

Learning Tetun as a *malae*

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The challenge

Newcomers to Timor, if lucky, are given two weeks language tuition
then let loose
to encourage,
to train,
to promote,
to understand...

Language proficiency levels

as based on the American Council for Teaching of Foreign Languages scale

Intermediate Low (survival)

- Simple conversations.
- Predictable familiar topics related to daily activities.
- Understood, with some repetition, by sympathetic listeners accustomed to dealing with foreigners.
- Discrete sentences, or strings of sentences.

Dili Institute of Technology offers intensive Tetun courses, in small groups, for 20 hours per week.
Most of our students can reach Intermediate Low after about three weeks.

Advanced (limited working proficiency)

- Narrate, describe, compare, explain, discuss. Deal with an unanticipated complication.
- Most informal and some formal settings.
- Topics of personal and general interest.
- Understood without difficulty by speakers unaccustomed to dealing with foreigners.
- Use terms of address properly.
- Handle elementary constructions accurately most of the time; some more complex structures.
- Speak in paragraphs: can link thoughts.

This takes over three months of intensive effort to achieve. Few foreigners get there.

Superior

- Discuss topics extensively, support opinions, and hypothesise. Deal with a linguistically unfamiliar situation, e.g. getting clothes repaired when you have never studied sewing terms.
- Most formal and informal settings.
- Wide range of general interest topics and some special fields of expertise. eg. contemporary issues, abstract topics, special fields of competence.
- No pattern of errors in basic structures. Errors virtually never interfere with communication or distract the native speaker from the message.
- Extended discourse: can link ideas throughout an extended speech.

Language learning plateau¹

- After rapid increase in early stages, progress stops. This can be temporary, or permanent. This occurs at about Intermediate Mid level (before reaching Intermediate High or Advanced).
- May continue to progress in reading and listening, but not in speaking and writing.
- Persistent fossilised errors. Whatever you still use incorrectly, stays incorrect.
 - Grammar: e.g. *ami / ita ; lori ba / mai Dili*
 - Pronunciation: e.g. Australian lack of final 'r' ('*haan bata*' for *haan batar*), Brazilian lack of final 'k' ('*labariki baraki*' for *labarik barak*)
- Increased fluency, but continue using basic structures and vocabulary.
- Without conscious effort, it is easy to stay at this level permanently.
- This is not enough for in-depth work in Tetun. When students with Intermediate Mid or Intermediate High level Tetun give five-minute lessons to DIT Tetun teachers, on a topic of their own choice, the teachers often cannot understand what the students are trying to teach, despite the students sounding fluent in Tetun, and the teachers being accustomed to foreigner-ese.

Grammar plateau: Don't use Tetun structures that have no parallels in one's own language:

- *mak, tiha, ona*
- verb sequences: *foo ba nia haan, soe sae*.

Such constructions are also under-used in translations, which – like new learners of Tetun – tend to follow the structure of the source language.

Vocabulary plateau:

- Fail to acquire advanced vocabulary: e.g. know *lori* for 'bring', but don't distinguish methods of bringing: *lori / tutur / hakilin / hasaan / leba / lalin*
- Overuse of Portuguese cognates: e.g. use *diferente* but not *oin seluk*
- Limited awareness of collocation (which words go together):
 - breathe out – *husik / hasai iis?*
 - congratulate – *foo / hatete parabens?*

How much vocabulary do we need?

Based on European languages:

- 3,000 words: can read a high percentage of words in an average text. (A suitable aim for Intermediate)
- 5,000 words: can read a short novel for pleasure
- 10,000 words: first year university materials

As a guide, Dili Institute of Technology's mini-dictionary *Word-finder* (by Catharina Williams-van Klinken) includes 4500 Tetun words, nearly all of which are well-known. It excludes a lot of Portuguese loans which are used in the media or for specialist areas but are not well-known in the community.

¹ Much of what follows, including vocabulary requirements, is based on Jack Richards (<http://www.professorjackrichards.com/pdfs/moving-beyond-the-plateau.pdf>, downloaded 28/6/11). His observations closely reflect my own experience in teaching and learning Tetun.

