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PACE AND PROGRESS IN ADULT LITERACY: WORD AND GRAPHEME RECOGNITION BY NEW READERS IN TIMOR-LESTE[1]

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1   Introduction

There are many new readers in Timor-Leste: adults who never went to school as children and who are now learning to read and write in various adult literacy programs. These programs are provided by either the government or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and mostly take place in Tetum, while often regional languages or dialects are used for explanation (Boon, 2011). As Tetum is the lingua franca and one of the two official languages of Timor-Leste, a majority of the population speaks and understands Tetum (Hajek, 2000), be it often as a second language. Most people have one of the regional, mainly spoken, languages as their mother tongue. Portuguese is the other official language, still spoken only by a minority (Hajek, 2000; DNE, 2006b), but their numbers will grow because it is now taught in formal education throughout the country. Large parts of the population speak Bahasa Indonesia because of the long years of Indonesian occupation, and some people have learned English through contact with the international community.

Adult literacy rates are low: according to the country's National Directorate of Statistics (DNE, 2006a), 46% of Timor-Leste's adult population of 15 years and older are illiterate. UNDP's Human Development Index (2009) gives a 50.1% adult literacy rate for Timor-Leste. It is safe to say that almost half of the people aged 15 years or older cannot read and write.

Learning to read is a complex process, especially for adult learners who never went to school and who learn to read at a later age, even more so when they learn to read in a language that is not their mother tongue. This paper is about adult literacy learners in Timor-Leste who are learning to read in Tetum, a second language for most of them, which uses an alphabetic script and the Roman alphabet. I will focus on grapheme and word recognition as part of their reading ability, and look at factors that affect these.

Much of what is known about new readers in general comes from research already done with children. Both Juel (1991) and Ehri (1991) investigated the reading acquisition process in children and found that this appears to take place in three phases/stages. Ehri distinguishes a logographic, a transitional and an alphabetic phase. Juel distinguishes a first stage in which the child relies upon environmental and visual cues, a second stage in which spelling-sound information is used and a third stage with automatic phonological recodings or direct recognition on the basis of orthographic features (p. 784). Both studies revealed that phonemic awareness and understanding grapheme-phoneme (spelling/letter-sound) correspondence are crucial in the process of learning to read an alphabetic writing system and of eventually getting to automized word recognition. As Ehri (1991) states: *"phonological recoding skill enables readers to read words by applying grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules. At first sounding out and blending operations are performed slowly and overtly, but with practice they become rapid covert processes."* (p. 398); *"findings of various studies indicate that phonological recoding skill is necessary for proficient sight word reading"* (p. 405). When it comes to consequences for reading instruction she expects that: *"explicit phonics instruction is more effective than implicit phonics instruction"* (p. 401).

Rayner & Pollatsek (1989) describe skills that appear to be crucial to the development of efficient reading, amongst which are recognition of letters (which involves being able to discriminate the distinguishing features of letters), word consciousness and, most importantly, phonological awareness. They mention many studies that *"make it clear that discovering the alphabetic principle is the key to successfully learning to read"* (p. 343). When it comes to teaching reading they conclude that *"code emphasis instruction (phonics) is effective in teaching beginning readers because it makes explicit the alphabetic principle"*, and that *"meaning approaches are valuable, since they make the task of reading (and uncovering the alphabetic principle) more interesting"*. They argue that *"good teachers are eclectic and tend to combine the positive aspects of different methods of teaching reading"* (p. 358). They discuss four stages of reading: *"linguistic guessing, discrimination and guessing, sequential decoding and hierarchical decoding"* (p. 391) and show that children use *"graphemic, orthographic, and grapheme-phoneme correspondence cues"* in learning to read (p. 371). Finally they argue that *"the ability to use higher-order rules and analogies to read new words represents the highest level of reading skill"* (p. 377).

