# Adult literacy education in Timor-Leste in recent years: from research to practice

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## Introduction

This article presents findings of a study on adult literacy education in Timor-Leste, for which data were collected in 2009-2011. The study is part of a larger research project on contemporary and historical dimensions of adult literacy in Timor-Leste that runs from 2009-2014[2] (see De Araújo e Corte-Real & Kroon 2012; Cabral & Martin-Jones 2012; Da Conceição Savio et al. 2012). The study presented here consists of two parts: a broad study in eight districts, investigating teacher and learner backgrounds and learners' emergent literacy ability; and a case study in seven districts, investigating teaching and learning processes in literacy classes and ideas of learners, teachers and coordinators about literacy education and use. The broad study was already reported on in the TLSA 2011 conference proceedings (Boon & Kurvers 2012a). Therefore, after a summary of the broad study, here I will mainly focus on the case study. For a more detailed account of my research, in the following I will refer to a number of already available publications and to Boon 2014a and b (both forthcoming).

## Broad study: Participants and reading and writing ability

In the broad study, data were collected in 73 adult literacy groups in three programmes aiming at literacy in Tetun: *Los Hau Bele* (Yes I Can), the three-month audio-visual literacy programme of Cuban origin[3], adapted to Timor-Leste's reality, that was part of Timor-Leste's national literacy campaign in 2007-2012; *Alfanamor*, Timor-Leste's national literacy programme, since 2007-2008 consisting of the two six-month programmes *Hakat ba Oin* (Step Forward) for beginners and *Iha Dalan* (On the Way) for advanced learners[4]; the *YEP Literacy & Numeracy* courses in 2009-2011, that were part of the *Youth Employment Promotion* (YEP) programme and used summarized versions of the *Hakat ba Oin* and *Iha Dalan* manuals[5]. For a detailed description of all programmes see Boon (2011a).

100 teachers and 789 learners[6] participated in the study. The teachers filled out a questionnaire. Their ages varied from 19 to 66 years; their number of years of education varied from four to 13 years; 75% had one year or less experience in teaching adult literacy; 80% had a regional language (e.g. Mambae, Baikenu) as their mother tongue; 54% was female. Many teachers worked in rather poor circumstances: outside at a veranda (61%), without electricity (66%), without chairs (40%) and without tables for the participants (82%). The 789 learners were interviewed briefly and were asked to participate in two reading and two writing tasks in Tetun. They considerably varied in age, from young teenagers to people in their mid-seventies. 68% were women. 88% had a regional language as their mother tongue and 82% reported

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[3] *Los Hau Bele* is based on the Cuban adult literacy programme *Yo, Sí Puedo* (Yes I can), orginally conceived in the late nineties (Boughton 2010: 62), and implemented in 28 countries (http://www.iplac.rimed.cu/, 17-1-2014).

[4] In 2004-2008, the author of this article was involved in the joint development of the *Hakat ba Oin* and *Iha Dalan* curriculum and manuals, as adult literacy adviser at Timor-Leste's Ministry of Education, paid by UNDP.

[5] These versions, *YEP Livru 1* and *2*, were developed with involvement of the author of this article.

[6] Informed consent was acquired in advance at all levels (including ministerial, directorate and coordination level), and during each class visit it was secured at an individual level in face to face interaction with the adult learners, with translations in their regional language.

they could speak Tetun. 31% had attended formal education in the past and 15% had participated in another literacy course before this one.

Each learner was given a grapheme recognition task, a word reading task, a form filling task and a word writing task. First we looked at the reading and writing ability of all participants who had had three to four months of literacy education[7] (n=369). This group consisted of learners with and without prior education. For all tasks, the participants who never went to school before (n=229) had significantly lower scores than the ones with school experience. We then focussed on those participants without any school experience, the main target group of adult literacy education. They could recognize on average 15 out of 30 graphemes, read on average 14 out of 80 words in three minutes, could fill out on average four items out of ten in the basic form and could write on average four out of ten words on dictation. Their scores on all four tasks showed huge variation, as shown in table 1:

**Table 1:** Proportion of participants who scored between 0 and 100% correct on each of the tasks

| Score | Grapheme recognition 30 graphemes (%, n=237) | Word reading 80 words (%, n=229) | Form filling 10 items (%, n=239) | Word writing 10 words (%, n=239) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0% correct | 9 | 52 | 11 | 30 |
| 1-20% correct | 16 | 23 | 35 | 17 |
| 21-80% correct | 52 | 16 | 44 | 36 |
| 81-100% correct | 23 | 9 | 10 | 17 |

Table 1 shows that many learners scored 0 or very low (1-20% correct) while others scored very high (80-100% correct). In this large individual variety in task scores, some patterns could be distinguished. For all four tasks, the younger participants on average had significantly higher scores than the older ones. Tetun proficiency seemed less crucial: only in the grapheme recognition task Tetun speakers did significantly better than non-Tetun speakers.

