

## **A comparison between popular education and a traditional adult literacy program in Baucau District from 2006 to 2007**

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After Timor-Leste gained its liberation in 1999 many institutions such as UN agencies, the non-formal education division of the Ministry of Education and Culture, bilateral aid partners, international and national NGOs, the Catholic Church, women and youth organizations ran adult literacy programs in different districts of Timor-Leste. Some of the literacy facilitators were paid while others volunteered to teach non-literates. Approaches or methods used to implement their adult literacy programs included both the popular education approach and a traditional or classical method for teaching literacy. There was some debate between some of these institutions over which was the more appropriate and effective model.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To describe the differences and similarities between popular education and the traditional method with reference to the teacher's roles, the learners' roles, teaching methods and curriculum development.
- To find out the advantages and disadvantages between popular education and the traditional method for adult literacy program.
- To know the appropriate approach for adult literacy programs in Timor-Leste and suggest how the two adult literacy programs could cooperate.

### **Population and Sample of the Study**

#### *Population*

This study covers two adult literacy classes in Baucau district in the period of 2006-2007. Altogether there were 8 classes of adult literacy in the Baucau district including 4 classes using popular education in Bucoli with 48 learners and 4 traditional (classical) literacy classes in Baucau town with 55 learners. Each class had 15 - 20 adult learners with the total participants being 103.

#### *Sample*

For the traditional (classical) adult literacy class the writer only chose one class at the Baucau Prison (Kaisae) and one popular education adult literacy class in Naroman Bucoli Foundation. There were 5 participants and 1 adult literacy teacher for each class that were chosen as a sample for this study based on gender balance. The Naroman Bucoli Foundation class consisted of 5 women and the other class which was part of the *Grupo Alfabetizasaun Nacional* (National Literacy Group) in Baucau Prison (Kaisae) consisted of 4 men and 1 woman.

### **Research Methods**

#### *Observation*

The Observational technique is a research method that is used to gather firsthand information on a study. The two types of data that the writer gained from observations are the condition of the infrastructure and the process of teaching and learning used in both adult literacy classes.

#### *Interview*

In this research the writer also used an interview method to gain information from both the adult literacy teacher/facilitator and from some adult learners to supplement data collected through observations.

## Differences and Similarities

### *Roles of teacher*

#### *a. In popular education adult literacy program*

Based on the research undertaken in the field the roles of an adult literacy teacher using a popular education are as friend and as a person who is willing to discuss. The teacher asks the opinion of the learners on the subject and explains the importance and relevance of the theme under discussion to their everyday life. They also plan for action when they notice there are problems that the learners need to solve.

Other roles of the teacher in this adult literacy class are as a resource person, facilitator and learner. Popular education means that a good adult teacher recognises that adult learners also have many experiences in their life so it is good to facilitate learner discussion on the subject that he or she is going to teach. The teacher also needs to explain the relation of the theme to the learner's daily life. However the most important role of the teacher is as a facilitator. As a facilitator he or she does not only teach but also learn and assists learners to share experiences and problems with each other, and to reflect critically on their own experiences in order to solve problems.

This role of facilitator is informed by the work of Knowles (1990). He uses the word *facilitator* in a specific context. He emphasizes that adult educators need to work to create learning experiences for adults that help them change their self-concept from dependent learners to self-directed learners. The primary responsibility of the teacher is to facilitate the learning process by selecting appropriate learning activities and encouraging application of the content. The change to self-directed learner aids the adult to internalize the concept that learning and intellectual development are integral parts of life.

#### *b. In traditional adult literacy program*

In the traditional adult literacy class the teacher presents the topic to the learners without discussing with the learners. Then, the teacher explains the meaning of the themes being presented and instructs the learners to copy the phrase or sentences written on the board in their note book. Next they are asked to read or pronounce the words as the teacher pronounces. When everyone can pronounce the words correctly the teacher then translates these phrase or sentences into Tetum for learners to understand. At the end of the class the teacher questions them about topics or themes that have been taught.

The adult literacy teacher acts as a lecturer and resource person with good knowledge. The teacher comes to class with an intention to deposit the knowledge that s/he has prepared at home without asking the learners if the topic or themes are relevant to their life or not. Since the role of the teacher in class is to teach, therefore, the traditional teacher prepared themes or topics which s/he decided need to be taught. The most important roles of the traditional teacher are to fill learners' with knowledge and make sure that the learners understand the themes or topics that have been taught.