Research with adults who are learning to read and write is often done with immigrants in western countries. Kurvers & Van der Zouw (1990), see also Kurvers (2007), distinguished five word reading strategies: guessing, mentioning letters, spelling out, partial analysis and direct recognition. They wanted to investigate whether the developmental patterns that had been found in studies on children's beginning literacy acquisition could also be traced in adults' first time reading in a second language. They found that adults who are learning to read pass through more or less the same stages as children. The adult learners in their study showed large individual differences in learning pace and success. Illiterate learners and learners who had already learned to read in another script showed differences in the use of reading strategies: the first more often still used sequential decoding strategies, the second more often recognized words directly (pp. 240-241). Adult learners in intensive courses showed much more progress in a short period than adult learners in a non-intensive course over a longer period (p. 238). The learners from the intensive courses made better use of word recognition strategies to read new words. Most learners in the non-intensive courses needed more

than a year to spell simple one-syllable words and to independently read simple short texts with simple words. According to Kurvers & Van der Zouw, it makes a difference if learners are learning to read in a second language: for new readers the forming of a phonological representation of a word is easier when the word is already known. Kurvers (2007) found that only students who used the strategy of relying on graphic (instead of visual) cues demonstrated substantial progress. During the lessons, a change in word recognition skills developed from logographic to alphabetic word recognition, from guessing to sequential decoding. Three students who did not receive any phonics instructions failed to make that change. Students in the intensive course demonstrated much faster change than the ones in non-intensive courses. Most progress was shown by beginning readers who reached the orthographic stage of directly recognizing written words. Phonics instruction and vocabulary in a second language seemed to be major determinants of reading development in that language.

Kurvers (2002) looked at what adult non-readers know about language, and found that neither phonemes nor words were the first to be recognized as independent entities by new readers: if they were asked to segment sentences they divided them in parts that formed conceptual or semantic entities: *in the shop*, or *the old man*, not in words; if they segmented words they did it in syllables, not in phonemes. Phonemes and words turned out to be linguistic entities that new readers are not primarily aware of. Learning to read in any alphabetical script and a script that marks word boundaries by spaces, like the Roman script, makes the learners aware of (the existence of) phonemes and words, as many studies in different languages revealed (Kurvers 2002).

Some research has been done on predictors of success when adults are learning to read and write in a second language. The study on what works for adult ESL literacy students by Condelli, Spruck Wrigley, Yoon, Seburn & Cronen (2003) showed key findings related to instruction, program practices and attendance. Some of the factors that positively affected learning to read were: making connections between class and the outside world, use of mother tongue for clarification, prior education and skills, age and varied practice and interaction. Longer scheduled classes resulted in more growth in reading comprehension but less growth in basic reading skills (suggesting that it might be better not to *"overemphasize basic reading skills for too long of a time but move on to higher level reading skills…"*). Kurvers & Stockmann (2009) found large individual differences among adult learners. Older learners on average needed more time than younger learners to reach certain literacy levels. Factors that turned out to positively affect learning to read (and that are relevant to this paper) were: L2 language contact, use of mother tongue in the classes, attendance rate, education attended before, use of computers (programs that provide a lot of practice in learning to decode) and less frontal teaching to the whole group at once. Most non-literate learners needed more than 1000 hours to reach a functional literacy level.

Outside of western countries, research has been done on adult literacy in developing countries, often stressing aspects that are specific for a development context. Archer (2005) sets out international benchmarks on adult literacy *"based on responses to a global survey of effective adult literacy programmes"* (p. 3), i.e. *"Programmes should have timetables that flexibly respond to the daily lives of learners but which provide for regular and sustained contact (e.g. twice a week for at least two years)"*. 67 Successful literacy programs in 35 countries were analyzed. On average, programs lasted for over two years, often divided into literacy and post-literacy phases (p. 19). The most common pattern of

regularity of classes was between two and three meetings a week, three being most common (p. 19). The average number of contact hours for initial literacy was around 300-400 hours (p. 20). Their estimate from the survey is that *"on average the whole process involves a contact time of about 600 hours over nearly three years"* (p. 20). Lind (2008) defines literacy as *"a continuous process of developing and using reading and writing skills (including numeracy) for multiple purposes"* (p. 135). She states that *"timing and duration of instruction needs to be flexible, but long enough to provide the time required to achieve a certain level of literacy, without being too long to avoid high drop-out"*. One conclusion was that *"it is probably more effective for learners to be given relatively short courses in stages, and to be evaluated or tested at a rather low skill level with success, as this is more likely to motivate them to continue to the next learning stage"* (p. 87). With regard to linking literacy to livelihood, she stresses the fact that each component *"should be given enough teaching-learning time (they cannot both be squeezed into the timetable usually meant for literacy, i.e. 300 hours or so)"* (p. 100).

