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### To cite this article:

Quinn, M. (2023). Implementing curriculum “more or less” in Timor-Leste. *International Journal on Studies in Education (IJonSE)*, 5(4), 476-495. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijonse.148>

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## Implementing Curriculum “More or Less” in Timor-Leste

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### Article Info

#### *Article History*

Received:

05 February 2023

Accepted:

15 June 2023

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#### *Keywords*

Curriculum reform

Scripted lesson plans

Timor-Leste

### Abstract

Curriculum reform is often oriented by top-down issues, particularly in implementing global imperatives around education. In post-colonial, post-occupied Timor-Leste, the most recent primary school curriculum (2015) has sought to reflect local needs and experiences and implement new content with learner-participatory strategies through scripted lesson plans. This study explores if and how teachers use these lesson plans, identifying patterns of pedagogical behaviour through classroom observation in nine schools. Short interviews with classroom teachers further revealed what understandings of the curriculum reform they brought to their work. The findings suggest that teachers are asserting some agency over the lesson plans in relation to how they perceive their local situation and needs of the students, but often omitting critical learning activities that are key features of the new curriculum. This bottom-up view suggests a basis for further reform, in this case, less scripting of ‘answers’, more focus on extending student language for new knowledge and professional development that focuses on specific pedagogical strategies.

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### Introduction

Curriculum reform in many instances seeks to improve learning or redress learning inequality, eradicating the ‘triple effects’ of home disadvantage, school quality, and discrimination (Crouch et al. 2021). Arguably the real site of reform lays in the classroom and the decisions teachers make in adopting or rejecting curricula advice and materials, a site that Alexander (2001, p. 3) calls ‘the most important part of educational terrain, the practice of teaching and learning’. Yet global imperatives for ‘quality education’, as defined by the Sustainable Development Goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>) and major donors such as United Nations agencies and the World Bank are liable to skew decision-making away from the local realities and toward more globalised, neo-liberal agendas (Rizvi, 2017).

Teachers are viewed as crucial in the global pursuit of quality education (see UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018) and this study is concerned with how teachers in Timor-Leste, a low-income country seeking to redress a history of low learning in under-resourced classrooms, use scripted lessons plans [LPs] to implement new curriculum. These LPs were developed in 2013-15 to reform teaching and learning practice, supporting teachers to move into new practices that provide more student-centred learning. One of the few larger studies into how teachers implemented the curriculum early in implementation reported that 57.7% of teachers covered the content of the

LPS 'More or less' (World Bank, 2019, p. 10), without defining what was actually done to a greater or lesser degree. To better understand teachers' behaviours around using the LPS and implementation of the curriculum, this study first asks,

*What elements of lesson plans are teachers following more of, and less of, in implementing the curriculum?*

More recently, senior education officers in Timor-Leste have publicly suggested revision of the relatively new curriculum ("MEJD sei halo revizaun kurríkulu ensinu básiku siklu 1, 2 [*MEJD will make a revision of cycle 1, 2 of the basic curriculum*]", 20/6/2022). Thus, the second question that shapes this study is,

*What changes to the current lesson plans might enhance learning in the classroom?*

Answers to both questions point to how reform in the primary school curriculum and ongoing teacher training might be undertaken to reflect current realities for teachers and students.

## **Education in Timor-Leste, since Independence**

At the end of Indonesian occupation in 1999, Timor-Leste's educational outcomes were among the poorest in the Indonesian archipelago (Beazley, 1999) so that establishing a local education system involved not only developing something truly Timorese, but one that improved learning for all children. The Timorese Education Ministry (currently, Ministério do Educação, Juventude e Desporto) has made considerable progress in establishing an education system in just over 20 years. The current *Education Strategic Plan* (WB, 2022) outlines how infrastructure, curriculum materials and a workforce are still being developed across all levels of schooling across the country. Basic Education, Years 1 – 9, has had considerable attention, with curriculum and materials development in the primary years, and re-development of curriculum at the junior secondary level.

In considering local education needs, the development of curriculum in small states such as Timor-Leste have the opportunity to embed 'animating concepts of post-colonial theory such as place, identity, difference, the nation, and modes of resistance, focus on the particular' (Rizvi, 2007, p. 260). Yet, in the early years of independence, the pressing need to restart education in the face of the large-scale destruction wrought by departing Indonesian troops (see Nicolai, 2004; Supit, 2020), presented little time to consider deeply local needs, including 'what education is needed and for what type of society' (Amadio et al., 2015, p. 4). Instead, several 'stop-gap' methods were employed, such as using existing Indonesian materials with Portuguese translations. One teacher, Maria, explained the situation in 2004:

*At the moment we haven't got a proper curriculum. We follow a book and then we also receive instruction, or we do a course.* (Quinn, 2005, translated from the Tetum original)

The first Timorese curriculum appeared in Year 1 classrooms 2005, with expansion into other year levels over the next three years. Curriculum documents had included principles of democratic and child-centredness (MECJD, 2004, p. 24), in line with UNICEF *Child Friendly Schools* program that had been adopted by the government. However, these materials were largely developed by Portuguese educationalists in Portugal and in his analysis of

this early curriculum, Shah (2012) noted that the curriculum did not take account of the local needs and aspirations for education, with little public consultation, and used materials donated by Portugal that lacked relevance to Timorese students (p. 36). He also noted that Tetum was largely ignored as an instructional language in favour of Portuguese, despite the widespread use of the national language and the minimal use of Portuguese by students, teachers and community (pp. 34 – 35). While using this curriculum, class repetition and drop-out rates continued to rise in primary school and teachers were still weak in professional skills:

