

THE RIGHT TO READ

WORK OF THE MARY MACKILLOP INSTITUTE OF EAST TIMORESE STUDIES

INTRODUCTION

The Mary MacKillop Institute of East Timorese Studies has produced a literacy program for use in the schools of East Timor entitled *Mai Hatene Tetun* (Let's Learn Tetun) which is the first comprehensive program for the sequential teaching of literacy to Tetun-speaking primary school children. This paper presents the educational principles upon which the program's approach to literacy and language is based, presenting research which proposes that students will find success in other languages and other school subjects only through an education which uses, values and develops their mother tongues. It will show that the program has been developed on the basis of issues of the relationship of language to Timorese identity, and on the human right of all people to the preservation, acceptance and promotion of their mother tongues, and to a bilingual education which honours those languages.

The analysis of the *Mai Hatene Tetun* Literacy Program throughout this paper will demonstrate that its rationale and content as shown in the teacher's manuals, readers and resources are based firmly on the accepted principles of mother tongue education, which flow from a sociocultural-sociolinguistic approach to the teaching of literacy. The program is founded on a functional view of language which gives primary emphasis to the relationship between language and meaning. It has been written for the children of East Timor so that they can look at their own experiences, use their imaginative capacities and communicate their thoughts, feelings and ideas" (Ward, 1998). The paper will demonstrate that *Mai Hatene Tetun* makes sense to its readers because it arises from their culture. It is an effective teaching tool because it has relevance to their lives. It approaches decoding skills using texts which convey meaning for the student whilst using teaching strategies which are broad and thorough enough to ensure the gaining of the appropriate skills needed in decontextualised settings.

Materials for Grades 1-4 only will be investigated, as those for Years 5 and 6 are still in process. Further materials are being generated for Kindergarten, a level of schooling which has only very recently been established in Timor, but as yet that section is also incomplete. The principles upon which the stories and teaching methods of Grades 1-4 depend apply equally to those grades still unfinished. As a comprehensive and systematic first language teaching program, *Mai Hatene Tetun* is a good example of the type of foundation necessary for the education of Timorese children. **IDENTITY**

The *Mai Hatene Tetun* Program is the only primary school teaching resource in the Tetun language at the time of writing this paper. There are several historical and political reasons for this, factors which have prevented the development of educational materials in Tetun or other indigenous Timorese languages.

The achievement of independence by the East Timorese people in 2002 came out of a struggle for identity over hundreds of years. Disparate tribal groups were separated by rugged terrain and consequently by different languages, and were visited only occasionally by traders. Claimed by Portugal in the 16th century, Timor remained for centuries and isolated outpost, administered in a haze of apathy (Dunn, 1996). As with its other colonies, Portugal placed little emphasis on education in Timor, developing

some basic systematic educational services only after World War II (Gunn, 1994, p.39). In 1974, the year Portugal withdrew, East Timor had an illiteracy rate of about 93% (Taylor, 1991, p.34). Such neglect had serious consequences in following years as it was a major contributor to the vacuum of leadership which helped pave the way for initial Indonesian success in its invasion of East Timor in 1975.

Unwittingly, Portugal's "benign neglect" contributed to the preservation of a relatively stable traditional Timorese culture, and through a similar paradox, the very oppression by Indonesia kept the Timorese people's nationalistic fervour alive. With many language groups, fiercely independent family units, complex marital and commercial exchange systems, animist religious practices and effective health treatment and cures, Timor quietly flourished during the four and a half centuries of Portuguese rule. Despite major differences of opinion and political persuasion the Timorese sense of identity became obvious to the world in the ballot of August 30, 1999, where in the face of the certain fury of Indonesia, 78.65% of Timorese claimed independence as their preferred choice, rejecting an offer of autonomy.

The previous neglect of education under Portugal ensured that the Portuguese language did not achieve the status of *lingua franca*, an honour reserved for the Tetun language, albeit one with Portuguese influence. The educational institutions conducted by the Catholic Church catered mainly to the Portuguese people living in Timor and to a small percentage of Timorese leaders educated for the purpose of administering the colony. The ordinary people tended to see Christianity as the religion of the elite and with the local languages and customs being ignored both in education and in liturgy, becoming Christian was seen as becoming culturally Portuguese. Despite their influence on the Timorese people the very neglect of education by the Portuguese ensured that the term "Portuguese East Timor" described the territory only in an official way and therefore to a superficial extent. It is significant then that in the census of 1952, a mere 13% of the population of Timor was Catholic, growing to about 30% in 1974 (Dunn, 1996, p.44). A truly hybrid culture would have manifested greater evidence of its roots in the important matters of language and religion. The fact that over 90% of the Timorese are now Catholic stems more from the requirements of the Indonesian *Pancasila* that all must belong to one of the five main religions than to Portuguese missionary zeal. Two Portuguese cultural lynchpins, language and religion, were therefore largely missing from the lives of the ordinary people for most of Timor's colonization. Current efforts by some to present Timorese identity as fundamentally Portuguese ignore the experience of the great majority of the population.

The invasion and occupation of East Timor by Indonesia in 1975 resulted in the deaths of one third of the population by the early 1980's and was characterised by a process of Indonesianisation of the survivors. Murder, torture, rape, enforced sterilization were used to great effect. Forced re-settlement resulted in widespread starvation over many seasons. Massacres were common, whole villages obliterated. The complicity of Western powers in their efforts to placate and exploit Indonesia resulted in a long silence where the voice of the Timorese people was not heard despite their proximity to Australia and the technological advances of the mass media. Only when 400 teenagers were filmed being shot in the cemetery at Santa Cruz, Dili in November 1991 did the world at last ask what was happening in East Timor, thus setting in train a ten year process which saw the Timorese people's claim to their own identity acknowledged. Timor Lorosa'e became the world's first new democracy of the 21st century.

Timorese identity is very much a matter of hot dispute both among the Timorese themselves and among those who have watched their amazing resilience from the outside. It is for the Timorese people to decide who they are and in what languages they will express themselves. Among many questions the Timorese people struggle with are: "From where do we derive our true identity?" and "How can the children best be educated?" These questions are related to the issue of Portugal, because some influential sections of the society, notably those who received an education in Portuguese times and who maintain that the Timorese identity derives from Portugal, champion the Portuguese language and accept the ensuing cultural and educational consequences. Portuguese has been named an official language in the Constitution of East Timor.

Tetun and Portuguese shall be the official languages in the Democratic Republic of East Timor. (Government, 2002, Section 13.1)

The Purpose of the Mary MacKillop Institute is to serve some of the educational needs of the children of Timor Lorosa'e which requires recognition of the obvious fact that when Timorese people speak to each other, they do not do so in Portuguese. They use Tetun or one of the other indigenous languages. Portuguese has been a forbidden language for 25 years. Few children hear Portuguese spoken at home, as only five percent of the population can speak it.

The position of Bahasa Indonesia as a widespread language in East Timor is not particularly relevant to the discussion. The reality of school and university life requires that this language still be used, but as an imposition of very recent origin and as the language of a very recent oppressor it is not popular and is not widely spoken in the home, having therefore little to offer in the formative years.

It is the indigenous Timorese languages with which children are familiar, not Portuguese, not English. Sound educational practice advises that for success in schoolwork, children must learn in the language that they know. (Cummins, 2001). So for East Timorese children, the only truly successful education is that which is conducted in their own language, the language they speak at home, and for a considerable number, that language is Tetun. (Government, 2002 , p.106) The issues of identity and language are fundamentally interrelated and the decisions taken about one profoundly affect the other. This paper will detail universally accepted evidence that children have the right to be taught properly, which requires that the language(s) they know must be the medium of instruction, whilst demonstrating that the Mary MacKillop Institute program *Mai Hatene Tetun* does just that.

