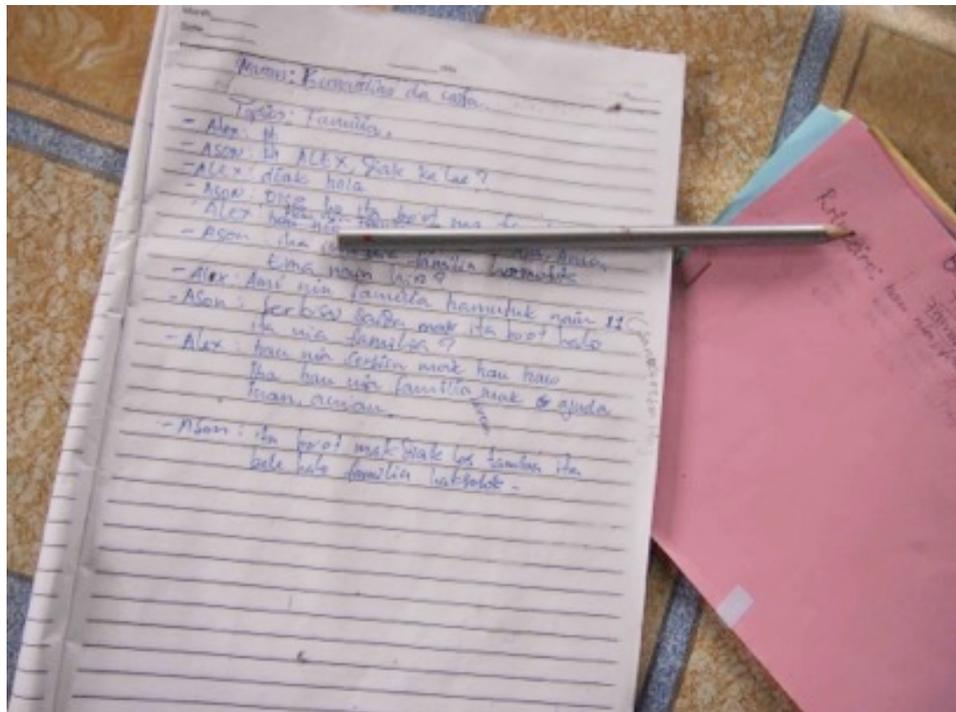


# Ha'u-nia Istoría: This is My Story

## Creative Writing Project Report

Prepared for Many Hands International by  
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## **The Project**

This creative writing project was developed by Many Hands International (MHI) and Emily Lush, a masters student from the University of Queensland. Before arriving in Lospalos, Emily designed a workshop plan in consultation with MHI staff (Appendix A). These workshops were intended to be delivered over a 10-day period in January 2015 as part of MHI's existing Youth Arts Program. The project served two key purposes: primarily as a contribution to MHI's ongoing cultural program, and also as work experience for Emily's university degree.

The project was guided by three key aims:

1. Develop the skills of MHI staff in teaching story writing;
2. Develop the skills of MHI Youth Arts Program participants in creative writing;
3. Develop a collection of storybooks written for children that can be published and distributed in Lospalos in the future.

## **The Workshops**

The workshops were designed to explore the key principles of creative writing for young people and guide participants through the process of authoring their own illustrated storybook. This was achieved by focusing on six key themes: finding a voice; mapping a plot; character development; using imagination; writing dialogue; and setting the scene through description. The remaining workshops were set aside for individual story writing and sharing our work in a story circle.

Each workshop involved a mix of tasks, including learning from example, group activities and collaborative writing. There was also time allocated for one-on-one discussions between each student and the workshop facilitators. Focus was placed on sharing our work and exchanging feedback in every session.

In total, nine creative writing workshops were held between Monday January 12th and Thursday January 22nd, 2015 at the Cultural Centre in Lospalos. Six to 15 students attended each day for workshops that lasted approximately two hours each.

