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Addressing the Literacy Needs of Marshallese Adolescents

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ADDRESSING THE LITERACY NEEDS OF MARSHALLESE ADOLESCENTS

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Based on personal experience teaching literacy skills to Marshallese adolescents in the Republic of Palau, I explore literacy challenges and needs particular to these students. The historical and sociocultural context of language use in the Micronesian Islands reveals the imbalance of current biliteracy efforts. Challenges in teaching literacy to adolescents is well documented, as are challenges in teaching literacy through a second or third language, but these students, and many others like them, also face these challenges without the same traditional cultural value in print literacy that they see in school. The literature suggests potential improvement through approaches that demonstrate the value of multiple literacies, the significance of bilingualism, and an appreciation for orality. Other recommendations for addressing the literacy needs of Marshallese adolescents include culturally relevant teaching practices, curriculum adaptations, and explicit literacy instruction, in which orality is considered an important component of literacy development.

Introduction

It was my great pleasure to spend two years living and working at an all-girls' boarding school in the Republic of Palau as a Peace Corps volunteer. During my time in the Peace Corp, I taught English to Asians and Pacific Islanders representing eight countries and eleven native languages—none of which were familiar to me, upon arrival. I worked with outdated American textbooks, limited technology resources, and unreliable electricity.. These challenges were part of daily life and we all learned to work around them quite effectively. The most pressing challenge for me and all my colleagues was addressing the literacy needs of our Marshallese students. While completing my service, I longed for the day that I would have a high-speed Internet connection and access to peer-reviewed academic journals, so I could offer the faculty some solutions. Once I returned to the United States, I found that it was not the Internet connection or limited library access that stood in the way of our solution seeking—little research has been conducted and few experiences have been reported in the literature. This paper attempts to illuminate the need for research on literacy development in English language learners without print literacy in their heritage language, and the need for research-based approaches to print literacy development that embrace orality in traditionally oral languages. By exploring the existing literature on teaching strategies, this paper also hopes to offer current practitioners suggestions for addressing the literacy needs of their adolescent Marshallese students.

In the Micronesian region, the struggle to help students develop English literacy skills is laced with challenges that begin with the idea of English as a learned "second" language. English was officially introduced to many Micronesian islands after their liberation from Japanese occupation at the end of World War II. Most of these island nations include

English, along with their other native languages, as an official language. In these countries English is not considered a "foreign" language, nor is it a "native" language, resulting in a classroom context that falls somewhere in between the typical English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) designations.

In addition to the typical literacy challenges for any group of English Language Learners (ELLs), Micronesian students often learn English among peers and teachers who do not speak standard English, in classrooms facilitated by untrained or undertrained teachers who lack educational resources—particularly, an absence of print material in the students' heritage language, and in a climate that makes it difficult to maintain paper and electronic resources. Even beyond these school-specific challenges, there are myriad sociolinguistic implications that present themselves when the nature of the challenge is to develop print literacy in cultures that traditionally valued oral literacy, did not have a written script prior to colonization, and have had an official orthography for less than 50 years (e.g. .

Currently, teachers in the region are approaching literacy through the acquisition of English. Although research indicates that ELLs with literacy in their first language develop literacy in their second language much more quickly and efficiently, most Pacific Island languages do not have a body of written material that would support this approach. Thus, primary teachers in Micronesia tend to focus on developing literacy through English. In my experience, high school students from the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianna Islands (CNMI), and the Republic of Palau demonstrate strong basic literacy skills. Still, many students from The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) struggle with automaticity, prosody, and basic reading comprehension.

Among the island nations of Micronesia, adolescent Marshallese students present an interesting and unique challenge. Developing literacy skills in adolescents is altogether different from developing literacy skills in children, suggesting that these teenagers need a different approach than what is normally prescribed. Developing literacy skills with ELLs who have weak literacy in their heritage language further intensifies the challenge. Additionally, unlike most other ELLs, all Micronesian students must move between a school-environment that values print literacy and a home-environment that values orality..

The work presented here is an attempt to better understand the complex literacy challenges facing Marshallese adolescents and to consider how teachers and schools can address these literacy needs. Because this topic has not been examined in depth by professional education researchers, this article will pull sources from many different areas of research and reflection in an effort to triangulate an understanding of these two goals. First, this article will examine the current educational situation in the RMI. Then, the language and literacy challenges for Islanders will be addressed, followed by the literacy challenges in other linguistic communities with imposed scripts, specifically the Navajo communities of the American Southwest. And finally, I will discuss suggested approaches for including orality as a component of literacy development.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is a sovereign island nation located in Micronesia, between Guam and the Hawaiian Islands. The Marshall Islands are made up of 29 coral atolls and 5 single islands. The RMI has a total landmass of around 70 square miles, which are spread across 780,000 square miles of ocean. In geographical comparison to the United States, that is a landmass similar in size to Washington, D.C. located in ocean waters

similar in size to the states of Texas, California, Montana, New Mexico, Arizona and Kansas combined.