Naturalness plateau:

- May be grammatically correct but not natural. e.g.
 - Start question with question word too often: *Nee saida?* (neutral question), *Saida mak nee?* (expresses irritation).
 - “Before eating, wash your hands.”: *Molok atu haan, fasi ita nia liman.* (grammatically correct but odd.) / *Fasi liman lai mak haan.* (correct and natural)
- Lack ‘chunks’ and formulaic utterances. To be fluent, we need to learn formulaic chunks of speech, not just individual words.
 - *Mak nee deit, obrigada.*
 - *Bele halo nusaa mos, ...*
 - *koalia oin ida, hahalok oin seluk*

Why the plateau?

- This is a natural stage, as we switch from intensive learning to consolidation before proceeding further.
- Intermediate Mid level is enough for everyday life. People “can manage”, so lose motivation. Without motivation, you cannot succeed in language learning.
- Nobody corrects us. Timorese tolerate a lot of “foreigner-ese” (and “translation-ese”).
- Poor written models. We come cultures where we learn a lot through written materials, but there is very little good written Tetun.
- Limited availability of advanced lessons and teaching materials.
- Anxiety at lack of progress.
- Short time frame in Timor. Why bother if you only have six months left?
- Harder to see progress than it was at first.

What next?

Check your proficiency level. What can you do so far with Tetun?

- You can do some of this by comparing yourself against lists of proficiencies; e.g. checklists published by ACTFL (The American Council for Teaching of Foreign Languages) or the Foreign Service Institute.
- Dili Institute of Technology Tetun teachers use a Language Proficiency Interview (as devised by Peace Corps) to evaluate the levels of students, before assigning them to a class.

Set goals.

- What do you want to do? When will you aim to be able to do it?
- Goals must be realistic and measurable.
- Set goals in terms of what you want to be able to communicate: e.g. be able to explain my organisation’s mission in a public forum, be able to apologise appropriately, discuss the pros and cons of increasing import tax.
- You cannot skip steps. e.g. you cannot talk in connected sentences until you can talk in separate sentences, and you cannot talk about abstract concepts until you can talk about concrete ones. Many people want to be able to jump to giving complex instructions on how to use Excel, without first learning simpler instructions such as giving directions to a taxi driver.
- Decide what action to take, and do it. Set aside the time and resources required.

Analyse: How do you learn?

- ‘Sponges’ enjoy being with people and soak up language
- ‘Analysts’ enjoy describing patterns but find it hard to use the language in practice
- At higher levels, you need both learning of rules and spontaneous acquisition.

Learn to “Notice”

- Lessons can “open your ears” to words and structures you have not noticed before.
- Look out for things you don’t understand. Follow them up, and practise them.
- Keep a notebook of new expressions.

Use new strategies

There are many strategies for developing your language skills. You can find suggestions in books or websites on language learning. e.g.

- Study grammar
- Consciously learn and use new words
- Develop your memory – flashcards, regular review, pictures
- Stay with a local family
- Tell someone what you want to say, and record them telling it back to you.
- Listen to the news and summarise it, either orally or in writing.
- Write a diary in Tetun.

Recommendation to organisations

- Give more time for staff to learn language and culture, both before they start work in Timor, and afterwards.
- If good communication in Tetun is important to your organisation, test how well you are doing, and take action accordingly.
- Consider offering home stay and rural visits.

Recommendations to learners

- Raise the bar! Don't fossilise.
- Learn how to learn a language.
- Learn how to test how well you are communicating, in speaking, writing and translation. If need be, ask Dili Institute of Technology to teach you how, or to conduct a test.

New Tetun resources from Dili Institute of Technology

We have the following new resources, available from the website, or as books or CDs through Silvia photocopy shop in Caicoli, or through Dili Institute of Technology. All but *Word-finder* were first released yesterday.

- Tetun-English interactive dictionary, for use on computers. It includes 5600 Tetun entries and 1700 subentries, over 700 example sentences, and over 2700 cross-references between related words. You can search by Tetun word, English word, an expression in any language, or by categories such as 'health' and 'vehicle'.
- Peace Corps East Timor Tetun Language Manual, edition 2.
- Recordings of the vocabulary and dialogues for the first ten chapters of the Peace Corps book.
- Computer 'flashcards' for the vocabulary for the first twelve chapters of the Peace Corps book.
- Word-finder: a Tetun-English mini-dictionary which has sold over 11000 copies. The recommended retail price is \$5, but for sets of 30 or more Dili Institute of Technology give a bulk discount of \$2/copy.

For these and other resources, and for information on Tetun courses, check out our website: www.tetundit.tl.