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ÑE JUON ENAAJ JELĀ KŌKĻAĻ EBAN PEĻOK:

TEACHING MARSHALLESE IMMIGRANTS

RILEY “LI” POST

HONORS PROJECT

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Abstract

Under the Compact of the Free Association (1983) treaties, Marshallese immigrants are free to live and work indefinitely without visas; however, American schools and educators have not been equipped with data and resources that can be used to address the cultural and linguistic diversity of their new neighbors. Therefore, the research question considers which resources and practices can help Marshallese immigrants succeed academically within the American education system. The findings, supplemented by the perspectives of local Marshall Islanders, suggest that educators need increased awareness of important cultural differences and further develop their cultural competency. Language teachers in particular may also find it helpful to note major distinctions between the English and Marshallese languages to predict where Marshallese English language learners may struggle with English grammatical concepts. The created resources, which aim to help local teachers develop their cultural competency, can be found following the paper.

Keywords: Marshall Islands, pedagogy, linguistics, cultural competency, contrastive analysis, teaching resources

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Ñe juon enaaj jeļā kōkļal eban peļok: Teaching Marshallese Immigrants

In Mercer County, Ohio, a smattering of small towns rooted in local agriculture and manufacturing, there has been an influx of newcomers from an unexpected place: the Marshall Islands. Motivated by economic or educational opportunities, more Marshallese families from within the United States and Marshall Islands come to the Celina area every year; an estimated 1,500 of Celina's population of 10,000 are now of Marshallese descent (Feibel, 2018).

In an environment where almost all residents are white, native English speakers, local schools struggle to address the cultural and linguistic diversity of their new neighbors; one agency particularly affected is education. Due to complex language barriers and cultural differences, the communication between students and teachers within a classroom setting has been difficult. One local teacher called the language barrier “really frustrating,” citing an inability to communicate, differing beliefs about formal education, and passive parental involvement as instigators to the problem. Another teacher agreed, saying that a lack of exposure to English vocabulary and resources, most likely caused by impoverished conditions, makes it difficult for many students, especially older learners first entering the U.S. education system, to succeed academically. However, from the perspective of a Marshallese school aid, students are forced into a new environment with contrary academic expectations and learning content that seems irrelevant to their lives in a language they may barely speak; she claims that “students don't engage because they don't understand.”

With this information in mind, the guiding research question was, *What resources and pedagogical practices can help Marshallese immigrants succeed in the American education system?* As expressed in the title of this research, *ñe juon enaaj jeļā kōkļal eban peļok*; if

teachers can acknowledge the “navigational signs” of their Marshallese students, they will never get “lost at sea,” and we can grow as a community in our understanding of one another. To fully understand the recommendations, however, relevant research on the Marshallese language, culture, and beliefs, especially as these pertain to education and the English language, must be reviewed.

Literature Review

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) lies on an archipelago of 29 atolls and five isolated islands in the North Pacific Ocean. As of July 2020, an estimated 77,917 people live on the Ratak and Rālik island chains (Central Intelligence Agency). Geographically, the RMI is identified as part of Micronesia along with the Federal States of Micronesia and Republic of Palau; the terms “Micronesian” and “Pacific Islander” are commonly used to describe residents of this region. However, not all people from these nations may identify as “Micronesian” because the islands are home to a plethora of unique ethnicities, languages, and cultures (Hawai‘i Appleseed Center, 2011).

In order to understand the perspectives of Marshallese immigrants, it is first important to discuss the covered-up history between the U.S. and the Marshall Islands, especially the effects of the U.S. government’s nuclear testing program and colonialist influence. From 1946 to 1958, the U.S. government conducted 67 confidential nuclear tests on the Bikini and Enewetak atolls; this included the Bravo Shot, the largest thermonuclear weapon ever tested by the U.S. Its overall fallout amounted to “more than one-thousand Hiroshima-sized bombs” (Barker, 2004, p. 23). The U.S. government’s prioritization of military interests over the lives of the Marshallese and purposeful withholding of information related to testing from Marshall Islanders led to

permanent displacement from ancestral lands for many as well as detrimental health issues such as burns, various cancers, and extreme birth defects. Ultimately, the program displaced and disenfranchised some populations without adequate health care and caused long-lasting health problems to the local populations that still affect the Marshall Islands (Honolulu Civil Beat, 2011). The U.S. government's denial of the irreversible consequences of the nuclear program (Johnson 2013, 2015) have caused many Marshall Islands to approach foreigners with caution or hold complex attitudes towards Americans (Pine & Savage 1989; Rudiak-Gould 2009).

In addition to the nuclear program, the U.S. government set up “institutional presences”—schools, jails, medical care facilities, and more—that established American ways of being and doing. This included emphasis on written systems and learning that took time, space, and importance away from Marshallese elders as the active purveyors of knowledge (Schwartz, 2019). The Marshallese cultural system of education that had been used for thousands of years was negated by Western standards for education, leaving behind a curriculum that even American teachers in the RMI have described as “irrelevant” (Hogan & Nimmer, 2013). By doing this, Western pressures to learn and utilize English were also integrated into Marshallese communities; according to Low et al. (2005), “[t]hrough their desire for participation in a Western economy, Marshall Islanders have learned to need and, in our view, over-value English” (p. 9).

By the time Marshallese students are in fifth grade, RMI policy specifies that English should be the medium of instruction in every class but Marshallese and physical education. However, Heine (2002) posits that due to a focus on English, not often spoken at home, over cognitive proficiency in students' native languages, Marshallese bilingual programs are often

ineffective. Due to this often unacknowledged history, it is worth noting that this history may cause Marshallese students and their families to have negative reactions toward American agencies and authority.

