



LANGUAGE POLICIES

Oral Traditions and English in Pacific Classrooms

By Destin Penland, Marylin Low, Patricia Sataua, and Ebil Ruluked

“I start up in English and then when the students get stuck I translate it into the local language. I don’t translate word for word, just the concepts. If I don’t, they will look up at the ceiling lost.”

a Pacific island teacher

One of the greatest gifts children bring to school is their experience with language and culture. At the same time, one of the greatest challenges for Pacific island teachers is determining how to build on these gifts, to help each child continue to learn their native language and culture while becoming academically proficient in English. The language(s) used for instruction in schools are determined by education

of the Northern Mariana Islands, and Hawai‘i. The table on page 7 describes language policies in three Pacific contexts.

Teachers across the region have begun rich and complicated discussions about how to effectively teach languages so students can appreciate their communities and actively participate both locally and abroad. In an attempt to better understand the challenges that teachers encounter, we interviewed 15 primary grade teachers representing 3 entities in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific: American Samoa, Palau, and RMI.

We began our interviews by asking the teachers what the local language policy meant to them and what challenges they faced in implementing the language policy on a daily basis in their classrooms. Themes from these interviews provide insight into the daily challenges that teachers contend with as they attempt to provide quality bilingual language learning experiences for their students. Following are a few excerpts and explanations that teachers shared.



Photo: Marylin Low

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language policy expectations. Each U.S.-affiliated Pacific entity has decided on a bilingual program for its students; most are transitional bilingual programs, as is the case in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), American Samoa, and the Republic of Palau, while some are English immersion, as in Guam, the Commonwealth

Teacher Language Ability

- *They [central office administrators] really want us to teach every subject in English; we try to, but the problem is the students really don’t understand English. That’s why we try to mix up vernacular and English in most subjects.*
- *Most of our teachers don’t use the second language in our class; even myself, I still need more training to speak English in my class.*

Teachers were candid about their own language learning needs. Not only did they need support in how to teach English, but they also needed support to improve their own oral and written skills in English. It was evident from teachers’ responses that as much as they wanted to follow the policy about teaching English, it was a challenge to do so. Because most children in their classes found it difficult to comprehend English, many teachers felt they had no alternative other than to translate into the vernacular to ensure learning was really taking place.

Language Status

- *I think becoming Americanized is something extremely important to us; we would rather have our children speak the [English] language than to speak our own language to our children. It’s a shame . . . not being proud of our own language.*
- *We really want them to speak English, learn English; our aim is for them to become good people in the future.*

During the interviews teachers also speculated about how languages were valued in their communities and the impact this had on language learning. When asked what evidence they had that one language had acquired greater status in the schools, they referred to the abundance of English language resources and lack of first language resources.

Language Status

- *They [parents] don't believe the native language should be taught at that age because it is already taught at home. But it is not taught at home. It is spoken at home . . . but it is not taught at home.*
- *The kids don't get enough English support at home. Maybe the policy and us teachers are both neglecting the children, because most of the children don't have experience in speaking English.*

The teachers interviewed also felt that the language experiences children had at home impacted how they learned languages in school. Teachers felt that parents did not always understand the difference between speaking a language and being able to use it for broader academic purposes; and they felt that this misunderstanding influenced parent perceptions of which languages should be valued and taught in school. Others reflected on which languages students learned at home and if the current language policies and practices allowed teachers to build and draw on students' strengths in their first language to support second language development.

English as an International Language

- *I guess I should say that English is an international language; I mean everywhere you go people speak English, and if you want to go outside [of] where you are English would be the language of communication.*
- *I think that the Ministry of Education made the policy that way because they want our kids to get on the U.S. level. Our situation right now is really kind of a problem because we are at the bottom compared to other countries. I think that's why they made that policy, to make our schools improve and develop.*

This international orientation seemed to resonate across the entities. Interviewees believed learning English was the key to higher education, understanding technology, and being able to survive in the outside world. With this belief, teachers as well

as some of the parents supported English as a language of instruction. English was not only viewed as an "international language" but as a necessary remedy for the development problems encountered by these communities.

Many of the teachers we interviewed were constantly attempting to counteract potential losses of language and learning. Regardless of the language policy's requirements, these teachers did what they felt was right for their students, simply because they cared. These teachers maintained the use of the first language and promoted culture and traditions in the classroom. They used bilingual teaching methods to teach new concepts and assisted struggling students by contextualizing learning – using students' knowledge and experiences to help them learn something new.

Throughout the course of these interviews we learned a great deal about the daily challenges teachers encounter as they attempt to implement their local language policies. Drawing from their everyday practical experiences, teachers provided insights into the complex issues surrounding language learning. We could not help but wonder, are the insights of these expert practitioners – teachers – considered when language policy decisions are made? And if they are not, how can teachers play a greater role in helping to inform language policy and practice decisions in their local communities? Language policies and practices are complex, but there are few who grasp the implications of such decisions better than those who are asked to implement the policies on a regular basis. By including teachers in the discussion, policy makers and community members alike can begin to shape educational language policies that better meet the needs of students.

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Examples of Language Policy in the U.S.-Affiliated Pacific

Entity	National Policy	Educational Policy	Language of Instruction
American Samoa U.S. Territory	20/80 bilingual program (20% Samoan, 80% English)	Transitional bilingual program	English in all subjects except Samoan Studies; 45 minutes per day of Samoan language and culture studies in grades K-12
Palau Independent country with U.S. political affiliations	Palauan and English (English is the main language of commerce)	Transitional bilingual program	Palauan until grade 8, then transitions to English; 45 minutes of Palauan language and culture studies per day in grades 1-12
RMI Independent country with U.S. political affiliations	Marshallese and English	Transitional bilingual program	Marshallese until grade 3, then transitions to English; 60 minutes of Marshallese Language Arts per day in grades 1-12