

LITERACY IN EAST TIMOR

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1 Introduction

East Timor is a new nation and a developing country in Southeast Asia. An estimated 50% of its adult population (of 15 years and older) is illiterate. The Ministry of Education and Culture of East Timor is undertaking several activities to increase literacy rates among adults and adolescents in the country. Since 2003 I have worked as Adult Literacy Advisor to the Minister of Education, my position being supported by the United Nations Development Programme in East Timor. I am involved in the development and implementation of a new national literacy program, the scope of which includes adult/adolescent literacy policy definition, curriculum and material development, teacher training, and institutional capacity building.



Photo 1: Literacy game in Adawari, East Timor, August 2006

The first part of this paper describes the activities and the literacy project that I coordinate on behalf of the Ministry's National Directorate of Non-Formal Education and that will result in the implementation of the new national literacy program in 2007-2008. The second part outlines the research plans on adult literacy learning in East Timor.

1.1 *New Developing Nation*

After twenty-four years of Indonesian occupation, East Timor gained independence in May 2002. Although some development has been taking place, today it is still Southeast Asia's poorest country. In the global human development report 2006, East Timor ranked number 142 of 177 countries.¹ According to the country's national human development report 2006, three quarters of its one million population live in rural areas; 70% of the population works in agriculture and 28% in services. Life expectancy at birth is fifty-five years and the under-five mortality rate per one thousand live births is 136. Of the total households, 67% have a main floor of earth and/or bamboo, only 27% have electricity as the main lighting source, and only 17% have sewerage or septic tanks.

In 2004, 43% of the population was under the age of fifteen and the youth unemployment rate in that year was 23%. Among the population, there is disappointment about the slow pace of development and about the high unemployment rates. In 2006, ethnic tensions led to violence that left at least thirty-seven people dead and caused 150,000 people (15% of the total population) to seek refuge in IDP²-camps. Gang-related violence and inter-communal tensions flare up frequently, which causes many people to be afraid to go back to their areas and makes them prefer staying in the IDP-camps.

1.2 *Language Situation*

When East Timor became independent in 2002, Portuguese and Tetum were decided to be the country's two official languages and sixteen national languages (including Tetum) were decided to be valued and developed by the state. In addition to these official and national languages, Bahasa Indonesia and English are accepted as working languages.

The use of Portuguese in East Timor has its origin in the colonial period: until 1975, East Timor had been a Portuguese colony for hundreds of years. Tetum is for some people the mother tongue, but for many East Timorese it can be seen as the lingua franca, used in most of the country's thirteen districts. The fifteen other national languages are (until today) mainly spoken languages. Eleven of them are Austronesian languages (as Tetum is as well); four of them are of Papuan origin.³ In

¹ (with numbers 143-177 being African countries and Yemen and Haiti)

² IDP = internally displaced people

³ Austronesian group: Tetum, Habun, Galoli, Atauran, Kawaimina, Welaun, Idalaka, Mambai, Kemak, Tokodede, Baikenu, Makuva. Papuan group: Bunak, Makasai, Makalero, Fataluku. Source: *Mai Kolía Tetun; a course in Tetum-Praça, National language of East Timor*, Geoffrey Hull, 4th edition, 2003, p. xi.

recent years, the National Institute of Linguistics⁴ published grammars and dictionaries for some of these national languages. This institute will continue to create basic resources like these for Tetum and the 15 vernaculars in the future. Bahasa Indonesia was the official language in East Timor during the twenty-four year long Indonesian occupation until 1999, so the younger generations who attended primary and secondary education during these years all speak Bahasa Indonesia. In more recent days, English has come up as a working language in East Timor due to the involvement of the international community in the organisation of the popular referendum in 1999, its role in the interim government until 2002, and its presence in many development projects ever since.

1.3 Literacy Rates

Literacy rates are low in East Timor: about half of the adult population is estimated not to be able to read or write. The national human development report 2006 includes the following information: *“In 2004 the adult literacy rate was only 50.1%, 56.3 for males and 43.9 for females. Illiteracy is highest among the older population: among 15-34 year-olds, 73% are literate while among those over 50 the proportion drops to 19%. This is largely the result of a lack of primary education: in 2004 about 62% of males and 80% of females aged 30-54 years had not completed primary education (the 2004 Census of Population and Housing).”*

Curtain (2006)⁵, who ran a national youth survey for UNICEF Timor-Leste, found one third of the (800) young people surveyed to be functionally illiterate. According to the data of the National Population Census 2004, in seven of the country’s thirteen districts, more than 30% of the people between fifteen and thirty-four years of age can not read and write, while in four other districts more than 20% of fifteen- to thirty-four-year-olds can not read and write.