Marshall Islanders in the United States

An estimated thirty percent of Marshall Islanders now live outside of the RMI (nearly half residing permanently in the U.S. Midwest) often due to a lack of economic opportunities, pursuit of education, and healthcare concerns in the RMI (Duke, 2014; RMI Census Bureau, 2011). Many Marshall Islanders have left or been displaced from their ancestral lands and have come to the U.S. under the Compact of Free Association (1983) treaties that allow Marshall Islanders to live and work without visas in the U.S. indefinitely. Marshall Islanders' increasing use of this right is "the direct consequence of an overwhelming prevalence of disease and a lack of economic self-sufficiency in Micronesia caused in part by U.S. policy toward the region" (Potutsky as cited in Hawai'i Appleseed Center, 2011), especially the long-lasting effects of the U.S. nuclear testing program on the Islands. Essentially, the long-term medical, educational, and economic complications introduced by the United States as well as the RMI's continuous dependency upon reparations has caused more and more Marshallese citizens to move to the U.S. Midwest, where many manual-labor-dependent industrial or agricultural jobs are readily available.

Access to healthcare, which is especially important due to the negative health indicators of this demographic, is a reason why many Marshall Islanders make this move. As confirmed by a local Marshallese resident, many Marshall Islanders in Mercer County have moved to the United States seeking medical attention for various illnesses such as diabetes, cancers, thyroid

tumors, tuberculosis, leprosy, and depression (Williams & Hampton, 2005). Despite their right to live and work in the U.S., COFA newcomers cannot receive most forms of federal assistance, including Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security, despite paying taxes. This causes a serious predicament: the medical care in the RMI is inexpensive but not specialized or accessible enough to respond to many serious, long-term medical issues, yet no medical coverage can be applied for within the U.S. where that specialized medical care is available.

Marshall Islanders who move to the United States will likely face a multitude of other challenges as well. In Hawai'i, it was noted that Micronesian newcomers might struggle to learn English, adapt Western culture, overcome social stigmatization, and find adequate health care and housing (Hawai'i Appleseed Center, 2011; Heine, 2002). According to Heine (2004), an educator and former President of the RMI, even "getting through U.S. schools, irrespective of grades, total experience, or the potential to go on to college, may be the measure of 'success' for some Marshallese families," especially when "[a]fter years of colonization, many Marshallese see themselves as they are seen by Westerners as 'lazy, impoverished and undisciplined'" (p. 6). Duke (2004) adds to this by saying that "Marshallese society's emphasis on collectivism, extended families across multiple households, and adherence to a traditional hierarchy based on hereditary chiefs run counter to U.S. cultural norms of individualism, status equality, and the nuclear family." This makes them frequent targets for discrimination. Their self-efficacy affects their motivation, especially regarding students and their education.

As of 2011, only around three percent of Marshall Islanders in the U.S. had earned a bachelor's degree as opposed to the 28 percent of the total American population (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). For example, Heine (2002) claims that community and

classroom expectations as well as procedural requirements of U.S. schools—strict attendance policies, for example—may be surprising to Micronesian families. Therefore, educators who do not understand these cultural differences or explain them to students may consider Micronesian students to be "unprepared," "uninterested," and "unmotivated" (p. 6).

In addition to these challenges, language barriers are noted among the top concerns of educators and Marshall Islanders alike in Mercer County. In Hawai'i, language barriers were also noted as the most pressing concern among 21 Micronesian migrants (Hawai'i Appleseed Center, 2011). Marshall Islanders who are new to the States will likely have some familiarity but likely not complete verbal and written proficiency in English. According to Heine (2002), "while English is taught in all FAS schools, students come from homes where at least one indigenous language is used predominantly. English is often a second or third language. Consequently, FAS students' English language abilities are frequently below grade level, necessitating placement in the state [ESL] programs" (p. 6). Even Marshallese families that have lived in the U.S. for multiple generations might have difficulties with gaining English proficiency due to the educational and ethnic background of the individual, their amount of time spent abroad, and their viewpoint towards the English language and its speakers (Buchstaller & Willson, 2018). In a place like Mercer County in which languages apart from English are barely acknowledged, let alone embraced, the communication gap in everything from important health matters to everyday interactions is even more prominent.

This is apparent in schools as well. According to Heine (2002), "[t]ests of Marshallese students entering schools in the U.S. often found many students to be two to four grades behind their peers in reading and language skills. Marshallese students in [Heine's] study confirmed that

reading skills, particularly vocabulary skills, writing and communication skills, particularly oral presentation skills are problematic areas for them” (p. 188). Putting students in ENL-specific courses may help, but Falgout (2012) found that most Marshallese students put in ENL programs never leave them, often hindering their means to take upper-level academic classes. A similar phenomenon will likely occur in Mercer County if left unchecked because all subjects are taught exclusively in English, resources are unavailable, and translators are relatively unavailable—one could imagine how difficult it would be to process what was being said, let alone learn and grapple with abstract ideas or domain-specific words expressed in English.

Finally, the language barriers are exacerbated by perceptions about language itself. According to Schwartz (2017), an educator whose work involves activism and environmental anthropology in the Marshall Islands and the United States, the Marshallese language is conceptualized differently than Americans view language: “[h]ow Americans appreciate text, as something we can take, break down, cite, and circulate, is not how Marshallese viewed words, and the sounds of the Marshallese language are related to land and lineage” (p. 108). This is important as sea levels rise, displacing more and more Marshall Islanders: “the language away from the islands will almost certainly go the way of other immigrant languages within a few generations” (Bender et al., 2010, p. 5). Outside of the context and customary practices the language was constructed in, the stakes of the language are even more important for Marshall Islanders in order to keep their unique language and culture alive.

In summary, Micronesians will likely face a myriad of issues upon arriving in the U.S. According to the most recent report from Empowering Pacific Islands Communities and Asian Americans Advancing Justice, as summarized by Nimmer (2017),

Pacific Islanders in the United States have higher-than-average rates of limited English proficiency and poverty, and lower-than-average rates of per-capita income and health insurance coverage, compared to other ethnic groups. Seventy-three percent of Pacific Islanders within the United States live in poverty, which is a higher percentage than any other ethnic group in the United States. Even compared to this broader group of Pacific Islanders, Marshallese have the highest unemployment rate and proportion of youth, and are less likely to have a high school diploma, GED, or bachelor's Degree. (p. 2)

Although this information should not lower teachers' high expectations for their Marshallese students, it is important for local schools to first understand the systematic root of the issues that Marshall Islanders may encounter in the U.S., employ best teaching practices, and help Marshallese families gain access to community resources whenever possible. In order to be culturally competent educators, local school staff should both understand the U.S. government's role in the origin and exacerbation of these issues and reflect on how these issues may affect Marshallese families' perspectives of the American education system as a whole.