LANGUAGE ISSUES IN EAST TIMOR

Huge challenges are faced by people who speak a different language from the majority of others in their current society. Either they have emigrated to that place or have been born into a family whose migration is recent enough to mean that a language other than the one dominant in the culture is used in the home. Others who experience language dislocation are those for whom the language of a colonial power has become the main organ of official operation, and whose indigenous languages, often many and varied, have been set aside. For example, the large influx of migrants to Australia since the Second World War meant that many people have had to learn English as a second language. The language learning difficulties faced by migrant children in Australia are diverse, necessitating specialist teachers and courses such as *English as a Second language*. Learning a language foreign to the home environment can be a daunting task

for such children but at least the purpose is apparent to them as they know that they are learning something which has clear and immediate benefit in their lives. The Aboriginal people in Australia have had a very different experience, with the language of the coloniser being thrust upon them. These people must deal with English, a dominant foreign language which has become part and parcel of social and official life after many years of colonization.

For the Timorese, the experience is different again, as it is a question of discarding one dominant language which was imposed on them, Bahasa Indonesia, and having it replaced with another, Portuguese, in a relatively short time-span. Portuguese has been named an official language along with Tetun after 25 years of being forbidden. This official decision means that in Timor, generations of people cannot speak or read or write the suddenly official Portuguese language. As Portuguese is spoken by only 5% of the population, the obvious intention of the Government is that the rising generations will have to learn it. The practicalities of undertaking this task are enormous, considering that there are so few teachers in East Timor who are Portuguese speakers. In the 922 schools in Timor, there are only 158 such teachers (Government, 2003, p.72). Some of these people have received no teacher training. Some are elderly persons who were engaged to stand in front of classes simply because they could speak Portuguese, sometimes replacing younger teachers with some experience who were replaced because of this language question (T. Ward, personal communication, May 15, 2003)

For Timorese children, to learn Portuguese whilst not yet being literate in the language of the home, the task approaches total meaninglessness. Tess Ward relates:

“A story was told to me of a little girl who refused to go to school after only a few weeks into the school year 2001. She said to her mother, ‘I’m never going back to school again because I can’t understand Portuguese’. No matter what the mother did, the child would leave the school and come home. She was a child with potential but she could not continue because of frustration”. (T.Ward, personal communication October 5 2003)

The writer has personal knowledge of a young man who was anxious to enroll in a trade course conducted in a language he could understand because the one he was attending used Portuguese and he learned little. Opposition among ordinary people to the re-introduction of Portuguese is widespread, as can be easily ascertained by anyone taking the time to talk to Timorese people on the subject either within East Timor or outside of it.

East Timor’s language reality is complicated not only through the presence of Bahasa Indonesia and Portuguese, but through the diversity of indigenous Timorese languages. The *Timor-Leste: Poverty in a New Nation* report (Government, 2003, p.106) shows that whilst Tetun is spoken by 80% of the people it is the basic mother tongue of only 10%. Other main mother tongues are *Mambae* claimed by 25% of the population as the mother tongue, *Makasae* by 10%, *Kemak* by 8% and *Bunak* by 10%. A thorough program recognizing the importance of mother tongue education would treat all these languages similarly, that is, with resources and tuition in those languages in the formative years. However, the economic, educational and political reality in East Timor at the present time means that there is more chance of generating reading materials in the widely-used Tetun language than there is for the others. Despite Tetun’s position as the mother tongue of only 10% of the population, its use as the vernacular by 80% invests

it with great importance. The people move easily from one language to another. A concerted program aiming at Tetun literacy could be used to raise the status of all Timorese indigenous languages, by committing resources to recognize and foster an element of culture which the Portuguese did so little to develop and the Indonesians did so much to destroy.

In the Timorese education systems there are requirements for the children to be taught Portuguese, and to be taught using Portuguese as the language of instruction for general subjects. A wide variety of opinion and compliance exists in response to these language directives, but the official position as it stands necessarily determines Timorese education as bilingual, as the population now has two official languages. The East Timorese, already a multilingual people, will have to learn Portuguese as a second, third or fourth language, and for this the children require an education system which is bilingual.

BILINGUALISM

Bilingualism is the “consecutive or simultaneous learning or acquisition of a second language and involves issues of language competence, performance, ability, proficiency, and achievement” (Laubeová 2000). Bilingual education aims at biliteracy so that children have access to the full array of means of communication in at least some of the languages operating in their culture. Far from being a hindrance to education, there are strong reasons for supporting children in their bilingualism. They come to understand what language is and how they can use it effectively. They can see more deeply that language is a way of organizing and dealing with reality. Bilingualism promotes flexible thinking. The task of processing information and solving problems is enhanced by grappling with them in different languages (Cummins, 2001)

Cummins and others who publish bilingualism discussions usually deal with situations where the first language (L1) is the mother-tongue and the second language of the child (L2) is the dominant official language for which a great deal of reading matter and teaching resources are available. There is only slight similarity here with the Timorese situation. With the great majority of people in East Timor communicating competently in Tetun, that language is accepted as the L1 in this study, although it must be acknowledged that there are other strong indigenous languages in East Timor to which the principles of bilingual education should apply. Officially the L2 of East Timor is Portuguese, but while it may be official, its dominance is undermined by lack of resources.

The education system in East Timor is not bilingual. There is little reading matter for children in any language, let alone Tetun, and what is written for them in Portuguese deals with anything but Timor, its life and its people. The instructional program existing in all Timorese schools for the teaching of Portuguese has been written for Portuguese-speaking children going to school in Portugal. It does not approach the language from the point of view of a speaker of other languages on the other side of the world. It is not a “Portuguese as a Second Language” program. The writer saw instructional books which have been provided to the schools in Timor for the teaching of Portuguese. Early pages showed various phonemes in large letters, e.g. “fa”, “fe”, “fi” etc. without any link to any content at all, so that children were presumably to learn sounds in isolation to meaning. When content was introduced, it had nothing to do with a Timorese child’s experience, as it was about children in Portugal. Very different experiences of the use of the Tetun *Mai Hatene Tetun* program can be related:

“One of my most encouraging experiences was to see a child take a Tetun book and actually read it right through, probably by memory reading. That gave me great joy, because I could see that the child knew what she was doing and understood the story. The other children around were happy also; it was obvious they understood what she was saying. They mimicked her, showing that the experience had interest and meaning for them; they wanted to be able to read too. It was so unlike the continual chanting of Bahasa Indonesia that we were used to hearing and seeing”.

T. Ward, personal communication, October 5, 2003)

Since language is a primary symbol in cultural transmission, for people to successfully maintain their identity and transmit their culture to their children, the use of the fundamental symbol of the home language must be given its rightful place. Bishop Carlos Belo has been in the forefront of educational understanding in regard to language use in East Timor. One of his first actions as Bishop in the early 1980's was to decree that all religious activities were to be undertaken in the Tetun language, and it was he who requested the program now under discussion in this paper for the schools. Soon after the arrival of the Interfet troops and the beginning of the establishment of order in East Timor in 1999, Bishop Belo said that he didn't want his people to lose the sense of who they are. Acknowledging that Portuguese would probably be used he commented that the people did not understand Portuguese. He said that it was more important than ever to continue using Tetun and that it would continue to be used in the church (T. Ward, personal communication, October 5, 2003).

Promotion of mother tongue learning is an integral part of bilingual education.