More and more information is emerging from recent research on adult literacy in Timor-Leste. Literacy programs have been described in several studies. Taylor-Leech (2009) describes post-independence literacy projects. She mentions that lessons can be learned with regard to the need for local engagement and expresses her concern that literacy needs and goals of the learners have not sufficiently been taken into account. Boughton (2010) lists recent achievements in the field of adult and popular education since 2002, one of the major concerns being the lack of post-literacy activities for people who have finished basic literacy programs. Boon (2010, 2011) looked at current adult literacy programs in Timor-Leste, and at the teachers and learners participating in these programs. She focused on language backgrounds and language use, and on reading and writing ability and progress. Most teachers and students in her study were multilingual and for most of them Tetum was as a second language. She found that learners' age, Tetum proficiency and former school experience were important factors in the process of learning to read and write in Tetum. Boon & Kurvers (2008) investigated strategies of adults who were learning to read and write in Portuguese, at the time when some literacy programs in Timor-Leste were still conducted in Portuguese. They stressed the importance -for literacy teachers- of knowledge about stages and strategies in beginning reading as well as of specific second language issues new readers come across.

The focus of this paper is on contributing to the understanding of how new readers acquire the alphabetic principle, as this has turned out to be of crucial importance in beginning reading. I do this by looking at grapheme recognition and word reading ability of new readers in Timor-Leste. Letter knowledge, being able to link letters to sounds and the understanding that spoken words consist of phonemes should, after three to four months of participation in a literacy course, lead to the capability of recognizing a number of graphemes and reading a few short, simple words. This paper will help to shed light on which learner or education characteristics determine whether this will actually happen.

Questions that will be addressed in this paper are: What can adult learners who never attended school and who participate in a literacy program for the first time achieve in terms of initial reading after three to four months of a literacy course? What factors seem to influence the building of initial reading ability? Looking at grapheme recognition and word reading as signs of initial reading ability: what graphemes/words turn out to be difficult for new readers in Timor-Leste and why would that be? Do the

findings of this study in Timor-Leste fit in with what we already know from previous research or do we see different things emerging?

First the research method will be described: who were the participants and what instruments were used for data collection. After this, a number of findings will be presented. The paper will end with conclusions and a few points for discussion.

2   Method

From June 2009 until March 2011 a survey was carried out in adult literacy education in Timor-Leste. Over seventy literacy classes in three different literacy programs were visited in eight of the country's 13 districts. The three literacy programs were: (a) the three months basic literacy program *Los Hau Bele* ('Yes I can'), which is part of the national literacy campaign and is based on the *Yo sí puedo* ('Yes I can') program of Cuban origin that was adapted to Timor-Leste's reality, (b) the *Alfanamor* program with a six-month beginners course called *Hakat ba Oin* ('Step Forward')[2] and a six-month advanced level course called *Iha Dalan* ('On the way'), and (c) the three- to four-month literacy and numeracy course provided within the Youth Employment Promotion program, using compact versions of the *Hakat ba Oin* and *Iha Dalan* literacy manuals.[3] All programs are based on a phonics approach, but they vary in duration and content. Mostly there are two or three lessons per week, with a total of six to nine hours of literacy teaching/learning per week. (For a more detailed description of the three programs, see Boon 2011.) One hundred teachers filled out a questionnaire and were interviewed, and almost eight hundred adult learners carried out small reading and writing tasks. The survey sheds light on how adults are learning to read and write in current literacy programs in this relatively new country. This paper will focus on the initial reading ability, not on writing. A selection was made of adult learners who never attended school as children, and who were participating in a literacy course for the first time, over a period of three to four months. The main focus will be on these new readers' grapheme recognition and word reading abilities.