*Many teachers began their career with poor subject knowledge, weak pedagogical skills and did not have full working competency in the two official languages of instruction in Timor-Leste* (Ministério do Educação [ME], 2011, p. 134)

The government has sought to build a strong workforce, with ‘raised standards of teachers and teaching’ (ME, 2011, p. 134), and most permanent teachers across Basic Education now hold the three-year *Bacharelato* or four-year *Licenciatura*, attained mainly through in-service training. Yet about 8% have minimal training and many started and remain as volunteer teachers, often untrained and paid a stipend by the school to address a severe teacher shortage: the workforce of 7500 primary school teachers (Ministry figures, supplied in April 2019) is growing more slowly than student numbers. It was these teachers that a new curriculum sought to support in helping students to learn.

### **The New Curriculum, 2015**

In 2013, the development of a new curriculum for Cycles 1 and 2 (Years 1 – 6) of Basic Education [New Curriculum] was initiated to address the weaknesses identified by commentators such as Shah (2012) and the government’s own appraisal (ME, 2011), and ultimately to provide better guidance for teachers. The work on this New Curriculum was undertaken by a core group of about 40 international and national consultants and local teachers and involved extensive consultation with educational and civil society groups (ME, 2014, pp. 7 - 9) to design curriculum content, pedagogical frameworks and teaching materials. Three underlying principles of the curriculum orient LPs and materials: *Ligasaun ba kultura no maneira moris lokál nian* [Connection to culture and way of local life]; *Emá nia dezenvolvimentu tomak* [Development of the whole person]; and, *Kualidade di’ak ba prosesu ensinu-aprendizajen* [Quality teaching and learning] (ME, 2014, p. 18).

In enacting the principle of ‘Quality teaching and learning’, a number of measures were taken, including producing scripted LPs for every lesson. The decision to provide such explicit documentation was taken largely to support teachers in view of the Education Ministry’s assessment of teacher knowledge (as noted above), modelling new practices such elements as making teaching and learning inclusive, relevant, practical and with a focus on literacy and numeracy (ME, 2014, pp. 8 – 11). Grossman et al. (2009) suggest that learning might be well-served through a greater focus on strategies teachers can use across the curriculum, and the pedagogical strategies used within the LPs were similar to those identified as most effective classrooms strategies in low-income nations in the findings of Westbrook et al. (2013, p. 2):

- flexible use of whole-class, group and pair work where students discuss a shared task
- frequent and relevant use of learning materials beyond the textbook

- open and closed questioning, expanding responses, encouraging student questioning
- demonstration and explanation, drawing on sound pedagogical content knowledge
- use of local languages and code switching
- planning and varying lesson sequences

Accordingly, instructions within the LPs were designed to lead teachers into participatory modes of learning, which Hardman et al. (2009, p. 68) contend provide ‘a better balance of teacher-led interaction and pupil-centred activities’ and appropriate for low-income countries where more transmissive pedagogy prevails, such as Timor-Leste (see Quinn, 2013). However, learner-centred practices have been characterised as adoptions of international norms, constituting inappropriate ‘educational transfer’ of global agency agendas (Beech, 2009, p. 346), and undermining the expectations of the central role of the teacher (e.g. Guthrie, 2017; Schweisfurth, 2013), including in Timor-Leste (Shah, 2012; Shah & Quinn, 2016). Thus, new practices needed to foster learning while still valuing the role and agency of the teacher.

To this end, the curriculum explicitly states,

*Manorin lidera atividade oioin ho klase hotu, grupu, pár, ka individuál, hodi envolve estudante sira hotu. [The teacher leads various activities with the whole class, in groups, pairs or individually, involving all students.] (ME, 2014, p. 225)*

The agency of the teacher is further strengthened by stating that the LP is to aid the teacher, stating in the introduction to every book of LPs for each year level that ‘The lesson plan in this book will help the teacher implement the new curriculum in an effective way’ (ME, 2015, p. 4). Throughout the LPs, teachers are encouraged to adapt lessons to the local situation (see Quinn, 2021 for greater discussion of localisation in the LPs).

Scripted lessons can provide high support for undertrained teachers and guide into new ways of teaching (Schneider & Krajcik, 2002), but also criticised as being overly prescriptive and reducing teacher autonomy (e.g. Commeyras, 2007; Dresser, 2012). Locally, criticisms were typical of this comment by the vice president of the Education Ministry’s in-service division at an education congress in 2017:

*Os planos de aula limitam a autonomia pedagógica dos docentes bem como competência pedagógica, [...] não permitem a devida aquedação dos conteúdos á realidade local dos estudantes. [The lesson plans limit the teachers' pedagogical autonomy as well as their pedagogical competence, [...] they do not allow for the proper adaptation of the contents to the students' local reality] (ME, 2017, p. 192)*

Despite such objections, some early studies into the 2015 – 2017 implementation of the curriculum (Ogden, 2017; Soares, 2019) found general acceptance for the new ways of teaching as the means to positively influence student learning:

*Os participantes consideram que as mudanças que ocorreram trazem vantagens às aprendizagens dos alunos [The participants [teachers] consider that the changes that have occurred bring advantages to students' learning]. (Soares, 2019, p.125).*

Through observing how teachers use the LPs to guide classroom learning and discussing their experiences of the LPs, this study will provide some insight into how teachers understand their role in enacting the curriculum and helping their students learn.

