Developing discourse-informed early-grade readers in the Timor region

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How a story is put together, even for early readers, can significantly hinder or facilitate reading for meaning, which is fundamental for continuing on to higher levels of education.

In addition to original stories in a local language made into printed reading materials for new readers, it is also common to adapt early-grade readers available in national and international languages. From our experience over several years working on around 150 titles in a dozen languages in the Indonesian province of Nusa Tengara Timor and the country of Timor Leste, we were initially seeing reading material produced that needed major reworking to be useful for the children. Without such reworking, the children learn to read some of the words, but can have difficulty following the story. This initially poor-quality material is produced by semi-trained local language teams, as well as by well-intentioned professional linguists and educators.

What is missing at a very high level is an awareness of common patterns in narrative discourse in local languages, such as handling background and foreground information, introducing participants, tracking participants, principles for paragraph breaks, handling direct quotes, etc. Many languages share high-level patterns, even across different families. When a source collection is developed in a language of wider communication that attends to these issues, it is relatively easy to develop good quality by-products in many other languages. And these “daughter” versions can be produced better and faster.

This paper provides examples of these and related issues in the interests of helping people in other regions provide high quality resources for children.