In July 2014 the population was recorded at 69,474 (CIA World Factbook). The two major population centers are Majuro, the capitol city, which is one of the most densely populated cities in the Pacific Islands, and Kwajalein, the world's largest atoll lagoon. According to the 1999 census, approximately 5,000 to 8,000 Marshallese are reportedly living primarily in Hawai'i, Arkansas, Oregon, California, Texas, and Oklahoma. Educators in these states have seen an increase in Marshallese-speaking ELLs in their schools.

History of English in the Marshall Islands

Colonization of the Micronesian region brought Spanish, German, Japanese, and English to the Marshall Islands. In 1886, The Spanish claimed Micronesia and used their authority primarily to "Christianize" the native islanders (Low, Penland & Heine, 2005). The influences of their religious missions were felt more strongly in the Carolinian and Mariana Islands than the Marshall Islands (Tobin, 2002). In 1889, Germany purchased Micronesia from Spain. Germany considered their relationship with the islands reciprocal—they brought "civilization" (Hezel, 1984, p.5) to the native islanders in exchange for the natural resources the islands offered, specifically copra, bauxite, and phosphate in the form of bird guano (Pine & Savage, 1989). During this period, missionary schools were established and operated by Spaniards, Germans, and many Americans (Pine & Savage, 1989). Prior to the missionary schools, the Marshallese kinship-based society utilized informal education methods to pass down particularistic social values and norms from elders and other clan members to the younger generation. When considering how to address the academic needs of Micronesian

students, there is value in recalling the colonial imposition of formalized education on a kinship-based society with particularistic norms and collectivist values.

In World War I, the Germans lost control of Micronesia to the Japanese. In order to produce the laborers needed for continued economic gain, the Japanese established the first public school system in the RMI. According to the Japanese, language learning would contribute to more rapid "civilization," would make Micronesians more loyal, as well as more economically productive (Hezel, 1984). Thus, half of the instructional time in formal schools was devoted to Japanese language study. In their article "The Language Question in Pacific Education," Low, Penland, and Heine (2005) state, "What should be noted here is that during both the German and the Japanese administrations, the focus was on the exploitation of Micronesia for economic purposes" (p. 3). Hezel (1975) echoes this thought, noting that colonial powers strategically used language for expansionist purposes, rather than as a nation-building tool or to meet the needs of the local peoples. These reports suggest that well before English was officially introduced to the Marshall Islands, the people of the country had experienced linguistic imperialism.

When Japan lost World War II, the United Nations Security Council allowed the United States to administer and govern Micronesia as part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (Low, Penland, & Heine, 2005). The goal of this arrangement was to promote development, so that the Micronesian islands could achieve self-governance or independence. Pursuant to this goal, local communities ran the schools of the Marshall Islands, and community members taught classes in their local language. Thus, the structure of formal education was retained, and for the first time the Marshallese determined what kind and in what manner their students received their education.

In the 1960's the U.S. policy changed. The Micronesian islands had become strategically important to the military and security interests of the U.S. Publically, the Kennedy administration promised to improve conditions in the Trust Territories by targeting education (Low, Penland, & Heine, 2005). School control shifted from local communities to the Trust Territory authority. A decision made in Washington, D.C.—not in the RMI and not by the Marshallese—changed the medium of instruction (MOI) from Marshallese to English in 1962 (Pine & Savage, 1989). The U.S. built hundreds of classrooms, hired expatriates to teach English, and sent Peace Corps Volunteers to aid in this transition (Low, Penland, & Heine, 2005). The Solomon report (1963) shows a clear shift in policy from nation-building to permanent relationship-building:

> These goals of course, constitute a major reversal of the old policy, prevalent in the early years of the United Nations, of "protecting" trusteeship people. It is a policy which calls for careful treading because it proposes to disturb, if not destroy, patterns of life that have served Micronesians for centuries. Insofar as education is concerned, the revised policy places the schools, more than any other public institution and agency, in the vanguard of a deliberate program of cultural change. (Solomon, 1963, Section II-B-5, p. 131)

This dramatic change in policy was primarily achieved in practice through the MOI switch from Marshallese to English. Today, the RMI is a sovereign nation in "free association" with the U.S. The Compact of Free Association provides a large percentage of the funding for education in Marshallese schools, and English continues to be the primary MOI.

Today, English and Marshallese are the two official languages of the RMI. Typically, the English language is used to communicate with non-Marshallese community members.