2.1   Participants

This paper presents data of a selection of 239 participants: learners who never attended school and never took a literacy course before and who had been participating in their first course for three to four months at the time the survey visit took place in their group. Of these 239 participants, 152 were female and 87 were male (as those who never went to school and now take part in literacy courses tend to be women rather than men). Most participants (230) were adults of 15 years of age or older, but nine of them were younger than 15 because occasionally children take part in adult literacy classes when there's no better alternative available for them; the mean age was 38; the

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youngest participant was seven years old, the oldest 76. 127 participants were 40 or younger, and 112 were over 40. A majority of 169 (71%) could speak and understand Tetum, but only 18 (7.5%) of them had Tetum as their first language. The other 221 participants (92.5%) had a regional language or dialect as their mother tongue. Only seven (3%) said they could speak (some) Portuguese.

2.2 Data collection and instruments

All participants took part in a grapheme recognition test and a word reading test, two important elements of beginning reading ability. During the grapheme recognition test they were shown a paper with 30 graphemes (Appendix) and were asked whether they could name them. The 30 graphemes were randomly selected, with the restriction that the first 23 graphemes (i.e., *d, o, s, m, i*) occur both in Tetum and in Portuguese, the next three only in Portuguese (*ç, ão* and *q*), the three after that only in Tetum (*ñ, oo, k*) and the last one (*y*) in neither, but it is used a lot in Bahasa Indonesia.

For the word reading test, the participants were given a list of 80 words in Tetum and were asked to read words from the list during three minutes (see Appendix 1 for the complete list). Their three-minute word reading was recorded. It could safely be assumed that the participants would know the meaning of the 80 words. The first ten words on the list occurred in all three literacy programs involved, i.e. *uma* (house) or *ida* (one). The next 60 words were frequently used Tetum words ordered from one to four syllables and from simple consonant-vowel syllables to more complex ccvc(c) syllables. And the last ten words were loanwords from Portuguese, consisting of four or five syllables. (See Boon 2011 for more detailed information on both tests.)

Both the grapheme recognition and the word reading test, done by the 239 participants as described above, showed a very high reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha .97 (grapheme recognition test) and .99 (word reading test).

3   First results

As shown in Table 1, the participants could recognize on average 15 (of 30) graphemes, ranging from 0 to 30, meaning that some participants (21, so almost one in ten) could not recognize any graphemes at all and that others (9) could recognize all 30 of them. Table 1 also shows that the participants could read on average 14 (of 80) words in three minutes, ranging from 0 to 80; about half of the participants (119) could not yet read any word correctly and some others (6) could read all 80 words correctly without any problems.

Table 1: Grapheme recognition and word reading scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Grapheme recognition	237	0	30	15.13	9.55
Word reading	229	0	80	13.99	24.18

The distribution of scores is actually quite different from what is usually found: the majority of the learners would read between one and 60 words in three minutes after

three to four months of participation in a course. In this case however, 7% of the participants had very high scores (more than 70 words) and 52% could not read any word correctly yet.

The older the participants, the fewer graphemes they could recognize and the fewer words they could read (see Figure 1).
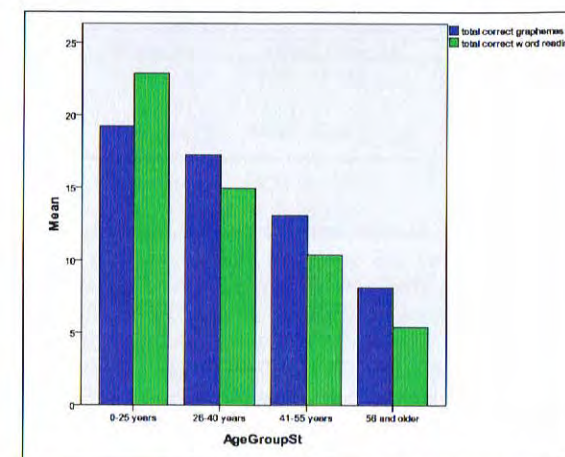

Figure 1: Grapheme recognition (blue) and word reading (green) scores divided by age group.

