

Marshall Islands Public School System

Language Education Policy



2015
Republic of the Marshall Islands

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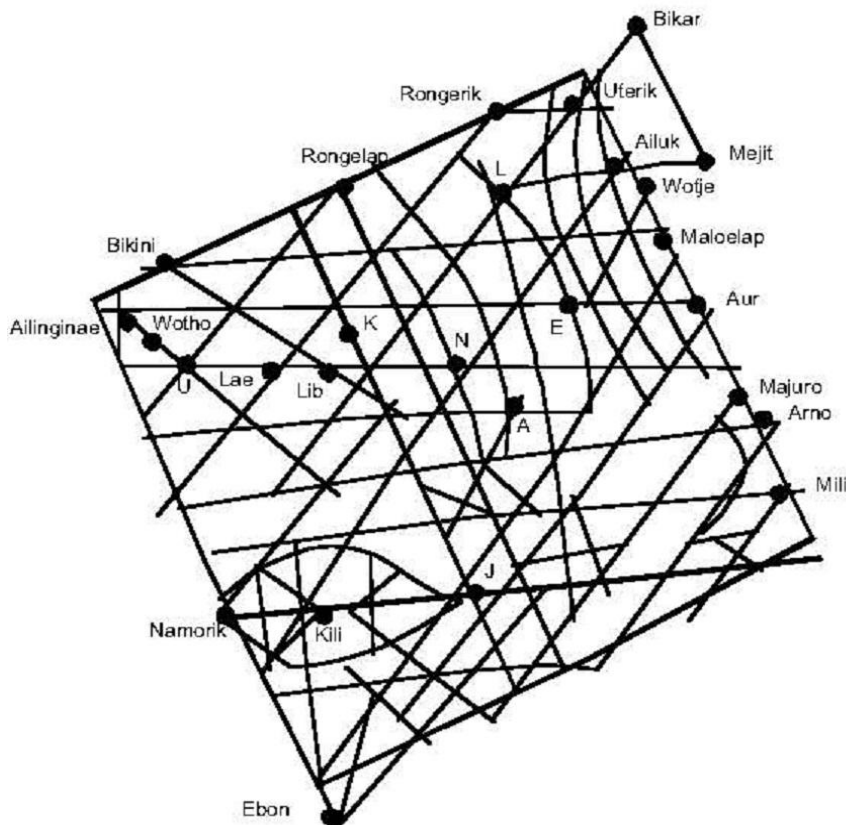
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Thank you all.

Hilda C. Heine
Minister of Education

Introduction

Though the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) stretches over a wide expanse of ocean and the Marshallese people live on remote islands and atolls, their seafaring ways resulted in the use of one language—Kajin Aelōñ Kein (Marshallese).



Kajin Aelōñ Kein refers to the Marshallese language as stated under the Nitijeļā Public Law 2005-34. It includes orthography, grammar, and new lists of vocabulary and phrases approved by the Language Commission, Committee of the Nitijeļā, and the Council of Irooj.

Kajin Aelōñ Kein distinguishes and binds Ri-Majol as a people and as a culture. It is through the language that the people can make sense of their culture. The significance of the language to the maintenance of the culture cannot be underestimated. Thus, it is both critical and timely that special measures are taken to invest necessary resources to teach, safeguard and protect Kajin Aelōñ Kein .

The development of the new language policy is a local initiative that is designed to ensure teaching of any languages, whether English or Kajin Aelōñ Kein, is in line with current research findings and global targets. Since 1953 UNESCO has supported children’s right to learn their mother tongue, and advocated maintenance of linguistic and cultural diversity through language-in-education policies (UNESCO, 1953, 2003). This is in line with a growing body of empirical research and theory on language acquisition and bilingual learning that complement a rights based rationale for basing early education in children’s mother tongue before introducing a second language as a medium of instruction.

Growing up, ajiri in Majol learn Kajin Aelōñ Kein their mother tongue at homes. Arriving early in kindergarten classes, these children bring with them this precious resource. Rather than building on this resource, the level and effort in use of Kajin Aelōñ Kein as a value added resource for learning has been weak. Ajiri in Majol have grown up in recent times to speak their home language with a level of proficiency suitable for social communication and basic commerce, but not for technical or academic purposes. The new language

policy intends to change that so that English and Kajin Aelōñ Kein continue as teaching languages in a bilingual arrangement. Kajin Aelōñ Kein is the medium of learning, at 100 percent, in grades k-6th grade; furthermore, Kajin Aelōñ Kein will be taught throughout secondary grades levels and used approximately 50% of the times in instructions.