The English language has a larger and more specific vocabulary than Marshallese; thus, to assist in both clear communication and legal disputes, all official records are in both English and Marshallese (Dartmouth Volunteer Teaching Program, 2012). Many employers expect employees to participate in conferences and meetings off-island, which are conducted entirely in English. And citizens are often required to use English on government documents. In the past, proposals were narrowly defeated to make English the exclusive language for all official documents (Dartmouth Volunteer Teaching Program, 2012). Over the last half century of American presence, English has been a highly influential contact language for Marshallese. As such, it is very common to hear English words and phrases interspersed in Marshallese communications.

In the Republic of the Marshall Islands, English achieves the "global status" and "special role" of an international language, as outlined by McKay (2002), through its official status, its role in both business and governmental capacities, its mandated study, and its designation as the MOI in the school system. McKay's (2002) discussion of Kachru's circles, would categorize the Marshall Islands as a member of the "Outer Circle," where "English serves as a second language in a multilingual country" (p. 9). In much the same way that Graddol (1997) argues there is some overlap between the "expanding circle" and the "outer circle," as countries transition from an EFL context to an ESL context (McKay, 2002), one could argue that the RMI and many of the Freely Associated Micronesian countries occupy a gray area between the "inner circle" and the "outer circle." The relationship between the United States, an "inner circle" country and the RMI is so tightly knit—utilizing U.S. area codes, U.S. zip codes, hosting large U.S. military and defense facilities, and allowing citizens

to freely travel, work, study and live in the United States—it is often difficult to consider the language environment a true "second language" context.

English and Marshallese language in Marshallese Schools

The Marshallese language belongs to the Austronesian language family, and is closely related to other Malayo-Polynesian languages spoken in Pohnpei, Kosrae, Chuuk, and the Gilbert Islands (Tobin, 2002). The two island chains in the RMI represent the two dialects of the Marshallese language. Dialect differences are mostly isolated to lexical choices and a specific pronunciation difference where double consonants occur (Willson, 2002). In examining the Marshallese language, it is important to note that prior to colonization, Marshallese was an exclusively oral language. Non-native Marshallese speakers, mostly foreign missionaries, developed the orthography for the language, so there is a considerable challenge in connecting the linguistically accurate phonemes of the language with the assigned written symbols. This faulty outsider-imposed orthography and the resulting misaligned phonology is what Bender (1996) calls "one of those accidents of history that can't be reversed" (p. 39).

According to the research done by the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) the education language policy in the RMI states that in grades 1-3 the MOI ratio is two-thirds Marshallese to one-third English; in grade 4, the MOI ratio is two-thirds English and one-third Marshallese; in grade five and beyond, English is the MOI with the exception of physical education and Marshallese language classes. In practice, the research showed "significant differences between language policies and the practices observed in classrooms (Low, Penland, & Heine, 2005, p. 4)." They indicated that a lack of Marshallese language arts resources inhibits the instruction of the language—compounded by the fact that English

language arts materials provided to the schools are designed for large two-hour instructional blocks (Low, Penland, & Heine, 2005, p. 5-6). Consequently, …

The use of English as MOI results in a large population of Language Other Than English (LOTE) students who learn English from LOTE teachers (Benham, 2006). Often, this means that students end up obtaining "learnerese," a variety of English that differs from Standard English (Scarcella, 2002). Low, Penland and Heine (2005) note that English is heard on playgrounds at very early ages and there are deep contradictions expressed by community members about the prevalence of English usage, and likewise the lack of quality English education provided by LOTE teachers. It is possible to obtain an education in the Marshall Islands from Standard English Speaker (SES) teachers. The most efficient means is private school enrollment. Catholic, Protestant, and Seventh Day Adventist missionaries from the United States operate many of the private schools. Alternatively, the Dartmouth Volunteer Teaching Program sends SES teachers to the RMI public schools, and World Teach offers short-term contracts to SES teachers willing to relocate to the RMI and teach in the public schools. The U.S. Peace Corps still operates a Micronesian post, but no longer sends volunteers to the Republic of Palau or the RMI.

In their analysis of language in education, Low, Penland and Heine (2005) write, "There is a need for stronger English and Marshallese learning opportunities that create the necessary conditions for children to be fully bilingual" (p. 6). They note that English has a strong presence and is in no danger of waning, but the real threat is that the shift in language instruction may be at the peril of the Marshallese language. With only about 20,000 speakers of Marshallese in existence, even a subtle shift in the education language policy can have a significant impact on the longevity of the language.

Education in the Marshall Islands

By all outward appearances, the status of education in the Marshall Islands looks healthy, but a more thorough examination reveals serious challenges. The CIA World Factbook indicates in July 2014, 54.7% of the population was under the age of 25, representing a burgeoning population of school-age citizens. The most recent data, from 2004, show that the RMI spent 12.2% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on education, placing the RMI third in the world for education expenditure—outspent only by Lesotho (13%) and Cuba (12.9%). To put this in perspective, the GDP of the Marshall Islands is estimated at $170.7 million (USD) for 2011, the 221st in world rankings for GDP. Although the percentage of education expenditure is high, the total dollar amount available to schools in the RMI is not.