Table 2 shows those significant negative correlations with age. It also shows correlations between the grapheme recognition and word writing scores and other variables: for the learners the number of months they had participated in a literacy course and for the teacher characteristics like number of years of education and of (adult literacy) teaching experience.

Table 2: Pearson correlations between scores and learner/teacher characteristics.

	Age learners	Months in literacy course	Teachers' education	Teachers' experience
Grapheme recognition (Pearson corr.)	-.465**	.194**	.012	.001
Word reading (Pearson corr.)	-.293**	.205**	-.025	.066

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Except for age, it was mainly the number of months of participation that seemed to make a significant difference. Teachers' years of education and experience did not seem to affect the grapheme recognition and word reading scores very much.

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for younger and older learners, and for Tetum and non-Tetum speakers. The younger learners have significantly higher scores than the older learners. Participants who could speak and understand Tetum had significantly higher scores on grapheme recognition, the average score on word reading was also higher, but this difference was not significant.

Table 3: Means and standard deviations scores for younger and older learners, Tetum-speaking and non-Tetum speaking

	Tetum speaker (n=168)	Non-Tetum speaker (n=69)	T	40 years or younger (n=126)	Older than 40 (n=111)	T
	Mean (Sd.)	Mean (Sd.)		Mean (Sd.)	Mean (Sd.)	
Grapheme recognition	16.33 (9.10)	12.20 (10.07)	-2.95**	18.66 (8.09)	11.13 (9.55)	6.51**
Word reading	15.18 (25.55)	11.23 (20.59)	-1.24	19.25 (27.34)	8.41 (18.87)	3.51**

$** = p < .01$

Of the 239 participants in total, 51 were tested twice. The second test took place three months after the first test, and the scores of this second test were used in the descriptions above (their scores after three to four months of attendance). Now scores of the first and second test will be compared, to find out whether the 51 learners showed progress in grapheme recognition and word reading over a period of three months (see Table 4). Again we will take a look at how age and proficiency in Tetum affected these scores. Table 4 shows that for grapheme recognition as well as word reading the participants on average showed significant progress in three months: on average, they advanced from eight to twelve graphemes recognized correctly and from three to six words read correctly.

Table 4: Grapheme recognition and word reading scores of the first and the second tests

	1st test Mean (Sd)	2nd test Mean (Sd)	T	p
Grapheme recognition	7.51 (8.38)	12.04 (8.90)	-6.49**	.000
Word reading	3.49 (12.20)	5.88 (15.94)	-2.08*	.04

$** = p < .01$ $* = p < .05$

Also in this smaller group, the age factor and the Tetum factor could clearly be seen.

Table 5 presents the means and standard deviations for two different age groups and for Tetum and non-Tetum speakers. An analysis of variance with repeated measures with age group as between subject factor and time as within subject factor was conducted, and a similar analysis of variance was conducted, but now with Tetum speaking as between subject and time as within subject factor. First of all, as already shown before, there was a significant main effect of time for grapheme knowledge (F=49.97, p=.000) and word reading (F=9.69, p=.003). There was no main effect of age but there was significant interaction between age group and progress: the younger participants showed much more progress in three months than the older participants, both in grapheme recognition (F=5.59, p=.02) and in word reading (F=6.07, p=.02). There was a main effect of Tetum speaking for graphemes (F=22.98, p=.000), but for word reading this effect was not significant (F=2.53, p=.12); besides, there was no significant interaction effect here, not for graphemes (F=.97, p=.33) and not for word

reading (F=1.63, p=.21). In other words, there was no difference in growth for the Tetum and non-Tetum speakers.