The MOE bilingual goals:

- To work towards an equal status for Kajin Aelōñ Kein (Marshallese) and English and to promote opportunities for speakers of Kajin Aelōñ Kein to use, develop and maintain their language.
- To facilitate the development of functional bilingualism in Kajin Aelōñ Kein and English by providing conditions under which all children will develop the ability and confidence to communicate for a range of purposes in both languages

RMI MOE Language Education Policy

The language education policy until now

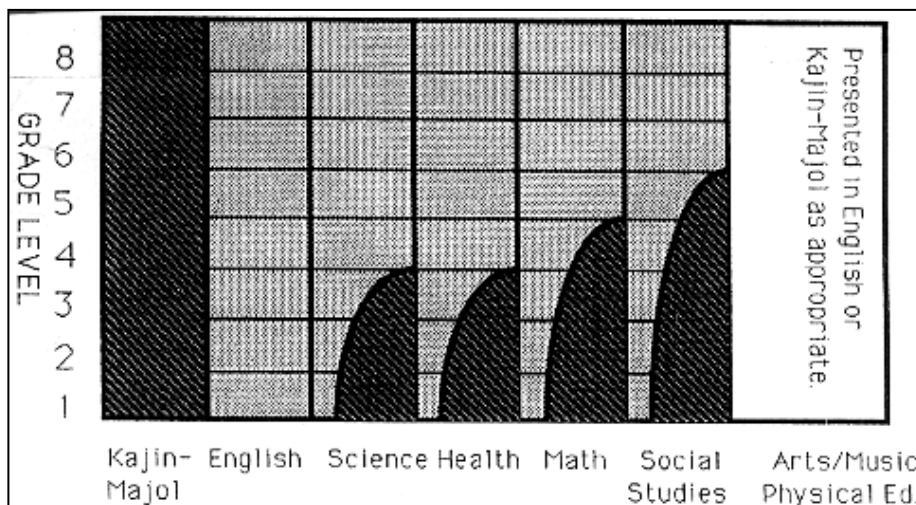
As the responsibilities of a new nation began to unfold, a committee was formed on behalf of the MOE to articulate a language policy for schools. In 1992, once ratified by the government, the language education policy was introduced to the people of the RMI – a time when public school started at grade one. It states,

“Marshallese shall be the medium of instruction with exception of the English language classes. As prescribed in the diagram below, transition of medium of instruction from Marshallese to English shall be occurring on a continuum basis”

Title 14, Chapter 2-3(b)

Illustrated in Figure 1, the language of instruction (LOI) design supports an early transition from Kajin Aelōñ Kein to English. In all subjects other than Kajin Aelōñ Kein Language Arts and English Language Arts, English is introduced gradually as a LOI starting in grade one. The LOI transitions to English in grade four for science and health and in later grades for math and social studies.

Figure 1: RMI Language Education Policy - 1992



The RMI’s transitional bilingual policy, like that of other Pacific entities, was born out of the need for English. In grades 1–3, the LOI is two-thirds Kajin Aelōñ Kein and one-third English. By grade 4, the MOI is two-thirds English and one-third Kajin Aelōñ Kein. By grade five, English is the LOI with Kajin Aelōñ Kein used only in Kajin Aelōñ Kein Language Arts with the option to use it in arts/music/physical education classes. The intent of this transitional program is to gradually increase the amount of time given to English as the LOI; using the

local language as the LOI in the early grades in the service of learning English. This design, when implemented as intended, promotes developing a stronger proficiency in English than Kajin Aelōñ Kein.

Rationale for Change

The MOE's goal of bilingualism is to enable students to become proficient in higher levels of cognitive-academic language knowledge and skills in both first and second languages.

Bilingual, bi-literacy, and first and second language research support the change in policy. Essential understandings based on international research and best practices highlight that:

The best predictor of cognitive-academic language development in a second language is the level of development of cognitive-academic language proficiency in the first language. (Dutcher, 1994)

The research confirms that a solid foundation in literacy and language learning begins with the first language and culturally responsive pedagogy. In other words, development of advanced language skills and concept formation in the first language improves learning (in) the second language (Gonzalez, 1998). There is strong evidence that introducing the second language too intensively too soon without appropriate supports can be largely counterproductive towards achieving bilingual goals (Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002). Research highlights the need to attend to processes of transfer (e.g., transferring concepts, skills, and knowledge from one language to another) and the use of appropriate pedagogy for teaching the second language (August & Shanahan, 2006; García, 2009).