One of Dr Jim Cummins' most important contributions to the bilingual debate is recognition of the importance of the language used in the home to an effective education. He says that bilingual children perform better in school when they are effectively taught their mother tongue and, where appropriate, they develop literacy in that language (Cummins, 2001). Faced with its multilingual reality, East Timor requires strong policies and programs in mother tongue education so that the demands of the Constitution may be met: *“Tetum and the other national languages shall be valued and developed by the State”* (Government, 2002, Section 13.2)

By the time he or she reaches school age, a child has had years of interaction with adults and peers using a common language, the mother tongue. The child has learnt about the family, the society and his or her life environment through the medium of this language and has spent years expressing his or her response to life using it. The meaning of life as far as the child understands it has been interiorised and expressed largely through the mother tongue. It is through this language that the child comprehends, makes sense, tells jokes, prays, plays, is sung to sleep, questions, and fulminates against the world on occasion. This meaningful communication within his or her world is carried almost wholly by language. Meaning is a central function of language and an essential component of it. (Cummins, 1984).

Having achieved facility in speaking the mother tongue during infancy, a facility which grows as meaning and comprehension grow, the child enrolls in school for the purpose of further education and socialisation and so that the meaning of the wider community and world can be grasped. Here the mother tongue is the one essential vehicle to carry the child forward. A second language may indeed be the social requirement of this or

that education system, but if any meaning is to be conveyed to the child and if the child is to be able to contribute meaningfully to the world, then the mother tongue must have its rightful place.

A large body of literature is currently being produced about the importance of mother tongue education, that is, the understanding that people achieve greater educational success and satisfaction if the initial language used in their instruction is the language with which they are most familiar (Cummins, 1984; Spolsky, 1986; Gibbons, 1992; Millar, 1997; Cummins, 2000; Kenner, 2000). Major questions are related to this current debate, e.g. “To what extent does learning to read resemble learning to talk?” “In what ways is literacy wider than reading and writing?” “In what ways have advances in the various fields of educational psychology affected literacy and linguistics?” and also, “What political realities affect education, particularly the various literacies required by people in an increasingly complex world?”

Bilingual Education Supports the Individual and Society

Geertz (1973) defines culture as “... a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which humans communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitude towards life and reality” (p.89). Culture then, is the way a people make sense out of life, and the primary symbol of culture is language. Patanyak (1986) refers to the emotional importance of the “speech community”, whose traditions and mythology are maintained by traditional languages. Loss of the mother tongue results in a “loss of rootedness” in the culture leading to emotional and intellectual impoverishment (p.7). Loss of mother tongues leads to the “atrophy of indigenous cultures” (p.5).

Use of the mother tongue in education is therefore not only essential for a child's progress in subsequent languages and in general education, but it is also necessary for personal well-being and hence, the betterment of society. The importance of bilingual children's mother tongue for their personal and educational development cannot be overestimated. The denigration of the mother tongue by neglect affects students' view of themselves and the society which formed them. A perception that their mother tongue is useless raises questions in the student's mind about their own value and the value of their culture to general society, and leads to the erroneous belief that its use will not lead to intellectual success (Daniel, 2003)

The writer of this paper experienced these very attitudes towards the languages of East Timor in the expatriate community in Sydney over some years. It was difficult to convince the people that hymns in their own language were acceptable in Church, as they had been raised on the belief that Portuguese was preferable because it was “more advanced”. Similar attitudes to indigenous languages were witnessed in Indonesian textbooks used in East Timor where Tetun was relegated to “the language your grandmother speaks in the marketplace.”

Cummins (2001) alludes to practices in some societies where children were punished for speaking their home language and says that while that may not be the case so often now, there is still a strong message abroad that success in society accompanies abandonment of language and culture. Many Timorese can relate events where they were punished for speaking Tetun, both by the Portuguese and by Indonesians. Cummins points out that an

abundance of multilingual and multicultural resources enhances the global community and maximizes variety and diversity. Linguistic resources bring richness to any nation, and any attempt to destroy language or culture diminishes the society, disadvantaging it socially and economically. Undoubtedly there are many problems involved with the provision of mother tongue education but the weight of international opinion on its importance requires respectful and intelligent response from educators. The alternate to bilingual programs would be millions of people increasingly disaffected, resentful of the denigration of their cultures and of the attempt to force them into a monochrome world from which they benefit least.

Mother Tongue Education is a Right

The side-lining of indigenous languages and cultures is an attack upon language and therefore an attack upon the identity of the coming generations, constituting a violation of children's rights. Cummins (2001) maintains that the child is rejected when his or her language is rejected, resulting in the likelihood that the child will be unable to participate confidently. He calls on teachers to take an active role in promoting the children's languages in practical ways, e.g., by affirmation and by encouraging children to write in their first language.

An education which uses and respects mother tongues is increasingly recognized as a fundamental human right. (Waters, 2001) summarises the linguistic bill of rights promoted by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas: Every [child] has the right:

1. **to identify** with their mother tongue and have this identification be accepted and respected by others;
2. **to learn** the mother tongue(s) fully, orally and in writing. This means that in all schools, including Government financed ones, children would be educated mainly by teachers using the mother tongues(s) of the children
3. **to use** the mother tongue in most official situations (including schools) Everybody whose mother tongue is not an official language in the country where she or he resides has the right to become multilingual. In this way the right of every child to profit from education would be realised.

Patanayak (1986) hints at the political and economic issues inherent in the favouring of the mother tongues of the majority:

“Educational use of mother tongue is validated for the majority mother tongues in the world and its denial to minorities is discrimination against them and a violation of a fundamental human right” (p.14)

Such rights are recognised internationally through the United Nations in theory at least. In 1948, the United Nations recognised education as a right (UN, 1948). Upholding the importance of the mother tongue to a true education, UNESCO proclaimed International Mother Language Day in 1999 which is marked on February 21 each year and also promulgated the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) emphasizing the importance of languages and calling for action against their disappearance (Daniel, 2003)

The dominance of a few European languages as a result of colonization and the new colonization of mind and thought brought about by the economic and military advantage of the West means that minorities everywhere struggle to find a voice, and this in the most glaring way possible, that of having their very languages threatened. The child is the inheritor of the culture and the only promise of its continuance. On the child's right to education in the mother tongue rests the survival of the language and cultures of the minorities of the world, and with that, the essential diversification of ideas, creativity, of thought and political power. Current decisions on education and language in East Timor will have profound impact on its future society.

The educational principles behind the approach to literacy endorsed and practised by the Mary MacKillop Institute arise from human rights. Children have the right to be taught in their mother tongue. The "*Let's Learn Tetun*" program consists of a holistic approach to teaching reading with the focus on the students' social context within which meaning is accorded its rightful place, as well as a systematic procedure for teaching related phonic skills. The goals of the Mary MacKillop Institute's Tetun Literacy program address both the principles which form the foundation of mother tongue education, and the right of a person to have such an education:

- To assist in the preservation of the culture, heritage and language of a unique indigenous minority people, the Tetun speakers of East Timor.
- To develop a literacy program which is language and culture rich for children who are Tetun speaking in East Timor, so that children can develop and maintain their own identity as East Timorese.
- To develop Tetun speaking children's competence in using their language and to enable them to become literate in it so as to be able to express themselves and to be proud of their heritage as East Timorese.
- To allow children to gain self esteem and to understand that their language and culture are worthwhile, good and important and so counteract some of the detrimental effects that years of oppression have had on the children's development.
- To use the language familiar to the child so that the academic goals of education will more easily be achieved. Children whose education is firmly grounded in their own language and culture have a much better chance of understanding and coping with the complexities of other languages and cultures with which they may be confronted. (Ward, 1998, p.2)

THEORIES OF LITERACY

Current theories of literacy distinguish between the older and more restricted meaning of "being able to read and write" and the much broader understanding that there are many literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Lo Bianco & Freebody, 2001; Collins & Blot, 2003). For example, numeracy is the literacy which deals with numbers; the "computer literacy" of young people can be astounding. A young Timorese man recently spent three months in Australia learning to mend sewing machines. His remarkable dexterity and natural ability gives him a high level of mechanical "literacy", although he can neither read nor write.