Micronesian Pedagogy

When it comes to teaching Marshallese students, most studies have emerged due to research on educational policy but do not necessarily address the cultural or linguistic needs of learners (Buchstaller & Willson, 2018). In fact, there are virtually no published studies that address best practices for teaching Marshallese students, especially not in the context of the U.S. education system. Many U.S. schools are at a loss for how to serve this population; this is a problem when considering that the number of Marshall Islanders coming to the U.S. is continually rising. Heine (2002) addresses this in her dissertation: "U.S. teachers and school

administrators lack critical knowledge about this recent immigrant group and attempts to assist them to succeed in school are, at best, minimally effective” (p. 1). She adds, “there is virtually no information out there about how Marshallese students learn, what values and expectations they bring with them to school, and how these values and expectations are nurtured and promoted by families and support systems in school and in host U.S. communities” (2002, p. 3). This can make it difficult for teachers to accommodate for the learning needs of students and, in turn, for Marshallese students and parents to understand the expectations of the U.S. education system. Both of these statements address the continually growing need for schools and researchers to further study the unique needs of Micronesian students.

Aside from Heine’s publications, the only other English works on the topic have been doctoral dissertations published in the U.S., almost all focusing on Micronesian populations in Hawai’i in subjects outside of education. However, Raatoir (2017), a Micronesian researcher, examines the experiences of “successful” indigenous Marshallese students in American colleges. He found that “successful” Micronesian students worked for a greater common good; adjusted to a self-oriented version of success, even if it meant distancing themselves from their families and communities; learned the importance of attendance in U.S. schools; and discovered how to reshape cultural perceptions of respect, time, and role models. This dissertation, although discussing collegiate instead of secondary students, posits that in order for Micronesian students to be academically successful in the American schooling system, students may have to adjust to a more individualist, monochronic, Western mindset.

Furthermore, Nimmer (2017), a former principal of a Marshallese middle school, claims that “[u]nderstanding the critical importance of working for the benefit of family and community

would enable teachers to more accurately interpret their Marshallese students' choices, values, and priorities" (p. 30). She suggests using culture-based education to place Marshallese culture and concerns at the center of curriculum; utilizing the Marshallese language—*Kajin Majel*—as the medium of instruction; preventing shame while adjusting to Western ideology and language; and allowing students to learn in peer groups. While it is currently impractical for Mercer County schools to revise curriculum completely to this model, the pedagogical strategies such as scaffolding, modeling, hands-on learning, and visual aids described by Nimmer (2017) are valuable mainstream teaching strategies that may be especially helpful when helping Marshallese students transition to the American education system. Although there are other dissertations with adjacent topics, none have the specificity needed to address the issues occurring in Mercer County, but many point towards a need for cultural competency.

Not only in Mercer County but also across the U.S., schools are serving increasingly diverse student populations, intensifying the need for teachers to know how to work with students of different cultures, abilities, languages, and more (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). To serve these populations, teachers need to gain cultural competency. As defined by Cross et al. (1988), cultural competency requires a person or organization to recognize and incorporate "the importance of culture, the assessment of cross-cultural relations, vigilance towards the dynamics that result from cultural differences, the expansion of cultural knowledge, and the adaptation of services to meet culturally-unique needs" (p. 28). Essentially, educators must acknowledge students' cultures, their own cultures, and how these intersect in order to connect with students. If, instead of developing their cultural competency, educators begin to formulate misconceptions about student populations and grow comfortable in their lack of resources or interest in helping

immigrant children, the chances of those students struggling academically increase (Trueba & Bartolomé, 2000). Therefore, focusing on cultural competency can prevent both misconceptions and student failure due to rejection of diverse skills and ways of thinking that could be valuable to students and their peers alike (Nieto & Bode, 2008).

Bolstering their cultural competency is also important to building rapport with students from different backgrounds from their own. Curriculum and instructional practices that implement a student-centered approach have proven successful but require educators to truly learn about their students' backgrounds and needs: "teachers who comprehend and appreciate the different cultures of their students accept, validate and acknowledge the experiences, languages, and traditions of linguistically or culturally diverse families. This process of validation is essential for students' own development of not only a sense of belonging but also a realistic and positive self-concept" (Midobuche as cited in Heine, 2004). National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2010) agrees by saying that accomplished teachers of ENLS "demonstrate a deep interest in cultural and linguistic diversity and view their students as rich resources" in order to understand the richness and complexity of their students and advocate for their success (p. 12-13). For students to both learn and enjoy their learning, the students of educators who use a culturally aware approach while taking into account students' individual differences will be more likely to succeed academically, and arguably more importantly, to feel valued in their school and community.

This is especially important for students like the Marshall Islanders because for many immigrant groups, their time spent at school could be their only significant contact with their new society, as most immigrants opt to stay mostly within their own communities

(Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2000). Even within Mercer County schools, teachers noted that Marshallese students are far more likely to spend time together and less likely to approach their non-Marshallese peers. As explained by a local Marshallese woman, motivation to learn in such an unfamiliar environment is incredibly difficult, and as students struggle with acculturation and unfamiliar expectations, any interactions between educators and Marshallese students are even more important for making students feel welcome and succeed academically.

Linguistic Resources

While *Marshallese Reference Grammar* thoroughly documents the grammar and phonetics of the Marshallese language, the jargon and specificity make it inaccessible for those unfamiliar with the field of linguistics, making it impractical for most English teachers to use. However, no English resources could be found that compare the structure of *Kajin Maje!* and English, especially not with the needs of ENL students and their teachers in mind. Even when learning about the language, there are only a few English resources available; the Marshallese-English Online Dictionary, displayed on the *Marshallese dictionary and language tools* website, contains the most comprehensive written translation resource available. Most of what I have learned and will discuss in the following contrastive analysis has come from this website or from Peter Rudiak-Gold's guide, *Practical Marshallese* (2014). Other than these, resources about the Marshallese language written in English are very few. Buchstaller & Willson (2018) address this, claiming that the creation of English language resources would be useful for teachers that do not speak Marshallese. Therefore, the need for more resources and more accessible examples of how Marshallese operates structurally is evident.