## **Methodology**

Examining this use of LPs presented a setting that is ‘complex, dynamic and multifaceted’ (Crocker, 2009, p. 7), typical of qualitative study. Timorese classroom activity has not been extensively studied, and observing without prescribed frameworks or rubrics allowed the various lessons to present themselves as cases with rich examples of practice. Practice could be compared against curriculum LPs (when used) to understand to what extent these plans oriented classroom activity.

Data gathered from nine schools in various locations over a five-week period in June/July, 2022 consisted largely of unstructured observations of classroom activity: what teachers and students were doing in comparison to what the LP directed. Where no LP was used, the alternative activities were noted. Observations were taken of the lesson scheduled on arrival and as programmed on the timetable. Teachers were – where possible – notified of the researchers’ visit by the principal ahead of time and given the chance to decline the observations or subsequent interview, which some did.

Comments from the classroom teachers captured in 10–15-minute discussions at the conclusion of the lesson provided some insight into their decisions about activity choices and views on aspects of the curriculum and LP approaches. All interviews were conducted in Tetum (by the researcher) and audio recorded, then transcribed and translated into English by a Timorese research assistant. Some classroom interaction was captured (with permission) in audio clips and LPs, and lesson materials and board work were photographed.

In arriving at a reliable sample in small studies, exploration of data saturation has suggested that collection of data continues until no new themes or patterns are being identified (Guest et al. 2020; Hagaman & Wutich, 2017). Observations were made in classrooms across Year 1 to 6, across five of the 13 districts/‘municipalities’ of the country (Dili, Manatuto, Liquiça, Baucau and Ermera) and while this constituted less than 1% of basic education schools, there was high repetition of behaviours and themes across classes and locations suggesting that the sample is representative of Timorese classrooms.

Locations are described as Dili (capital city), town (district capitals), outskirts (less than 20-minute drive to town/city) and rural. Data collection is summarised in Table 1, organised in order of lessons viewed, with all teacher names as pseudonyms.

Analysis was conducted adopting a grounded approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), identifying patterns of practice during lessons and how teachers explained these choices (if they could), as well as their comments in regard to using the curriculum. The data provided insights into how teachers used and understood the curriculum, and the pedagogical practices that they used to help students to learn.

Table 1. Overview of Data Collected

Location	Teacher	Year level	Subject	Lesson Plan [LP] No.	Observed	Interviewed	Excerpts
1 Dili	Hermina	Year 2	Portuguese	NA	X	X	
	Jeronimo	Year 4	Portuguese	NA	X	X	
	Orlando	Year 2	Portuguese	NA	X	X	
	Graça	Year 6	Portuguese	NA	X	X	
2 Town outskirts	Justina	Year 6	Maths	MT-6-13	X	X	X
	Feliciana	Year 6	Natural Science	NS-6-31	X	X	X
3 Rural	Isabella	Year 4	Portuguese	PT-4-31	X	X	
			Tetum	TT-4-54	X	X	
	Tania	Year 2	Maths	MT-2-51	X		
4 Town	Ana	Year 1	Tetum	TT-1-101	X	X	
	Elisa	Year 6	Maths	MT-6-52	X	X	
5 Dili outskirts	Amelia	Year 1	Tetum	TT-1-122	X	X	X
			Maths	NA	X	X	X
	Julia	Year 6	Portuguese	NA	X	X	
6 Rural	Flora	Year 5	Maths	MT-5-72	X	X	X
			Health	Textbook pp. 30 – 34)	X	X	X
7 Dili outskirts	Clara	Year 6	Tetum	NA	X	X	X
	Joana	Year 6	Portuguese	NA	X	X	X
	Gloria	Year 2	Mathematics	MT-2-57	X		X
			Health	SD-2-19	X		X
8 Town	Marcela	Year 5	Mathematics	MT-5-56	X	X	X
	Helder	Year 3	Mathematics	MT-3-62	X	X	X
9 Town	Daniel	Year 1	Tetum	TT-1-154	X	X	X
	Josefa	Year 5	Portuguese	PT-5-51	X	X	X

**Lesson code:** Discipline-Year-Lesson order

e.g. MT-6-13 = Mathematics, Year 6, lesson13

## Findings from Classrooms

In exploring the question,

*What elements of lesson plans are teachers following more of, and less of, in implementing the curriculum?*

case studies of the lessons presented by three teachers – Elisa, Isabela and Daniel – illustrate particular ways in which teachers followed the LPs. Each lesson is outlined and then discussed with reference to other teachers observed, both those using or not using the LPs, identifying aspects that prevail in Timorese classrooms.

### Elisa's Lesson, Year 6, Mathematics

Elisa has been teaching for 23 years, specialising in mathematics. Lesson MT-6-52 explores how to identify the largest common denominator (*máximo divisor comun*). The students had been asked in the previous lesson to bring along 40 stones for this lesson, and when Elisa discovers that many had not, she gives them five minutes to find them outside. Most students have returned when she begins, using the example from the LP of *O meu pai é pescador* [My father is a fisherman]. The story tells that the 135 fish caught must be divided into piles of three at the market. The problem posed is how to calculate the number of piles. Elisa demonstrates the working on the board, as per the LP.

From here, Elisa asks the students to divide their 40 stones into various groupings, demonstrating factors. All students are working through the activity and are able, when called on, to provide factors, which Elisa writes on the board and then shows the link, say, between  $40 \times 1$  and  $1 \times 40$ . She calls out students fiddling with the stones during explanations, directing them to push the stones away so they are listening.