Further examination of the educational budget raises additional questions. The website for the U.S. Embassy in the RMI notes that the education budget (including subsidies to non-public schools) is approximately $9,000,000. They claim that about 83% is general funds and 13% is special funds, such as U.S. grants, and about 4% is set aside for capital improvement projects; thus, the funds (not including capital improvement projects) is less than $900 per pupil. In comparison, in 2008–2009 the United States spent $10,591 per pupil according to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. On the other hand, Levine (2013) points out that "compared to countries in other regions with similar economic conditions, Pacific island countries spend considerably more per pupil on education and attain markedly poorer results" (p. 12). He suggests this is not a lack of funding, but an inefficient use of available funding.

Beyond a lack of or misuse of resources, the Marshall Islands and other Micronesian island nations face additional challenges. Levine (2013) lists common hypotheses for explaining stagnation in Pacific island educational improvement, including:

- Inadequate funding – Levine notes high education expenditures in the Pacific islands and calls this hypothesis "out of vogue" (2013, p. 15).

- Islanders do not value education – Levine offers survey information and statistics that dispel this myth, and suggests anecdotally "this may simply be a case of not valuing lousy education" (2013, p. 17).

- Mismatch with culture – Although Levine acknowledges there are issues to be overcome by imposed education systems, he notes that there are many countries that experience this mismatch and show much better educational outcomes, likewise, there are a few excellent schools in the region that do overcome these obstacles (2013, p. 18).

- Lack of government capacity – Upgrading structures, reforming systems and responding to natural disasters, Levine points out, all prove the technical capacity of Pacific island nations to act when there is will and urgency (2013, p. 18).

- Education as a source of employment – Levine questions the effects of the culturally accepted "patronage mentality" on education, specifically that it allows the retention of poor performing teachers and promotes excessive allocation of education funds to teacher salaries at the loss of materials and maintenance, etc. (2013, p. 21).

- Weak governance – Evidence of power centralization, incoherent policy, widespread corruption, weak regulations, insufficient data reporting and lack of

accountability show effects on island nation development across service areas, including education (2013, p. 22).

- No incentives to improve efficiency – Levine points out the lack of incentives for efficiency from outside donors due to competition with other donors. At the administrative level, accountability measures work against a patronage system. And teachers and students have neither incentives nor consequences for absenteeism or poor performance (2013, p. 24).

- Weak demands from society – Parents and communities often accept the state of education and do not push for reforms. Levine suggests reasons such as cultural tendencies for avoiding confrontation, accepting entrenched authority out of cultural respect, limited outrage over misuse of funds from abroad, or unawareness of the comparatively poor educational quality (2013, p. 25).

In their report on regional needs, the Pacific Regional Advisory Committee (RAC) for the U.S. Department of Education (2005) listed five major obstacles: standards and assessment; teacher quality; literacy and languages; principal leadership; and student, family, community outreach. The Pacific RAC (2005) specifically notes the literacy challenge is to find equilibrium between the preservation of heritage languages and cultures with English literacy proficiency (p. 20). They recommended creating more research-based instructional materials and assessments written in indigenous languages, offering new models for alternative certification of indigenous language teachers, investing in research and development of literacy lessons in both languages, providing research-based instructional strategies and assessments to improve literacy across all content areas and grade levels, and developing specific strategies to focus on secondary school students who are not proficient in

English and/or reading (Pacific Regional Advisory Committee (Pacific RAC), 2005). While these recommendations seem like excellent solutions, the details of the "alternative certifications," the "literacy lessons in both languages," and the "specific strategies" remain undefined and elusive. Teachers and students facing these challenges do not have the luxury of waiting for these newly certified teachers or research-based instructional materials to arrive. For the teachers, the question of how to address the current needs of the students still remains.

The overall education statistics show that the RMI is competitive with its Micronesian neighbors. The lack of funding for education is not unique to the RMI, but is a challenge shared by all the Micronesian nations. The Pacific RAC reports that the RMI had 9,666 students in 78 schools in 2002–2003, and at the end of that school year 60% of the students graduated—a strong graduation rate among the other Micronesian nations (Pacific RAC, 2005, Appendix B). They also noted that half of the teachers in Palau and the Marshall Islands held high school diplomas—certainly a problem to be addressed, but again, not a problem unique to the RMI (Pacific RAC, 2005). Why the Marshallese students seem so far behind their Micronesian counterparts remains unanswered and troubling, but exploring this in detail is beyond the scope of this work. Still, I cannot help but wonder if understanding this discrepancy would help address the problem.