This literature review provides a brief background of the issue at hand. By illustrating the lack of currently available resources for local teachers, the need for creation of such resources is essential for not only ensuring the future success of all Marshallese students but also guaranteeing that they receive the best education possible in our schools and communities.

Methodology

This research question was answered initially through peer-reviewed, published works based in Marshallese perspectives. Work from several publications and dissertations founded the basis of the resources, and culturally appropriate *bwebwenato* (storytelling) phone or virtual meetings with Marshallese community leaders were used to verify the ideas claimed in the research and add new depth to the resources created.

With regards to the language analysis, I use informal contrastive analysis, “a way of comparing languages in order to determine potential errors for the ultimate purpose of isolating what needs to be learned and what does not need to be learned in a second-language-learning situation” (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 96). Because the structures, sounds, and writings of languages can vary greatly, there is a tendency for ENL students to draw upon knowledge of a native language while learning another. Contrastive analysis recognizes that this will occur and seeks to make it easier for students to juxtapose elements from a language they are more familiar with (Lennon, 2008). Because these language are so different, knowing, for example, which of the over 20 pronoun combinations in *Kajin Majel* correlate to which pronouns in English would be far more effective when teaching than trying to explain the concept of a pronoun “from scratch.” Just as foreign language teachers tend to draw upon both a students’ native and target languages for explanation, the ability to draw upon a student’s first language to teach a target

language offers great benefits for a students' learning and also expands a teacher's available pedagogical strategies in the language acquisition process.

Findings

From the research I completed, verified and supplemented by the recommendations of local Marshallese leaders, the answer to the research question is twofold. First, educators need to understand how elements of the collectivist, age-stratified, polychronic Marshallese culture conflict with tenants of the American culture and how this conflict may play out in their classrooms. My main findings, based in the recommendations of Heine (2002; 2004), Nimmer (2017), and Raatoir (2017) and bolstered by local Marshall Islanders, include the following:

- Marshallese students may be used to shared problem-solving and decision-making and may be adverse to the individualistic academic environment commonly incorporated in American classrooms. Utilizing small-group work with rotated roles so that students can familiarize themselves with their peers and work collaboratively may help students feel more familiar with the environment.
- Respect for authority is often emphasized from a young age in the Marshallese culture. Students may have been taught to listen and remain silent unless spoken to directly by an adult; therefore, students might not feel comfortable volunteering for questions or asking for help when they need it. Building strong rapport with students and explicitly explaining classroom expectations may be the key to changing this: students need to not only understand if a teacher wants them to speak up in the classroom but also trust a teacher enough to.

- Due to the polychronic nature of the Marshallese culture, keeping strict schedules, times, and deadlines is not prioritized, meaning students may not see the need to arrive at classes or events precisely on time. Providing them with a clearly marked schedule or helping set them up with a planner may be helpful.
- In the Marshallese culture, familial relationships or obligations are seen as far more important than attendance at work or school, so families may need to be explained the value of consistent attendance.
- Marshallese students may not understand the purpose of homework, especially if there is limited support that can be given from parents, peer pressure, or fear of asking for help or clarification. Heine suggests using a reward system to provide additional motivation for doing homework.

These findings can be seen in the handout, *4 Things to Know When Working with Marshallese Students*, provided in Appendix A. These suggestions not only mirror the struggles local teachers reported when working with their Marshallese students but also reflect a need for teachers and students to build shared expectations about the American education system.

Furthermore, the handout contains some suggestions from a local Filipino educator who taught at two schools, one public and one private, in the Marshall Islands over the course of twelve years, for building rapport with students. These include learning a few Marshallese phrases to greet students as well as finding ways to incorporate students' cultures in the classroom such as including Marshallese and dual-language books in classrooms and libraries to encourage dual-language literacy.

Second, my findings indicated that educators, especially English teachers, need to understand the linguistic needs of their students and utilize best ENL teaching practices when working with Marshallese ENLs, drawing upon their understanding of the Marshallese language as often as they can. Through the process of contrastive analysis between the Marshallese language and English, I used the work of the Rudiak-Gold (2014), Bender et al. (2016), and *The Marshallese-English Online Dictionary* as well as the help of a bilingual Marshallese community member to note the following findings.

Marshallese follows a S-V-O typology, meaning that most sentences are organized similarly to English. However, in sentences that only contain a noun or pronoun and an adjective, there are no *to be* verbs, including *am*, *is*, or *are*. As a result, in some simple sentences, the verb is “left out” entirely. For example, in sentences that only contain a noun or pronoun and an adjective, there are no *to be* verbs, including *am*, *is*, or *are*. For example, in English, you would say, *She is kind*, whereas in Marshallese, you would say the equivalent of *She kind*. Additionally, in sentences like *They are happy* would be the equivalent of *They happy*. Instead of saying *I will be a doctor*, you would say, *I will doctor*. One exception is when talking about location. The word *pād* functions grammatically similarly to English *to be* verbs in sentences discussing whereabouts. For example, the sentence *I am in America* would be written as *Ij pād ilo Amedka*. Although students may struggle with why they need to use *to be* verbs in English, using the function of the word *pād* may help explain the concept to students. Overall, Marshallese ENL students will not only have to learn how to modify verbs instead of nouns or pronouns but also that every English sentence requires a verb to be complete.

In the newest orthology, Marshallese uses a modified Latin alphabet with the following letters: a ā b d e i j k l l̥ m m̥ n n̥ ñ o ō p r t u ū w. While many letters may look familiar, English has letters that English does not (c, f, g, h, q, s, b, y, x, z). Furthermore, there are many different spellings of the same words, as shown by inconsistent spellings of even common phrases between scholars, *The Marshallese-English Dictionary*, and local community members, so the consistency of the written system may present interesting challenges if a teacher decides to utilize elements of the Marshallese language while teaching English.