Three to four months of literacy education had not been enough for most participants to build initial reading ability. Letter knowledge and particularly being able to apply grapheme-phoneme correspondence are crucial but not sufficient for learning to read an alphabetic script (Adams 1990; Byrne 1998). Many learners had acquired the graphemes, but they had trouble blending them to words. Of those who could read words, many lacked the speed or fluency required for comprehension. And although many learners could write their name and signature, they had not learned to write (new) words independently. For a more detailed account of this part of the study, see Boon & Kurvers (2012a) and Boon (2011b; 2014b, forthcoming).

**Case study: The teaching and learning of literacy**

In 2010-2011, I observed and audio-recorded 20 adult literacy classes in twelve groups in seven districts: Viqueque, Aileu, Covalima, Dili, Ermera, Manufahi and Manatuto. Districts and locations were selected in coordination with national and district coordinators. Of the 20 classes, eight were *Los Hau Bele*, four *Hakat ba Oin* and eight *Iha Dalan* classes. During the observations, I used a checklist, took field notes and used still photography to capture texts on the blackboard and class layouts. After the classes, I interviewed nine groups of learners, ten teachers and six district/subdistrict coordinators of literacy education. During the

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[7] In three to four months of literacy education, mostly six to nine hours per week, one could finish the *Los Hau Bele* programme (+/- 3 months), or most of the *YEP* literacy programme (+/- 4 months), or half to two thirds of the *Hakat ba Oin* programme (+/- 6 months).

interviews, I used interview guidelines related to specific activities and roles of coordinators, teachers and learners.

I will focus here on two topics from the case study that contribute to a deeper understanding of the above findings: language use in the literacy classrooms and the teaching of reading and writing.

*Multilingual classroom talk*

In the adult literacy classes in the case study, I observed the use of four different languages: Tetun, the regional language, Portuguese and Indonesian (Boon & Kurvers 2012a). Drawing on observations of two classes in Viqueque and Covalima, Boon (2013) gives a detailed account on what languages were used when and by whom. Tetun, the target language for literacy, turned out to be the main language of classroom interaction. The regional languages, Makasae in Viqueque and Bunak in Covalima, were used for extra explanations, repetitions of lesson content, translations and 'small talk' not directly related to the lesson content. Tetun and loanwords from Portuguese, and occasionally from Indonesian, were used by the teachers for 'meta-talk', i.e., the talking about literacy and numeracy. In the Viqueque class, reference to numbers was made mostly in Indonesian, but also in Tetun and Portuguese, and, occasionally in Makasae; in the Covalima class this mainly happened in Portuguese, occasionally in Indonesian and not in Tetun (although Tetun was the main language of instruction).

The multilingual interactional practices observed in these two classes resonated with the practices I observed in other adult literacy classes in other districts. On some occasions, the contrast between different languages was clearly used as a meaning-making resource. Some switches distinguished different kinds of talk: from small talk in the regional language to lesson content in Tetun; from explanation in Tetun to extra explanation in the regional language. But there were also occasions when people simply drew on the totality of multilingual communicative resources available to them.

The use of regional languages alongside other languages in adult literacy education is not surprising, given that regional languages are widely used in local communication outside the classroom (Hajek 2000; Taylor-Leech 2009). Following Arthur (2001), Tetun could be described as the 'on-stage' language in literacy classes, and the regional languages as 'backstage' languages, since the latter were accepted for small talk and extra explanations/repetitions, but not as languages to be used in 'staged' question-and-answer performances.

The audio recordings of classroom talk revealed the multiple ways in which teachers and learners drew on the linguistic resources available to them to get new lesson content across and make meaning of reading and writing tasks. They found 'local pragmatic solutions' (Lin 2001) to the challenges involved in taking on a new language of teaching.

*Teaching adult literacy*

My class observations revealed that all twelve groups were very heterogeneous, with young and older learners with and without prior education. The (mostly whole-class) teaching generally followed the specific literacy programme in use. A significant part of all lessons was spent on writing exercises on the blackboard. In all classes, there was a strong focus on the letter-syllable-word level, and on technical literacy (spelling and decoding skills). To refer to letters, letter names (not their sounds) were used, often Portuguese-Tetun letter names like /ʒi'gɛ/ for 'g', /'ʒɔtɐ / for 'j' and /ɛmi/ for 'm'. Observations revealed a stronger focus on writing (often: copying from the blackboard) than on decoding, reading and understanding written text. Few reading exercises were done, mostly at the syllable-word level, only occasionally regarding short phrases. Not much attention was paid to developing speed and fluency in reading, to achieve comprehension of longer phrases or short texts.