Freire (1972) the internationally renowned Brazilian popular educator criticizes traditional education, calling it 'banking' education. He argues that the teacher dispenses knowledge to the learner who passively receives it and stores the information. Freire offers, in contrast, a 'libertarian, dialogic, and problem-posing education' (Elias and Merriam, 1995:169), one in which a group of people use dialogue to understand and act on a life circumstance.

### *Roles of learners*

#### *a. In popular education adult literacy program*

In the popular education adult literacy class, the teacher firstly presents a topic or theme for discussion. The teacher asks learners' opinions or thoughts on the topic. Learners participate actively in the discussion process giving their ideas or input to the topic, and they relate the topic to issues that they face in their daily life. After the discussion the teacher leads the class to a reading and writing activity. In this session they start to read a word that is written on the board. Then the teacher guides them to write the words into their note book. Next the teacher leads another discussion on numeracy by counting each letter in every word. In this activity if some learners do not understand yet some words or have difficulties the other learners help their friends by explaining to them. Finally, at the end of the class they discuss and do an evaluation of the activities that they have done in the class for that day. In this session learners discuss anything that they did not agree with during the learning activities and together they solve any issues and plan future learning activities.

Popular education is based on the concept that before the learners come to the class they already have life experiences and they are the experts in some aspects of knowledge. So it is important to involve adult learners in determining the learning process. Adult learners also have expectations of what they need to learn from an adult literacy class, since they have certain reasons to attend class. Therefore, popular education requires the learner to plan what they are going to learn, how they are going to learn, when and where it is best for them to learn.

As Galbraith (2004) states Knowles established the physical and psychological climates that aid learning: involve learners in planning methods and curriculum; help learners diagnose their own needs; help them identify learning objectives; help them find and use resources to meet their goals; and help them carry out learning plans and give them self-evaluations.

*b. In traditional adult literacy program*

In the traditional adult literacy class the adult learners sit behind their desk and wait for the instructions from their teacher. When the teacher presents the learning topic to them, they listen carefully and follow their teacher as s/he reads or pronounces the words. The words are written on the board and then the teacher gives another instruction for them to write those words into their notebooks. They seat quietly and listen to teacher when he translates those words into Tetum. Then the teacher asks the learners to read the words loudly and translate them into Tetum. The roles of the learners in this class are to sit quietly, listen to their teacher, pronounce the words when teacher reads them take note of those words and finally translate them into Tetum.

Learners have very limited roles in this class. They are not considered as experts on the issues presented by the teacher, who expects them to learn not to teach or discuss the topic or give an opinion on the topic or suggest ways of teaching. Planning for the teaching topic, place and time are the tasks of the teacher. Learners consider themselves as people who come to the class to learn. They still feel that they are empty people that need to be filled-up by their teacher. The teacher does not give the learners the opportunity to be active participants in the learning process.

However, Freire (1972, 1985), believes that education should not be a 'banking' process, where students are filled with teacher-determined content, and are then asked to reproduce it. He argues that students of literacy, at whatever stage of learning, are capable of *conscientization*, of reading the world and breaking the 'culture of silence' in order to create their own instructional agenda.

*Teaching methods*

*a. In popular education of adult literacy program*

Teaching methods used in the popular education adult literacy class were investigation, discussion, lecturing, thematization and problematization. Firstly, the teacher investigates the learners by discussing with them the topics. Then she informs the class what the activities for the lesson will be. Next she gives a short presentation on a theme relating it to their daily life experience, and poses challenging questions to stimulate further discussion until learners find some solutions to some issues that they face.

Investigation and discussion methods were used to identify issues that are faced by learners in their daily life. This approach to teaching adults means they can participate more actively in both the teaching and learning process. In order to facilitate participation by the learners the teaching subject is introduced as a general theme, which is also used to problematise their life situation generating active discussion.

This Freire approach to literacy learning is known as 'contextual' learning (Chacoff, 1989:49) because learning to read and write flows from the discussion of themes important to the learners, drawn from their real-experiences.