Literacy Needs for Adolescent ELLs

Using a wider lens to frame literacy concerns, it is clear that adolescent ELLs from any cultural or linguistic background have specific academic needs. Successful acquisition of advanced literacy in English hinges on many factors, including advanced literacy in the first language, obtaining strong oral English skills in primary school, opportunity to interact with

standard English speakers, basic reading ability, language input via written text, instructional attention to form, and overall excellent English instruction, specifically in reading (Scarcella, 2002).

In consideration of Marshallese adolescents, few of these factors are in their favor. They do not have advanced literacy in their first language since print materials are limited in Marshallese. Because SESs are a minority in the RMI, Marshallese students rarely have opportunity to interact with them in an academic setting. And since only about 4% of the teachers in the RMI hold bachelor's degrees, it is reasonable to assume that most instruction in reading, selection of good written text for language input, attention to linguistic and grammatical form, and general English instruction would not meet Scarcella's definition of "excellent." Students in this situation are able to "decode" written material, but would not be able to make sense of academic reading materials because of the pragmatic, grammatical, lexical and metalinguistic requirements of such texts (Scarcella, 2002). She writes, "Students believe they access academic reading materials in the same way as their peers, but they do not (221)." This statement is particularly important because it demonstrates how adolescent students might begin to perceive that they are an inherently poor reader in comparison to their peers, rather than a reader who has not received adequate materials, instruction, or opportunity. Scarcella (2002) believes that it is not possible for ELLs with educational backgrounds similar to these Marshallese adolescents to attain advanced literacy without intensive instructional intervention.

Developing literacy in adolescents is very different from developing literacy in children. The literature on research-based strategies for literacy development is vast, but specific to adolescent ELLs it is relatively narrow. The research suggests five classroom

practices that improve literacy development and content-area learning for adolescent ELLs: teacher modeling, explicit literacy strategy instruction, and formative assessments; more reading and writing assignments; more speaking, listening and viewing as related to the academic texts; more attention to critical thinking and metacognitive skills for academic tasks; and flexible grouping and responsiveness to learner needs (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). It also suggests three discipline-based practices to support content-area literacy: recognizing and analyzing discourse features in the content-area; understanding text structures in the content-area; and content-area specific vocabulary development (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). These findings emphasize that all secondary school teachers need to explicitly address (first or second language) literacy development for adolescent ELLs—it is not the exclusive responsibility of English content-area teachers.

Scarcella (2002), Meltzer and Hamann (2005), and the Pacific RAC (2005) agree on two points. They all believe literacy must be developed in all content areas, not isolated to the English classroom. They also believe that this development requires all teachers to be trained in research-based instructional strategies proven to assist with literacy development.

Literacy for Pacific Islanders

Both the Pacific RAC and Benham (2006) point to a variety of educational challenges facing Pacific Island students. To begin, the Pacific Islands encompass a geographic location of approximately 750,000 square miles of the Pacific Ocean, creating transportation and communication obstacles. There is also a general lack of resources that often cannot serve the large student population. And due to the aforementioned geographic and transportation challenges, many students cannot attend secondary school. The wide range of physical facilities and technical infrastructures in the region make it difficult to build communication

systems, access electronic resources, and integrate technology into instruction (Pacific RAC, 2005). Teacher shortages plague all of the Pacific Island nations (Benham, 2006). Researchers cite a lack of teacher recruitment, teacher preparation and professional support as particular hindrances. Additionally, addressing the educational needs of the region is difficult without culturally relevant assessments that align with the educational standards and utilize the teacher as the primary assessor (Pacific RAC, 2005).

When it comes to literacy development and language acquisition, the challenges are equally demanding. There is a growing sense of English usage as a vehicle to suppress indigenous culture, history and language (Benham, 2006). This tension begs to be addressed through culturally and contextually relevant teaching and learning practices with an awareness of multiple literacies, the significance of bilingualism, and the inclusion of oral and artistic literacies such as chant, song, and dance (Benham, 2006).

In addressing the academic achievement of Pacific Islanders, many studies highlight the importance of culturally relevant teaching and learning policies and practices. The research suggests whole literacy curriculum, critical literacy, culturally based education, and pedagogy steeped in social justice offer promising opportunities for improved student achievement among Pacific Islanders (Benham, 2006). Katheryn Au's Kamehameha Early Education Project (KEEP) in Hawai'i, as an example of a multidisciplinary constructivist language arts program that values indigenous language and culture through whole literacy—emphasizing student ownership of reading and writing (Au & Carroll, 1997). Lumelume and Todd (1996) refer to research by Jane Ricketts (1982) and Elly (1998) that showed significant literacy development in the areas of reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, respectively, when primary-age Pacific Islander students listened to stories being

read aloud. Since oral storytelling is a traditional value in Pacific Island cultures, this finding also supports the recommended emphasis on culturally relevant teaching practices. The research conducted by Lumelume and Todd (1996) concludes that behaviorist-structuralist teaching models do not develop functional English literacy for these students, and they recommend a whole literacy approach instead. Many of the whole literacy techniques Ricketts and Elly studied show gains that can also be attributed to good written input (Scarcella, 2002) and better Standard English modeling than many LOTE teachers can offer (Lumelume & Todd, 1996).