Eight lessons were partly dedicated to numeracy, practicing calculations. Eight other lessons included basic functional literacy, mainly writing names, signatures and other personal data. Often this regarded strings of letters that could be learned by heart, without an understanding of grapheme-phoneme

correspondence; not every learner could mention each letter and read the syllables in words he/she produced.

Apart from these general findings in all programmes, there were findings specifically related to certain programme features. Specific for all eight *Los Hau Bele* classes, for instance, was that a significant part of lesson time was spent on connections (and rote association) of numbers and letters. The idea behind this method of connecting a number to each new letter to be learnt, is that numbers are already familiar to many adult literacy learners (Boughton 2010:64), and that combining something familiar (a number) to something new (a letter) makes learning the letters easier. In the classes observed, however, connecting numbers to letters did not seem to help people acquiring the alphabetic principle (see also Boon & Kurvers 2012b[8]), but to put them to an extra task, of which the usefulness in authentic reading and writing was not clear. This might have to do with, for reading, the arbitrary relationship between the chosen numbers and letters, while the alphabetic principle applies for reading systematic relationship between letters and sounds. I observed that for new writers the writing of letters with a line below and the (according to *Los Hau Bele*) corresponding number underneath seemed too difficult; it resulted in drawings in which they somehow copied what was on the blackboard without understanding what or why, which led the attention away from practicing the letter-sound correspondence that is crucial in the emergent reading process.

A specific element in four *Iha Dalan* classes and one *Hakat ba Oin* class was the establishing of links between lesson content and the outside world by writing long lists of words and sometimes phrases related to participants' daily work: names of agricultural products and natural resources, tools they used in the field. On the one hand, this activity clearly made sense to the participants, since they were obviously "reading and writing their own world", hence their active, enthusiastic participation. On the other hand, also here the focus often did not go beyond word level, and it seemed that learners often repeated words they already could read and write. When the words were not used as stepping stones to improve decoding skills, this activity did not seem to contribute much to the better applying of the alphabetic principle, nor to moving up to fluent reading and writing of longer phrases and text comprehension.

The interviews with learners, teachers and coordinators provided information about their ideas on literacy education, literacy use in daily life and further learning needs after basic literacy (see also Boon, 2014a, forthcoming). Learners explained that in the past they missed out on school because of poverty and conflict, and that now they welcomed any opportunity to acquire literacy. In most places visited, learners said there were not many occasions in which they could practice their newly built reading and writing skills in daily life. Some mentioned occasions like sms-texting, reading letters and voting during elections. One occasion frequently mentioned, was elderly people having to write their name and signature to receive their monthly retirement pay. For many elderly people, to learn this was the ultimate goal of participating in a literacy class. But many other learners, young and older, were eager to learn more in all literacy, post-literacy and continued education options available. Most interviewees (learners, teachers and coordinators) saw the three-month *Los Hau Bele* programme as a first step on a longer road of becoming literate, that might take one or a couple of years and included more literacy and post-literacy education, like the *Hakat ba Oin* and *Iha Dalan* programmes, followed by programmes equivalent to basic education. Despite the fact that districts had been declared "free from illiteracy" after closure of the *Los Hau Bele* programme, learners, teachers and coordinators were well aware that more literacy and post-literacy education was needed for learners to become skilled readers and writers. They shared a great concern that by lack or delay of more education options, participants quickly might, in their words, "fall back into illiteracy".

**Conclusions, recommendations and implementation**

The above findings of the broad and the case study (see also Boon 2014b, forthcoming), illustrated the heterogeneity of literacy groups in recent adult literacy education in Timor-Leste, and the large individual variety in literacy ability developed. Contrary to what is often heard, not all adult learners enter literacy

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[8] This article describes four teachers teaching different *Los Hau Bele* lessons, resp. lesson 17, 34, 42 and 48 according to the programme's teacher manual.

programmes as "illiterates", and the majority does not "become literate" in a few months in a single programme. The broad study revealed a huge individual variety in reading and writing scores after three to four months of literacy education. Although some participants had high scores, many others had not yet learned to apply the alphabetic principle and could not read and write words independently. Three to four months of literacy education clearly was not enough for the majority to acquire basic literacy skills. These findings are in line with findings from international studies on adult literacy (Kurvers et al. 2010; Condelli et al. 2003).

Looking at what happens in adult literacy classes can help to better understand the above findings. The broad study showed that participants' proficiency in Tetun played a less crucial role than expected. This might have to do with the use of multiple languages in literacy classes, as revealed by class observations in the case study. Classroom communication generally turned out to be multilingual, with teachers and learners using their full repertoire of linguistic resources to explain and understand new lesson content. Learners in that way could probably compensate for not being able to understand Tetun. Teachers and learners clearly had found pragmatic solutions to deal with the challenges of the highly multilingual setting they daily operate in.