“(The) impressive diversity of possible literacies – from oral literacy to stimulation reading – suggests that “literacy” as a key work in our culture, has a status in the current era rather like that of “science” in the nineteenth (sic); it refers loosely to any body of systematic useful knowledge” (Collins & Blot, (2003), p.3).

However, Timor’s development as a viable nation requires education of the people, and education in the 21st century requires written language literacy, a fact clearly understood by the Timorese people generally. The current illiteracy rate of 52% (Government, 2003, p.xv) arises from the lack of educational opportunities in the past. Sister Tess Ward has come upon people from four small villages in the mountains of the south-west of East Timor, people who had heard of her visit to a more established centre and who had walked for four hours down to meet her. Their one request was for a school for their children. School fees in both State and Church-run schools are causing financial hardship for many families, even though the usual rate is about \$US3.00 per month. Despite this, one of the successes of the newly-independent Timorese nation, which indicates the determination of the people to educate their children, is the increase in overall school enrolments since 1999 despite the destruction of 95% of the school buildings. (Government, 2003, p.65).

Investigation of the nature of reading itself accompanies any deliberation on literacy or literacies. In western English-speaking nations there are strongly held positions on the best ways to teach reading. Behaviourist schools of thought equated reading solely with decoding activities, believing that given the right set of tools, particularly, the ability to break words up into their basic phonic components, the student would be able to piece it all together and understand the meaning of the passage. In its extreme form, such a view holds that literacy once achieved is the same everywhere, that its nature is fixed and unchanging. Once you can read, you can read. (Collins & Blot, 2003). Significant research over several recent decades has successfully challenged this view. From the 1960’s onwards, insights of linguists contributed significantly to studies of the reading process. The psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic approaches to reading, and a combination of these, demonstrated the close connection between the written word and the skills of writing, speaking and listening.

The ease with which children acquire oral language early in life shows that oral expression of thought is natural. As members of a language community, children quickly attain proficiency in mimicking and practicing recognizable sounds and silences which have meaning for them and those around them. Children realise very quickly that language has purpose, that it functions in their day to day existence as a tool for meeting their needs and generally establishing communication. (Halliday, as cited in Ruddell, 1994). The spoken word expresses the thoughts of the mind but can only do so when the words used have shared meaning between speaker and listener. No matter how hilarious the joke, laughter will only arise if the hearer “sees it”. An erudite speech or clear instructions are useless if spoken in a language unknown to the listener. Meaning is everything.

Ruddell (1994) summarized some of the means by which written language uses symbols to express oral language:

- Phonemes represent the basic units of sound,
- Spaces discriminate between manageable units, and between units of similar sound but different meaning,

- Orthography establishes conventions of writing and spelling
- Typography introduces elements expressing various forms of stress, e.g. underlining.

The ability to read and write these written symbols of language depends on meaningful content similar to that required in oral communication. Children grow in oral skills in the context of the life they are living, talking of food, family, the weather, pets, games, feelings. The gradually expanding boundaries of their lives are the arena of their thoughts which they express in speech. If children are then to have success in the interpretation of the written symbols of language, in reading, then the content of what is read must have similar meaning and function for their lives (Harste, 1994). However, it cannot be assumed that oral facility automatically heralds success in literacy, hence the importance of school programs such as the one being discussed here. The following anecdote underlines the necessity of a systematic program:

“Kindergarten teachers from all over Timor, about 22 of them were taking part in a workshop and part of what I was asked to do was to help them make a “big book” as they would do with children. They were very reticent but after a while they got going with my assistant taking one group, me taking another and the third being left to itself. After 30 minutes I realized that this last group had done nothing. They had hidden themselves away but had nothing written. I suddenly realized they couldn’t write Tetun. They had no understanding of how the oral language they had talked all their lives could be written down. I felt very sad. They asked would I come back and teach them how to write Tetun. I felt like crying. They felt deprived at not being able to write in their own language. They could not even write what a child says. To see so clearly the difference between oral and written language was a large learning curve for me.”
(T. Ward, personal communication, October 5, 2003).

Reading for Meaning

Psycholinguistic insights into reading emphasized the importance of the meaning of the text to the reader. Sociolinguists developed this further recognizing the social context of language and therefore of reading. Language was seen more clearly not as something divorced from the situation in which it occurred, but influenced by its home and community milieu (Bloome and Green, as cited in Ruddell, 1994). The Tetun language of East Timor clearly illustrates the social context in which it is being formed. Elements of Portuguese indicate the effects of long colonization and yet the language cannot be described as similar to Portuguese. Tetun has been shaped by the Portuguese language but has used that influence to serve its own character. Similarly, the influence of Bahasa Indonesia on Tetun is apparent, more particularly in the speech of young people who remained in Timor after the invasion of 1975. Despite outside influences, Tetun retains its status as a language rich in earth symbols, having been developed by a population predominantly engaged in agriculture, e.g. fingers = *liman faun* (lit. “fruit of the hand”)

The sociolinguists’ approach to reading also concentrated on issues of dialects and reading, demonstrating the integrity of dialects in their own right. They showed, for instance, that dialects of English which had hitherto been denigrated as “bad English” actually had linguistic systems, rules and conventions adhered to by their speakers. They upheld the right of speakers of these dialects to have their speech catered for within the process of education in literacy. Dialects comprise “linguistic *difference*, not

linguistic *deficits*” (Ruddell, 1994, p.33). Such an approach is surely most poignantly applicable to East Timor, whose linguistic richness is made up of almost 30 languages and dialects which have been neglected and denigrated for centuries. The imposition of the languages of this or that current dominant power has meant for the Timorese a sidelining of their own tongues, resulting in these languages remaining largely unwritten.

If Timorese children are to learn to read and write, the insights of psycholinguists must be honoured, because written material must have meaning for the reader. For such meaning to be present, reading material must be based on a sociocultural foundation, using texts which of their nature provide meaning, that is, material dealing initially with the ordinary familiar objects and events of life. Equally essential for the transfer of meaning are texts which are true to the sociolinguistic requirements of reading, texts written in language familiar to the child, the language of the home. An examination of the Mary MacKillop *Mai Hatene Tetun* program reveals that is highly meaningful culturally and linguistically for Timorese children.

CONTENT OF THE *MAI HATENE TETUN* PROGRAM

1. Sociolinguistic Focus

The *Mai Hatene Tetun* program observes all the necessary sociolinguistic principles. Its purpose is to lead children to literacy in Tetun, a language which the great majority of them use daily. An increasing amount of writing is appearing using the language e.g. news items and articles in newspapers, all of the Scripture and prayers used the Catholic Church’s three-year Liturgical cycle and the whole of the New Testament. Differences in expression and spelling exist as is to be expected in a language which does not have a long written tradition.¹

Various efforts are currently being made towards the standardisation of the Tetun language. As more East Timorese are able to undertake the further education that is rightfully theirs, more linguists will emerge for whom Tetun is the mother tongue and these will have the expertise which that ownership implies. The Mary MacKillop Institute, through its literacy program and other efforts, wishes to contribute to the development and preservation of this language, but is mindful that it is a language which belongs to the Timorese people and that therefore the final acceptance or rejection of any attempt at vocabulary building or standardisation rests with them. Western tools of linguistic analysis, interpretation and addition, formidable and essential though they be, must always approach the language and the people from the standpoint of servant, not dictator. Collaboration between various groups working towards the standardisation of Tetun will ensure that the needs of the people prevail over all other considerations, practical or academic.

