

# WHY DO STUDENTS' LANGUAGES MATTER?

Learning about, recognizing, and supporting students' language backgrounds and multilingual practices are key to supporting students by developing relationships and nurturing...



## CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL ENRICHMENT

Activities that promote multilingualism foster students' and educators' curiosity, collaboration, and intercultural communication.

## ACADEMIC AND LIFE SUCCESS

Students use all of their language skills to learn academic content and new languages (including new dialects and varieties) that are important for succeeding in school and outside of school.

## STUDENT WELL-BEING

Students' social and emotional development includes their capacity to verbalize their feelings (in any language) and their ability to see their knowledge, such as their multilingual language skills, as valued assets in the classroom and in society.

Multilingual students whose families are from the Freely Associated States (FAS)—the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Republic of Palau—will have varied experiences in multilingual contexts that influence how they adapt and thrive in any education system. These experiences will manifest in students' uses of language to make meaning across different social contexts (school, work, community) while using different language modes (listening, reading, writing, speaking).



### LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

Students who attend school in the FAS may encounter dual language instruction or English-only instruction at different grade levels or schools, and teachers' proficiency levels in the language(s) of instruction influence how students learn language.



### HOME LANGUAGE USE

Students' families and caregivers may speak one or more languages at home. How families negotiate their language practices at home varies based on island customs, places of residence, and expectations for their children's language development.



### LANGUAGE RESOURCES AND ACCESS

Students' language development in their home or heritage language may be supplemented through literature (elementary readers, novels), singing (for example, chants or hymns), or internet interactions (for example, public forums or messaging apps).



### STUDENT MOBILITY

FAS students who have moved between schools, districts, states, or countries are exposed to a wide array of language environments, possibly including inconsistent exposure to or use of academic language, which may affect language development.

## STUDENTS' LANGUAGE BACKGROUNDS AND EXPERIENCES MAY LOOK LIKE...



### ... A STUDENT WHO IS PROFICIENT IN SPOKEN ENGLISH BUT WHO MAY SPEAK A DIFFERENT ENGLISH DIALECT OR MAY NOT HAVE EXPOSURE TO ACADEMIC ENGLISH.

Kat is a grade 4 Chuukese student in elementary school in Hawai'i. Kat, who was born in Honolulu and never lived in Chuuk, has grown up speaking local Hawai'i English mixed with Pidgin (Hawai'i Creole English) and has some knowledge of Chuukese as her heritage language. She is proficient in using these local language varieties but struggles in reading, writing, and testing at school because the school uses Standard American English as the academic language. Kat's teacher recognizes Kat's speaking proficiency and ease of communication in Hawai'i English that incorporates Pidgin vocabulary and grammar, so the teacher uses these strengths to scaffold Kat's academic Standard American English development to support her success in school.

### ... A STUDENT OR FAMILY MEMBERS WHO APPEAR TO SPEAK A DIFFERENT "FIRST"/"HOME" LANGUAGE THAN WHAT IS REPORTED ON SCHOOL INTAKE FORMS.

A high school teacher in Arkansas learns that a new student who just arrived from the Marshall Islands will join his homeroom class halfway through the semester. Based on the reported home language provided in the school intake form, Mr. Smith asks the school's Marshallese cultural liaison to interpret when he meets with the family. However, at the start of the meeting, he learns that the parents do not speak much Marshallese because they are originally from the Republic of Kiribati, a neighboring country, but they identified "Marshallese" in the ethnicity and home language questions on the school registration forms because they are citizens of the Marshall Islands. The student, who spent her middle school years on Majuro in the Marshall Islands, can interpret for her parents from Kiribati to Marshallese, and the liaison interprets Marshallese into English. After the meeting, the liaison explains to the teacher that more Kiribati families are starting to come to the region via the Marshall Islands and suggests that the school district provide Kiribati language translations for school intake forms and consider hiring a Kiribati liaison to work with newly arrived families and students.