After working through all of the hands-on activities and discussion, Elisa constructs a set of notes on the board about calculating factors, encouraging students to provide words and phrases. In fact, these notes are scripted in the LP, scattered at various points throughout the lesson, but Elisa gathers them at the end to build a summary of what has been learnt. While writing these in Portuguese, she moves back and forth into Tetum to check understanding, for example, “*Comun* iha Tetum hanesan? [what is *comun* in Tetum?]”. Elisa then gives five minutes to copy the notes before rubbing them off the board. Students work quickly and most have completed the activity in the time.

There are then ten minutes for the students to solve further algorithms. In fact, the LP does not provide practice activities, so Elisa starts the students on the homework exercises that use the knowledge of factors. She discourages the use of the stones and encourages memory of number facts instead. When most students have finished, one student at a time is called to the front to write the solution on the board for everyone to check.

Elisa finishes the lesson by reiterating that knowing how to divide is an important skill and asks the students what they have learnt today.

#### *Adapting Lesson Plans*

Like most teachers in the sample, Elisa used the LP from the New Curriculum, and her own notations indicated that she had taught this lesson a number of times over the years. She worked through all the activities, adapting the written component to a summary activity, and incorporated the homework into the actual lesson. She felt confident to change the plan in these ways, saying in her interview,

*Ha'u haree iha ne'e la hakerek maibe hau bele uza ha'u nia konesimentu. Ha'u nia konesimentu ne'ebé mak ha'u aprende hosi livru balun hodi implementa fali iha ne'e hodi labarik sira bele komprende liu.*

[I see that it's not written here but I could use my knowledge... when I see that is not clear, I use a different method so the children will understand]. Elisa

(All comments were collected in Tetum and translated by the researcher into English. For space, only English is given for the remainder of the comments.)



Other teachers agreed that adaptation was possible, for example:

*Personally, I am happy for this curriculum because it helps each person, especially me, to see and try this curriculum but doesn't mean I have to follow this [exactly], just to remind us as reference to use and get it implemented. Marcela*

However, more often, Marcela and other teachers tended to adapt by leaving out rather than re-organising and adding, as Elisa did here, as will be seen in the other case studies. The notable aspect of Elisa's lesson, rarely seen, was that she concluded the lesson as the LP suggested, reviewing what was learnt and including its use in everyday life. Most lessons, based on the LPs or not, tended to have no conclusion, even when scripted in the LP. Since many lessons exceeded the time allotted, completion was signaled by the school bell and a prayer as students left for the break or the day. In classrooms where two consecutive lessons were observed – Isabela's, Flora's and Clara's lessons – there was merely the announcement that one lesson had finished and it was time for the next one.

#### *Construction of Written Notes*

Elisa innovated the LP by moving all the lesson notes to the end of the activity, putting the emphasis on understanding the ideas *before* being written in books. In fact, she explicitly told the students not to write anything until the notes were complete and they understood the words. Pedagogically, she strategically moved from mathematical understanding to constructing the language to represent the learning, moving between Portuguese and Tetum to check understanding. Such a strategy was not seen in other classrooms, and on a practical level, it also meant that notes could be copied from the board quickly and with understanding. A more common practice observed in this study, and over many years observing other classrooms, is that students are asked to copy texts from the board and *then* the teacher explains the meaning. This appears to be an established practice for teachers who used the LPs (Isabela, Ana, Amelia, Daniel, Josefa) as well as those who didn't (Hermina, Jeronimo, Clara, Joana), despite this not being an instruction in any LP. Formal notes are typically rendered in Portuguese, but since the language is less widely understood and students have not yet learnt the new content, such copying-without-understanding is not only pedagogically illogical, it is very time-consuming and reduces the activity to an exercise in copying shapes from the board. In addition, the propensity for teachers to wait for the slowest student to complete any task before moving to the next activity means that teachers and students face considerable activity-less time as they wait for everyone to be ready. Elisa demonstrated effective use of classroom time in building up understanding of the notes which could be written up quickly.

#### *Local Materials*

Elisa made use of materials, those easily gathered from the environment. This was done effectively by a number of teachers: Tania brought in stones for Year 2 to count; Gloria used egg cartons and stones for number grouping; and, Feliciano provided a range of bamboo tubes for students to explore air force in Natural Science. Feliciano explained this as a strength of the curriculum:

*[the activities in the LPs are] good, because everything is not far from us, our experience near our lives.*

*For example, it's not difficult for us to give them boxes, empty bottles, the activity that supports us with something are all around us. Then these are instantly relevant to our everyday life.*

Daniel compares it to the previous curriculum:

*This lesson plan is appropriate with the contents of Timor .... We see, say, stones, wood, snakes, actually from Timor. For example, the previous curriculum had an elephant that doesn't exist in Timor, the children see it as a dream.*

While education aims to expand horizons, the LPs build fundamental knowledge and skills using Timorese-related objects and situations. For example, letter sounds are prompted by commonly found objects such as candles and clothing items; Health stories use Timorese families and common illnesses such as diarrhoea; and, Portuguese is learnt using Timorese stories and situations. It was common that teachers in these classrooms were aware of making links to local situations when teaching content.

### **Isabela's Lesson, Year 4, Portuguese**

Isabela has been teaching for about 10 years. Lesson PT-4-31 presents a text and students are required to order the paragraphs and answer comprehension questions. Isabela had prepared as directed by the LP by printing out copies of the text, and cutting them into paragraphs for a group activity. She spends considerable time, about 10 minutes, moving the class of 27 students into four groups, meaning there are 7 or 8 students trying to see the book with text that she has distributed.