When East Timor became independent in 2002 it set itself a clear goal: in the National Development Plan, the vision for the next generation in the year 2020 is that people will be “literate, knowledgeable and skilled.” Needless to say that there is a lot of work to be done.

⁴ The Instituto Nacional de Linguística (INL), a research centre of the National University of East Timor (UNTI), concentrates its efforts on the creation of basic resources (monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, grammars, ABC books, texts of vernacular literature) for Tetum and for the other fifteen vernaculars defined as “national languages” in Article 13 of the Constitution.

⁵ TL Youth Survey results 21-2-2006



Photo 2: Literacy game in Adawari, East Timor, August 2006

1.4 Literacy Programs

Many organisations have been organising literacy programs in East Timor. In 1974 FRETILIN⁶ started to conduct literacy programs based on Paulo Freire's method. With the start of the Indonesian occupation in 1975, these literacy activities became part of the resistance movement. In 1981 Indonesia started a literacy program in Bahasa Indonesia in urban centres. In 2000, after the Indonesian occupation ended in 1999, Timor-Leste and Brazil started a partnership with a literacy program called Solidarity in Literacy (*Alfabetização Solidária*) in Portuguese, which was continued for about one and a half years. From 2001 until 2005, Oxfam GB conducted a literacy program in several districts, based on the Reflect methodology.⁷ And, since 2001, the National Directorate of Non-Formal Education, part of the Ministry of Education and Culture, has been organising a national literacy program and regular capacity building sessions and teacher trainings.

Currently, a large variety of organisations are operating in the literacy field. Alongside the Ministry's national literacy program, with 260 literacy teachers in the thirteen districts, literacy programs are conducted by UNICEF, Timor Aid, Xanana Gusmão Foundation, OPMT (East Timorese Women's Organisation), Cristal Foundation, Fundasaun ba Futuru Comunidade, BELUN, and other national and international NGO's. Various literacy methodologies are being applied. Most literacy courses take place in Tetum or in Portuguese, and local languages are often used for instruction and explanations. In view of this, there are

⁶ FRETILIN = the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, resistance movement that fought for independence, first from Portugal and then from Indonesia, now majority party.

⁷ See www.reflect-action.org

major challenges for the years to come: compensating for the lack of good Timor-Leste based literacy and numeracy primers for learners and manuals for teachers, improving the education level of the literacy teachers, making available more resources for teacher salaries, providing long term training facilities, and countering the lack of qualified teacher trainers.

Unfortunately not many of the literacy programs mentioned have been thoroughly evaluated and, as a consequence, little is known about the effectiveness of the various programs and about their results.

2 Toward a New National Literacy Program

2.1 Preliminary Activities in 2004

In 2004, the National Directorate of Non-Formal Education started the first preparations for a new national literacy program. The agreed overall goal of a new program was to reach significantly more adults and adolescents every year with more effective literacy courses in the country's two official languages, Tetum and Portuguese. The directorate carried out a needs assessment and made a start with policy development. Conclusions from the needs assessment were that the sector lacked a specific national adult literacy curriculum as well as contextualized literacy course materials in Tetum and Portuguese (reflecting East Timorese culture and daily circumstances and being relevant for adults and adolescents living in this country). Another finding was that the 260 literacy teachers contracted by the government needed in-depth training on adult literacy methodologies and didactics.

According to the outcomes of the needs assessment the ministry decided to take initiatives in curriculum development for adult literacy, in material development in the two official languages, and in capacity building of teachers, trainers and staff.

As a landmark, the National Directorate of Non-Formal Education organised the "First National Adult Literacy Conference," which took place in September 2004, linked to International Literacy Day. This was done in collaboration with Oxfam GB and UNICEF and eight other international and national organisations with adult literacy experience in Timor-Leste. The main subject was the need for a national literacy campaign and how to learn from literacy experiences in East Timor's past (1974-1975) and from literacy campaigns in other countries.

In the same year, three workshops were organised to define the contents of a core curriculum for adult literacy courses. The first and third workshop involved local and international literacy organisations and the second about 100 adult literacy teachers and district coordinators.