*[Due to unforeseen circumstances, the final workshop was cancelled. To accommodate Emily's travel arrangements, the final two workshops were condensed into one session.]*

## The Facilitators

*Emily Lush:* Emily's primary role in this project was to design and facilitate the creative writing workshops and to provide support for MHI staff.

*Cornelio de Jesus Baptista:* As the Youth Arts Program leader, Corry assisted in developing the workshop plan and making sure the activities were context and age appropriate. Corry helped to recruit participants for the program, facilitate the workshops, and also provided language support for Emily.

*Nelson Diana da Costa:* Nelson was employed for the project as Emily's translator. He also made a vital contribution to developing the workshop plan and facilitating student participation.

We would also like to thank Mana Lucia, Mana Holly, Mana Kim, Mana Amy and Maun Thomas for their support and advice.

## The Participants

Student participation in this project was voluntary. Participation numbers fluctuated from day to day, with five to 15 students in attendance. Students were aged between eight and 20 years, and more boys than girls attended. All of the students were familiar with each other and many were already friends before the workshops began, which helped to quickly build a rapport and develop a positive and supportive environment for creative expression.



## **Successes**

### *Thinking about life in a different way.*

From the outset, it was a priority to encourage students to look at their own lives as a source of inspiration for story writing. The activity performed on in Workshop 2, The Tree of Life, was designed to help students identify the narratives that run through their own life stories. This involved visualising our lives from the roots (where we come from, what our heritage is) through our day-to-day tasks to finally look at how these experiences blossom into our future aspirations, hopes and dreams.

Many students used this seed of an idea to develop their storybook, locating themselves (or a fictional character based on themselves) at the heart of their narrative. Some students wrote aspirational stories about professional goals they wanted to reach or hobbies they wanted to master. This involved using an interesting balance of fact and creative thinking.

### *Collaboration.*

From day one, students demonstrated a real passion for sharing ideas and working collaboratively in pairs or small groups. Close friends banded together and often remained partnered for the duration of the workshops. In response to this pattern, some activities were adapted to be collaborative rather than individual. In one of the final workshops, students worked in pairs to write and illustrate a storybook from their imagination, sharing the tasks of illustrating and writing, and working as a team to develop their narrative.

### *Working independently.*

Initially there was some concern that students would find independent writing too challenging. Some evidence of this was observed in the tendency to copy or emulate a classmate's work. Believing that every student was more than capable of writing their own story if given the right tools, we wanted to push past this. As the workshops progressed and students were reassured that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers in creative writing, they gradually became more confident in sharing their own ideas. One exercise in particular, called 'Finish This Story', encouraged students to explore narrative tangents from their own imaginations. A great variety of stories were uncovered. The final storybooks and other writing passages produced by each student are testament to their confidence in thinking and writing independently.

### *Adapting activities to the Youth Arts Program.*

One of this project's key strengths lay in matching activities to MHI's existing arts program. This involved building on existing skills and exploring familiar genres of creative arts in new ways. For example, one exercise using role play encouraged students to embody their lead character and 'perform' a piece of dialogue using words and body language suited to that character. This idea was inspired by their theatre classes. Some students also displayed a real passion for sketching, so emphasis was placed on visualising story ideas and using illustration to add to the narrative, especially in the descriptive writing workshop.

### *Using examples.*

Throughout the workshops an example was used to illustrate certain activities. *The Boy and the Crocodile* was chosen because most participants were already familiar with the tale. Using a simple, familiar and relatable example of a storybook written for young people helped to clearly illustrate certain lessons, including plot. In this workshop, participants helped to 'dissect' *The Boy and the Crocodile* into its four parts (beginning, middle, twist, end) before using this format to start plotting their own story.

## Challenges

### *Creative thinking.*

Exploring creative and imaginative thinking was sometimes a challenge for some students. To encourage students to move beyond the limits of literal thinking, we introduced some new exercises to the workshops based on imagination. It was helpful to depart, on occasion, from the main story that students were working on. Even in these exercises, many students acknowledged that they were more comfortable with writing story lines inspired by things they had seen and experienced in their own lives rather than things that were purely imaginative.

