allows it to become one.

Secondly, they should check their proficiency level, taking stock of what they can and can’t do in Tetun. One option is a self-check against a standard list of ‘proficiencies’, for instance the checklist published by The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (1986). An alternative is to be more formally tested by a trained Tetun teacher.

Thirdly, learners should set goals as to what they want to be able to do with Tetun, and when they wish to achieve this. Goals ought to be realistic and measurable, and specify what the learner wants to be able to communicate, rather than how many chapters of a book they want to study, or how many lessons they want to attend. Examples include being able to explain their organisation’s mission in a public forum, being able to apologise appropriately, and being able to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of increasing import tax. Setting realistic goals means recognising that one cannot skip levels. For instance, a learner must be able to talk in separate sentences before being able to learn to connect sentences, and needs to be able to give simple instructions (such as directions to a taxi driver) before learning to give more complex ones (such as instructions on how to use Excel formulae).

Finally, learners should determine a plan of action, and implement it. Language learners are often categorised as either ‘sponges’ or ‘analysts’. Sponges enjoy being with people and soak up language, while analysts enjoy describing patterns but are not necessarily good at putting the theory into practice. Many experts suggest that regardless of one’s natural preference, both approaches are necessary, especially for language learning at higher levels (Oxford 1990:4). This means that learners will need both spontaneous interaction in Tetun, and targeted learning.

One area of targeted learning is grammar. At Dili Institute of Technology we use the *Peace Corps East Timor Tetun language course* (Williams-van Klinken 2011a). Each chapter has short non-technical descriptions, with examples, of various points of grammar. Other more technical resources include grammar descriptions by Hull and Eccles (2004) and Williams-van Klinken *et al.* (2002).

A second area for learners to concentrate on is vocabulary. They can benefit from memorisation aids for learning new words, such as flashcards, regular review, and pictures with Tetun labels. In addition to learning individual words, it is necessary to learn new collocations (combinations of words), for instance learning that *tebe bola* (lit. ‘kick ball’) means ‘football’, while *tebe liman tebe ain* (lit. ‘kick arm kick leg’) describes an epileptic fit. Many learners find it helpful to keep a list of new expressions, and consciously follow up any that they do not readily understand. Resources which can help English speakers study Tetun vocabulary include Hull’s Tetun-English and English-Tetun dictionaries (2002,

2006), Dili Institute of Technology's pocket-sized *Word-finder* and interactive dictionary (Williams-van Klinken 2008, 2011b) and its computer flashcards for basic vocabulary ([www.tetundit.tl](http://www.tetundit.tl)).

A third area for targeted learning is naturalness. One method which learners can use to develop this is to tell a native speaker what they want to say, and then record them telling it back in their own words. The learner should take careful note of how the native speaker expresses things, ask about anything that is new, and then try using these expressions and constructions.

For targeted learning, most people find it helpful to have regular tuition. Classes not only provide opportunities for formal teaching on a wide range of topics, but can also open learners' ears to new expressions and constructions which they may in fact hear frequently, but of which they are not yet consciously aware.

For learning Tetun through exposure (being a 'sponge'), the key ingredient is indeed to learn to become conscious of how people use Tetun. Without this, learners can be surrounded by Tetun without benefiting from it. Another key step is for learners to move outside their comfort zone. Speakers at Intermediate Mid normally communicate well (though inaccurately) on everyday topics. To gain broader vocabulary, they need to put themselves in situations where they talk about new topics, whether these be sewing or history, pop music or bride price. Another challenge is to stay for a while with a local family, whether in the city or in a rural area. Other ways to focus one's attention are to listen to the news and then summarise it, or to write a daily diary in Tetun. Many more language learning ideas can be found in books or websites on the topic.

## Conclusion

It was noted above that most foreigners in Timor have insufficient language proficiency to fully function in a Tetun work environment. Amongst those who require (or desire) to communicate well in Tetun, this is an issue which needs to be addressed both at an organisational level and at an individual level.

For organisations, it would be helpful to test the Tetun language proficiency of foreign staff, to determine whether they have sufficient command of the language, and if not, what areas need to be addressed. Based on our experience, most organisations need to give their foreign staff far more opportunity to learn the language before they can be expected to function properly in it.

Individuals, too, will benefit from testing their proficiency, and setting aside the time and resources to continue learning Tetun, even if they presently feel stuck on a language learning plateau. With intelligent perseverance and adequate help, it is indeed possible for the vast majority of learners to reach higher levels of language proficiency, which not only aids their work, but also enriches their lives and relationships in East Timor.

## Note

For information on Dili Institute of Technology's Tetun courses, and for free downloads of its books and other resources, see <http://www.tetundit.tl>

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