First drafts of the new, Timor-Leste-based adult literacy course materials in Tetum and in Portuguese⁸ were developed and tested for three months mid-2004. A revised version of the materials was delivered end of 2004, using the outcomes of the field test and the consultation of 100 literacy teachers. In this same year, all 260 literacy teachers attended their first training sessions on adult literacy methodologies and didactics.

The activities in 2004 resulted in a decision by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2005 to conduct a three-year follow-up program.



Photo 3: Curriculum workshop in Dili, East Timor, October 2004

2.2 The “Timor-Leste Adult/Adolescent Literacy Project 2005-2008”

The “Timor-Leste Adult/Adolescent Literacy Project 2005-2008,” a three-year project to finish and implement contextualized course materials for the Timor-Leste adult/adolescent literacy program under responsibility of the National Directorate of Non-Formal Education of the Ministry of Education and Culture, started in July 2005.

The first aim of the project is to support the East Timorese national literacy program for adults and adolescents with a new generation of course materials in Tetum and Portuguese based on a widely accepted core curriculum for literacy courses. The second aim is to train current and new literacy teachers and facilitators to work with the new curriculum and materials for adult/adolescent literacy courses. The third aim is to establish a team of local experts that can develop, sustain and revise course materials and that can train future literacy teachers.

To reach these goals, the National Directorate of Non-Formal Education coordinates a range of activities (as described below) during three years. The key to success proves to be the collaboration with many

⁸ In Tetum “Hakat ba Oin” and in Portuguese “Passo em Frente,” Versions May 2004, tested June-July-August 2004 in four groups in Becora Prison, Dili.

other organisations with literacy programs for adults and adolescents in East Timor.

2.2.1 Overview of Completed Activities per End of 2006

2.2.1.1 Core Curriculum

One of the first documents completed after the start of the three year project was the core curriculum for literacy courses for adults and adolescents in East Timor. The core curriculum's main part is a list of themes and sub themes that can serve as a basis for the selection of relevant content for literacy courses aimed at these target groups. Apart from this, it contains a short checklist of somewhat more technical components that can be paid attention to during literacy classes and a lot of tips and suggestions for the literacy teachers.

The selected themes are broadly considered to be relevant for East Timorese adults and adolescents that are learning to read and write. The list of themes and sub themes and the other elements of the curriculum were developed in a series of workshops with, in total, fourteen organisations that conduct(ed) literacy programs in East Timor,⁹ combined with valuable contributions from one hundred literacy teachers and coordinators. All of them were asked what they thought would be relevant content for reading and writing courses for East Timorese adults. In addition to this, they participated in a priority ranking activity. Furthermore, the ideas and content suggestions were matched with the starting level of the new Equivalence Program for Primary Education for adults and adolescents,¹⁰ a possible follow-up for students who finish the literacy program. This process resulted in the "Thematic guideline for adult/adolescent literacy courses in East Timor," a document that contains the fruits of a broad exchange of ideas and experience.

The participants in this process strongly preferred the name "Thematic Guideline" rather than "Core Curriculum." By using the word "curriculum," they were afraid that people would regard it as a program that *had* to be followed, more or less *imposed* on literacy organisations by the government. They felt that the word "guideline" left them more space to use their own creativity. All participating organisations stressed the importance of freedom of choice of content and didactics when preparing

⁹ The fourteen organisations were: BELUN, CARE INTERNATIONAL, DAI POPULAR, GFFTL, GOMUTIL, OPMI, OXFAM GB, NAROMA GROUP BUCOLI, SAHE INSTITUTE FOR LIBERATION, TIMOR AID, UNDP, UNESCO TL, UNICEF TL and the National Directorate of Non-Formal Education.

¹⁰ This Equivalence Program for Primary Education for adults and adolescents is also being developed by the National Directorate of Non-Formal Education of the Ministry of Education and Culture of East Timor.



Photo 4, Teacher training in Baucau, East Timor, September 2006

literacy courses, so that course content could be matched with the learning needs of each specific group and people would not feel obliged to follow a certain path. They needed guidelines and checklists more than a set (standard) curriculum.

The themes they listed cover most areas of society that East Timorese adults/adolescents participate in: agriculture, economy, work, transport, education, environment, geography, health, history, human rights, languages & communication, local culture, public administration, etc. The idea is that, while practising and enlarging their reading and writing skills, the students learn useful things about themes that are relevant to them in their daily lives. When doing reading and writing exercises on health, for example, students learn about the importance of hygiene to prevent diseases, or about ways to prevent malaria. When reading about education, they learn about the education system in East Timor, and about the importance of sending their children to school and supporting them throughout their school career.