Isabela omits the introductory activity of holding a discussion about holidays using either Portuguese or Tetum, and instead she reads it to the class. Students are expected to follow along in the textbook, although many cannot see the text. Next, each group must read the text aloud in turn to the class and then several individual students are asked to read it again to the class. Isabela asks the class about the individual reader, *was it good or not?* to which students chant *yes* and everyone applauds. This is not in the LP.

Isabela then distributes the activity: paragraphs to be re-organised into text order. She uses some of the LP instructions to explain that they must, but does not include the instruction to read the original text to help with this task. As it takes a while for students to try to read the pieces, Isabela writes on the blackboard the first word of each paragraph. Students now focus on matching the initial word rather than reading the paragraphs, complicated by the fact that two paragraphs start with *Ele* and another two start with *Quando*. Students are not actually reading or referring to the text in the book.

The LP directs that each group must wait for the teacher to check the final order and considerable time is spent waiting for Isabela to attend to each group. There is nothing to do while waiting. If she sees a mistake, Isabela re-orders the paragraphs, but does not say why or prompt students to correct the mistake. There are no instructions about how to correct mistakes in the LP. This phase takes about 30 minutes (15 mins in the LP).

The next LP activity is for students to read silently and individuals to read out parts of the text – largely completed earlier – then discuss, but Isabela turns the discussion questions into a written activity, writing both the provided discussion questions and the answers for students to copy. There is no discussion of the answers and students bring their books to Isabela when they have finished. Everyone waits for all to finish copying. Books are collected to indicate the end of the lesson. The lesson takes 65 minutes, 50 minutes on LP.

### *Contextualising New Content*

Isabela followed the LP less than Elisa, omitting activities that involved discussion, particularly those to contextualise the lesson. LPs typically begin with a strong focus on contextualising new material to be taught, linking to what has been learnt and/or showing how that new content connects to the students' world, as seen in Elisa's LP. However, like Isabela, teachers tended to disregard any initial discussion of the new content. In other examples, Feliciano omitted a discussion establishing what students already knew about air, and Tania omitted a song and discussion of counting to five. In these and other cases, teachers merely announced the lesson, wrote the heading on the board, and started the activity.

Interestingly, a few teachers who did not use the LPs tried to contextualise the lesson, but often in ways removed from the target content. For example, Jeronimo asked the students to suggest names of people which he wrote up, but the lesson was about common nouns, not proper. Graça used an image of people of various nationalities and religions, but this did not present material to assist students to understand the Martin Luther King text 'I have a dream' in Portuguese, or even the actual lesson topic, which was the structure of stanzas and verses.

Probably least contextualised were language lessons, in both Tetum and Portuguese. Ana and Amelia followed the Year 1 Tetum LPs in providing a single *imajen xave* [key image] and *liafuan xave* [key word] to exemplify a particular letter. For example, Amelia's lesson to teach the letter *l* used the word *lilin* [candle] as the key image and word, which she drew and wrote up using the LP. However, these focus letters were never shown in use inside continuous text, despite the fact that every school visited had multiple Timor-produced story books for Years 1 and 2, dating back to the UNICEF book deliveries in 2006, in addition to new reading materials provided in 2015. In fact, during the entire five weeks, no child in any class was seen holding a book that modelled any written language in use. Such de-contextualisation of language into single words or sounds contributes to the significant under-achievement has been documented in EGRA (World Bank, 2017) and suggests weaknesses in the language LPs where no reference to language in use/in texts is evident.

### *Reading Practices*

Isabela's decision to move reading of the text *before* the activity gave a more logical order to the lesson, ensuring students understood the text before having to work with it. While she did no preparation before she read it – such as previewing the text, establishing new Portuguese vocabulary or structures – reading *to* the students provided a model of the language. Students being able to *see* the text as it is read would provide additional support, but with so many students around a single copy meant that this advantage was lost. Of course, multiple print outs to read in smaller groups would be optimal, but restrictions on printing are a reality for schools.

However, the phase of multiple renderings of a single text by combinations of students and then individual students, as Isabela did, does little to understand and extend the text in any way. Such repeated reading of a text does not appear in any LP and yet its prevalence in classrooms indicated that teachers value the performance of reading, despite the fact that it ensures that only one child (or group) is active while up to 40 students are not

involved and typically, not listening. The most striking example of this was Hermina's class where a 47-word Portuguese text was read aloud 17 times, by the teacher (once), class and groups of students (five times) and then individual students (11 times). While students were keen to be that student reading to the class, it left the bulk of students unoccupied. Sometimes the teacher – e.g. Gloria, Hermina – would then engage for four or five minutes with the individual student after reading aloud, leaving the rest of the class to talk, play or wander around.

Reading in pairs – as were the actual directions in Isabela's LP – or innovating the text in some way would add much learning to classrooms. The text in Isabela's lesson could be easily innovated to use the students' experiences, for example, by changing sentences so that the students talked about themselves (**bolded** section stays the same):

Original: *O Mariano é um menino **que frequenta o quarto ano de uma escola de Same*** [Mariano is a boy **who attends Year 4 of school in Same**] [PT-4-31]

Possible innovation: *Eu sou uma menina **que frequenta o quarto ano de uma escola de Ermera*** [I am a girl **who attends Year 4 of school in Ermera**]

Importantly, such innovations would provide the opportunity to notice and teach the elements of Portuguese grammar that are not used in Tetum.

