

Educating for Capacity Building: A Case Study of Timor-Leste Officials Studying on An English Language Training Programme in New Zealand

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Abstract

The English Language Training for Officials (ELTO) programme builds capacity in the government sector in Southeast Asian nations. One of the long-term goals is to support sustainable economic development in participating nations through participants' improved use of English for international communication.

The research purpose was to identify key short and longer term impacts of the programme by listening to learner voices. Stage one focused on reflections of alumni and New Zealand Aid staff in Dili; stage two focused on participants in Wellington. Three areas of change were investigated among the Timor-Leste officials: empowerment through improved English language skills, expanded professional knowledge and capabilities, and increased intercultural awareness of other participants and New Zealanders.

Interviewees reported a growth in confidence, improved professional skills and knowledge, and expanded networks and cultural awareness. Aspects of the programme which helped build capacity were: studying a course related to their work in an English environment, living in a homestay and having a conversation buddy, giving presentations and doing project work, participating in workshops and lectures, having workplace visits, fieldtrips, and language support, and reflecting on learning.

Educating for change within ELTO involves a collaborative approach to programme development and delivery with regular monitoring and evaluation, an English for Specific Purposes programme tailored to learners' needs, task-based learning, learner-centred teaching and learner autonomy.

A course designed like this improves the capacity of individuals to carry out their work in government, and can contribute to longer lasting changes in understanding good governance and development within government departments.

Keywords: capacity, government, sustainable economic development, learner voices, change, good governance

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Introduction

Building capacity is critical to human development. It starts with building skills and knowledge in individuals and communities, and leads to the growth of societies and nations.

“For an activity to meet the standard of capacity development as practiced and promoted by UNDP, it must bring about transformation that is generated and sustained over time from within. Transformation of this kind goes beyond performing tasks; instead, it is more a matter of changing mind-sets and attitudes” (United Nations Development Programme, 2009).

The ELTO programme is supported by the New Zealand Aid Programme within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The purpose of this New Zealand-based programme is capacity development in the government sector in the Southeast Asian region. The programme began in 1992 and has expanded over the past 25 years. Over 1,300 government officials from Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Mongolia, Myanmar, Timor-Leste and Vietnam have participated in the programme and currently, there are up to 128 participants trained per year. In Part One, the officials spend seven weeks attending a regional institute and living in homestays. In Part Two, they spend thirteen weeks in the capital, Wellington, live independently and are matched with a conversation buddy.

Sustainable economic development is at the core of the programme. Each intake targets a specific government sector, such as education, agriculture or governance. Although an English language training programme, the focus of ELTO is English for Specific Purposes. Key features of the programme include presentation and project work, language workshops, field trips and workplace visits. Individualised learning support and independent learning play central roles in assisting the officials to maximise the learning opportunities they have studying in an English immersion environment.

The purpose of this study was to identify key short and longer term impacts of the programme by listening to learner voices. Specifically the researchers chose to investigate three areas of change for the Timor-Leste participants: empowerment through improved language skills, expanded professional knowledge and capabilities, and increased intercultural awareness of participants from other countries and New Zealanders. Two sets of interviews were carried out. The first set were in November 2016 in Dili, Timor-Leste, with five alumni and two staff members from the New Zealand Embassy. The second set took place in Wellington in December 2016 with six participants from Intake 43, which focused on agriculture.

Timor-Leste officials were chosen for this study for several reasons. Timor-Leste is the newest independent country in the Asia-Pacific region, having gained their independence from Indonesia in May 2002 after 25 years of armed struggle. At this time most of the infrastructure, including homes, schools, hospitals and public services, were destroyed. Consequently, the country faces enormous development challenges in rebuilding the nation. The lack of educational facilities and disrupted schooling within the population means there is a shortage of human resources, greater than in any other country participating in the ELTO programme. Additionally, in a

2012 survey, the Timor-Leste officials self-identified as the country group with the greatest need. They had difficulties understanding how to approach tasks, lacked general knowledge and struggled with academic writing and sentence level accuracy. Finally, Timor-Leste aspires to be a member of ASEAN and thus benefit from strong regional support networks.

Method

Interviews in Timor-Leste:

Five ELTO alumni were interviewed, individually and as small groups, using standard questions and additional questions to clarify and extend their comments. There was social interaction and general conversation with four others. Two New Zealand Embassy staff were interviewed about their impressions of the impact of ELTO on the professional skills of alumni.