The teaching in most classes observed in the case study showed a dominant focus on the letter-syllable-word level and on technical literacy skills. The broadly used letter names seemed to complicate synthesis: using the letter names /ɛfi/, /ɛli/ and /ɛni/ to form or decode the word *fulan* (moon/month) is more difficult than using the sounds of those letters. In most lessons more attention was paid to writing syllables and words than to reading or reading comprehension of larger units. And some activities did not seem to contribute to acquiring the alphabetic principle.

Most education observed did not take into account the diverse literacy levels in the highly heterogeneous groups, nor did some of the materials used. The rather programme-centred education seemed to result in a one-size-fits-all approach in which lessons were probably too easy for some learners, too difficult for others, and just right for only a few. This might lead to motivation loss and drop out of learners whose learning needs are not met.

Class observations also revealed that not many links were made between classroom literacy and literacy practices in daily life (although some lessons spent time on basic functional literacy).

In interviews in the case study, participants in low-literate environments said they did not have many opportunities to practice reading and writing out of class. Learners, teachers and coordinators also signalled a lack of, or delay in, provision of further literacy, post-literacy and other education options after the first few months (often due to financial constraints), which caused broadly shared worries about low retention and people "falling back to illiteracy".

The study's findings lead to a number of recommendations. Firstly, teacher trainings could stress crucial aspects of literacy teaching, so that teachers become better equipped to guide learners from emergent literacy skills to fluent reading and writing. Teachers need to be provided with more knowledge and practice on teaching activities at the letter-syllable-word level that contribute to the acquisition of the alphabetic principle, to increasing speed and reaching automatic application of grapheme-phoneme correspondence. They need training on providing their learners with extensive practice beyond the word level to expand initial literacy ability, and on focusing not only on technical reading and writing but also on meaning and comprehension.

Secondly, if literacy groups in the future will be as heterogeneous as in recent years, which is highly likely, then there might be a need to adapt the education to that heterogeneity. Teachers should be provided training on how to better meet the large diversity of literacy levels within the groups they teach. Programmes and materials should provide more possibilities to establish differentiation. Heterogeneous groups need teachers who have developed capacity in multi-level group teaching, and programmes and materials that take into account diverse learning needs.

Thirdly, more relevant lesson content might be realized by focusing less on "classroom literacy" and more on daily life literacy practices, e.g. by using more authentic materials, practicing daily literacy tasks and making links to numeracy and financial literacy used in daily transactions.

Fourthly, provision of a variety of well-connected literacy, post-literacy and continued education options is crucial to avoid rapid loss of newly built basic literacy ability.

Our study already saw a small, practical follow-up in 2012-2014, related to the first three recommendations. Some suggestions were put into practice on request by and in collaboration with Timor-Leste's Ministry of Education, NGO's and international organisations involved in adult literacy in Timor-Leste. Tetun language support was provided by the National Institute of Linguistics. New additional materials in Tetun for adult literacy and post-literacy education have been developed, piloted and in some cases implemented. Two new teacher manuals[9] contain guidelines on steps to take when teaching a multilevel adult literacy group: assessment of the various starting levels and learning needs with easy-to-use entrance tests, making lesson plans based on that variety of levels and needs, carrying out lesson plans in a more learner-centred way and, finally, assessment of achieved literacy and numeracy ability. These guidelines can be, and in some cases already have been, used as a basis for teacher training. For adult learners, seven new literacy and post-literacy manuals have been developed[10], with which they can first repeat previously acquired basic literacy and numeracy, and then expand and strengthen their reading, writing and numeracy ability with manuals with relevant content in larger units. The manuals are based on authentic materials, like posters and signs in the streets throughout Timor-Leste, and authentic settings, like the buying and selling at local markets and shops where the reading, writing and calculations involve a large variety of products and prices. These materials provide teachers and learners with some examples on how to expand learners' emergent literacy and numeracy ability, how to meet diverse learning needs, and how to establish more links between classroom and daily life literacy. In that way they form a small contribution to the -hopefully- more relevant, more learner-centred and tailor-made teaching of literacy to adults in Timor-Leste's future.

**Acknowledgement**

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[9] "From basic literacy to the entrance level of Equivalence 1" and "From basic literacy to the entrance level of the Foundation Course" (titles translated from Tetun).

[10] "Repetition manual: basic literacy & numeracy"; "Reading on the street: posters and signs" - level 1 and 2; "Reading, writing and calculating at the market"; "Reading, writing and calculating in the shop"; "Percentages"; "Options after literacy" (titles translated from Tetun).

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