Notably, all the examples of repeated reading observed in Tetum and Portuguese lessons used texts that provided opportunities to innovate and re-work the text language, which would highlight features of the language being learnt. Helping teachers to notice and use such opportunities could encourage rich and relevant language learning.

#### *Focus on 'Correct' Answers*

In a similar way to the emphasis on reading-as-performance in Isabela's lesson was the performing and recording of correct answers, in contrast to, say, building answers to Elisa did. In simply re-arranging the paragraphs for students, Isabela was less concerned with showing students *how* to find the correct answer as *having* the correct answer. Simple prompts could have asked students to interact with, and bring attention to, the language, such as reading the whole paragraph to order the events or using the original text for comparison. Ensuring 'correct' answers in this lesson was also demonstrated in supplying the answers to the questions designed for discussion. Discussions are opportunities for teachers to gauge students' growing knowledge and reorient any misunderstandings – as Elisa demonstrated – but Isabela simply provided a set of 'correct' responses.

In a similar way, Feliciano's science lesson asked students to work with partners to write their experimentation with creating a *kilat-ar* [pea-shooter] and to then use a class discussion to clarify and include any further details:

*Have a discussion about the process they presented and fill in any missing parts* [NS-6-31]

Instead, Feliciano had each group read out their drafts, applaud, but then collected the papers before providing students with the 'correct' version to copy into their book, taken directly from the LP notes. Again, many lessons focussed on only complete and correct answers in workbooks – usually copied from the board – meaning that students missed the opportunity to write, revise and extend their first drafts, ultimately valuing 'correctness' over learning.

### **Daniel's Lesson, Year 1, Tetum**

Daniel has been teaching for 6 years and completed a three-year Diploma in primary education, the highest degree attained within the sample. He was not expecting to teach Tetum this day, but says he has been trained in all subjects and likes teaching young students. He begins the lesson using a picture of a story from the previous lesson, leading a spirited discussion of what was covered. This is followed by four songs, some with actions, but difficult to discern with 31 students shouting the words.

About 10 minutes is spent establishing lesson details as they are written on the board: the day, date, discipline and topic. There is some discussion of letters as this is done. Lesson TT-1-154 revises the letters *s, d, f, p*.

Another song, about coming to school to learn.

The LP uses the alphabet book which the school has in the staffroom, but which Daniel does not retrieve. The LP instructs to write up words using the focus letters, but Daniel starts by establishing the meaning of each word with an extended discussion before writing each one up. The students are eager to join in the discussion. They copy the words into their books, though this is not in the LP.

From the LP, Daniel writes up incomplete sentences and three choices of words to complete each sentence. He nominates a student to give the correct word and tells them if they are right. There is no explanation of how to find the right word or what might help and students appear to guess the word. Students are copying all the options and not necessarily listening. When they finish, they are asked to come for checking and Daniel gives large ticks, even though he has provided the answers. While waiting for all students complete the task, there is a lot of movement and chatter from those who are finished with nothing to do.

The next LP activity uses words with focus letters missing. Daniel sets it up on the board without explanation, so students copy the activity as written. Thus, they copy all the options again.

Many students are either waiting for him to look at their work or wandering around, doing something else, so Daniel starts a song to regain attention, but it is now nearly two hours since the class started so they are distracted. Finally, Daniel sees one of the instructions in the final part of the LP to create sentences using the words and tells the students to do that, giving a few examples orally. Only one student does this activity and takes it to him. He makes no comment, corrects her spelling and sends her back to her desk. Most students are playing, dancing or walking around.

Daniel sings another song which few students join in. The bell goes and the students run out of the room. The 50-minute lesson has run 2 hours, 10 minutes.

### *Extending Oral Language*

It is acknowledged that Daniel took the class at the last minute, underscoring why the notes to teachers emphasise being prepared: 'Read the lesson plan and try to do activities before teaching' (ME, 2015, p. 4). Yet one of the strengths of Daniel's teaching was the emphasis on both ensuring students understood the vocabulary and extended ideas through talk. For example, in considering the word *dih* [wasp], Daniel introduces the word with a short discussion, shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Daniel's Discussion

1	Daniel	(pointing to the word on the board) <i>Di-hi...agora</i>	di-hi [wasp]... now
2	Students	<i>Di-hi</i>	di-hi
3	Daniel	<i>Se mak konese dihi?</i>	Who knows a wasp?
4	Students	<i>Ha'u! Ha'u!</i>	Me! Me!
5	Daniel	<i>Dihi. Dihi ne'e tata ita katar ka midar?</i>	Wasp. Wasp bite is itchy or sweet?
6	Students	<i>Midar...midar...</i>	Sweet...sweet...
7	Student	<i>Bubu</i>	Swelling
8	Daniel	<i>Se mak bele dehan, hei mestri! Ha'u ne'e dihi tata ne'e hamnasa de'it, komik par mate..</i>	Who can say, hey teacher! I was bitten by a wasp and I just laugh, it funny to death
9	Students	<i>Ahhh...</i>	Ahhh...
10	Daniel	<i>Ne'e tanis?</i>	Here [you] cry?
11	Student	<i>Tanis..</i>	Cry..
12	Daniel	<i>Dihi tata ita ne'e tanis tebes ka bosok?</i>	A wasp bites us and we cry, true or false?
13	Students	<i>Tebes....</i>	True...
14	Daniel	<i>Tamba mo...moras</i>	Because it's pa...painful