The standard questions were:

- Do you feel your language skills, particularly in English, improved as a result of the ELTO programme?
- Are you more confident to use English in work situations now?
- Have you been able to keep improving your English skills since returning home?
- Have you noticed any changes in the way you work since returning home?
- Did you gain useful professional knowledge or skills while in New Zealand?
- Have any of your colleagues or managers commented on any improved skills since you returned home?
- Have you been able to keep in touch with your New Zealand homestays or ELTO classmates from other countries?

Interviews in Wellington:

Six Intake 43 Timor-Leste participants were interviewed individually. Each was asked standard questions, with clarification questions as needed, investigating three areas of change.

The standard questions were:

Change 1 (empowerment through improved English language skills)

- What course activities have helped improve your language skills?
- What changes have you observed in your language skills?
- What activities are easier to do now than when you started Part One?
- Have you become a better-organised worker? How?
- Have you become a more independent learner? In what ways?

Change 2 (expanded professional knowledge and capabilities)

- Do you feel more confident to research information than when you began the course?
- What did you learn from the workplace visits in Part One and Part Two?

- Do you think you will do your job differently when you go home?
- What course activities have helped expand your professional knowledge and capabilities?

Change 3 (increased intercultural awareness of other participants and New Zealanders)

- Did you enjoy your homestay experience? Why/why not?
- What did you learn from working in groups with other country members on the ELTO course?
- What course activities have helped increase your intercultural awareness?

Conclusions

Interviews in Timor-Leste:

1. Improved confidence and improved English language skills

All the interviewees emphatically stated that their English language skills improved and they feel much more confident nowadays, particularly in the use of English in work situations. There were many examples of how this has changed the way they work.

“It’s easier when I meet some police from New Zealand. ... We have confidence to talk with them in English.”

“Because I am a Director (of a government department) I need to give my feedback or to give a decision or to approve a project. So (now) I feel very confident to decide something, very confident to say ‘no’, very confident to say ‘yes’.”

The interviewer and other New Zealanders in Timor-Leste observed some striking changes in personal confidence and manner in many of the alumni since studying in New Zealand.

“Before the course they are very shy, not confident. After they are more confident in everything and English. ... Their demeanour changes. They can relate in a freer, easier way with New Zealanders and English speaking people.”

2. Scholarships and increased work responsibility

Many ELTO alumni receive scholarships for further study, are promoted to senior positions or are posted overseas which is evidence of their improved professional capacity.

“For people in Foreign Affairs, the programme seems very good preparation for their careers and overseas postings.”

Two of the people interviewed talked about international conferences that they were invited to attend to represent Timor-Leste. They attributed this to their improved English proficiency and confidence to prepare and give presentations.

3. Presentation skills and participation in meetings

Several of the interviewees commented on how useful their improved presentation skills are, which has resulted in giving presentations both in Timor-Leste and overseas and helping senior colleagues prepare presentations. This applies to presentations in languages other than English.

“Practice giving presentations during the ELTO course was very, very useful. It makes me confident to speak to all people, to talk to others. ...I prepare for my chief the presentation – she trusts me because I am alumni of ELTO.”

“I presented at the conference. The people from X, they said very proud, after you came back from New Zealand you are very confident to present.”

“Every month we have a meeting in English (with donor and partner agencies) and I use what I learned. ...As a Director I have to organise meetings. I have to push myself how to organise the meeting, how to say the first words when I open a meeting.”

“At meetings we have to listen and understand and speak in English. After New Zealand, this is more easy for me.”

New Zealand Embassy staff also commented on the value of improved presentation skills, for example at ASEAN meetings and international conferences, and of familiarity with the process of formal meetings.

4. Workplace visits and interviews in New Zealand

New Zealand Embassy staff commented that workplace visits in the ELTO programme seem to be important to and valued by ELTO participants.

“Because of the experience of visiting schools – we can see it’s very different. When we visit schools (in New Zealand), we can see the condition, how the students learn and we can compare it with Timor-Leste. For example, now we do monitoring and evaluation and visit schools in other districts (in Timor-Leste). When I visited, I saw directly and I could make comparison.”