The Mary MacKillop Institute has approached the linguistic aspects of the literacy program from that perspective. Early publications differed slightly in spelling and in the use of some diacritical marks compared to written materials available in East Timor, e.g. the New Testament (Fernandez, 2000). In 1999 the militias and their Indonesian military sponsors destroyed 95% of schools so all the books the Institute had in 42 schools in East Timor were lost. The opportunity was taken to re-edit the program before re-printing and since that time the Director of Catholic Education in the Dili Diocese, Father Leão da Costa, has been responsible for the editing of the spelling and style used in the program. Examples of the types of differences show that *Mai Hatene*

Tetun observes the fundamental linguistic principle that where previously unwritten languages like Tetun are adopting an orthography, the least difficult written expression should be chosen. For example, the Tetun word for “here” is the variously spelled “nebé”. Some use an accent on the last syllable to indicate emphasis which is different from the usual penultimate stress. Others write the word and “ne’ebé”, with the apostrophe indicating a glottal stop. The practice in a Church periodical is to write either “nebe” or “nebé” with the variations appearing in the same publication, (Ruten, 2002; Gusmão, 2002). A newspaper writes “nebe”, (Obras Publikas, 2003). The written expression of the language will develop in future years as linguistic concerns are weighed against the accepted practice of the people. In the meantime, it is important that the volume of Tetun writing increases, a task to which the authors of the Mary MacKillop Institute’s program are happy to contribute.

¹ The website of the INL (National Institute of Linguistics) has claimed since 2002 that its orthography is the officially sanctioned version put forward by the Government of Timor Lorosáe. In fact, as of November 2003 no Government regulation regarding the authority of the INL nor the standardisation of the language has been promulgated. (INL, 2002)

Methodology of the Program

The contents of the *Mai Hatene Tetun* Teacher's Manuals Classes 1-3 indicate the scope of the program and the methods used. Clear and detailed instructions covering basic reading methodologies help to redress the effects of 25 years without teacher training for primary teachers.

The work is planned for a forty week school year. The units of work take three weeks with reading and writing activities undertaken daily. The focus of each unit of work is the content of a book or books using a "shared book" approach. As looking, talking and listening constitute a child's oral practice, they are the first stages in reading development. Teacher and children together look at the pictures, talk about the subject and "read" along together. The teacher is able to model good reading whilst still involving the children and maintaining their interest. The basic organisation of reading is taught this way: how to hold a book, where to begin reading, going from left to right and from top to bottom, and dealing with other concepts of print. Children understand that the print marks have meaning related to the pictures.

The Mary MacKillop Institute program relies on both immersion in reading and a systematic teaching of word attack skills to ensure that children can both enjoy what they read and develop successful methods of confronting increasingly difficult text. Lessons always begin with some reading followed by investigation of smaller pieces of text or syllables as well as a variety of activities to read for meaning. Structured sets of syllables are tied to each unit so that the children develop phonological awareness and word attack skills in relation to the story which has their interest at the time, e.g. in Class one:

Class 1 – Story Titles and Syllables List for Each Unit

Unit	Tetun Title	English Translation	Syllable Focus
1	Ha'u Gosta Ha ...	I Like to Eat ...	a
1.1	Boot no Ki'ik	Big and Little	a
2	Manduku ho Lalar ida	One Frog One Fly	i
2.1	Sa Ida Mak Balada sira Halo	What Animals Do	i
3	Loriku Oan ida	Baby Parrot	o
3.1	Mamar no Toos	Soft and Hard	o
4.	Maudasi Belun Foun Sira	Maudasi's New Friends	e
4.1	Sa Ida Mak Halo Ain Fatin Hirak Ne'e	What made these Tracks?	e
5	Balada Moris Fatin	Where Animals Live	u
5.1	Rusa Oan	Little Deer	u
6	Ahi Adas	Firefly	ba
6.1	Balada Sira Ha Sa Ida?	What Animals Eat	
7	Rade Matenek Ida	Clever Duck	bo
7.1	Sai Ida Mak Ema Homan?	What is She Weaving?	
8	Maugunda nia Haas	Maugunda's Mangoes	ha, he
8.1	Sira Dere Sa Ida?	What are They Playing?	
9	La'o Lemo Rai ho Ha'u	Come Wandering About with Me	le, lo, la, li
9.1	Sa Ida Mak Ema Hakfila?	What are They Making?	
10	Amanu ho nia Inan	Amanu and his mother	sa, si, so

10.1	Sira Halo Sa Ida?	What are They Doing?	
11	Bikolo Fai Hare	Bikolo Pounds Rice	ka, ho
11.1	Sa Ida Mak Moris Hosi Tolun?	What Comes Out of an Egg?	
12	Hili Ai	Gathering Wood	fa, fu
12	Sa Ida Mak Ema Fa'an?	What are they selling?	
13	Manu-tolun Ida	An Unusual Egg	to, ti
13.1	Sa ida Mak Nia Lebo?	What is he carrying?	
14	Lafaek Nebé Fila An ba Rai Timor	The Crocodile that Became Timor	ti, ne

(Ward, 1998, p.16)

Further activities encourage and direct the children to write, so that their writing skills are linked to reading and talking centering around the theme of the unit, as shown in the following extracts:

Session 1: Reading and Checking for Meaning

Each day for thirty minutes the teacher and children read at least some of the story which is followed by an activity designed to highlight meaning. Because there has been no teacher training in East Timor for primary teachers for twenty-five years, the *Mai Hatene Tetun* program's manuals have detailed suggestions for teaching techniques. Suggested ways of varying the activities are set out simply and clearly, for example:

Week 1

Day 1:

"Using the shared big book or small book, the teacher speaks with the children about the picture on the cover and asks the children what they think the story is about. Then the teacher reads the story to the class, pointing to the words as he/she reads. This is followed by an Oral Class activity."

Day 6:

"Teacher asks small groups to read a different page of the story. He/She may need to continue to read along with the children. When they come to the end of the story, ask the children to retell the story in their own words and suggest an alternate ending to the story. The teacher can scribe for the children on the blackboard or on large sheets of paper. Ask the children to re-read their version of the story. As children's ability increases, it is important to allow them the opportunity to rewrite the story individually if they are able." (Ward, 1998, p.4)

Oral and written cloze, sequencing the story, multiple choice questions, yes or no statements and scrambled sentences are activities which are suggested and they are explained in detail for the teachers to use.

Session 2A: Phonological Skills

With lessons of 30 minutes a day, there is emphasis on daily attention to developing students' word recognition skills, normally, but not exclusively, context. Various ideas of games and labeling, word matching and building of lists of sight words are suggested. Varied phonological awareness skills are used so that children learn about correspondence between sounds and letters in words and develop the ability to decode with ease. Proven methods are pointed out to teachers, e.g.

The vowels will be the only letters taught in isolation. All consonants will be taught placing the consonant with a vowel, in other words by using syllables. That is, the consonants will not be taught in isolation. In Class One there is no need to actually name the letters, but rather the children will learn to make the sound and symbol recognition. Later, when they already know the sound and symbol correspondence, children can learn the names of letters." (T. Ward, personal communication, October 5, 2003)

Teachers are directed towards word attack skills e.g. teaching syllables, emphasising that the skill is not an end in itself but exists for the sake of reading and writing. They are urged to approach these skills in meaningful contexts. The initial point is a story which has meaning for the children, then when familiarity is established the focus is narrowed to smaller amounts of text and then to individual words and syllables. These skills are accompanied by various activities to promote instant word recognition both by using related pictures and by focusing on graphophonic cues. Assessment is an essential part of the program so that children's progress is understood and to ensure that they are helped to achieve the aims of the program. Constant assessment procedures are outlined and a record of children's achievement is suggested.

2. Sociocultural Focus

The methodology of the *Mai Hatene Tetun* program teaches children to master reading and writing in Tetun. It is not only the language which is important to literacy, but the milieu which the language expresses and in which the children live. The Poverty Assessment states: "*Timor-Leste is a rural country. Three quarters of the population live in villages, and three in four households rely exclusively on income from agriculture*" (Government, 2003, p.43). Investigation of the content of the *Mai Hatene Tetun* program will show its foundations on these sociocultural realities.