Like English, Marshallese contains both proper and common nouns, some of which may be composed of suffixes or affixes. Bender et al. (2016) offer the example words *dam* (forehead) and *jeman* (father). Whereas *jeman* can be divided into *jema-* (father) and *-n* (their), *dam* cannot be divided into two separate words. Marshallese nouns are not inherently count or noncount, however, which may cause confusion when explaining English articles.

Unlike English, Marshallese verbs are not conjugated and remain constant regardless of who or what is doing said action. Rather conjugating verbs, the Marshallese languages utilizes suffixes attached to pronoun roots; a specified ending is added to pronouns to specify tense, number, or person. For instance, the pronoun root meaning *he, she* or *it*, *E-*, is modified to present tense by adding a *-j* suffix—*Ej*—and modified to the future tense by adding a *-naaj* suffix—*Enaaj*. There are several differences between English and Marshallese pronouns, as explained by Rudiak-Gold (2004), that may confuse students. First, Marshallese pronouns express no gender: “speakers of Marshallese English tend to use male and female third person pronouns indistinguishably,” meaning *e-* can represent *he, she, or it*. Marshallese has an exclusive and inclusive *we*, meaning that there are different pronouns for *we* when including the

speaker. Explaining the split of *e-*, perhaps by using visual representations, may help students understand the pronoun split. Additionally, explaining that both we pronouns *je-* and *kōm-* are the same in English will clarify the difference with students.

There are also many phonetic differences between Marshallese and English, which could be especially difficult when similar-looking letters are used to symbolize very different sounds. First, *Kajin Majeļ* has several phonemes that English does not; for example, there are three different *l* phonemes and three *r* phonemes with different sounds dependent upon if sound resonates in the nose and which speech organs are used to produce the sound (Bender et al., 2016). Additionally, many of these phonemes have been described as being produced with “the tongue pulled back and raised at the back of the mouth, giving it a ‘darker’ sound” (Rudiak-Gould, 2004). There are also phonemes used in English that are not in *Kajin Majeļ*. For example, English has fricative phonemes such as the *f*, *v*, *sh*, *th*, and *v* sounds, and just as native English speaker would struggle to pronounce the unfamiliar sounds in *Kajin Majeļ*, these fricative phonemes may be especially difficult for native Marshallese speakers to produce, as they are not found in the language at all. To make it more complex, the letters in the Marshallese alphabet, despite looking similar, also can produce different sounds than that of the English alphabet, which could confuse ENL learners:

- In Marshallese, the letter *b* changes to more of a lighter *p* sound at the beginning of words. Similarly, the letter *p* is pronounced like a *b* unless it is at the beginning of a word or directly follows another *p*.
- The letter *d* makes a sound similar to a rolled Spanish *r* with the tongue directly behind the teeth. The letter *r* is also trilled.

- The letter *j* is placed in the mouth similarly to an English *t* and often makes more of a *s*, *sh*, or *ch* sound.
- The letter *t* turns to more of the sound of an English *d* when between two vowels.
- Only the *w*'s at the beginning of a word sound like the English *w*.

When working with developing ENL speakers, the differences between Marshallese pronunciation and the letters used in the new orthology to describe the sound system may be important to focus on with students. Reviewing the alphabet thoroughly and pointing out where pronunciation differs between letters, using specific words as examples, could help students understand these differences. Also, knowing that fricatives do not exist in Marshallese and may require extra addition will be important for teachers working with new speakers. In a second handout in Appendix C, *Working with Marshallese ENLs*, I highlight these differences and provide recommendations for English teachers, starting with reviewing the alphabet thoroughly and pointing out where pronunciation differs between letters while using specific words as examples. I also suggest helping students focus on the fricatives that do not exist in Kajin Majel and practicing verb conjugations with students.

Overall, these findings and the resources inform the field of education, especially educators in Mercer County, by providing them easier access to insight on their Marshallese students. By synthesizing and verifying research about how to help Marshallese students, local teachers will hopefully walk away with a better understanding of their Marshallese students' needs. Moreover, the contrastive analysis provides a resource that enables English teachers to draw upon Marshallese words to explain English concepts; through learning about the structure of Marshallese, they will be better informed on English areas of focus for ENLs.

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Appendix A

4 Things to Know when Working with Marshallese Students

All suggestions offered are supported by research and the recommendations of Marshallese community members. However, because all students are unique, not all of the ideas may apply or be equally effective with all Marshallese students. This is not intended to stereotype Marshallese students but to rather provide baseline recommendations that may help you build rapport with your students and construct a positive, comfortable learning environment.

1. These students will likely be underprivileged, partially because of the United States government's policies towards the Marshall Islands.

From 1946 to 1958, [the U.S. government conducted 67 confidential nuclear tests on the Bikini and Enewetak atolls](#), 33 of which had greater yields than the largest tests at the U.S.'s own test site. These tests included the Bravo shot, the largest thermonuclear weapon ever tested by the U.S., which was the equivalent of more than one-thousand Hiroshima-sized bombs. Ultimately, the program displaced populations without adequate health care and caused long-lasting health problems that still affect the Marshall Islands today.

Under the [Compact of Free Association treaties](#), Marshall Islanders can live and work indefinitely in the U.S. without a visa but cannot receive most forms of federal assistance, including Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security, despite paying taxes. Hence, when many Marshall Islanders move to the U.S. seeking medical attention for common health indicators such as diabetes, cancers, thyroid tumors, tuberculosis, leprosy, and depression, they may not have access to health insurance needed to cover the cost of such treatments. This has created a serious predicament and a cycle of poverty: the medical care in the Marshall Islands is inexpensive but not specialized or accessible enough to respond to many serious, long-term medical issues, yet no medical coverage can be applied for within the U.S. where that specialized needed medical care is available.