Table 5: Means and standard deviations 1st and 2nd tests, split up by age group and Tetum and non-Tetum speakers

	Learners 40 and younger (n=13)	Learners older than 40 (n=38)	Tetum speaker (n=36)	Non-Tetum speaker (n=15)
	Mean (Sd.)	Mean (Sd.)	Mean (Sd.)	Mean (Sd.)
Grapheme recognition 1	9.54 (7.45)	6.82 (8.65)	10.28 (8.31)	.87 (3.36)
Grapheme recognition 2	16.77 (8.07)	10.42 (8.68)	15.25 (7.93)	4.33 (5.96)
Word reading 1	3.54 (8.79)	3.47 (13.26)	4.94 (14.32)	.00 (.00)
Word reading 2	10.54 (21.94)	4.29 (13.31)	8.28 (18.52)	.13 (.35)

Looking at the scores per item of all 239 participants gives us some idea of what graphemes are difficult for new readers to recognize, and what words are difficult for new readers in Timor-Leste to read. It turned out that in the grapheme recognition tasks the letters *o* and *k* were recognized best and the letters *q* and *y* worst. Many people had trouble with the diphthongs *ei, eu, oi, ou* and *ão*, and also the letters *v, x, z* and *g* were not recognized well.

While doing the tests it became clear that many people mixed up letters that either look more or less alike *(d-b, q-p, u-n, n-m, k-h, r-t-f)*, or that sound more or less alike *(v, b, p* and *f;* or *c* and *k)*. Accents and tilde on letters *(i, ú, é, ó, ñ)* did not seem to cause much trouble, although they sometimes led to confusion.

Of the 239 participants, only seven said they spoke Portuguese, not enough to check whether they could more easily recognize the graphemes *f, ão* and *q*, which are only used in Portuguese, not in Tetum.

In the word reading task, the words *uma* (house) and *ka* (or) turned out to be easiest, almost like *fahi* (pig), *manu* (chicken) and *ba* (go/to); long multi-syllable words like *barakliu* (much/many more), *liuhusi* (earlier) and *hateten* (tell/say) turned out to be difficult for many people, as did -to a lesser extent- shorter words with consonant clusters like *kria* (make/create) and *lakleur* (soon).

4 Conclusions and discussion

The first results of the survey as presented in Chapter 3 can help to answer the research questions that were formulated in Chapter 1. They reveal what people who never attended school and who participate in a literacy program for the first time can achieve in terms of initial reading after three to four months of a literacy course of six to nine hours per week, in some of Timor-Leste's currently provided adult literacy programs. Scores on both tasks after three to four months showed very large individual differences: on average, people could recognize 15 graphemes and read 14 words, but individual variation was high, scores varied from recognizing 0 to all 30 graphemes and being able to read 0 to all 80 words. Of the 239 learners, after three to four months almost 9% still could not recognize any of the 30 graphemes presented,

and 27% could only recognize one to ten of 30 graphemes. Of the 239 learners after three to four months, 52% could not read any of the words of the presented list of 80 words yet, and 20% could only read one to ten words correctly. So, more than half of the learners had not managed to learn to read words in three to four months. This might be related to a strong focus on the alphabet as such and a lack of practice in word reading, which was observed in many literacy classes: many participants were able to spell out words letter by letter, but did not succeed in the next step of blending graphemes and phonemes to syllables and words.

The first results also shed light on factors that seem to influence the building of initial reading ability, like age and Tetum proficiency. The older the participants were, the lower their scores were on both tasks, although some older participants had much higher scores than some of the younger participants. Proficiency in Tetum (as L1 or L2) seemed to make a difference for grapheme recognition, and strangely enough not for word reading. The fact that some Tetum speakers had Tetum as their first language (rather than their second language) did not seem to matter in either task. Apparently, being able to speak and understand Tetum is more important than having Tetum as one's mother tongue. The number of months that people participated in the courses mattered significantly. Both teacher education and experience (in years/months) did not seem to affect the scores.

The 51 participants who were tested for a second time after three months did show progress over those three months, although it was relatively limited. Younger participants showed more progress on the two tasks than older participants, and Tetum speakers showed more progress on grapheme recognition. The lower averages of this group of 51 at the two test moments (first eight and later twelve graphemes recognized, first three and later six words read correctly), compared to the averages of the larger group of 239 participants (15 graphemes recognized and 14 words read correctly) can have several reasons: they might have to do with this group having more 'weaker' learners, facing more challenging circumstances or receiving less instruction.

