TIMOR LESTE COLLABORATIVE PROJECT:
A SHORT REPORT

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Introduction

This report discusses findings from a small-scale scoping study, which is part of a larger curriculum project—a collaborative venture between staff from the Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL) and a New Zealand university.

The aim of the wider project is to develop a context-sensitive English language curriculum for students at UNTL who are undergoing pre-service training to be teachers of English as a foreign language in local secondary schools. (Details of the institutional and linguistic context are provided in the appendix.) According to Norton (2000), investment by learners is a key factor in the successful implementation of a new curriculum: "if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will increase their value in the social world" (Norton, 2000, pp. 165-166). Thus, when designing the curriculum, it is important to ensure that the students will not only understand how to use the specific learning tasks but that it also expands their repertoire of skills and knowledge for application in their subsequent professional and social lives.

The report begins by outlining the history and objectives of the project before explaining the specific research questions posed for the scoping study. The means of collecting data will be outlined and examples of the participants' attitudes will be presented based on open-ended questionnaire responses. These findings will be discussed in terms of how they might lead to the design of a curriculum which is internationally-framed and context-sensitive in terms both of its content and implementation. The report will conclude with the further steps that are being taken to move the project to its next phase.

History and objectives of the project

The curriculum project was initiated in late 2005 when the second author, who had been working at UNTL on a VSA (Volunteer Service Abroad) assignment, sought research funding. Consequently, a Higher Education Exchange Programme (HEEP) scholarship was awarded by the Asia New Zealand Foundation to facilitate staff exchanges between Timor Leste and New Zealand. The Head of UNTL's English

Department visited New Zealand between March and October 2006, during which time he worked with New Zealand Applied Linguistics staff to link the existing UNTL curriculum across skill areas and also to align it with benchmarks in the European framework (Council of Europe, 2001; Little, 2006). The reformulated curriculum framework was taken back to Timor Leste, where it was discussed by UNTL staff and eventually received formal approval from the Rector for its adoption. Although funding was extended for the following year, in 2007 there were no further exchanges between the universities due to security issues in Timor Leste. However, discussions continued on developing the curriculum objectives, with a particular focus on reading and writing skills and the potential use of the Greenstone digital library (greenstone.org), the software programme FLAX (Flexible Language Acquisition) software (flax.nzdl.org), and Moodle as an open-source online learning platform. Subsequently, senior staff from UNTL visited New Zealand at various times in 2008 and were given opportunities to familiarise themselves with the above facilities. During one of these visits, formal agreement was reached to facilitate further academic collaboration between the two universities, the next step of which was to design the scoping study which is the basis of this brief report.

The study

The scoping study was intended to identify the attitudes of those UNTL staff currently responsible for teaching the writing strand of the English language curriculum, and the following two research questions guided the enquiry:
- How can the UNTL English writing curriculum meet student needs at all levels?
- What resources and support are needed to achieve the desired changes?

The data were collected by two means; firstly, a questionnaire comprising five open-ended items was issued to, and discussed with, two UNTL staff visiting New Zealand in 2008; secondly, and subsequently, a parallel questionnaire was administered to the four writing instructors at UNTL. The following outline presents a few samples, rather than the complete set, of the responses to those questionnaire items (*italicised below*) which most directly addressed the research questions.

Findings

These are verbatim responses provided by the six UNTL English Department staff in response to the survey questions. It should be noted that the respondents' first language is not English: the authors of this report have decided to give priority to accurate citation of the participants' expressed responses to the interview and survey questions. The initials in parentheses refer to the pseudonyms of the respective respondents.