Common evidence-based features of successful bilingual programs include: (Gouleta, 2006; Rutalemwa, 2010)

- Students are learning (in) the mother tongue and as a basis for learning (in) a second language.
- Parents and community are actively involved in day-to-day implementation of the bilingual program.
- Teachers are able to understand, speak, and use the language of instruction with a high level of proficiency, whether it is their first or second language.
- Teachers are well trained; they have cultural competence and subject-matter knowledge, and they continually upgrade their training.
- Input from local leaders and community members on the role of local language and culture in children's education and their future is valued and used.

In addition, the RMI MOE utilizes recommendations from both Language-as-a-Right and Language-as-a-Resource orientations (Ruiz, 1984) to guide the direction of the new language education policy in support their bilingual goal. The Language-as-a-Right orientation views language as a basic human right, and that individuals have rights to use and learn (in) their own languages. In the RMI context, this orientation points to the rights of the Marshallese children to learn (in) Kajin Aelōñ Kein at school. With the Language-as-a-Resource orientation, languages are viewed as personal and national resources. The language resources serve as assets to build potential for the nation, act as social bridges to connect across different groups, and as cross-cultural bridges for awareness and integration. In the RMI context, these languages are Kajin Aelōñ Kein and English. Both Kajin Aelōñ Kein and English are viewed as resources for students and a successful nation, and one does not replace another at the end of a child's public education experience.

The new language education policy

Principles that support the development of high levels of Kajin Aelōñ Kein and English proficiency:

- Kajin Aelōñ Kein is taught as a subject at all grade levels (Kajin Aelōñ Kein Language Arts).
- English is taught as a subject at all grade levels (English Language Arts).
- Initially, Kajin Aelōñ Kein is used predominantly as the medium of instruction for subjects other than English Language Arts.

- English is introduced gradually as a medium of instruction.
- In later grades, Kajin Aelōñ Kein and English are used as teaching languages in a bilingual arrangement.

The above principles are reflected in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Distribution of Kajin Aelōñ Kein (orange) and English (black) as LOI

Grade	English Language Arts (hrs/week)	Kajin Aelōñ Kein Language Arts (hrs/week)	Other School Subjects				
12	5	5	SOCIAL SCIENCES	HEALTH	PE/ ART	MATH	SCIENCES
11	5	5					
10	5	5					
9	5	5					
8	7.5	7.5					
7	7.5	7.5					
6	7.5	7.5	Kajin Aelōñ Kein as LOI Including outcomes for English use				
5	7.5	7.5	Kajin Aelōñ Kein as LOI Math, Science, Health, Social Studies, PE, Art, Project-based learning				
4	7.5	7.5					
3	7.5	7.5					
2	7.5	7.5					
1	7.5	7.5					
K	7.5	7.5					

Figure 2 represents the new RMI MOE language education policy. Equal instructional time will be given to Kajin Aelōñ Kein Language Arts and English Language in each grade: 90 min per day for each subject from grades K through 8, and 60 min per day for each subject from grades 9 through 12. Kajin Aelōñ Kein will be the LOI for Kajin Aelōñ Kein Language Arts, whereas English will be the LOI for English Language Arts, grades K through 12. Assessment for Kajin Aelōñ Kein Language Arts will be in Kajin Aelōñ Kein. Assessment for English Language Arts will be in English.

LOI for other subjects, grades K - 6

Kajin Aelōñ Kein will be the LOI for all subjects other than English Language Arts from grades K through 6. This LOI arrangement will promote the teaching of the Kajin Aelōñ Kein language, culture, and concepts across different subjects (e.g., math, social studies, science, art, music, physical education). In grades 4, 5, and 6, knowledge of English will be used in these subjects to extend and deepen understanding of a concept or skill. Learning outcomes for English in grades 4 - 6 Kajin Aelōñ Kein medium classrooms state that students will:

- Identify corresponding vocabulary between Kajin Aelōñ Kein and English to deepen understanding and communicate learning (e.g., concept words including nouns, verbs, adjectives).
- Compare word-building strategies in Kajin Aelōñ Kein and English (e.g., use of affixes) for various subject-specific words.
- Explore similarities and differences of grammatical structures between Kajin Aelōñ Kein and English (e.g., when comparing, describing, explaining, arguing).
- Explore cultural differences between Kajin Aelōñ Kein and English when speaking/writing for different purposes and audiences (e.g., asking questions of an elder).

Most importantly, the main purpose of Kajin Aelōñ Kein as the LOI in grades K-6 for all subjects but English Language Arts will be to ensure that a strong foundation of Kajin Aelōñ Kein language and culture is established for all students. Assessment of all subjects K-6, except for English Language Arts, will be in Kajin Aelōñ Kein.