Literacy for Linguistic Communities with an Imposed Script

The similarities between Marshallese culture and Navajo culture are few, but there is a great deal of linguistic, educational, and political parallels that can inform this discussion of literacy. Both of these linguistic communities use English as a *lingua franca,* albeit not necessarily a dialect of English that quite matches that embraced by schooling. Historically, both communities suffered under American imperialism. Both communities traditionally value orality over literacy, had no script prior to colonization, and currently use an outsider-imposed alphabetic script for print literacy in their respective indigenous languages. Both communities used non-formal education prior to colonization. And currently, both communities are heavily influenced by American education practices. Since little research has been done on the sociolinguistic implications of print literacy or the revitalization of language and culture in the Marshall Islands, the Navajo studies conducted on these topics may offer valuable insight.

Until recently, studies showed that written Navajo was used exclusively in school and church domains (McLaughlin, 1989). That research suggested the alien nature of school and

church, as activities foreign to traditional Navajo culture, meant use of new written Navajo language would be rejected and the outside second language, English, would be used instead (McLaughlin, 1989). In his ethnographic research, McLaughlin (1989) documented the use of Navajo literacy beyond school- and church-related activities, including many instances of personal and inter-personal communications written in both languages. He presented a broader analysis of literacy to account for the findings. This analysis relies on Critical Theory that includes a cultural context, community ideology, and cultural struggle for identity and empowerment in addition to a straightforward analysis of sociolinguistics, which was, by itself, not enough to support the realities of literacy in this Navajo community (McLaughlin, 1989). A similarly narrow sociolinguistic analysis in the Marshall Islands would be equally inadequate. An examination of literacy in the RMI would also require a Critical Theory-based analysis.

A number of other studies looked at the use of culturally relevant and culturally based teaching practices in Navajo schools. The recommendations attempt to balance the practical economic need for print literacy with the self-affirming cultural need to honor oral tradition. Studies suggest non-native teachers begin by understanding their own Western assumptions about print literacy, storytelling, and learning styles (Zolbrod, 2012; Eder, 2007). Findings from the studies show that curriculum adjustment alone is inadequate to address the needs of the students; instead, a broader, contextualized, and authentic approach is required. Zolbrod (2012) suggests using explicit grammar instruction with culturally relevant analogies, such as the similarities of sentence structure to Navajo kinship. He also integrates the Navajo creation mythology and its corresponding four steps for task completion (thinking, planning, execution, and perfecting) into all academic tasks in his classroom. Eder's (2007) study

demonstrates how the integration of storytelling into classrooms illuminates such cultural practices as the role of elders, interaction with the natural world, and a focus on honoring relationships. As a balance to print literacy development, comparisons and analysis of stories show cyclical rather than lineal story structures, implicit verses explicit moral lessons, use of such literary techniques as: repetition, meter, pattern, pause, whisper, chant, movement, intonation and vocal timing (Egan, 1987; Eder, 2007). Eder (2007) also emphasizes the need for these stories to be contextually appropriate—told by the right storyteller, in the right setting, during the right season according to tradition, and with cultural authenticity—in order to be effective.

Informing Professional Practice

Scholars, particularly Walter Ong (1982), who addressed the dichotomy of orality and literacy have been criticized for their deficit ideologies that promoted a biased view of literate cultures as superior to oral cultures (Egan, 1987). A modern approach to orality and literacy considers them interwoven parts, as in Egan's (1987) statement, "We do not move from orality to literacy, but rather from orality to a combination of literacy and orality" (p. 464). Vico, a philosopher, rhetorician, and linguist, suggested (as cited in Egan, 1987, p. 465) that literacy, rational prose, and metacognitive analysis (the features associated with the superiority of literacy) are late achievements in human thinking that developed out of our poetic human nature. The challenge going forward is to find ways to preserve the poetic nature of human orality as students move toward more analytical modes of thinking with their development of print literacy skills.