What aspect of writing is the most important?
- The most important aspect of writing is word organisation or the way of how thoughts are transformed into a written language (English). (AL)
- The most important aspect of writing is outline. When the writer finishes the outline means that 50% of the writing has finished. (TC)
- Writing is a complex process that allows writer to explore thoughts and ideas and make them visible and concrete. (GC)
- Introduces topic sentence in a single paragraph and list the important point to develop the ideas. (SJ)

How is writing organised in the English Department of UNTL?
- Writing is one of the four language skills. It is a written language that exercised or used by the people in their communication. It is the hardest language skill to be learned in the schools. (TC)
- Writing at UNTL is organized in five parts. They are writing 1, 2, 3, 4 and academic writing. Academic writing should be harder than writing IV and IV harder than III and so on. From writing 1 to IV talk about general topics and some theories, for example the way how to write and some types of writing. Academic writing discusses about graphics, tables and percentages, for example, the comparison between two or three things for the first year and five years coming. (TC)

How do you teach writing?
- In writing, I use kiss style (keep it short and simple); means that one complete sentence should have one subject, one predicate and one object and then full stop. If the writing has more than one idea should be put into two or three sentences. Then, to link the deferent (sic) ideas, the writer uses the links of conjunction or connective words, like and, but, in addition, moreover, furthermore and finally; and so forth. In the paper, the writer determines the topic, then, introduces some important points in introduction and then later will be discussed in the body (like: body 1, 2, 3, and 4) and finally come up with conclusion. (TC)

What could be done to improve the English writing curriculum?
- The teachers need to create small workshops to discuss the way how to develop writing skills, sharing materials read from different sources about writing, asking and using feedback from students about what they what to learning in developing their writing skills. (AL)
- To give some home works and some papers for students to do at home and then come check individually or in groups in the classroom. (TC)
- We do not have clue or way how to develop the curriculum therefore we need the experts of writing to see and set up the levels of the writing to each semester in our department. (SA)
- To improve English curriculum at UNTL, we need to decide material's baseline or resources for each year. (SJ)

What resources or materials do you need to make these improvements?
- There is a need of books and resources in relation to theories and practices of writing and how to develop students writing skills. (AL)
- The need of self-access materials for teachers and students to have access and there should be other electronic resources available. (AL)
- The materials used to improve writing subjects are some books, such as let write, step of writing, successful writing and some note taken from the internet. (TC)
- The resources should be based on baseline need and we are highly to hear your advice what are resources applicable for improvement. (SJ)

Discussion: Addressing the research questions

Throughout these responses by the instructors there is a consistent theme, which reflects their belief that provision of appropriate resources, in the form of writing textbooks and course materials, will assist them greatly in their desire to improve the quality of their students' written English output. At present there is a shortage of such resources, and this strongly-held perception assists us in addressing the first research question, "How can the UNTL English writing curriculum meet student needs at all levels?"

Investment, as defined by Norton (2000) and by Norton and Toohey (2001), seems to be a key issue here. UNTL students' engagement with English, especially in terms of reading, writing and academic literacy practices, is constrained by practicalities such as large class sizes and economic considerations which mean that most students cannot afford coursebooks and other learning materials such as pedagogical grammar texts.

There are very few English texts available in the environment outside the university. There is one English newspaper written for an expatriate audience, and some pages written in English in other multilingual newspapers (Taylor-Leech, 2009, pp. 8-11). Hence it is felt that access to more relevant and interesting texts would benefit and stimulate the students, especially if a sense of shared ownership of these texts between instructors and students could be encouraged. One recommendation to be pursued by the UNTL staff is developing a collection or corpus of written texts by students which can serve as local models at the different levels in the curriculum.

In addition to accessing English-language materials, another way to approach the issue of learner investment is to consider an appropriate pedagogical approach to reading and writing. The responses to the questionnaire seem to indicate a fairly conventional teacher-directed approach, and this is confirmed by the second author's experience while working at UNTL. It may be thought that a more learner-centred task-based strategy could be adopted, on the basis that appropriate tasks can provide both the input and output processing necessary for language learning. If the tasks relate to the students' needs and interests, learners' motivation (and hence investment) is enhanced both by carrying out the task and by achieving the outcomes (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 229). This may be schematised in Figure 1, below:
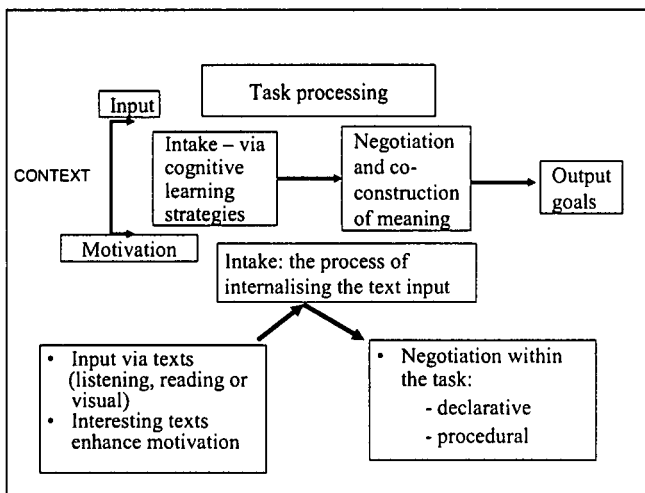
Figure 1: *Tasks in second language learning*