“Understanding New Zealand police approach and systems, especially Community Policing, helps us to work with New Zealand police in Timor-Leste.”

5. Valuing ASEAN and New Zealand connections

Comments about homestays and the friendships made, and maintained, with ELTO participants from other countries, clearly demonstrated that these connections were valued and that cross cultural understandings were enhanced.

“Especially for homestay life and life-style, wife and husband are equal. One day (in Timor- Leste) will be the same (laughter) and now I can cook!”

“I never forgot my homestays.”

The interviewees were emphatic about keeping connection with other ELTO alumni, both in Timor-Leste and other countries.

“I’ve had contact with my friends from Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam – all on Facebook.”

“I keep in touch with homestays and teachers and friends from other countries, from Laos and so on.”

“My ELTO friends here helped me a lot in conducting my diplomatic mission” (Official posted to Cambodia).

New Zealand Embassy staff commented that they have heard of ELTO alumni meeting overseas, for example at ASEAN meetings in Vietnam and Lao PDR. One Foreign Affairs person posted to Myanmar reported meeting with ELTO alumni there.

Interviews in Wellington:

1. Empowerment through improved English language skills

- All the interviewees were positive about the language improvements they had made during the course. Their comments focussed on speaking and writing activities as well as independent study.

“When we are doing work back home we have to go to the public and speak. So by doing this presentation it help us how to manage, how to overcome our fear, how to improve our speaking in front of the public. And also we do that in a different language. It is kind of a challenge for us and also it is very useful for us.”

“I can see that it’s changed here the way that I write. The teacher showed us the right way how to improve our writing skills. ...I work as a desk officer.... I require academic words, so by knowing this way of how to write good English, I can improve my writing capability.”

“The research report is a kind of way to develop our English. So before, we just copy and paste, but it’s not good. But our teacher say you have to paraphrase, use your own words to describe something.”

“I think the independent learning strategy is very useful for us because with this it can help you ...plan for your study, what you want to study. It means you have to ask yourself ... you have to find out your weaknesses and strengths. Through this guide it can help you which area you want to improve during this course.”

“The important things is individual learning, especially how you manage your time, and how to study to know the way to practise your English well.”

- All the interviewees reported on their improved English language skills, particularly speaking confidence, and writing and listening skills.

“In the past I feel like I am a little bit scared, a little bit unconfident, but after attending the class, I try to improve my skills in terms of speaking because it can make me feel confident to speak out what I want to speak out.”

“Now I know better how to write, to express out all I want to write about. In the past, I don’t know how to start to write because I have a problem with the times.”

“Before if I speak with the native language experts ...when they were working in Timor-Leste, I really confused when they were speaking English. But nowadays I think I not more confusing because I think I can catch what the people say, more than 50%, is around 80% I understand of what the people say to me. Very helpful to me.”

- Participants gave a range of responses about activities they found easier to do now than when they started the programme, including speaking with and in front of others, time management, understanding more vocabulary, and listening comprehension.

“I think the easy activity that we are facing at the moment is go and talk to the people. Because in the past we have a fear inside, a lack of confident, so that make us not so good to speak out what we want to speak out. But after we learn how to improve everything, we have confident now.”

“So after we come here I feel some things are easier than before. ... I get some improvement of academic word list. ...It helped because as a government official, everything has to be official so it is related to the academic words.”

“When my teacher in Part 1 was teaching in front of the class I really confused to understood because their pronunciation was very strange for me and I never hear before. ... At least one for me, the easy one, is my listening is more confident.”

- All of the officials were adamant that their organisation skills, particularly in terms of time management, improved. They faced challenges prioritising their classroom assignments, homework and independent learning, as well as challenges in their wider lives.

“...since I came here, I live in a situation where the time is important ... I learn the benefit of time management, because when you are using your time for the best to improve you will become good in your career I think.”

“I will try to manage my time, because when you didn’t follow the timeline that you planning, this is a big problem. Because when you didn’t do today, tomorrow new job will come again, so you get more the job. So, today you must try to finish it; tomorrow a new job.”

“ELTO programme is not (only) teaching to increasing about our ability in English language, but how to management as a official of the government to manage to lead our department, how the best way. As a chief of department, before, I didn’t know how to manage the administration or technical side, but in here we have a lot of knowledge.”