Balancing Orality and Literacy in Classroom Practice

In classrooms in Hawai'i, some teachers are using culturally relevant teaching strategies to strike a balance between orality and literacy. At KEEP, Kathryn Au encourages teachers to depart from traditional literacy instruction in order to incorporate "talk story," a traditional Hawai'ian informal speaking pattern that uses meandering narratives and overlapping participation by two or more speakers (Au & Kawakami, 1985). After reading a story aloud, teachers discuss the story with students without hand-raising and singling out students, but by allowing them to participate at will and overlap one another's speech as they construct an understanding of the story. Rodrigo Acoba, a teacher at Waipahu Intermediate, creates opportunities to use "talk story" to hear about the personal, cultural, and academic struggles his students are facing (Deering, 2005). This strategy is based around the Hawai'ian notion of 'ohana, or extended family, a concept the school is using to help bridge the cultural gap between home and school cultures.

Other researchers on the mainland are encouraging teachers to view language learning as a unification of language and culture, what Agar (as cited in Lantolf & Johnson, 2007, p. 879) called *languaculture*. With an understanding of languaculture, educators can think about language and culture as two inherently linked parts that must balance the whole—so that when one is forgotten, ignored or otherwise missing, its absence is felt. Languaculture provides teachers a framework for understanding the way students see, feel, think, act, and construct reality (Lantolf & Johnson, 2007). The art of storytelling is also making an impact in early childhood literacy development (Peck, 1989; Dyson & Genishi, 1994). Proponents suggest that storytelling helps students learn to evaluate storytelling styles, story genres and structures, and how to critically judge literature based on personal taste and literary merit (Peck, 1989).

Secondary educators are also using "process drama" strategies similar to methods proposed in *Theater of the Oppressed* by Augusto Boal (1979) to help students develop confidence with speaking and listening skills, engage in self-exploration, identity-building and self-empowerment, as well as offering support for print literacy development (Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Schneider, Crumpler, & Rogers, 2006). Process drama presents students with a complex situation, a generative theme, or moral dilemma, and then asks the students and teacher to collaborate on an unscripted, improvised dramatic exploration of the topic.

Daniel Kelin has used similar teaching practices in his Marshallese classrooms and in Hawai'i with many Micronesian and Pacific Islander students (Kelin, 2005). Kelin calls his method "playbuilding," implying that his focus is less about process analysis and more about storytelling. This idea aligns with Egan's (1987) thoughts on viewing orality without a Western lens that is focused on higher-order thinking stemming from a print literacy tradition, Eder's (2007) recommendation that storytelling ought to be culturally and contextually appropriate in order to be effective, and Benham's (2006) challenge to recognize multiple literacies, and incorporate oral and artistic literacies such as chant, song, and dance. Playbuilding allows students the opportunity to more fully explore the richness of orality through some of the literary techniques Egan (1987) and Eder (2007) identified: repetition, meter, pattern, pause, whisper, chant, movement, intonation and vocal timing. The resulting plays have had great success. In Micronesia, remote outer islands have heard good reviews and requested recordings of the plays—a great irony, Kelin (2005) points out. In Hawai'i, the plays have added extra run dates to accommodate the growing crowds who bring extended family, lots of food, and lay on blankets and mats under the stars to watch the performance—a scene that embodies the Hawai'ian notion of '*ohana*. Clearly, this culturally

based teaching methodology is making an impact on Pacific Island students and their families.

Aaron Garrod, an emeritus professor of Education at Dartmouth, spent fifteen years working with teachers and students in the Marshall Islands on dramatic projects that encouraged a balance between orality and print literacy. Undergraduate pre-service teachers worked in the RMI school system for ten-week internships. The Dartmouth Volunteer Teaching Program put on numerous bilingual adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. Garrod (2005) argues against the notion that this is a culturally imperialistic approach, noting that "high culture" can also be used for "liberation" (p. 3). His artistic efforts as a director included "a primary aim to show respect for both Shakepeare's iambic pentameter verse and the vitality of the [Marshallese] language" (Garrod, 2005, p. 4). Garrod used *Theatre of the Oppressed* warm-ups from Boal's work, he involved community members in the production and translations of Shakespeare's text, and notes that "we essentially 'Marshallized' the play: made costumes and references relevant to the islands" (p. 6). Characters were realigned with Marshallese mythology, and the choreography and songs were created to be culturally familiar to students and audience members alike.

These classroom drama methods—process drama, bilingual adaptations, and playbuilding—strongly align with critical literacy and culturally relevant teaching practices. With input from the teacher, they rely on the group dynamics and the "community of learners" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 69) to continually "recreate, recycle and share" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 81) the content through dramatic improvisation before acting, performing, and reflecting the production into the community. By using an oral story and encouraging the

students to perform and present a story that is never written down, the pedagogy mirrors the cultural values of orality.