### ... A STUDENT WHO CAN SPEAK, READ, OR WRITE SEVERAL LANGUAGES AT VARIOUS LEVELS OF PROFICIENCY.

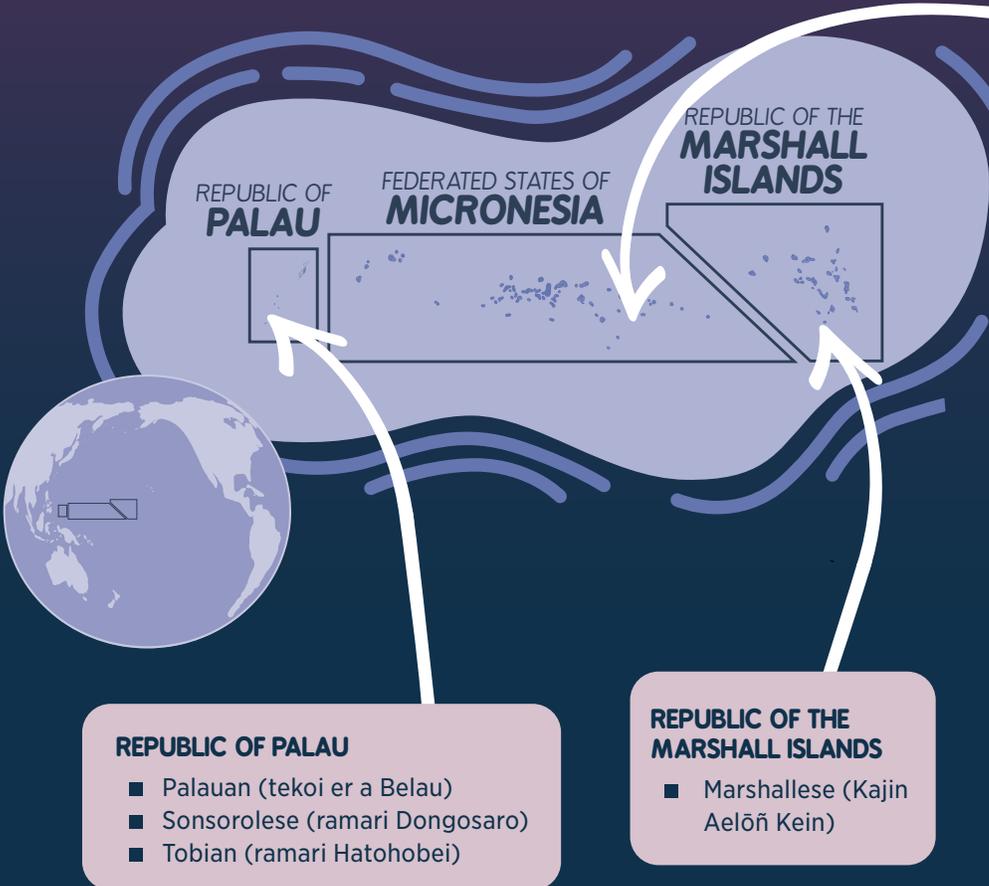
Maria, a Palauan-Filipina grade 8 student who grew up in both Palau and the Philippines, is nervous about starting her new school year in Southern California. She typically has split her school year between two countries—half in Palau and half in the Philippines—because of her parents' work demands. While in school in Palau, Maria was taught in Palauan and English, and in the Philippines, Tagalog and English were the languages of instruction. Maria is fluent in spoken Palauan and Tagalog and has some proficiency in written Palauan and English, which she uses across different settings of school, church, family, and friends. Her teachers in California ask thoughtful questions about Maria's language background and encourage her to connect with the Palauan and Filipino clubs at school so that she can develop those language practices alongside her development of academic Standard American English for the classroom.

### ... A STUDENT WHO SPEAKS MULTIPLE LANGUAGES PROFICIENTLY BUT MAY NOT BE LITERATE IN ANY OF THESE LANGUAGES.

Jon was born on Woleai, in the outer islands of Yap State in the FSM, where he attended grades K-4 with Woleaian as the primary language of instruction. Only a handful of early grade readers were available in Woleaian, and though textbooks were in English, the teacher taught the content in Woleaian. Jon's family sent him to live with his uncle in Colonia on Yap, and although Jon did not understand much Yapese or English when he started grade 5, he quickly learned how to navigate school in Yapese and English, which were the languages of instruction. Two years later, Jon's family sent him to live with relatives on Guam, where English is the language of instruction. Jon speaks mainly English with other Micronesian friends, and his Guam family uses a combination of Woleaian, Yapese, and English at home. He is proficient speaking these three languages, but he does not read or write proficiently in any of them because of limited resources and time to develop foundational literacy skills in each language. He continues to persist in his education on Guam, in part, because his English language teacher focuses on collaborative, engaging, and participatory activities using multimedia and visual aids (tables, graphs, photos, or film) to convey spoken or written messages.

# LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN THE FAS

More than 20 Indigenous languages are spoken in the Marshall Islands, the FSM, and Palau. Many citizens and residents of these countries speak multiple languages—including English, other Indigenous languages of the Pacific region, and other immigrant languages—that can serve highly nuanced different purposes in social, educational, governmental, and specialized cultural settings.



## FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA

- **KOSRAE**
  - Kosraean (kahs Kosrae)
- **POHNPEI**
  - Kapingamarangi (leelee Kilinid)
  - Mwoakilloan/Mokilese (lal in Mwoakilloa)
  - Mortlockese (kapasen Mwoshulók)
  - Nukuoro (basa de henua)
  - Pohnpeian (mahsen en Pohnpei)
  - Sapwuahfikese/Ngatikese (lokaiahn Sapwuahfik)
  - Pingelapese (lokaehiah Pingelap)
- **CHUUK**
  - Mortlockese (kapasen Mwoshulók)
  - Chuukese (fóosun Chuuk)
  - Polowatese (kepehen Pwolowat)
  - Namonuito (kapahan Nómwonweité)
  - Pááféng (pworausen Pááféng)
- **YAP**
  - Yapese (thin ni Waqab)
  - Ulithian (yal'ool Yulldiy)
  - Satawalese (kepesaen Saetaewan)
  - Woleaian (kapetali Weleya)

A student's first/last name, parents' ethnicities, or their island(s) of residence only reveal part of their multilingual experience. Students in the FAS may encounter non-Indigenous languages, besides English, spoken by immigrants living and working in the islands. For example, various Asian and Pacific languages are spoken by contract workers and long-term residents across the FAS.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO REFLECT ON LANGUAGE DIVERSITY?