One reason for this could be some students' eagerness to find the 'right answer' for certain activities. We tried to overcome this by emphasising that there are no 'wrong answers' in creative writing, and that each student's input is equally valuable. We struggled at times to find a balance between providing enough structure for activities (by offering examples, for instance) and encouraging students to use their imaginations to fill in the blanks.

Even in a practical sense, it was interesting to observe that most students followed a set formula when completing an exercise in their notebooks. This involved first writing their name and the 'topic title' at the top of the page – presumably something they have been taught at school. This eagerness to follow a formula translated through to the final storybooks, which most students preferred to title with a name that literally reflected the contents of their narrative, for example *The Artist*, *The Player*, *The Bee and the Butterfly*. One way students came to expand their creative thinking was through the activities that encouraged them to add onto their stories and explore different narrative and character elements that they may not have initially considered. For example, the story of *The Artist* became the story of *The Painter* when this book's author was asked to elaborate on his character: *What kind of art does the character practice? What is he good at painting? What skills does he want to improve on?*

### *Attendance.*

A practical challenge that we faced was fluctuating rates of attendance. The workshop plan was originally designed to lead students logically through the steps of creative story writing, but we soon found that we needed to adapt the plan to cater for students who could not attend every workshop. We introduced a 'buffer time' at the start of each class to bring everyone up to speed on the last session's activities, and give time for students to catch-up if needed. This also helped to accommodate students who arrived late for the workshops.

### *Student engagement.*

Student engagement played a role in attendance numbers, and was a major concern for Corry in particular. Engaging students involved mixing 'fun' activities with learning activities, which in hindsight we should have paid more attention to in the workshop planning phase. In week one, it became apparent that we should give students a 15 minute break in the middle of each workshop, something we had not planned for in advance. When students had a chance to talk, move around and drink some water at the halfway point of the afternoon, they were often more engaged for the rest of the session – and more likely to come back the next day. With an added break time, we needed to adjust the schedule of the workshops slightly. We observed that some students were reluctant to take a break even when asked, and preferred to keep working on the task at hand.

### *Communication barriers.*

Communication barriers were a challenge for everyone involved – particularly Emily. When students read their work aloud in the workshops, it became clear that constantly translating between Tetun, Fataluku and English would be too disruptive and time consuming. Instead, we made the decision to gather-up everyone's work at the end of each class and spend the next morning translating what had been written. Even with this procedure in place, with the flow of conversation and chatter between students, some things were missed.

Translating more abstract concepts associated with creative writing was also a challenge. To overcome this, we worked together each morning to go through the lesson plan step by step and make sure there was understanding and consensus between all three facilitators before the workshops began. Presenting a 'united front' for the students helped to overcome communication barriers, and gave students added confidence in the activities. Nelson's role as a Tetun speaker was imperative whenever students asked quick questions or sought clarification on a task.

### *External factors.*

One unanticipated effect on student attendance was the weather; on days when it rained in the afternoon, lower attendance rates were almost always the case. Another challenge came when some of the facilitators had personal commitments to attend to, taking them away from the scheduled workshops. We had to adapt when necessary to unforeseen absences, and work hard when we were together to plan as much in advance as possible.

When Emily had to leave Lospalos a day earlier than originally planned, we similarly worked together to condense the final two workshops into one session.

## **Key Outcomes**

### *Students.*

The benefits of these workshops for students can be discussed more in terms of process than final results. Each student created his or her own storybook, which is no small achievement, but more than this, every student in attendance engaged fully in the activities and contributed to the group on any given day.

The students didn't need to develop their reading or writing skills, which were already at a very high level. Students seemed to enjoy having the freedom to write about topics of their own interest and construct narratives relevant to their own lives, using their words in different, creative ways. One outcome we hope came across to students is that there are no 'wrong answers' in creative writing, something we sought to teach by providing examples and guidelines for activities, but ultimately leaving the key decisions up to them. At times this was perhaps contrary to their mainstream learning experience.