Most of the course components listed in the “Thematic Guideline” can, according to the developers, be part of any basic literacy course. They include some functional tasks like writing your name and signature, filling out simple forms, calculating prices, noting down dates, telephone numbers, etc. But they also include some minimal technical skills like being able to read and write the letters of the alphabet, to recognize and produce the corresponding sounds, knowing when to use capitals and small letters, and how to use space, margins, lines, punctuation, etc. This list of course components serves as a checklist to anyone preparing a literacy course.

Apart from the list of relevant themes and the inventory of possible literacy course components, the “Thematic Guideline” contains a lot of suggestions for the literacy teachers: on how to teach adults and adolescents, how to assess adults and adolescents’ learning needs and use their knowledge and experience in the lessons, how to link lesson content to the daily lives of the learners by collecting real life materials and using these in the classroom, how to develop their own course materials together with the students, etc.

Version 1 of the “Thematic Guideline” was delivered in February, printed in May and distributed in the second half of 2006. Most of the literacy teachers, coordinators and organisations involved in literacy programs for adolescents and adults in East Timor now have a copy, and use it when preparing lessons and new courses.

2.2.1.2 *New Literacy Materials for Beginners*

For the adults and adolescents in East Timor who want to learn to read and write, a new set of literacy manuals has been developed. The manuals make good use of the materials and test experiences from 2004. The new set contains four student books and a teacher manual. All books were developed in Tetum (“Hakat ba Oin”) and in Portuguese (“Passo em Frente”), both meaning “Step forward.” Book 1 deals with the letters of the alphabet, one word for each letter, frequent letter combinations, the numbers until ten and the writing of names and signatures. Book 2, 3 and 4 are all built around the same series of topics: in the street, at home, food, body and health, family, nature, work, free time, reading and writing and Timor-Leste. Book 2 deals with an extensive series of words, book 3 with sentences and book 4 with short texts on the same topics. Apart from that, each book pays attention to basic numeracy skills and to the functional task of filling out forms.

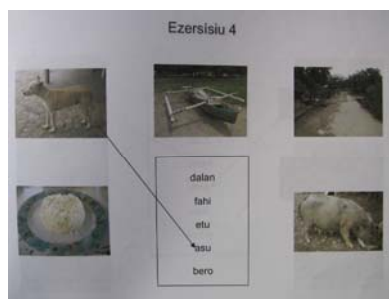


Photo 5 and 6: Literacy in Tetum, “Hakat ba Oin” Book 2

The “Hakat ba Oin” set, the version in Tetum, was tested in an eight-month-long field test in thirty groups in five districts. In September 2006 the field test was evaluated in collaboration with the 30 teachers involved. The teachers and students gave very positive feedback on the new materials because they reflect East Timorese culture and daily life: learners could easily relate to the topics and the many digital pictures provided them with useful visual information that supported them in their reading efforts. Often learners would recognize places or even people on the pictures, and to find their own country or district and their own people in the manuals turned out to be very motivating. They also liked the fact that the materials contain a lot of exercises and repetition. Teachers were surprised about how quickly their learners built and improved reading and writing skills. The changes suggested by learners as well as teachers mainly concerned a large number of details which implied many, relatively minor, changes. Typical suggestions received are: more variety in exercises and more productive writing exercises linked to the daily life of the learners. Apart from that, teachers suggested using fewer personal pronouns like “he” and “she” (confusing because both are “nia” in Tetum) in the sentences describing the pictures but instead inserting some frequent names like João, Domingos, Ana, Maria, etc. And some of the pictures turned out to be confusing or multi-interpretable; so, they were replaced by better ones.

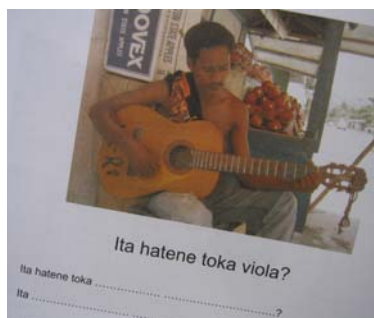


Photo 7 and 8: Literacy in Tetum, “Hakat ba Oin” Book 3

The revised version of the four books and teacher manual in Tetum were delivered December 2006. The Tetum language was checked by the National Institute of Linguistics, and at end of December 2006, the corrected final version was delivered to the National Directorate of Non-Formal Education, to UNICEF, and to USAID-DAI. Also, the “Passo em Frente” set in Portuguese was tested in several experiments in the field. Outcomes of the experiments, largely similar to the Tetum field test results, are being used to make a revised version.