In Class One the stories revolve around families, food, animals, land, traditional practical objects and their use, musical instruments, places in Timor, cultural items and everyday occupations, as shown below:

Mai Hatene Tetun Content of Class One (27 Stories) *(numbers indicate frequency of appearance)*

Animals

Crocodile (6), fish (4), crabs (2), octopus, baby sharks, frogs (4), turtles (6), prawns, chickens, dogs (3), buffaloes(4), cuscus, horse (2) pig (4), goat (6), parrot, a fly, snakes (4), carpet snake, sea snake, dragonfly, possum (2), white-breasted eagle, monkey (4), butterfly (2), seagull, mouse, chicken, lorikeet, ant, lizard, scorpion, dingo, possum, horse, bat, heron, deer (2), ducks (2), bird, rat, gecko, scorpions, a firefly.

Land

Mist, mountain, fire, clouds, night, earth

Traditional practical objects

Container for holding rice, bag-like basket, sleeping mat, hat, sack, basket, fan, shallow basket for winnowing and other purposes.

Musical instruments

Small drum, bamboo instrument with strings, gong, fiddle, drum (2), guitar (2), buffalo horn, dancing (2)

Places

Dili to collect colourful shells; Mount Ramelau to watch the sun rise over the sea; jungle to look for deer; Berakuli to harvest rice; Duirho to see the beautiful waterfall; Suai Loro to watch my mother make salt; Railaku to watch the people pick coffee; hot springs in Marobo and relax our tired feet.

Cultural items

Timorese crown for people to wear, arrows to hunt, earthen pots for people to cook in, goats' fur to be worn around the ankles by men for traditional Timorese dancing, traditional Timorese sword to give to the warriors.

Traditional occupations

Traditional Timorese cloth, spinning cotton, making salt, making a small drum, making pots, making a wall out of stalks from a palm tree, building a house, preparation of rice, cooking rice, gathering wood

Food

Bananas (2), beans, fish, vegetables, betel nut, salt, wood, dried deer meat, corn, eggs, apple, starfruit, sarmale, mango, tamarind, orange, watermelon, custard apple, pineapple, lichee, jackfruit, jambulan, coconut

Classes Two and Three share stories about daily life and the family, the use of plants, various places, the preparation of food, and traditional stories and legends, as follows:

Use of Plants

Year Two

Bikolo Weaves Many Things

Year Three

Lalu Weaves Katupa
The Tali Palm
Making Pickles From Seaweed
Builelo Weaves Coconut Baskets

Daily Life

Year Two

Life in the Village
Beremau
Fishing
Maubleki, Bikolo and Lakafuni
Bikolo's Inheritance
In Maudasi's Garden
Sunday for Beremau and His Family
Tailoko and Bitala have a Day Out
Maudasi's Property
The Rice Harvest

Preparation of Food

Year Two

Planting and Harvesting Rice

Year Three

Making Carambole Pickles
Growing Rice
Salore Likes Eating Tukir
Bidasi Makes Dried Fish
Cooking with Coconut Oil
Drying Deer Meat
A Change of Diet

Stories/Legends

Year Two

The Dove and the Ant
King of the River
Legend of the Sleeping Crocodile\

Year Three

The World Can Fall Down
Three Stones
The Earth and Sky are Close

Where are They From?
Looking for Cockles
Catching Crabs
Maulelo Goes to the Cockfight

Year Three

Life for Laubesi and Rikihana
While Buibere is Away
At the Seaside
Biso and Mask
Bikolo Gives her mother a Surprise
My Axe

Places

Year Two

People from Different Places

Year Three

Atauro
By Horse to Baucau

Animals

Year Two

A Small Buffalo
Lokobere and the Little Crocodile
Monkey's Travels
Builelo and Her Monkey
A Little Sea Turtle
A Frog and a Tortoise
An Old Lizard and His Friend Gecko
Five Possums and a Dog

Year Three

A Cockatoo Names "That's True"
The Python and the Horse
The Monkey and the Tortoise
Clever Lokoleo

Along with an emphasis on rural life, the Year Four program contains imaginative stories as well as folk tales explaining the existence of natural phenomena. There are a few versions of traditional European fables e.g. "money is not everything" and "it's never too late to change". Traditional stories using animist themes are evident, including taboos and the visitation of spirits. Throughout the grade there are also more extended descriptions of practical activities still essential to village and town life, e.g. the planting of corn, the production of cassava and the control of fire. In all the grades a strong strand of humour exists in the story collection.

The practice of learning first in the vernacular using themes, objects and situations from daily life allows for the principle 'from the known to the unknown' to work. The interlocution to the *Mai Hatene Tetun* program states:

"Most school learning is achieved through verbal means – either spoken or written – and unless children understand what they hear and read, they will learn relatively little. One of the fundamental principles in the teaching of reading is that children would learn to read in the language that they speak best, so that they can concentrate on decoding the written symbols for a message that they can readily understand". (Ward, 1998).

The reaction of East Timorese people to the *Mai Hatene Tetun* program has made it clear that the meaning gained from the content of the program makes it interesting, enjoyable, informative, attractive and absorbing. It makes sense. It has an in-built relationship to life as experienced by the people about whom it has been written. An illustration of this is the following story told by the Institute's teacher-linguist:

"There is a community centre in Railaku for children who don't go to school to which school children come in the afternoon. All they would want to do all day was to read the Tetun books. One of the books that is almost worn out is Class 1 Book 9 La'o Lemo Rai ho Ha'u". (Travel

around with Me). On page 8 is the sentence: “Mai ho ha’u bá Railaku haree ema ku’u kafé.” (Come with me to Railaku and see the man picking coffee.) A man connected to the centre said that the book was “the most famous book in Timor” because the children read it over and over again until it was ragged. The children were proud that their home was mentioned and it made them so happy. They could identify with the content because it made sense to them.” (T.Ward, personal communication, October 5, 2003)

Timorese people can identify with the content of the stories of *Mai Hatene Tetun* because they derive from Timorese experience. They arise from the culture of East Timor and express the people’s ways of thinking and making meaning.

DIRECT EDUCATIONAL ADVANTAGES OF MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

1. L1 Literacy helps the learning of L2 Literacy

Literacy in the home language is but one of the benefits gained by Timorese children who use the Mary MacKillop Institute’s program, as mother tongue literacy also assists children to master subsequent languages. Researchers demonstrate the greater ease with which children attain literacy in the L2 if they are already literate in their L1. (Klassen & Burnaby, 1993; Omolewa, n.d.; Kenner, 2000). Swain (1989) demonstrates that literacy in the mother tongue enhances a child’s performance in third language learning. The importance of literacy in mother tongue to the learning of subsequent languages applies also to adult learners (Nurss, 1998).

Developing the understanding of the first language enhances the chance to become competent in a second or third language because the literacy skills learned through that which is familiar can be transferred to the learning of a second language. A child who is literate in the language of home can more easily understand the purpose of reading and the relationship between printed word and meaning. From initial immersion in reading activities which relate to their daily experiences of life and which therefore they can readily understand, they more easily move to applying their skills of gaining meaning from print matter which are new, different and abstract. They move from the meaning of the printed word in familiar contexts to a wider and decontextualised arena. Cognitive development gains achieved through learning to read in the context of what is known can be applied by the developing child to areas of knowledge and discovery which had been unknown (Gibbons, 1992). Hence, if Timorese children are to learn anything, including Portuguese with any success, they must learn to read and write their first language.