Public speaking was not a key focus of this project at the outset, but we think it's another important outcome worth mentioning. Through the process of undertaking these workshops, students were constantly presenting and discussing their stories in front of the group or in pairs, which helped some students gain confidence in public speaking and skills in offering constructive criticism to their peers.

### *Facilitators.*

All three facilitators used this as an opportunity to develop their skills in facilitating group activities. Corry also gained experience with a creative writing curriculum, and has added to his pool of resources for teaching story writing as a tool for self expression.

## **Recommendations**

At the end of Workshop 9, some students expressed to us that they would like to take their storybooks further by typing them up on the computer. Other students who were absent from the final few workshops wanted a chance to finish their final storybook with illustrations. We recommend that the creative writing project continue in some form for these students, and be delivered again in the future for new students who become involved with Many Hands.

It would be very helpful to seek student feedback about the creative writing workshops, something we unfortunately didn't have time to do. This feedback could inform future chapters of the project.

We also recommend integrating story writing with the broader Youth Arts Program by matching existing classes with more storytelling activities. In this way, creative writing can give students and teachers new inspiration for sketching/painting activities, theatre characters and plot lines, and music classes, possibly through lyric writing workshops.

The culmination of this project also presented an opportunity for Corry especially to reflect on the Youth Arts Program more generally. Longer workshop sessions and additional teaching support to help build capacity around teaching methods and engagement strategies were two issues that came up, and warrant further discussion.

## **Project Legacy**

- 10+ storybooks, which can be copied and used as learning resources for other children in the Lospalos community;
- Workshop plan template (Appendix A) that can be adapted for future use;
- Activity sheets for workshops (Appendix B);
- Materials for awareness raising via MHI website, newsletter and UQ communications (photos, text passages, anecdotes);
- This report.

## Reflections

*Emily:*

“These workshops were a learning experience for everyone involved. Personally, I have benefitted most from the challenges involved in deliver the workshops, particularly in learning how to overcome communication barriers. I have also learned not to underestimate a person’s talents or capacity for creative thinking, whatever their circumstances in life might be. I feel privileged to have shared in this process with the students and to have watched their stories evolve.

My greatest hope is that some of these students will continue with creative writing in the future – especially as a complement to drawing and illustrating, which they have shown a real passion and talent for. I believe that every student engaged in these workshops to their full capacity, pushed the boundaries of their thinking, and opened their mind to think in new ways about writing and the possibilities for creativity.”

*Nelson:*

“We had difficulty with communication, but we have tried to explain correctly so that the participants understand us. Sometimes participants come, sometimes they don’t. This is our obstacle. Overall I learnt many things and it was a good chance to practice my English. I got some experience from Emily about creative writing, and in the future if I want to develop or improve, I have the support.”

## Appendix A: Workshop Plan

Workshop	Topic	Activities	Aim
1	<b>Introduction</b>	Group introductions; ice breaker activity TBC.	Participants understand expectations and have a clear idea of the workshop plan and what they will gain through participating.
	<i>Finding a voice</i>	The boy and the crocodile. Using a familiar story, participants re-write the narrative from their own perspective, as if they are one of the characters or an observer. Share with the group and compare similarities/ differences.	Introduction to creative writing. Participants see how individual perspectives can influence a story.
2	<b>Choosing a topic/ character</b>		
	<i>Writing a story inspired by your own life</i>	Tree of Life. Using pencils and paper, participants create a tree of life to visualise their life story. Includes - roots (family, where they come from), ground (where they live, what activities they do every day), trunk (skills and abilities), branches (hopes, dreams, future goals), leaves (significant people in their life), fruits (things they are grateful for).	Develop ideas for the storybook based on life experiences. Draw links between past, present and future and how these can inform a progressive narrative.