Upon moving to the United States, Islanders will likely face a multitude of other challenges as well. According to a [recent report](#), Pacific Islanders in the United States have higher-than-average rates of limited English proficiency and poverty and lower-than-average rates of per-capita income and health insurance coverage compared to other ethnic groups. 73% of Pacific Islanders within the United States live in poverty, which is a higher percentage than any other ethnic group in the United States. Even compared to other demographics of Pacific Islanders, Marshall Islanders have the highest unemployment rate and are less likely to have a high school diploma, GED, or bachelor's degree. Therefore, it is vital to support your Marshallese students however you can, maintain high expectations for their learning, and offer plenty of praise.

Further reading: [5 Concrete Ways to Help Students Living in Poverty](#)

[The National Education Association's *Teaching Children from Poverty and Trauma*](#)
[National Youth-At Risk Journal's "Supporting Students Living Below the Poverty Line"](#)
Bravo for the Marshallese: Regaining Control in a Post-Nuclear, Post-Colonial World

2. The Marshallese culture is very different from Western culture, which could create barriers in your classroom.

As put forth by Hilda Heine, formal Marshallese teachers and Secretary of Education for the Marshall Islands, here are some cultural differences that may come into play in an American classroom:

- The Marshallese culture and school system relies more on shared problem-solving and decision-making than the United States' individualistic culture. Using small, cooperative groups with rotating roles and partners often so the student can get to know everyone in the class and work collaboratively may help students feel more familiar with the environment and their peers. Also, be sure to explain how students can avoid cheating and plagiarism.
- The Marshallese culture is more hierarchical than in the U.S., especially as it pertains to age. Respect for elders and authority is emphasized from a young age. Students may have been taught to listen and be quiet unless spoken to directly by an adult; therefore, students might not feel comfortable volunteering for questions or asking for help when they need it. Building rapport with students and explaining expectations for in-class participation may be especially helpful—just do not be angry if your Marshallese students avoid speaking up during class.
- The Marshallese culture is a [polychronic culture](#), whereas the American culture is monochronic. While we might see time as an essential commodity and prefer focusing on one task at a time, keeping strict track of time and schedules is not as highly prioritized in Micronesian countries. Unless specified otherwise, students may not see the need to arrive at classes or events on time. Helping them establish a set schedule or even setting them up with a planner to increase their temporal awareness may be helpful. Additionally, emphasize the importance of regular attendance.
- Marshallese families and communities tend to be close and very important in students' lives. Working to establish positive relationships with families, especially with parents, and involving them as much as possible can help you build rapport with students. If you can involve community members or utilize projects aimed at community improvement, students may be more motivated to participate in class.

As recommended by an interviewee who taught in the Marshall Islands for over a decade, learn a few basic phrases to speak with students as well as how to pronounce students' names correctly. Even just learning to greet students with *iakwe* will help them feel more welcome. Additionally, she recommended to include students' cultures in the classroom so that students feel valued and think, "There's a part of me in this classroom." One way she suggests to do this is by including Marshallese and dual-language books in classrooms and libraries to encourage literacy in both languages. Because music is a huge part of their culture too, if you can involve music, you may also capture students' attention.

Further reading: [Every Culture's "Culture of the Marshall Islands"](#)
[Marshall Islands Story Project](#)

Pacific Resources for Teaching and Learning's *Culturally Responsive Schools for Micronesian Immigrant Students*

3. Your students may not understand expectations of the American education system that we assume are second-nature.

Although the Marshall Islands have a formal education system, it does not function as strictly as the American education system. Therefore, students may not fully understand the expectations of the American schools, especially attendance, homework, and classroom participation. For homework especially, Marshallese students may not understand the purpose of homework, especially if there is limited support that can be given from parents, peer pressure, or fear of asking for help or clarification. The sooner you can explain—and more importantly, *rationalize*—your classroom procedures and expectations to students and their parents, the better. If there is a bilingual community member who would be willing to act as a translator, it would be wise to enlist their help for this process.

4. Your students may have challenging language barriers—the Marshallese language is very different from English.

Marshall Islanders that are new to the States will likely have some familiarity but likely not complete verbal and written proficiency in English. According to Hilda Heine, while English is taught in Marshallese schools, English is almost never the predominant language used at home. Therefore, students' English language abilities are frequently below grade level, and many students test two to four grades behind their peers in reading and language skills upon entering the U.S. Reading—particularly vocabulary—writing, and communication—particularly oral presentation skills—have been noted as problematic areas. Overall, students may be nervous to speak in English in front of their peers and will likely benefit from supplementary English instruction and accommodations. Providing additional scaffolding for difficult reading, writing, and communication tasks and focusing on content then grammar when grading may help students feel more comfortable as they develop their English skills in your class. If you are especially invested in this topic or have specialized in working with ENL students, drawing upon concepts in Marshallese to explain English concepts may be extremely helpful.

Also, after a bit of practice, learning a few basic phrases to utilize with your Marshallese students may show them that you acknowledge their language and culture and bring a smile to their faces! To hear the pronunciation of these words, be sure to check out [this channel](#)!

EVERYDAY PHRASES

ENGLISH WORD OR PHRASE	MARSHALLESE EQUIVALENT	PRONUNCIATION
Hello. / Goodbye.	Iakwe.	[yah-kwe]

How are you?	Emman mour?	[em-men more]
I'm good.	Emman. / Emon.	[em-men]
I'm so-so.	Ebwe.	[ee-bway]
I'm not doing well.	Enana. / Nana.	[ee-nah-nah]
You're welcome.	Kin jouj.	[keen juwsh]
Thank you very much.	Komool tata.	[kom-ol ta-da]
Yes.	Aet.	[I-it]
No.	Jab.	[tjab]
I don't know.	I jaje.	[E ya-hee]
I understand.	I melele.	[E mel-ay-ay]
I don't understand.	I jela.	[E hel-ay]
Wait.	Kottar.	[ka-tar]
Do you understand?	Kwo melele ke?	[kwo meh-lay-lay a-gay]
I understand.	I melele.	[ee meh-lay-lay]

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

ENGLISH WORD OR PHRASE	MARSHALLESE EQUIVALENT	PRONUNCIATION
Are you hungry?	Kwo kwule ke?	[Kwo kwu-lay a-gay?]
Did you eat?	Kwaar mona ke?	[Kwo moh-na a-gay?]
Are you tired?	Kwo muk ke?	[Kwo mook a-gay?]
Are you thirsty?	Kwo maro ke?	[Kwo ma-ro a-gay?]