With UNICEF support, the Ministry of Education and Culture is going to implement “Hakat ba Oin” and “Passo em Frente” on a national level in 2007: all 260 literacy teachers in the country’s 13 districts will use the new books in their literacy groups. The new materials cover a six-month-long literacy course of a maximum of ten hours per week. In addition to the efforts of the Ministry and UNICEF, USAID-DAI is prepared to invest in teacher and staff training to support the national implementation.

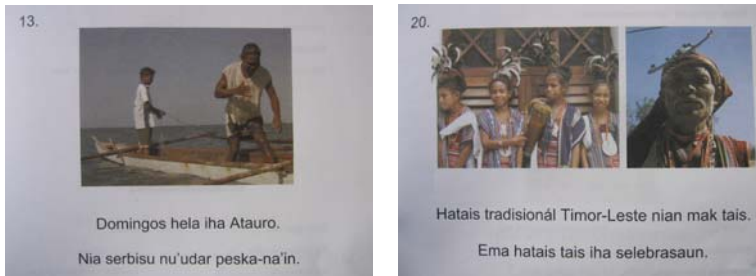


Photo 9 and 10: Literacy in Tetum, “Hakat ba Oin” Book 4

2.2.1.3 New Literacy Materials for Advanced Students

After the first six months of basic reading and writing, the students will need more practice to strengthen and enlarge their newly developed reading and writing skills. This is why another, more complex, set of materials was developed for more or less “advanced” literacy students, to make sure they continue using and consolidate their new skills. This new set brings the students to the starting level of the Equivalence Program for Primary Education that is being developed for adults and adolescents by the National Directorate of Non-Formal Education.

The new, more complex materials for advanced literacy students consist of fourteen student modules and one teacher manual and were also developed in Tetum (“Iha Dalan”) as well as Portuguese (“A Caminho”), both meaning “On the road.” The modules cover most of the themes in the “Thematic Guideline” as described above, each theme resulting in one module: agriculture, economy/work/transport, education, environment, geography, health, reproductive health, history, human rights, languages & communication, local culture, mathematics, public administration, and science. The basic texts and exercises in these modules provide the students with a lot of opportunities to practice technical as well as functional reading and writing. In the mean time, they receive a lot of useful information on a wide range of relevant topics. The module on reproductive health, for instance, stresses the importance of

prenatal checkups for pregnant women, of skilled birth attendance, and of breastfeeding. The environment module informs students about the importance of preventing soil erosion and air and water pollution.

In 2007, the “Iha Dalan” modules will be field tested in thirty literacy groups in five districts. Experiments with some of the modules in Portuguese (“A Caminho”) are already taking place. By the end of 2007, the modules will be revised. This will be done on the basis of the field test outcomes and nationwide implementation of the final version is expected to take place in 2008.

2.2.1.4 Capacity Building of Teachers, Trainers and Local Experts

Several teacher training programs were conducted during 2005 and 2006 to build the capacity of literacy teachers and facilitators. Some 300 literacy teachers participated in sessions on literacy methodologies and didactics and prepared themselves to work with the new core curriculum and new course materials in their literacy classes. The teacher training program continues in 2007, linked to the national implementation of the new course materials in all thirteen districts.

In December 2006, twenty-two future teacher trainers attended a workshop on how to organize teacher trainings for literacy teachers on the contents and use of the new core curriculum and all the new literacy manuals. They will deliver teacher trainings to NGOs that want to work with the new materials and to the 300 literacy teachers contracted by Non-Formal Education that are going to participate in the national implementation of the new literacy materials. In 2007, more workshops for teacher trainers are planned. A guidelines document in Portuguese is available for all teacher trainers.

Capacity building of material developers is being prepared. To create opportunity to practise and develop new materials, they need laptops and digital cameras, for which budget has to be arranged.

