

Assessments and Standards

By Rod Mauricio

Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) used the *Assessment for Learning* instructional strategy to steer a search for an effective professional development (PD) model for Pacific schools and teachers. The *Assessment for Learning* strategy represents key areas in early reading deemed promising for Pacific school teachers. It promotes student performance by using grade-level expectations through standards.

Assessment for Learning entails initially identifying student learning needs in order to target delivery of instruction. In most Pacific schools, English is taught as a second language, and English assessments are parts of the effective practices. English assessments are translated to support the development of literacy in local languages. Translations of this type are not easy because they require making an oral language written, or literate. This involves different language skills that have yet to be studied. The difficulties of translation prompted examinations of the skills necessary in the languages to align language and/or literary skills in English with those in Pacific vernacular languages. Are the skills important in English also important in the vernacular languages?

In the past, Pacific island societies did not have writing systems. Learning at that time was built around observation, participation, and hands-on prac-

tice. That system supported the building of cognitive abilities utilizing memories through oratory applications in practice. The system worked well with memory skills, mechanical skills, carving, fishing, agriculture, and so on. Written literacy is new and has not built its foundations in the language system.

Bilingual education programs offered opportunities for Pacific island schools to develop local literacy in schools—to incorporate Pacific languages to improve comprehension. The programs supported awareness and development of local reading and writing, as well as standards. However, the standards developed for those areas are basically a reformulation of the Western standards. Because the English language had been thoroughly studied, the standards are based on known English skills only. The standards for local languages presented challenges. The standards do not address important oratory skills original to the cultural, local knowledge and values, or important sacred knowledge of the oral traditions. The standards thus seem to devalue important cultural knowledge and do not include it in the school systems.

Based on initial examination of the language skills and the differences lost in translation, Rod Mauricio and Marilyn Low made a presentation at the Pacific Educational Conference (PEC) regarding important language skills and items lost in the process of translation. Here are some examples of what is being lost:

- Differences in sounds for the same letter used in English and the vernacular, for example, the English /p/ and Pohnpeian /p/ are not exactly the same sound, and neither are the English and Pohnpeian /k/, /t/, and /d/.

- Different letter shapes, some of which appear in digraph (2-letter) form, but are unique individual letters (e.g., oa, ng, mw, pw).
- Local language sound systems are not compatible with English phonological phoneme awareness (PPA) methods (e.g., voiceless consonants for positioning lips only).
- Differences in a tense language structure versus a tenseless language structure—translation is even more complex but vital for comprehension.

The presentation helped teachers realize the local language skills students have been missing and are not learning because they are absent in English. Teachers realized how language structures in texts influence comprehension and the importance of suffixation in local languages as the means to elicit meaning and comprehension.

Today, education standards are designed to bring students together toward a common desired outcome. Our curriculum standards are modeled after foreign standards. They entail foreign values, foreign philosophies, and beliefs different from those of Pacific contexts. Teachers and educators who developed them were once students learning from contents of a foreign framework designed for the foreign world. Today, a new approach is envisioned for literary development for Pacific education systems—including Assessments and Standards as central parts and including essential contexts of the languages and cultures.

Rod Mauricio, Specialist, PREL's Center for Assessment, Research, and Evaluation, may be contacted at mauricir@prel.org.



Photo by Jennifer Padua