*b. In traditional adult literacy program*

The teaching methods observed in the traditional adult literacy class included lecturing and questioning techniques. The teacher presents and explains the topic to the learners and asks questions to check for understanding or not. Next they are asked to answer his questions.

Lecturing is a well known teaching method used in education. In this teaching method the teacher plays a more active role than learners. The teacher prepares the lesson before entering the class by collecting teaching materials and developing a good plan. This method helps the learners to focus on the

specific subjects delivered by the teacher. It can be useful for a class wanting only to learn to read and write. However, it limits learner participation since it gives more chance to the teacher to dominate.

In the traditional method the teacher is someone who dispenses knowledge, someone who lectures, tells, feeds, disseminates, covers material, and teaches the subject matter more than the students. The students sit passively while the teacher is on show. Desks in rows and a blackboard and podium up front are an arrangement designed for this role of a teacher. However, Huntington (1997) suggests that lectures are an effective method for giving short sets of instructions, background information, guidelines, or other information that is needed in a short time frame.

### *Curriculum development*

#### *a. In the popular education adult literacy program*

The popular education approach to curriculum development for this class centers on the themes generated by learners since the theory of popular education believes that learners know best what they want and need to learn.

There is no formal curriculum set by government or by the other organizations which support this adult literacy class through teacher training. Because the learners decide the topics or themes that they want to learn they feel that literacy is for their own benefit and that this literacy program is theirs, and therefore they participate actively in every session. According to Moore-Dodson (2005) adult learners should be assisted in drawing upon their backgrounds, as they practice literacy skills. Building on what is already known makes the tasks of reading, writing, and math more meaningful and less threatening than a curriculum that does not take into account what the learner brings to the learning setting.

However a disadvantage of this approach to curriculum development is that it is difficult for them to continue their study to higher levels in the non-formal basic education system since they have used an unofficial curriculum and the topics and themes that they learn may not match the government endorsed literacy program curriculum.

#### *b. In the traditional adult literacy program*

The traditional method class used the resource guides and workbooks prepared by the non-formal education division of the Ministry of Education and Cultural. There is a text book for the teacher and workbooks for the learners called '*Iha Dalan: Lee no hakerek ba adultu sira*' translated as 'there is way for adults to read and write'. These books are written in Tetum. The literacy tutor is trained in how to use these books with the learners but there is no input from the learners about content and learning activities.

A formal curriculum is important for any level of education today. When an individual completes a curriculum recognised by the government he or she can access higher levels of education since, his or her achievements would be recognised.

It is also useful when the curriculum is decided by educational experts since they know what needs to be learned, why learners need to learn certain subjects, and what teaching methods are best to deliver the program. However, education experts do not always know what learners need to learn in certain areas. The effect of a curriculum written by an outsider is that the learners are not as committed to attend all classes since they can feel that what they want to learn is not in the curriculum and that the class does not answer the needs of the participants.

As Auerbach (1990:39) states 'people learn best when learning starts with what they already know, builds on their strengths, engages them in the learning process, and enables them to accomplish something they want to accomplish.'

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper outlines some differences and similarities, advantages and disadvantages between the popular education approach and the traditional or classic method to teaching literacy to adults in the district of Baucau.

Based on my research the following recommendations are offered for consideration by in order to improve the quality of adult literacy programs in Timor-Leste.

#### *a. Grupo Naroman Bucoli (popular education)*

This adult literacy group needs coordinate with the government's non-formal division so the program they deliver can be recognized and the learners can continue to higher levels of the adult basic education program delivered by the Ministry of Education. Naroman Bucoli also needs to share their teaching methods and curriculum development with other organizations including the government so other people may benefit from the adult literacy approach that they have adopted.

*b. Grupo Alfabetizasaun Naçional (traditional/classic)*

The adult literacy teacher of this class needs to access some training on how to teach literacy to adult learners and to gain a better understanding on how to play their roles more effectively with the class. The Non-formal Education Division literacy coordinator could organize exchange visits for the literacy teacher to some popular education adult literacy classes so he can learn how others facilitate an adult literacy class using a more appropriate method.

In conclusion the Ministry of Education could identify and support non-government organizations with good capacity in delivering adult literacy classes and work with them to develop a curriculum that is community based.

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