- In Part 2 of the programme, afternoon sessions are usually focused on language support and independent learning. All of the interviewees replied positively about becoming more independent learners.

“Now they are showing us, or they lead us to the right way how we are going to improve our English skill. But it’s back again to us how we are going to do that. It’s like the teacher is leading us to the front door, and then for the further way we will do by ourselves.”

“...since I study in New Zealand I can see how the differences in terms of how the teacher always show you how to improve your study, but they also give you the time. So it’s back on you again how you are going to use your independent time or your free time to do your independent learning as much as you can.”

“... you must read a lot of information. You read a lot of book, you get a lot of opinion. When you got a lot of opinion, you can talk a lot to the people. And you can write a lot of information writing too.”

“I think after from this ELTO course now we know ourself well, my weakness...Maybe when I go back to my country I will be change my attitude also, because before I working, how can do working, I don’t know how to begin to start. ... But now I understand how.”

2. Expanded professional knowledge and capabilities

- All of the interviewees learned how to research information, paraphrase and reference sources. They were able to apply these skills in the research reports and presentations, and valued these new skills for their jobs.

“The research report is quite challenge. ...I think it is very helpful. Before I didn’t know to do. Without this explanation and using this manual it is quite hard. ...I think it is very useful. We have to write reports to our superior.”

“If we want to find some information, we try to find reference. We have to make some comparison. ...Before I used to use only Indonesian language, Tetum and Portuguese. But now I can use English.”

“I feel more confident now because the system in here they teach us professional thinking.”

- The workplace visits enable the officials to meet experts in local businesses and government ministries in related professional fields, learn about the New Zealand context and ask questions. After the visits, there are activities to reflect and share information.

“ ... with the visit I can speak directly to the official who work to cover the issue in Southeast Asian countries. So now I know the right person to contact.”

“The conscious of New Zealanders is very different from my country - how you are aware, how you are looking after or taking care for your environment it's really, really important.”

“The important thing the farmer freely to do the farm, so didn't have intervention from the government. So I think this is a good thing that we bring to our country because when the government control all thing that farmer do, this is a problem.”

“We visited Agricultural Training Centre. We learned a lot of how they train young people studying there.”

“When I got back to my country I will share to my workplace and my friends. I will explain what was in New Zealand, the political system, the economy, the culture. I will talk to even to my boss. I will tell them we have to adopt and we have to think about develop East Timor for the future.”

“... the farmer in New Zealand is really different in South East Asia...So we say in New Zealand the farmers is linked with the industry, but in our country, the farmer is only for self-consumption. ...This is the mindset we have to change. As a public servant or as a technical assistant from the government, this is a big challenge how to transfer this society.”

“Here we learn about the method how to convince our leadership, our decision maker to follow our technical decision. Because decision maker and technical decision has to be one way, not opposite way, because opposite way can't work.”

- In terms of approaching their jobs differently on their return, there were some pertinent comments about information they would like to share and changes they would like to implement in their workplaces.

“What I can carry from here to Timor-Leste is my better understanding and better knowledge about New Zealand. I will try to write more about the best of New Zealand so the people in my country can know and can see that New Zealand is also a good partnership for Timor-Leste in terms of developing Timor-Leste.”

“There is something useful that learned here that I can implement there - for the time management. For the human resource, or how to implement, how to achieve the target for better future.”

“The first one is you must planning what you want to do. You must finish it today, not spend for tomorrow. This is one thing that is very important. This is the simple one but this will change everything. The time is very important.”

“Knowledge I gained here is my foundation. ... Timor-Leste is a new country, everything has a newness. So we also recognise that human resource as a main challenge or main obstacle in the government system. But I think training like ELTO programme is really helpful in the future. ... This is really what the ELTO produce - to prepare the human resource.”

- The course activities which helped expand officials' professional knowledge and capabilities were the presentations, fieldtrips and workplace visits, the reading programme, the theme study, and the research report.

“In the future, whenever I go to speak to the public, I will know how to be confident, how to share my knowledge to deliver to them in a professional way.”

“The fieldtrip is very important because you can understand better in the field. I think fieldtrip it is very useful to expand or broad your knowledge.”

“Reading is to improve everything to know. Every new thing is only through the reading. The message has gone inside my head. It is not just for myself but for my generation as well.”