These engaging and spirited class discussions have students eager to join in (e.g. “Me! Me!” at turn 4), yet are distinctive for restricting student language to single words or merely confirming what the teacher says (see turns 11 and 13). In fact, the students were so used to repeating the teacher that in turn 6, they repeated the last word Daniel said – which was incorrect – prompting an extended example of reacting to a wasp bite in turns 8-14. Rarely were students prompted to respond in sentences or even extended phrases, and a student offering in turn 7 was not taken up or extended. Such classroom speech patterns – here, and in most classes observed – present challenges to developing student language. Even when Elisa co-constructed her board work with her students, she prompted the students to merely complete or confirm her sentences. Such practices mean that students rarely work with content in extended oral language, except when working in groups, and even then – as seen in the lessons of Isabela and Feliciano – responses are to ultimately confirm the words of the teacher or those in the LP. Such restricted oral language practices have been observed earlier in Timorese classrooms (Quinn, 2013) and have not substantially changed with the new curriculum. Training in more dialogic practices (Alexander, 2020), might provide teachers with the practices to help students to create language texts, oral and written.

### *Creating Written Texts*

This LP had explicitly built in opportunities to use the focus words in new constructions, but as a lesson ‘extra’ rather than core activity, for example,

*If they finish quickly, tell them to make new words and try to put the words in order to form a sentence.*

[TT-1-154]

While this activity could have extended student’s written language into new words and sentences, Daniel omitted it. Later, the LP said to do much the same thing – *Tell them to try to make sentences with the words which they*

made – and having noticed this activity, Daniel did provide some valuable support for this task. He pointed to the sentences already on the board and suggesting how to change them:

*‘Sara lakohi han nia pateka’ [‘Sara doesn’t want to eat melon’: already on the board]. For example, João doesn’t want to carry a bag. I like carrying a bag.... Ana likes a new bag... You try to write one sentence in your book.*

However, the confusion students showed with this task suggested that creating sentences was not a common activity and it was certainly not seen in any lesson, at any level, during the observations. Daniel tried to assist by explaining further how to make sentences from the focus words (bolded here):

*As I have done today. I like to buy a new board...with this word: ‘Ana scared of **snakes**’....you need to do a sentence. Pedro was bitten by a **wasp**. Just choose whatever you think. Add these words to it. **Wasp**.. **bag**...Maria **winks** at me*

In the end, only one student produced any new language structures – *Ha’u foin sosa faru foun* [I just bought a new shirt]; *Ana pisku matan* [Ana winked] – while 30 other students did not move beyond copying the few focus words that the LP provided. In considering the results for early years literacy assessment (EGRA), rather than ‘if they finish’, activities that use and create language structures would be better moved to LP goals and objectives, that teachers need to move students to creating new language structures.

#### *Non-learning Time*

Like many lessons observed, a lot of this overly long lesson was spent on non-learning activity. This included watching the teacher write activities on the blackboard, despite the explicit advice to have all boardwork ready prior to the lesson, or ‘If you write during the lesson, be quick; there is not a lot of time to write beautifully’ (ME, 2014, p. 5). Transferring activities directly from the LP or textbook to the board meant that students were often needlessly writing LP instructions and *all* the activity options, as Daniel’s students did, rather than decide and write the correct version:

*tell to write each of the sentences with the answer that is correct into their notebooks* [TT-1-154]

This was similar to other Year 1 Tetum lessons where students were asked to draw the key images (e.g. the candle) and all the teachers’ instructions, those intended to prompt the letter sound rather than become a focus for activity. Time spent writing up the whole exercise or all the instructions was very common, seen in lessons by Josefa, Clara, Joana, Gloria, Julia, Flora Amelia, Ana, Isabela, Jeronimo and Hermina, taking time away from learning any content.

Singing – seven songs in all – was a feature of Daniel’s lesson even though these did not contribute to learning about *s, d, f* or *p*. Singing was felt to be important interpersonally and contribute to positive conditions for learning:

*Because they are small children, if they sit to write a lot, they talk a lot and are worn out, they don’t like it and not used to it. So, this singing, makes them feel good. This singing can pull them out [energise?], encourage them not to feel sleepy, not to feel lazy, so they are happy to learn.*

Amelia expressed similar motivational reasons for using songs:

*Singing is important because being children, when we see they don't have motivation, we would use this/singing.*

Arguably, singing as a motivator or energiser might not be needed if there less time was spent on passive activities of copying and waiting, and more focus on activities that provided opportunities for learning, such as using and creating ideas.

Thus, even at 2 hours, 10 minutes – much longer than the 50 minutes allocated – there was not much time spent on working with content, in understanding or applying new ideas. Such non-learning time was observed in many of the other classrooms and presents important challenges for increasing learning in primary school classrooms.

### **More or Less?**

From these examples of classroom practice, several practices emerged as being used more and used less by teachers. On the whole, teachers were focused on creating positive classroom experiences for students. There was a lot of applauding and positive feedback in response to students' efforts. Singing was used to bring about good feelings and, compared to what was observed in earlier classrooms (Quinn, 2013), there was less physical, verbal and emotional violence toward students. The curriculum advice promoting positive discipline and positive environment (ME, 2014, pp. 225-6) appears effective in making classrooms safer and more positive.

Part of this calmer environment could also be attributed to the changes to language policy. Possibly, teachers no longer feel pressured to only use Portuguese, a language that teachers themselves are still learning, and know that Tetum is allowed for teaching.