- Students in the FAS are exposed to many different languages as they move within or outside of the islands. As they build their linguistic and social skillset to help them navigate their environments, students moving to new places may need more structured support to succeed in their formal education. Before assuming a student's language experience, teachers can ask students what language(s) they might speak in different circumstances or in different social groups and then consider how this knowledge can support their learning in the classroom.
- Teachers bring their own multilingual experiences into the classroom, which they can reflect on to develop an awareness of how language is used in their own communities. Educators can consider which languages or dialects they have been exposed to and how they have affected their own identity and attitudes (both positive and negative) toward speakers of other languages or dialects. Teachers can use their experiences to relate to students and their families who may come from different cultural contexts.

# PRACTICING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION

## WITH PACIFIC ISLAND STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

*Culturally responsive practices are “behavioral and policy actions that acknowledge stakeholders’ cultures and utilize that knowledge to create an optimal learning environment where personal beliefs and assumptions are regularly examined, cultural identities are nurtured, institutional policies and procedures are interrogated for bias, [and] cultural competency is developed.”*

(Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015)

### IN THE CLASSROOM

**Design lessons and activities that highlight language diversity and multilingual experiences.** When language diversity is the content matter, students can see themselves and their knowledge as assets in the classroom. For example, teachers can ask students to complete a self-reflection assignment reflecting on their language experiences, practices, and identities, or to visualize Pacific languages in the “family tree” of Austronesian languages. This can also provide insight into human migration patterns from Taiwan to Madagascar and throughout the Pacific islands.

**Encourage students to leverage all their language skills to create meaning and demonstrate their content knowledge.** Whether the students in the classroom represent a wide or small range of language backgrounds or whether the teacher shares a similar or different language background from their students, teachers can create a classroom environment where students can speak or write the language(s) they are most comfortable with alongside learning new languages and new content. Pre-assignments can include explicit instructions for students to use their most familiar languages to reflect on and discuss an upcoming activity. Additionally, the guidelines for students’ final projects, such as project-based activities, group performances, and group writing assignments, can also explicitly encourage the use of multiple languages to reflect the group members’ backgrounds. These activities allow students to develop awareness of their own languages through interaction and comparison with languages spoken by other students and with English as the language of instruction.

**Provide scaffolding for students of all ages to learn both the social dialect and academic English used in your region.** Even though a student transitioning from an FAS school district may have had English-medium education, the English variety they speak or understand may differ from what they experience in their new classroom. Teachers can support students by demonstrating how to complete an activity using the expected academic language and creating routines such as collaborative discussions prior to written assignments.

### SCHOOL AND DISTRICT-WIDE

**Consider strengthening translation/interpretation services that reflect the diversity of languages represented in your school or district.** Many parents and caregivers of FAS students may have difficulty participating in school activities or following school announcements and instructions because of limited Standard American English proficiency. Schools with larger populations of students from the FAS can consider investing in interpreters, translation services, or cultural liaisons to help families get timely information about school procedures and activities and to relieve the burden on students of all ages who often interpret/translate for family members out of necessity when no interpreter/ translation is provided.

**Develop processes for identifying and supporting students who may or may not need specialized English Learner services.** Incoming students in the later grades identified as English Learners or those who are identified as Long-Term English Learners may require foundational English literacy skill development that differs from support younger students receive. In other cases, students who come from the FAS or grew up in the United States may proficiently speak Standard American English or another English variety, but this oral proficiency might not be reflected in English Learner placement assessments that emphasize literacy or academic language. Administrators might provide professional learning opportunities on English language development and Pacific Island students’ language backgrounds so that teachers can use data from standardized English Learner assessments and contextual knowledge of students’ experiences to assign appropriate interventions and support services.

**Facilitate opportunities for students to receive the Seal of Bilingualism with their high school diploma.**

This award, established in 42 U.S. states and Washington D.C., recognizes that the mastery of two or more languages and opens opportunities for success in college, career, and different aspects of life. At the time of publication, FAS Indigenous languages assessments that have been developed for the Seal of Bilingualism include Chuukese and Marshallese. For more information, visit the Seal of Bilingualism website: <https://sealofbilingualism.org/>



Information on FAS students’ school experiences for this infographic was compiled through consultation with educators, community leaders, and cultural advisors.



This infographic was prepared under Contract # ED-IES-17-C-0010 by Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific, administered by McREL International. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

Complete references, acknowledgements, and additional resources for this infographic series are available on the REL Pacific website.