“Theme book provided by ELTO really helped me. What we read in the book and what we see in the reality is the same. This is what is happening in New Zealand, not only in the book. So not only theory but also in the practical can see directly what is true.”

“They push us how to write research linked to our country and then New Zealand. This is a very good way for me. ... I think what New Zealand is doing very good. If I take the example from New Zealand and I compare it with from Timor-Leste. I really like this programme.”

3. Increased intercultural awareness of other participants and New Zealanders

- Without exception, all the Timor-Leste officials reported on positive homestay experiences. Their comments provided some interesting insights into cultural differences.

“My homestay they are very good person and I am so proud to live with them because they are a good example of a good family. We share a lot of information. So we are connected each other.”

“For me, we are family. I feel like I am still with them. I will always remember them because they are so kind.”

“And one thing also ... for gender balance, saw for me directly how the role in the one house between husband and family because if I make comparison between New Zealand and Timor-Leste there is quite unbalanced between husband and wife. But here I saw with my eyes something that is very contrast.”

“Absolutely I enjoyed it because I have a mother and father in my country but I have more one mother and father in New Zealand. I feel it look like in my home.”

- In the morning classes, students typically work in mixed country groups to share ideas. The officials' comments reveal the strong intercultural connections they

experienced, the value they placed on intercultural learning and about the depth of their friendships.

“I can see how the differences of opinions, the differences of capacity, the differences of knowledge that the other ELTOs have. Sometimes we are having trouble to understand each other, but we see that not as an obstacle but we find a way to understand each other.”

“When we interact with other different cultures, the feeling of proud of ourselves is going up. Sometimes because of this difference, we have to show off our identity.”

“When we mix together, we mingle and then we get some new experience. ...I have an idea and they have an opinion and also they have a suggestion.”

“Other country ELTOs is very, very good friend. They tried to explain to us what their country have today to other countries to know. They didn't hide anything. They want to come here to learn what new thing they bring to their country. So I'm very proud to get the information from other country.”

- In Part 2, the ELTOs have a flatmate from a different country and several participants commented on how this arrangement builds intercultural awareness. The conversation buddy programme was also valued. Cultural performances, sporting activities and shared lunches were other popular ways to experience other cultures and the Timor-Leste students also valued opportunities they had to experience New Zealand's indigenous Maori culture. Class group work activities provided cultural and content learning opportunities.

“I have lived together with one friend from Laos, and I know I can learn from every day because we live together. I can observe it all.”

“Every weekend they (conversation buddies) invite us to lunch together and we went to some places and they talking about the story and they talking about the culture.”

“The cultural performances it giving the chance to every country...to show off their culture.”

“...we learn especially about Maori culture because they invite us their marae and then we learn.... It was something new for me, because when I just stay at my country I didn't know.”

“In our class also we have on one table different country. The theme book, after you read, you must explain what in your country happened. So each country should be talk about each country. So that is why we know well about each other.”

Summary:

Through the interviews conducted in Timor-Leste and Wellington, the officials told us the aspects of the ELTO programme which build capacity are:

- Studying in an English speaking country

- Studying an intensive language course with a theme related to their government job
- Living in a homestay
- Having a conversation buddy
- Giving formal presentations
- Writing a research project
- Attending professional workshops
- Listening to lectures from experts
- Visiting workplaces
- Going on fieldtrips
- Receiving language support
- Reflecting on learning

Implications:

Educating for change within the ELTO programme involves a collaborative approach to programme development and delivery across different institutes, with regular monitoring and evaluation. The programme is tailored to learners' specific language needs in their government roles in the ministries of developing countries. The approach to teaching is learner-centred and the learners are supported to meet their individual goals. Task-based instruction engages the officials in authentic and meaningful tasks that will be useful in their professional lives. Finally, the course encourages learner autonomy so that life-long learning can be a realistic goal.

A course designed like this does improve the capacity of individuals to carry out their work in government, and can contribute to longer lasting changes in understanding good governance and development within government departments. Building capacity in developing countries supports sustainable development of these nations. This helps to reduce poverty, and thus move a step closer towards a more secure, prosperous and equitable world.

“Countries that have achieved sustainable economic growth are supported by efficient institutions and sound policies. Often the quality of the policies depends on the people who are running them. Because of the need to have good people overseeing policy, training is important” (IMF, nd).

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