LOI for specific subjects, grades 7 – 12

Kajin Aelōñ Kein and English will be the LOI in a 50/50 bilingual arrangement, grade 7 through 12. In Figure 3, social science courses, health, physical education and art will be taught, learned and assessed in Kajin Aelōñ Kein. Math and science courses will be taught, learned and assessed in English. Both languages will be used in all classes as appropriate to deepen understanding of the language and/or content under study

Figure 3: LOI distribution for subjects, grades 7 – 12:

Grade	English Language Arts (hrs/week)	Kajin Aelōñ Kein Language Arts (hrs/week)	Subjects				
12	5	5	SOCIAL SCIENCES	HEALTH	PE/ ART	MATH	SCIENCES
11	5	5					
10	5	5					
9	5	5					
8	7.5	7.5					
7	7.5	7.5					

If other courses such as marine science and/or environmental science are to be offered, the LOI will be determined by the PSS and aligned with the 50/50 bilingual arrangement for grades 7 through 12. Teachers will be required to have a combination of high proficiency in English and knowledge of math and science if these are the subjects they are assigned to teach. As well, knowledgeable teachers with high proficiency of Kajin Aelōñ Kein will be required to teach the social sciences, health, physical education and art. The structure outlined in Figure 3 will be used intentionally and explicitly toward the ultimate goal of bilingual proficiency.

To prepare students who are interested in pursuing post-secondary studies in and out of the RMI, the curriculum for English Language Arts in grades 9—10 will be modified to incorporate topics from subjects taught in Kajin Aelōñ Kein. For example, social science topics from civics/government and economics will be incorporated into English Language Arts. Similarly, topics from life sciences will be used in Kajin Aelōñ Kein Language Arts. In this way, students will be equipped with necessary English academic language and literacy knowledge and skills to continue post-secondary studies in those topics. They will also benefit from a stronger understanding of math and science topics when discussed in their home language.

Why language education policy matters

To support bilingual development, the policy design must be intentional, structured carefully to ensure both languages receive the attention needed to develop to high levels of proficiency. However, as strong as the language education policy might be, it will take the collective school community to implement it effectively. To this end, teachers will be supported in their development of strong language proficiencies and gain pedagogical knowledge to effectively use code-switching and other strategic approaches to enhance student language and content learning. Bilingualism and bi-literacy is so important, this policy was developed to guide teaching and learning in public schools in the RMI for years to come.

Process for language policy review

Initial request

The RMI Minister of Education submitted a request to the Pacific Regional Comprehensive Center at PREL in the summer of 2013 for technical assistance on revising the MOE's language education policy. The request was based on evidence that the current bilingual program was ineffective and the MOE's commitment to a new framework to strengthen bilingualism and biliteracy for K-12 students.

Leto Letak Mejeje

An important community meeting was held to discuss the role of Marshallese language and culture in the public education. On November 14, 2013, a Leto Letak Mejeje was facilitated by the College of the Marshall Islands on the theme "Kūkkim Dāpij Kajin im Manit kein ad, im jaaketo jaaketak ñan doon" (Hold on tight to our culture and language, and share among one another). This event brought together Marshallese leaders from the Ministry of Education, the Customary Law and Language Commission (CLLC), the Office of the Council of Irooj, and other Micronesian experts to share ideas in a panel discussion with traditional knowledge holders, teachers, students and members of the community about the value of their language and culture and what they want for their future and their children's future – particularly as regards education in the public schools. Overwhelmingly, the response was for public schools together with community to collectively strengthen students' knowledge and skills of the Kajin Aelōñ Kein language and culture.

Working groups

A series of virtual and face-to-face sessions were provided for a group of MOE representatives and community members, including representatives from the CLLC and College of Marshall Islands (CMI). These sessions created a space for group members to share their background knowledge on bilingualism, bi-literacy, and program designs, and provide opportunities for the group to discuss changes and potential implications. Working groups have been created to address the following areas: Local Resources; Inventory of Kajin Aelōñ Kein and English Materials; Employing Local Knowledge; and Language Education Policy. Each working group has a lead to guide the work. The working groups met once a month to update each other on progress.

The Language Education Policy working group had core representation from the MOE, along with representation from community (CLLC and CMI) and technical assistance (TA) providers (PREL/PRCC, QPENP). Starting with recommendations from the Leto Letak Mejeje and virtual/face-to-face sessions in considerations for change, the group members worked together to come to consensus and make recommendations on changes to the language education policy in support of the MOE's bilingual goals. Recommendations were shared with other working groups to collect input for revisions.

Conclusion

While the review and revision of the language education policy has been a collective effort, the MOE made final decisions on how to revise the language education policy, based on their collective experience, input from community members and TA providers.

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