The research team intends to explore in more detail how such a task-based approach to the teaching of (specifically) writing might fit into the ecology of UNTL, and the extent to which the use of Greenstone and FLAX could ameliorate some of the problems of teaching large classes of trainee teachers. Electronic storage of texts in digital library collections could overcome the lack of printed resource materials for English-language reading and writing instruction. And the FLAX software has the potential to empower the UNTL English staff - and their students - to develop their own reading and writing tasks, using an expanding collection of digital library texts selected in terms of appropriate content and language level.

Conclusion: The next phase

It is hoped that the UNTL students will invest in both the material resources of the project (the digital software) and in the symbolic tools (the interactive negotiation and co-construction of meaning involved in task processing). Not only will such investment develop their repertoire of immediate learning skills, but it will also enhance their value in the social and professional world (Norton, 2000).

However, we also wish to take the notion of investment in two further directions. Firstly, the staff directly concerned in teaching writing at UNTL need to make professional and personal investments in the curriculum project. This means that the project team must ensure that not only are the instructors fully informed about the aims, objectives and processes involved, but that they are full participants in the innovation. Thus, at various times during 2009, members of the New Zealand team will each spend several weeks in Timor Leste, working alongside the local staff to co-

construct mutual understanding of both the content and process of the curriculum, and the opportunities and constraints to its implementation afforded by the local context. Assuming that conditions are favourable, and that the local staff are willing to invest personal time and effort, further opportunities for graduate and postgraduate study in New Zealand will be considered.

This involves the second, more conventional notion of investment: that of financial resources. Fortunately, sufficient research funds have been provided to allow the New Zealand team to make the 2009 visits to Timor Leste and also to obtain requisite equipment and material. Thereafter, further funds will be sought, not only from New Zealand, but also from other agencies, both international and local—i.e. in Timor Leste. While the balance of financial investment, and opportunity cost, will differ among the various stakeholders, it is considered necessary that each should feel equal partners in the collaborative venture.

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Appendix

A. Institutional context

Universidade National Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL) is the National University of Timor Leste. It has a student body of about 8,000. There are seven faculties in the University: Agriculture, Political Science, Economics, Science & Education, Engineering and Medicine and Law. There are about 280 permanent academic staff and a number of part time staff as well.

The university opened during the Indonesian era (1976 – 1999) and reopened in November 2000, after closing during the civil unrest and accompanying destruction in late 1999. The University reopened with mainly Timorese staff, very few resources and with buildings still being rebuilt and restored. The university continues to rebuild both in terms of its professional and its physical capacity until today.

The collaborative project is situated in the Faculty of Science and Education, in the English Department. The faculty is also the government's teacher training institution, preparing science and foreign language teachers for secondary teaching. Students undertake a four year degree course which culminates in delivery of a thesis paper. Students mostly enter the University from senior High School, although since the end of the independence struggle there has been a cohort of more mature students, whose study was disrupted or who themselves participated in that struggle. There is a demand for places at UNTL as the government has set a low fee structure for the university. In 2000, the English Department received about 1000 applications for 169 places.

Class sizes at the university are now lower than in previous years, with about 30 - 40 students in each class. The classrooms are generally light and airy with a whiteboard at the front and desks and chairs available for the students. There is a central library available for all students. It contains a wide selection of books, many of which have been donated from Australia.