Cummins maintains that L1 is essential for any success in other languages, but that proficiency in the first is not a pre-requisite for success in the second:

“Rather than being suspicious of (L2) and delaying its introduction, my belief is that we should encourage the development of biliteracy where students are writing bilingual books (according to well-established whole-language procedures), reading them with parents and peers, and generally augmenting their awareness of Language and how it works. Strong and uncompromising promotion of L1 literacy is a crucial component of this

approach but we should adopt a both/and rather than and either/or orientation to L1 and L2. When promoted together, the two languages enrich each other rather than subtracting from each other.” (Cummins, 2001)

The Summer Institute of Linguistics (1990) agrees, maintaining that success in a second language results from success in the first language, but making it clear that this position does not mean that the first language must be fully developed before the second is introduced. So in East Timor, after initial literacy in Tetun is attained in the early grades, both Tetun and Portuguese can be effectively taught. Successful bilingual programs work to strengthen both languages.

Objections to using the mother-tongue in school include the fear that time so spent would be better used reinforcing the second language, or that the L2 would be learned faster if the L1 was set aside. These objections are found to be groundless in the face of evidence that the L2 is actually strengthened when the L1 is given its proper place (Millar, 1997; Cummins, 2001). The direct relevance of his point to the language debates in East Timor is obvious. If there is to be any success at all in ensuring that Portuguese becomes an official language of Timor Lorosa'e in anything more than name, full scale efforts to educate the children in the mother tongues, particularly Tetun, are essential. Unfortunately, this opinion is sometimes seen as a threat to Portuguese rather than a statement of demonstrated educational fact. The opinion has been expressed in East Timor that children don't need to be taught Tetun because they already know it. Such a view would not find wide support among educators; indeed, the very opposite is the usual practice. For example, despite its almost total domination as the language of communication in Australia, English is the one compulsory subject throughout the school years, showing clearly that all children, regardless of the level of available educational opportunities, need ongoing assistance to attain written and oral proficiency in even the most widely used language of communication.

Gibbons (1992) refers to developmental issues which affect children's attainment of literacy. She notes that older primary aged children who have a strong grasp of literacy in their L1 usually manage very well with the L2, but not so younger children. Their more tenuous grasp of the mother tongue can well be overwhelmed by the imposition of another language resulting in confusion. A poor understanding of two languages results from the expectation of learning a second language without adequate and consistent support for the mother tongue. She states: "... one of the worst times to switch linguistic environments is around age five or six, when the comparative fragility of the first language does not support the learning of a second" (pp.285-286). Only by developing strong literacy in the mother tongues in the early years will Timorese students be able to become literate in other languages in the future.

2. L1 Literacy Supports Other Subjects

East Timor is at a crucial point in its educational development, with those responsible being faced with decisions which will have far-reaching consequences. The consensus of educational research is that not only is the learning of other languages dependent on students' literacy in their first language, but that mother tongue literacy enhances a student's general educational prospects markedly (Gibbons, 1992; Heugh, 2000; Daniel, 2003). As well as being an essential foundation for literacy in a second language, a thorough grounding in literacy in the language of the home develops a child's general ability to learn.

UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Education, John Daniel, refers to research done in twenty-three primary schools in fifteen States in the US since 1985 which shows that bilingual children's academic results have a direct positive link with the amount of time spent in learning their mother tongue at school (Daniel, 2003). Conversely, Kathleen Heugh in her article "Multilingual Voices Lost" reports on the detrimental effects which a lack of bilingual education has had on the South African population. As well as deficient progress in both L1 and L2, low levels of general academic achievement have characterised an educational regime which disregarded local languages. She says that the home language has a crucial role as the prime means to literacy and that the entire curriculum and student's academic success are dependent on it (Heugh, 2000). Quoting Lambert and Peale (1962) Gibbons (1992) states that competent bilingual children show more capacity for flexible thinking and for problem solving than monolinguals (p.284). Many East Timorese people demonstrate oral facility in two indigenous Timorese languages, Tetun and at least one other. Bahasa Indonesia is spoken by most people, while Hakka Portuguese and English are spoken by some as well. The people's flexibility in making meaning using different languages is established. Given the opportunity, they would respond similarly to written literacy, enjoying the benefits flowing from their broad and varied facility with languages.

Cummins (2001) demonstrates the importance of children being allowed to learn concepts in their mother tongue. He uses the example of telling the time: once it has been learned in the familiar language the concept can be transferred with relative ease to a second language, with the child having merely to substitute language labels onto an idea which he or she has already grasped. The intellectual construct of "telling the time" remains constant. The success of this procedure follows into more advanced work, e.g. distinguishing the main idea from supporting details in a work of literature, or understanding the difference between fact and fiction. If the concept has been understood in the familiar language, it can be transferred to one or more other languages. Tess Ward agrees:

"Children who have the opportunity to learn in their own language are dealing with one thing at a time and are able to concentrate on decoding, but if you're asking a child to learn to read and write in a language they don't speak you are asking the impossible." (T. Ward, personal communication, October 5, 2003)

LANGUAGES OF INSTRUCTION

The relationship between the languages of the home and general school subjects introduces the issue of languages of instruction. The problems presented to a child who is expected to learn concepts in a less familiar language, be those concepts mathematical, scientific, historical or linguistic, are obvious. Such expectations are burdensome and unnecessary, and usually lead to educational failure. The question for the authorities is not only whether or not to maintain literacy programs so that children can read and write their mother tongues, but to decide which language to use as the means of communication throughout the whole curriculum, and what effects result from this choice. Bilingual societies and their schools have to face the question of which language(s) to use in the instruction of students.

In East Timor, the official language of instruction is Portuguese, which is being introduced progressively. The decision was made to introduce Portuguese as the language

of instruction into Grades 1 and 2 in East Timor starting in the school year beginning October 2000 (Govt of TLS, 2002, p. 872) with it remaining a second language for higher grades, the reverse of the recommendation of current research as shown in this paper. The following incident illustrates the problems presented by the sudden imposition of a foreign language as the vehicle of tuition in a school room.

“In 2001, two Grade One classes were being taught in adjacent rooms in a school in East Timor, one by a person whose first language was Tetun and the other by a Portuguese person. The Portuguese teacher’s classroom could only be described as bedlam, with children screaming, banging and running around. The teacher too was yelling, but in Portuguese. She was witnessed hurrying into the classroom of the Tetun speaking teacher, who left her class to explain to the children in Tetun what they were to do. She then returned to her own group. This procedure took place five times during the 45 minutes I was there.” (R. Kiss, personal communication, October 6, 2003).

Extensive research on the languages of instruction has been undertaken by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa through their Working Group on Educational Research and Policy Analysis (IDRC, 1997). In Chapter 2 they detail the research findings of experiments which support Cummins’ findings that use of the child’s home language in early education brings cognitive gains to the child, and that use of a different instructional language produces cognitive problems. Citing Akinnaso (1993) the report presents the findings of the Ife experiment in Nigeria on the use of the mother tongue as a Language of Instruction throughout the 6 years of primary education. Those children who experienced mother-tongue tuition (in the Yoruba language) performed better academically than those who did not. At the same time these students were found to be no less proficient in the mainstream language, English, than those who had English-only instruction in the last three years of the experiment. It was found that children advanced not only academically, but also in affective, cultural and social areas. It was noted, though, that other factors may have had some effect, e.g. more experienced teachers, curricular changes and new teaching materials. If this research were applied to education in East Timor, the use of Tetun (or other strong mother tongues) as the medium of instruction would be the priority in the early years, with Portuguese being introduced alongside it. The students would find success in general academic areas whilst being no more disadvantaged in Portuguese than any children in East Timor experiencing Portuguese only instruction. The comparison between Nigeria and East Timor breaks down here, as English is the mainstream language in Nigeria, with students being influenced by that language outside of the school environment, whereas Portuguese does not have that influence in East Timor. The teacher, resource and curricular variables noted in the Nigerian experiment, whilst daunting for East Timor, are not beyond its capability. A concerted program of teacher training, the establishment of a national curriculum as well as literacy programs similar to *Mai Hatene Tetun* would pave the way for educational success.