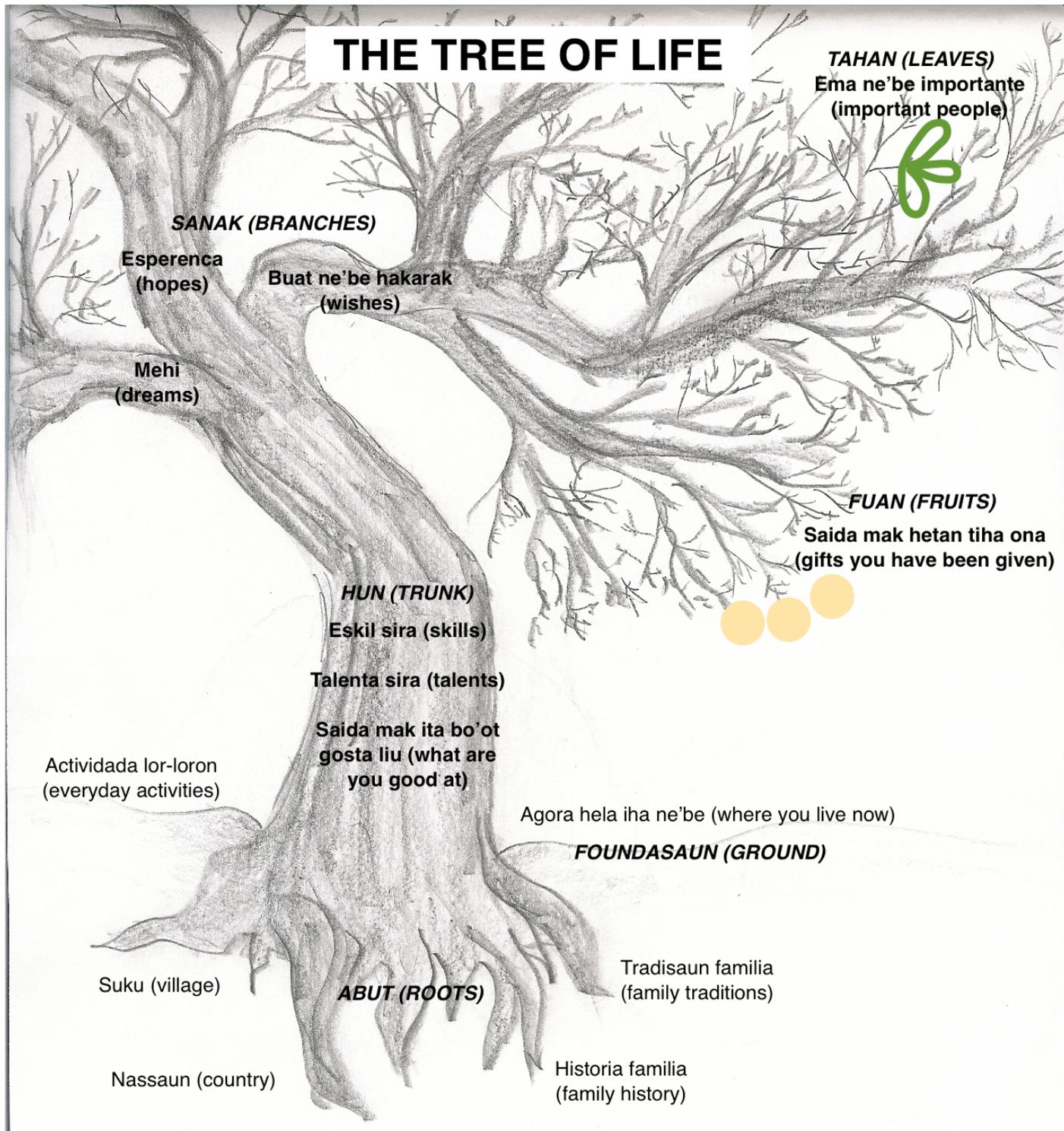
Workshop	Topic	Activities	Aim
			<b>Each participant has a rough storyline for their storybook.</b>
3	<b>Plot &amp; structure</b>	First, then, next, finally. Using the writing prompts <i>first, then, next</i> and <i>finally</i> , participants construct a basic plot for their story. Each prompt is written in a few sentences on a coloured card.	
	<i>Plot twists</i>	Plot twists. Working in pairs, participants swap one of their prompt cards with a partner. The next person adds the next part to their story, introducing a plot twist.	<b>Participants have a basic beginning, middle and end for their storybook.</b>
4	<b>Character development</b>		
	<i>Developing a lead character</i>	Personality mapping. Using a sheet of paper split into four sections, participants write the likes, dislikes, motivations and flaws of their lead character.	
	<i>Supporting characters</i>	Character mapping. Participants use a mind map to plot supporting characters in their story.	<b>Participants have identified the lead and supporting characters for their story.</b>