Feel free to use the following resources to learn more about particular language struggles your Marshallese ENLs may have and access some recommendations regarding those.

Appendix B

Working with Marshallese-Speaking Students

Below, you will find some sentence-level issues that Marshallese speakers may have in writing.

Possible Issues	Reason for Misuse	Correction	Explanation
Missing verbs The argument very strong.	Marshallese does not include verbs in many simple sentences.	<i>The argument is very strong.</i>	- In English, every sentence requires a verb, even sentences that just include an adjective.
No inflectional markers of tense <i>Yesterday I deliver a presentation to my class</i>	Marshallese does not conjugate verbs and does not contain many of the verb cases used in English	<i>Yesterday, I delivered a presentation to my class.</i>	- We need to conjugate the verb to indicate tense. - There are three times: present, past, and future. They each have a set of simple, perfect, and progressive aspects, forming 12 different tenses (e.g. present simple, past simple, future simple). - Provide an example that shows how different the meaning of each tense is. For example, <i>I am walking to class</i> . The present progressive implies the speaker is currently doing that action. <i>I walk to class</i> . The present simple tense implies that the speaker does this usually, or in general. - If the student is conjugating irregular verbs incorrectly—for example, using <i>hurted</i> instead of <i>hurt</i> — let them know that the pattern they used is correct generally, but show them the correct conjugation for that particular verb.
Gendered nouns <i>I have to carry this book to class, but she is very heavy.</i>	The Marshallese pronoun for <i>he</i> , <i>she</i> and <i>it</i> is the same word.	<i>I have to carry this book to class, but it is very heavy.</i>	- Nouns referring to inanimate objects do not take feminine or masculine gender in English. We use the pronoun <i>it</i> to refer to them.

<p>Missing or misused articles <i>Essay contained the credible sources.</i></p>	<p>Articles are not used in the same way in Marshallese as they are in English; Marshallese has no equivalent of a definite article.</p>	<p><i>The essay contained credible sources.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If a noun is singular and countable, it takes an article. - Abstract nouns that represent ideas or emotions usually do not take articles. - Use “the” when referring to an object that is known and specific. Use “a/an” when referring to a general or unknown object.
<p>No “to have” or “to be” verb <i>There is not my pencil.</i></p>	<p>There is no equivalent for the verbs “to have” or “to be” in Marshallese; instead, students would say the equivalent of <i>there is my pencil</i> or <i>I will doctor</i>.</p>	<p><i>I do not have a pencil.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We use “to have” as an auxiliary verb to show possession or ownership (I have a car) or show performance of some actions (I have breakfast). -Passing around an object during class and having students describe who “has” the object may be a useful visual, hands-on way to demonstrate this verb. -The verb “to have” most commonly to talk about names, ages, feeling, nationalities, and professions, especially when talking in the present tense. https://lingokids.com/english-for-kids/verb-to-have https://lingokids.com/english-for-kids/verb-to-be
<p>Incorrectly formed possessive <i>Author the paper presents a sound argument.</i></p>	<p>In Marshallese, there are no special grammatical constructions to indicate possessive case.</p>	<p><i>The paper’s author presents a sound argument.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In English, to show that something belongs to someone, the ‘of’-construction can be used. Another way to form a possessive is by adding an apostrophe + s to the main noun in the phrase.
<p>Confused prepositions <i>I approve on this idea.</i></p>	<p>In general, prepositions are very challenging for ESL learners, no matter what their first language is. No two languages have the same set of prepositions. This applies to Marshallese as well.</p>	<p><i>I approve of this idea.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In some cases, it is possible to explain prepositions in terms of their lexical meaning. For example, you could demonstrate the difference between <i>talk to him</i> vs <i>talk about him</i> or <i>we sit on the table</i> vs <i>we sit at the table</i>. Sometimes, you can even create a drawing to illustrate the difference. - However, in most cases, the use of prepositions is impossible to explain. Some nouns, verbs, and adjectives are just followed by specific prepositions

			<p>(e.g. <i>approve of, decide on, wait for</i>) as fixed phrases. Students have to memorize these collocations as chunks.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Do not hesitate to tell the student which preposition to use if you see that the use cannot be explained in terms of meaning. You can say: “Here we would write X” or “This verb is followed by X in English.”- When students want to use a verb after a preposition, the verb takes the form of gerund (verb+-ing). For example: <i>We agreed on finding a solution.</i>
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Appendix C

Working with Marshallese ENLs

While these notes will not necessarily be beneficial to all Marshallese students, the following notes point out some details regarding the Marshallese language as well as some concepts students might especially struggle with and tips to address them. Feel free to provide the following charts to your Marshallese students to show them the English equivalents of Marshallese words!

First, I think it is important to note that not all of these possible issues should be focused on at once, and not all are at an equal pedestal. For instance, expanding students' vocabulary and teaching the conjugation of important verbs should come far before teaching English articles, which barely impact the overall meaning of a message. You might consider the following questions first:

- What English concepts does your student need to understand to be successful academically?
- What does your student want to know about English or want to accomplish using English?
- How much experience—or what experiences—does your student have with English?
- Is your student familiar with grammatical terminology?

Typology

Like English, Marshallese follows an S-V-O typology, meaning that most sentences are organized with the subject first, followed by the verb, then a direct object. The most important exception to this rule is with simple sentences. In Marshallese sentences that only contain a noun or pronoun and an adjective, there are no *to be* verbs, including *am*, *is*, or *are*. For example, in English, you would say, *She is kind*, whereas in Marshallese, you would say the equivalent of *She kind*. Additionally, in sentences like *They are happy* would be the equivalent of *They happy*. Instead of saying *I will be a doctor*, you would say, *I will doctor*.