The IDRC reports that in the United States, longitudinal studies (1981-91) of bilingual education programs were undertaken by the Centre for Minority Education and Research of the University of California. The task was to determine which method of instruction enabled Spanish speaking children in 51 schools across five states to catch up to English speakers in the basic skills:- an English only program, or a combination of Spanish and English. Three alternatives were used:

- ❖ **Group 1 Immersion** — instruction by ESL trained bilingual teachers
- ❖ **Group 2 Early-exit bilingual** — instruction in the home language for less than 40 minutes a day for no more than 2 or 3 years; again, teachers were either bilingual or had ESL qualification;
- ❖ **Group 3 Late-exit bilingual** — instruction in the home language for 40% or 50% of the school day until Year Four.

This study found that the mother tongue is indeed the primary language of learning. The students in the late-exit bilingual programs (Group 3) achieved significantly higher in three basic skills than the Immersion students (Group 1). It was also found that early transition to English-only programs do not work because students do not maintain or develop the skills acquired in their first language. It was also found that students became proficient in the second language when second-language content classes are used in the remaining 50% of instruction time. It is clear that bilingual or multilingual programs, along with an integrated approach to the curriculum, provide the best results in learning a second language and in general cognitive development.

“Bilingual children perform better in school when the school effectively teaches the mother tongue and, where appropriate, develops literacy in that language. By contrast, when children are encouraged to reject their mother tongue and, consequently, its development stagnates, their personal and conceptual foundation for learning is undermined.”
(Cummins, 2001).

Research further documented by the IDRC in Tanzania showed that students in secondary school who were taught in Kiswahili had a learning advantage over those taught in English. It was reported that answers given by students to questions asked in English were often incoherent and betrayed either misunderstanding of the question or inability to frame an answer in English. However, if the same question was asked in Kiswahili, the students had no problems. It was deduced that such would remain true for primary children who have even less exposure to the second language. The unfortunate result of this type of situation which is a reality in East Timor is that intelligent but non-Portuguese speaking children are told, and then come to believe, that they are stupid and dull.

The IDRC report also outlines a 1990 study of a South African bilingual program in which the Language of Instruction was changed from the mother tongue to English in the third grade. In attempting to assess the cognitive development of the children in that program, they cite Luckett (1994) who states, *“pupils could not explain in English what they already knew in their first languages; nor could they transfer into their first languages the new knowledge that they had learnt through English”* (p.5). The main conclusion of this study was that if the language of instruction is changed from the mother tongue too early in a child’s development, failure will result. The conclusions of these studies apply to students in East Timor, so many of whom, are not only experiencing a sudden and too-early change in the language of instruction, but who are not having the advantage of home language instruction at all.

In countries which have large numbers of immigrants, like the United Kingdom and the United States, the task of educating linguistically diverse groups is immense. The benefits of a bilingual program in which as much time is given to the mother tongue as to the dominant language was demonstrated as effective in the UK when the University of Bradford conducted an experiment between 1978 and 1981 concerning Punjabi-speaking

children beginning at age 5. Those experiencing instruction in their mother tongue for half of the time performed significantly better than those who were taught only in English (IDRC, 1997). Such efforts to educate students in their mother tongue and the proven beneficial results reported by the research are important factors which could inform bodies charged with the task of establishing educational policies would benefit east Timorese children.

All of these studies suggest that for successful education to happen in East Timorese schools, children should be taught in their mother tongue for at least half of every day and that this should take place for at least the first four years of schooling. Children's intelligence should not be judged on their success in using Portuguese.

The effects of not using the mother tongue in general instruction in schools is only too apparent in East Timor, where there is pressure to teach using Portuguese, where exams are the only means of assessment and where repetition of grades based on the results of these exams is widespread. The School Mapping survey of 2001 cited in the report *Poverty in a New Nation* (Government, 2003, p.68) shows that between 20-25% of students repeated and 10% dropped out of school in primary and junior secondary in that year. Tess Ward relates:

"In one of the schools there are 120 children in Class 1. Sixty-one of these children are repeating Class 1, another twenty are spending a third year in Class 1 and two are spending a fourth year in Class 1. Along with the 61 who are repeating for the second time, another 68 children were asked to repeat, but instead, they did not return to school. This is because although they are literate in Tetun, they are expected to become literate in Portuguese before they can progress to Class 2."

(T. Ward, personal communication, August 5, 2003).

Teachers are in an advantageous position to judge the effects and benefits of school children's experiences. The enthusiasm with which the *Mai Hatene Tetun* program has been received suggests that it is fulfilling a need for which there are no other materials as yet. The Program operates in those schools where teachers have undertaken the workshops necessary to help them understand the methods used. The great desire of so many teachers to have the program is both clear and humbling. Tess Ward states:

"When I came back in November/December 1999 with Josephine and saw the destruction it was horrendous. I was back here the following year, 2000, twice. One Principal we knew was a long way away in his garden when we arrived at his burnt out school so we called a child asked him where the teacher was. Although it was far the child agreed to tell the teacher we had arrived. The teacher ran all the way up a goat track and when he got to where we were his face was actually radiant – I was very moved. He threw his arms around us even though the Timorese aren't usually very demonstrative like that. 'Sister,' he said, 'everything was burnt and I thought how can I find the sister who brought those books.' He and his students had made desks and chairs out of bamboo, and he wrote with charcoal using one remaining wall as a blackboard. It was Tetun he was writing on the wall, not Bahasa"

(T. Ward, personal communication, October 5, 2003).

CONCLUSION

It has been shown that literacy in the mother tongue is a prerequisite for the literacy in a second language and for general success in schooling. The foundational sociolinguistic principle that language, and therefore reading, must have meaning is integrally connected to the basic principles of mother tongue education. If one believes that the life situation of the reader is integral to the reading/literacy process, then it is logical that the language already known by the child must be the vehicle for instruction. However, even if one takes the alternative approach, i.e. that reading is a matter merely of decoding, it still does not follow that reading can therefore be taught in a language other than the mother-tongue. For it to be useful at all, reading must make sense. Education in the mother tongue is fundamental to the gaining of literacy. The *Mai Hatene Tetun* (Let's Learn Tetun) program is devised with the understanding that as meaning is a central function of language and an essential component of it, children must be given enough opportunities to learn in the language that they already know in order to gain meaning, and hence learn. As L1 literacy is necessary to assist children to be successful in other school subjects, its value for the whole of schooling is obvious. With the importance of L1 demonstrated so formidably worldwide, its use in a child's education becomes not just a matter of the choice of this or that Government or education department, but is a basic human right of every child, of every Timorese child.

The Mary MacKillop Institute will continue to produce the comprehensive Tetun Literacy program, *Mai Hatene Tetun*, comprising books and resources for children and teachers from Kindergarten to Grade Six and will provide the teacher development and training associated with the program. The Institute will continue to co-operate with education authorities and will take part in discussions about the standardisation of the language. The Institute supports wide-ranging and unhurried sharing of information and ideas, so that as many people as possible, Timorese first, but others as well, have a chance to comment on or contribute to the written style of the language which has served Timor for so long. Institute members oppose moves by foreign academics to impose hastily concocted orthographies. Any such activities are a type of re-colonisation of the minds of the Timorese people, who have had quite enough imposition from the outside.

The Institute recommends that regular seminars and conferences on Timorese languages and their place in education be held, and that all those concerned collaborate in a manner respectful of the Timorese people and their culture, and of colleagues in all language fields. It supports all initiatives which contribute money, personnel and time for educational and linguistic research, so that informed decisions on language and education can be made for the future of East Timor.

Susan Connelly
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