The degree course in the English Department has 160 credits. The papers are taken over 8 semesters with the first four semesters focusing on building English language competency. The curriculum is quite diverse, including Teacher Education subjects, Linguistics subjects, both general and applied, as well as English Literature. One semester is given to a paper called Community Service where students visit sites throughout Timor Leste and participate in development of that community. In Semester 6 students start preparing their thesis which is presented and defended in front of three examiners in Semester 8.

Graduates can then apply to the Ministry of Education for a position in a school or look for other work in NGOs or other positions where English language is required such as in embassies or international organizations operating in Timor Leste.

The following is taken from a report by the second author submitted during her assignment at UNTL in 2005:

> The multilingual environment is very exciting but also brings challenges for the English Department. There seems to be quite strong motivation on the students' part to develop their English language skills and an equal desire on the part of the staff to see the students become fluent and accurate users of English, particularly in their role as prospective teachers of English.
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> *Writing.* The students' ability in writing does not match their oral skills. There are some students who are able to write a coherent and cohesive written text, but my observation is that there are some major difficulties experienced by the majority of students when attempting academic writing. It seems that they may be able to grasp the structure of, for instance the present perfect when it is an item in a list, but when required to use it in a text there seem to be difficulties.
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> After reading about 40 exam scripts, where students were asked to do some writing which was fairly straightforward, e.g. write an 8-sentence narrative and an informal letter to their auntie, I think that some serious consideration needs to be given to assist the students to write well. Once again their motivation is high but there seem to be major hurdles. There is a lot of work to do at sentence level.

B. Linguistic context

The official languages of Timor Leste are Portuguese and Tetum. Bahasa Indonesia and English are defined as working languages under the Constitution.

Tetum is an Austronesian language, one variety of which is spoken around the capital city, Dili. Other dialects of Tetum are also widely used in the country, including Tetun-Terik, and there are at least 15 other indigenous languages in the country. Along with other local languages, Tetum is the most common means of communication between Timorese (Hajek, 2000, p. 401). A large proportion of the lexis of Tetum is derived from Portuguese (Van Engelenhoven & Williams-van Klinken, 2006, p.735), and it has therefore been described as a creole.

Under Indonesian rule, the use of Portuguese was banned, but it was used by the clandestine resistance, especially in communicating through spoken and written channels with the outside world (Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2008). Portuguese and Tetum thus gained importance as symbols of resistance and were later adopted as the two official languages.

The main mediums of instruction at the university at the moment are Portuguese and Bahasa Indonesia. Portuguese has been designated as the language of instruction for schools and teachers are being supported to learn the language using instructors from

Brazil and Portugal. UNTL staff report that there is frequent mixing of languages and negotiation over language choices between lecturers and students, both within and outside the classroom.

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Timor Leste has a strong oral culture. Many of its customary songs and poems are part of a rich tradition passed down through generations. "The Timorese people have a rich oral tradition in which mythology and legend play an important role in passing on knowledge about the pre-colonial period and the later evolution of the kingdoms." (Government of Timor Leste,
http://www.timorleste.gov.tl/AboutTimorleste_rename/culture.htm)

Over 90% of Timor Leste's population are Roman Catholics. The Catholic Church under the Portuguese regime was largely responsible for increasing literacy in the population, and many Timorese high school graduates went on to complete further studies in Portugal. During the Indonesian era Bahasa Indonesia was taught in schools and the school system at all levels was developed using Indonesian textbooks.

Evidence of a well developed use of literacy is found in Cabral & Martin Jones's (2008) article "Writing the Resistance: Literacy in East Timor 1975-1999". This article explains how literacy in different languages was embedded in the struggle for independence. Literacy practices were used to mediate the struggle using multilingual texts as dictated by the situation at that time. They were used on three fronts, the armed front, the clandestine front and the diplomatic front. Tetum and Portuguese were the main languages used.

Students at Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e show competence in at least three languages; their mother tongue, Tetum and Bahasa Indonesia. Some have a degree of fluency in Portuguese and only very few enter the university with a high level of fluency in English.