The first survey results also provide information on what graphemes and words turned out to be difficult for new readers in Timor-Leste and why. Looking at scores per item, it was found that some graphemes/words were easier to recognize/read than others. The observation, for example, that many participants had trouble recognizing *q* and *y* is probably due to the fact that both graphemes are not used in Tetum, contrary to *o* and *k* which were recognized well and are used frequently in Tetum. Various graphemes were mixed up because of either their form (see also Rayner & Pollatsek 1989: 336-338) or their sound being much alike. Graphic/visual images of letters like *b-d*, *u-n* and *n-m* more often seemed confusing for participants than sound/acoustic images, although the trouble distinguishing and producing different sounds for *p-b-f-v* seemed to occur rather frequently in certain districts (i.e. the districts of Baucau and Viqueque). Longer, multi-syllable words and words with consonant clusters (*kr, kl*) and diphthongs (*ia, eu*) appeared to be more difficult to read than shorter words and words with less complex consonant-vowel-syllables.

What was found in this study generally fits in with what we already know from previous research, but some aspects are remarkable. Age correlated negatively with what people achieved and how fast they made progress, and proficiency in the literacy language, in this case Tetum, apparently did make a difference. On the one hand surprisingly fast progress was seen with some learners. On the other hand, progress

seemed slow, especially for many older learners. Attending a literacy class for three to four months was certainly not sufficient for many participants to really learn to read new words. Grapheme recognition seems crucial for word reading: participants with high word reading scores generally had high grapheme recognition scores as well. But high grapheme recognition scores did not automatically result in high word reading scores: many participants recognized a lot of graphemes but still had trouble reading simple, short words correctly. This nicely illustrates the developmental pattern in the stages: to reach the alphabetic stage, learners have to learn the grapheme-phoneme correspondences; this is a necessary but not sufficient pre-condition: they also have to acquire the cognitively complex skill of blending phonemes.

What we found about teachers' education and experience might have to do with what Lind found (2008: 88): *"several studies have shown that literacy teachers' formal qualifications or pedagogical training is less important than their positive attitudes and rapport with the community"*. More research is needed to find out what other teacher characteristics may have an influence on learners' results.

Finally the first results leave us with some points for discussion. It is necessary to observe more classes to find out how teaching takes place: what kind of instruction and how much practice participants really get, etc. In this study, very large individual differences were found. This in itself is not so remarkable; see for example Kurvers & Stockmann (2009). But what is remarkable are the large numbers of participants at the extreme ends of the range, either scoring 0 or the maximum. An interesting question with regard to these individual differences is: What do they tell us and what do they imply? Some participants did not succeed in learning to recognize graphemes or read simple short words after three to four months of participation in an adult literacy course. Why is that? What can be done about this? What are the implications for education? Other participants learned very quickly: Why is that? What is it that makes these participants such fast learners? Is it the teacher, the circumstances, the participants' active attendance?

What this study makes clear is that participants who had not mastered the alphabetic principle had little success learning to read. It would however be interesting to find out more about the word recognition strategies that these participants used. This will be investigated in further research.

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Lady filling out a form, Dili, March 2011

Looking at pictures in a literacy manual, Viqueque, March 2011

APPENDIX

a) The grapheme recognition task

v	e	eu
d	m	oi
b	i	ou
h	r	ç
o	x	ão
n	í	q
t	ú	ñ
s	é	oo
z	ó	k
g	ei	y

b) The word reading task

Front page:

lee	ba	lia	tenki	labarik
haas	ka	nia	joven	nakfakar
ida	la	iha	tomak	hanorin
uma	ho	nian	nu'udar	bainhira
manu	no	di'ak	serve	tarutu
bola	ne'e	foti	maibé	malirin
fahi	sei	sira	oinsá	raiseluk
oan	mós	hotu	dadauk	badinas
paun	boot	ohin	hanoin	lakleur
Timor	ha'u	kria	ne'ebé	nakukun

Back page:

ikusmai	seluseluk	komentáriu
haruka	loroloron	prezidente
naroman	matabixu	independente
lakohi	dalaruma	komunikadu
nafatin	odamatan	unidade
hakilar	tekiteki	lansamentu
hateten	barakliu	polítika
matenek	ulukliu	favoravel
labele	liuhusi	koordenadora
hanesan	filafali	ekonomia