*I also use Tetum language to support their knowledge in what I delivered. They came from an environment where they don't speak Portuguese at home. They have the difficulties of learning Portuguese in School. We use Tetum to help them. Orlando*

Teachers were also using more local materials and examples, as suggested by the LPs, and this contributed to students recognising their lives in their learning.

Comments by teachers indicated their agency in working with the LPs, not constrained to keep strictly to the script. However, this meant that at times teachers ignored key aspects of lessons, including contextualising and expanding activities in the LPs, simply moving to activities that were more comfortable, practices that appear 'rusted on', such as choral reading and copying, practiced by teachers across the sample. Indeed, Schweisfurth et al. (2020), in their survey of curriculum reforms note that habits are difficult to change, that 'evidence on the implementation of pedagogical reforms points unequivocally to the resilience of practice and challenges in changing what teachers do' (p. 561). At times, teachers adopted what Jansen (2002, p. 200) characterised as education symbolism, in this case, adopting the behaviours of the new curriculum – e.g. groupwork, students talking together – without understanding deeper learning goals of co-constructed learning and the exploration of ideas through discussion. For example, the talking ultimately led to the teacher providing the 'correct answers' rather than student-constructed answers. Teachers placed less importance on understanding, and more on getting notes written into books, which certainly gave students something to review later, but with little guarantee of



comprehension. Stronger understanding of why the LPs contextualise new learning, unfold new content and summarise what has been learnt might help teachers to make more principled choices about how to adapt the lessons.

## **Reforming Current Curriculum**

In light of criticisms in regard to teacher autonomy, the appropriateness of scripted LPs should always be considered, but teachers in this study generally viewed the scripted instructions favourably and even some of those who did not use them mentioned this was due to access to copies (Orlando, Jeronimo) rather than any disquiet about the New Curriculum. In post-COVID-19 times, global agencies are, in fact, calling for more emphasis on ‘targeted instruction...structured pedagogy’ (UNESCO et al., 2021, p.7) in response to a so-called ‘learning recovery’ worldwide.

So, in considering any further reform, this study suggests some answers to the question:

*What changes to the current lesson plans might enhance learning in the classroom?*

The observations suggest elements of the LPs that might be further enhanced as well as areas that professional development might support teachers to understand learning better and use the LPs more effectively.

In terms of the LPs, it may be time to provide *less* scripting of answers, to break the habit of turning discussions into note-taking exercises and finding the one ‘correct’ answer. LPs might also be reviewed to foreground strategies to support students into representing their learning through oral and written language, to help them both learn content and strengthen Tetum and Portuguese. The phase of students experiencing material – exploring mathematical factors, making a pea-shooter, reading a text, etc. – needs to be followed with ways to explore the content and represent what students have learnt. Discussion should add to, not replace, the students’ own attempts to describe their learning. Work around teacher/student language in joint construction of texts (MacNaught et al., 2013; Rose, 2014) provides models for how pedagogical talk might be embedded in LPs, using the classroom languages, as an alternative to copying notes.

To build early language and literacy in Tetum and then into Portuguese, a review of LPs could embed the use of the many books and resources produced for students since 2001, to build a focus on seeing, using and replicating print. In communities where print texts are not in homes, the classroom is the prime site of literacy learning and reviewing Year 1 and 2 LPs to build in text-based practices would support building these key foundational skills.

However, LPs themselves alone will not change practice without deep understanding of what these practices mean and how they might enhance learning. It may be useful to reflect on Alexander’s (2009) definition of pedagogy, that ‘encompasses both the act of teaching and its contingent theories and debates’ and notes that ‘[p]edagogy is the discourse with which one needs to engage in order both to teach intelligently and make sense of teaching’ (p. 927): professional development planning should consider what teachers need in order to understand ‘theories and debates’, to make sense of what the LPs are asking of them. Probably most obvious in the observations was that while teachers were following the LPs for each lesson, in the busy-ness of classrooms they were not considering

– or have knowledge of – the underlying curriculum principles or the general advice to teachers, found in the front of the LP books. Professional development for teachers might re-visit some of the curriculum messages – for example, how participation enriches learning, the importance of being ready to teach – so that teachers have a greater understanding of what the LPs are trying to do and the aims of the curriculum they are implementing.

Key literacy key understandings need to be embedded professional development programs. Key oral language strategies such as extending ideas beyond the text, rehearsing ideas orally into written forms and working between languages to move into Portuguese would bring greater value to learning and the ideas that support the use of LPs. Unlike Elisa, most teachers did not appreciate the impact of comprehension on reading and writing so that strategies that moved beyond choral and copying activities would be key to engage students in their learning, more so, perhaps, than singing and applauding. Interpersonal elements are not to be ignored, but need to support learning meaningfully to enrich achievement.

Teachers in this sample demonstrated a willingness to learn more and take advice, in fact, every teacher who was interviewed asked for feedback from the researcher on how to improve their lesson from what was observed. This willingness to improve is worth capitalising on through targeted teacher support.

## **Concluding Comments**

Scripted lesson plans have been found to provide ideas and much-wanted direction to teach new content and the New Curriculum has attempted to address many content and learning needs in Timor-Leste. Teachers have shown that they are making decisions based on their knowledge of students, the local linguistic situation and what they understand as the goals of the curriculum. Based on what has been observed, less scripting and more targeted professional development might better equip teachers with pedagogical knowledge to make such decisions to enhance the learning achievement of Timorese children.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to the teachers and principals who welcomed me into their schools.

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