As noted, adolescent Marshallese students face unique challenges in literacy development. These challenges deserve to be specifically addressed. The literature suggests these students need explicit instruction in literacy strategies and form, more reading and writing assignments based on good written input, as well as more speaking, listening and viewing. This new balance between orality and literacy encourages fluid movement along the biliteracy continuum to help students negotiate their own language skills in the real world (Hornberger & Link, 2012). Especially for Marshallese students at the lowest levels of English proficiency, this pedagogy, which builds on their speaking strengths, provides them a much-needed scaffold to move from basic literacy to advanced literacy.

Potential Areas of Concern

Although there is much potential benefit from these approaches, there are still some potential areas of concern. First, the playbuilding methodology as presented here is very difficult to do if the students want to create a strict interpretation of a story—a problem exacerbated by the diversity of island cultures present in the classroom. A strict interpretation of a Yapese story, for instance, would be almost impossible to carry out without the help of Yapese storytellers and community members who would not be readily available resources in a Palauan-based school setting. Second, many of the Marshallese students in this class are still in their "silent period," a stage of language development in which they would not feel comfortable performing in front of an audience. Since many of the adaptations are made to specifically help these students, it may be quite difficult to ensure that they get an appropriate role in the play and participate in their fullest capacity. Allowing them to be a part of

dancing, chanting or musical parts of the performance may be a possible solution. Lastly, the classroom time devoted to dramatic productions leaves little time for formal assessments. In an increasingly standards-based educational environment, it may require some creative use of formal assessments to properly evaluate the knowledge and skills of these students for the purposes of administering final exams and providing final grades.

Informing Future Professional Practice

This summary is primarily intended to help the teachers who currently teach in the position I left when my Peace Corps service ended. If this work inspires them to try these methodologies and if these strategies even marginally help the students, then we have moved forward in a positive direction. My long-term hope is that understanding how these culturally relevant adaptations overlap and integrate can help teachers in Micronesia to guide their students from basic literacy to advanced literacy without sacrificing the richness of their cultural background knowledge, their heritage language, or their cultural beliefs in the value of orality.

The ideas and approaches presented here may also be useful beyond the borders of the Micronesian nation states. There is direct correlation between the culturally relevant content and culturally relevant pedagogy in these curricular plans for Micronesia and classes that include Micronesians here in the United States. Classrooms in Hawaii, Washington, Oregon, Colorado, and Arkansas have seen a great increase in students from the region. Other populations—different in culture but similar in academic needs—could benefit from similar curricular adaptations. I am thinking specifically about other linguistic communities that value orality over literacy, whose languages use an imposed script, and are endangered, such as the Navajo and other Native American populations, or the Karen, Hmong and other

refugee populations. Schools located on tribal lands, nearby in the United States, or in areas designated as preferred refugee resettlement communities could also incorporate many of these culturally relevant strategies and perspectives to help their students, as well. Linguistically similar communities are not the only communities that must address these same academic needs in students. Many urban areas have large numbers of adolescents without advanced literacy. Some may be ELLs and some may not, but both groups of students could see benefits from these strategies.

Conclusion

Adolescent Marshallese students face unique challenges in literacy development. As adolescent ELLs, these students need explicit instruction in literacy strategies and form, more reading and writing assignments based on good written input, more speaking, listening and viewing as related to the academic texts, and cultural responsiveness to learner needs (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005; Scarcella, 2002). In order to develop a curriculum that is culturally responsive to the needs of these students, the differentiation between home and school cultures must be addressed. Eder (2007) warns that curriculum change itself is not enough, because it is the teaching practices that demonstrate value for multiple literacies, the significance of bilingualism, and appreciation for orality.

The research suggests that teacher preparation and professional development could help educators understand the relationships between orality and literacy as well as language and culture (Egan, 1987; Lantolf & Johnson, 2007). With a new perspective on how these concepts overlap and integrate, teachers can be better prepared to guide their students from basic literacy to advanced literacy without sacrificing the richness of their cultural background knowledge, their heritage language, or their cultural beliefs in the value of

orality. The incorporation of culturally relevant teaching practices that support orality and languaculture, such as storytelling, story reading, talk story, process drama, bilingual play adaptations and playbuilding show promise as effective strategies (Eder, 2005; Elly, 1998; Ricketts, 1982; Au & Kawakami, 1985; Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Schneider, Crumpler & Rogers, 2006; Garrod, 2005; Kelin, 2005).

Although the challenges for adolescent Marshallese students are great, these approaches offer hope for steady improvement in literacy development. The challenge for schools and educators, it seems, rests less in adapting curriculum and more in developing excellent, culturally relevant teaching practices—a challenge made no easier to solve by the region's teacher shortages, geographic remoteness, and lack of technical and professional development resources. One can hope that an incorporation of culturally relevant teaching practices into the schools would not only address the literacy needs of adolescent Marshallese students, but would enliven the classrooms, draw the community into the school, and inspire members of the community to increase their participation in the school and maybe even consider a career as a local

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