Workshop	Topic	Activities	Aim
5	Re-cap of first week	Time to revisit any leftover activities, feedback, questions.	
		Time for individual writing.	
6	Writing dialogue	Role play. Participants use role-play to act-out a scene from their story. How do characters interact, how do they speak, what is their body language.	Use this experience to develop an understanding of dialogue, how to write natural dialogue.
		Write a passage of dialogue, either interaction between two characters or narration from the lead character.	<b>Participants each have a passage of dialogue to use in their story.</b>
7	Scene setting & description	Drawing from description. Working in pairs, one participant describes a scene from their story in as much detail as possible while their partner draws their interpretation of the scene based on the description. Is this what you pictured? What can you add to your description to make it better? Participants practice writing a descriptive passage to set the scene for their story.	Participants can use descriptive language to help readers visualise the scene of their story.
		Description from drawing. Using another person's illustration (or a sketch made in another class), participants write a description of the scene.	<b>Participants each have a descriptive passage to use in their story.</b>

Workshop	Topic	Activities	Aim
8	Illustrating the story	Using sketches from the previous day or starting fresh. Participants can work individually or in groups to add illustration elements to their books.	
9	Writing/illustrating	Time for individual writing and illustrating.	Title, title page.
10	Conclusion	Story circle. Group comes together and each participant is invited to present their finished storybook to the group. (Alternative: share in pairs).	
		The next chapter: Writing a follow-up story, keeping a journal, finding inspiration for new stories.	

## Appendix B: Activity Sheets

### Workshop 2: The Tree of Life



## Workshop 3: Plot

### Etapa Stória

Primeiro (first)

Ho ida ne'e (then)

Tuir fali (next)

Hotu tiha (finally)



Workshop 4: Character development

**Character Mapping**

<u>Familia</u>	<u>Sira hela iha nebe?</u>
<u>Saida mak sira halo lor-loron?</u>	<u>Saida mak sira nia mehi?</u>

<u>Gosta</u>	<u>Lagosta</u>
<u>Forsa</u>	<u>Frakeza</u>

## Workshop 6: Writing dialogue

### **Hakerek dialogu tuir imi nia karakter iha imi nia storia**

- Oinsa ita bo'ot nia kolia?

- A'as
- Tu'un
- La lais
- Nei-neik

- Saida mak ita bo'ot hateten?

- Husi ita bo'ot nia storia tuir imi nia imaginasun.

- Lingua saida mak ita bo'ot uza hod kolia?

- Tetun
- Fataluku
- Portuguese
- English

- Saida mak ita bo'ot nia jestu isin?

- Tauk
- Moe
- Fiar an
- Esperto
- Kontente
- Baruk

***Ha kerek dialogu no pratika iha apresentasaun bele individual ka ho parseiro.***

## **Appendix C: Materials List**

- 1 x pack of A5 coloured paper
- 1 x plain paper scrapbook
- 10 x lined notebooks
- Coloured pencils, erasers and sharpeners
- Whiteboard and marker pens (provided)