Furthermore, six members of the Non-Formal Education staff are involved in preparing the national implementation of the new literacy materials for beginners in 2007 and for advanced literacy students in 2008. Preparations now focus on contents of the new materials, but, at a later stage, their tasks will also include distribution of all new literacy materials to literacy teachers in the thirteen districts. In addition to this they will be responsible for the following tasks: organisation of the start of the literacy courses applying the new materials, student administration, assessment of progress in the building of reading and writing skills in the three hundred classes, delivery of literacy certificates to students who pass the final test, monitoring and evaluation of the new literacy program in the thirteen districts, financial management of the new national literacy program, management and delivery of the teacher training program, future

adaptation and revision and reprinting of materials. Until late 2008, the Non-Formal Education staff will be supported in all aspects of the national implementation of the new literacy program.



Photo 11: Teacher training in Baucau, East Timor, September 2006

2.2.2 Objectives for 2007 and 2008

The main objective for 2007 is the implementation of the beginners' manuals in Tetum and Portuguese ("Hakat ba Oin" and "Passo em Frente") in all thirteen districts. Apart from that, the materials for advanced literacy learners will be field tested, the tests will be evaluated, and the materials will be revised accordingly. The Tetum version will have to be checked by the National Institute of Linguistics, and all the modules in Tetum ("Iha Dalan") and Portuguese ("A Caminho") will be printed to allow scaling of the project to the national level, covering implementation in all thirteen districts in 2008.

Furthermore, the syllabus needs to be finalized: a course outline describing the complete, new, year-long literacy program consisting of the six-month-long beginner and the six-month-long advanced course, covering the core curriculum and applying all the new literacy course materials.

The teacher training program covering all new materials will be continued during 2007 and 2008. Meanwhile, establishing and capacity building of teams of local experts (teacher trainers, material developers and NFE staff) will continue.

An additional objective for 2007 is the establishing of adequate connections between this one year literacy program and other adult education programs, the basic literacy program “Sim, eu posso” of Cuban origin¹¹ and the Equivalence Program for Primary Education, that will both be implemented at national level in 2007/2008 as decided by the Ministry.

2.2.2.1 *Challenges*

For East Timorese adolescents and adults who want to become literate in Tetum or Portuguese, the main challenge is that they have to learn to read and write in a second or often third language. In addition to this, they have to cope with lack of time due to their workload at home and in the fields, lack of resources, demotivation by community peers (in reported cases) and, in rural areas, lack of a literate environment.

Working on the improvement of literacy programs, the main barriers for the adult education sector are the low education level of teachers/facilitators, teachers struggling with the new standard Tetum, not many teachers being fluent in Portuguese, the low teacher salaries (\$60 per month, often resulting in teachers switching to other education sectors with higher salaries, after they gain some teaching experience), the lack of educational resources, and the rather heterogeneous groups (many different levels within groups, different learning needs of adults and adolescents, etc.).

While great efforts are made by the Ministry and important activities take place, the above issues will continue to have considerable impact on success in the coming years.

3 *Research Project on Literacy in East Timor*

In 2007, a research project, which aims to investigate historical and contemporary aspects of adult literacy acquisition and use in multilingual East Timor, will start. The project will consist of a critical historical study of literacy policies and endeavours in a societal and political context and an empirical study. This empirical study will include (a) a multi-site sociolinguistic-ethnographic case study investigating values and uses of languages and literacy, instructional practices and learning in the act of becoming and being literate in Portuguese, Tetum and Fataluku and (b) an evaluation study assessing the influence of language choices, methodology and transparency on the effectiveness of adult literacy programs in these

¹¹ “Sim, eu posso” is a 3 months audiovisual program to build basic literacy skills in Portuguese. This program was successfully applied in Brasil and is now - with the support of Cuba - being adapted for use in East Timor.

three languages. The empirical study will combine social-cultural and cognitive/linguistic perspectives.

In any society, becoming literate implies at least two things: on the one hand becoming a member of a community of literacy practices (mediated by values, attitudes, traditions, resources and praxis) and on the other hand getting access to the written code that is used in that culture, be it the mother tongue of literacy learners, a lingua franca or a relatively unknown language recently introduced as a result of changes in language and literacy policy.

In this research project these two strands of research and theory building will be combined, by looking at literacy in society (i.e. the uses people make of literacy in different domains and different languages and the values attached to it), by looking at the acquisition of literacy from different angles (comparing languages, orthographies and first and second language in the teaching and learning of literacy and the literacy skills acquired) and by unravelling the interactions between the two.

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