“She will be a student.” *Enaaj rijikuu!*
E naaj rijikuu!

One exception to this is when talking about location. The word *pād* functions similarly to English *to be* verbs in sentences discussing whereabouts. For example, the sentence *I am in America* would be written as *Ij pād ilo Amedka*. [Although students may struggle with understanding why they need to use *to be* verbs in English, using the concept of the word *pād*, which functions grammatically similar to a *to be* verb, may help explain the concept to students. Students will need to learn that every English sentence requires a verb to be considered grammatically complete, so you may see many fragments until this concept is fully grasped by students.](#)

Alphabet

Marshallese uses the same Latin alphabet as English, but the letters *c*, *f*, *g*, *h*, *q*, *s*, *x*, *y*, and *z* are not included. Their alphabet includes the following letters: a ā b d e i j k l | m n ŋ ñ o q ō p r t u ū w. If you are helping students on a basic level, you may be able to draw upon their understanding of these letters for writing, but it is important to note that there are many different spellings of the same words, as shown by inconsistent spellings of even common phrases between scholars, *The Marshallese-English*

Dictionary, and local community members. Therefore, the consistency of the written system may present interesting challenges if a teacher decides to utilize elements of the Marshallese language while teaching English.

Pronouns and Declension

Instead of modifying verbs, Marshallese adds specific prefixes and affixes to pronouns. For instance, the pronoun root *E-* means *he, she, or it*; to show the action will happen in the future, you would add *-naaj*, making the word *Enaaj*. Here is a basic synopsis of all of the Marshallese pronouns with their English equivalents, which can be used to explain English pronouns and even verb modification:

Pronoun	Root	Present Tense (-j)	Past Tense (-ar)	Future Tense (-naaj)
I	I-	Ij	Iaar	Inaaj
You	Kwo- Ko-	Kwoj	Kwaar	Kōnaaj
He/She/It	E-	Ej	Eaar	Enaaj
Inclusive We	Je-	Jej	Jaar	Jenaaj
Exclusive We	Kōm-	Kōmij	Kōmar	Kōminaaj
You (plural)	Koᵾ-	Koᵾij	Koᵾar	Koᵾinaaj
They	Re- Rō-	Rej	Raar	Rōnaaj

Rudiak-Gold (2014).

As you can see, Marshallese pronouns are not gendered, meaning *E-* can represent *he, she, or it*. Although this will likely not be a problem, [the concept of gendered pronouns may need to be explicitly explained to students—using visual representations to explain this will be especially helpful.](#)

Marshallese also has an exclusive and inclusive *we*, meaning that there are different pronouns for *we* when including the speaker. For instance, if you would say, *You and I are swimming*, you would use the pronoun *je*, whereas if you said, *My friend and I are swimming*, you would use the pronoun *kōm*. [Explaining the split of *e-*, perhaps by using visual representations, will help students understand the pronoun split. Additionally, explaining that both *je-* and *kōm-* are the same in English will clarify the difference with students.](#)

Verbs

In Marshallese, verbs are not conjugated and remain constant regardless of who or what is completing the action of the sentence as well as when the action was completed. The verb remains the same, as seen with the verb *mejeje*—to understand—in the sentence below:

“I understand.”	<i>Ij mejeje.</i>
“You understand.”	<i>Kwō mejeje.</i>
“He/she/it understands.”	<i>E mejeje.</i>
“I understood.”	<i>Iaar mejeje.</i>
“You understood.”	<i>Kwaar mejeje.</i>
“He/she/it understood.”	<i>Eaar mejeje.</i>

As with many ENL students, Marshallese ENLs will need to learn how to modify verbs instead of nouns or pronouns, especially irregular verbs.

Nouns

Marshallese nouns are not inherently “count” or “noncount” like English nouns. Furthermore, Marshallese nouns are not regularly pluralized, meaning that Marshallese students may be prone to leaving plural markers off of plural nouns or hypercorrecting plural markers.

Teaching Ideas: <https://teflhandbook.com/efl-esl-lesson-plans/a1-upper/teaching-plurals/>

Articles

Marshallese does not use articles (*a, an, the*) in the same way that English does, and the articles come after the word they are modifying rather than before. Marshallese does have three words that function like articles, however: *eo, ro, and ko*. *Ro* is used with human nouns, whereas *ko* is used with nonhuman nouns; both come after the noun they are used to describe.

The office	<i>wōpij eo</i>
The child	<i>ajri ro</i>
The dog	<i>kidu ko</i>

Once students master other concepts, students may need to be explicitly taught the rules for using English articles. As a native English speaker, it may be difficult to explain, but using an article chart like the following may be helpful: <https://blog.esllibrary.com/2016/02/11/teaching-articles-a-an-and-the/>. Keep in mind that while we tend to harshly judge misuse of articles, it will likely take much practice to help students remember which article to use where, especially because Marshallese nouns are not innately “count” or “noncount” like English nouns.

Teaching Ideas: <https://www.speechandlanguagekids.com/teaching-articles/>
<https://www.off2class.com/how-to-teach-articles-esl-students-2/>

Object Pronouns

Just like in English, Marshallese object pronouns (*me, you, him, her*; etc.) change when they come after the verb as opposed to before it. [The Marshallese object pronouns can be found below and drawn upon to explain their English counterparts.](#)

Object Pronoun	Root		Object Pronoun	Root
Me	Eō		Me	Ña
You	Eok		You	Kwe
Him/Her/It	E		Him/Her/It	E
Inclusive Us	Kōj		Inclusive Us	Kōj
Exclusive Us	Kōm *Kōmmen		Exclusive Us	Kōm- *Kōmmen
You (plural)	Kom- *Kōmi		You (plural)	Kom *Kōmi
Them	Er (humans) I (non-humans)		Them	Er

Rudiak-Gold (2014).

Tenses and Tense Markers

First, it is important to understand that the Marshallese language is more contextually based than English. Low-proficiency ENLs may rely far more on contextual information rather than explicit grammar “rules” to convey messages.

Marshallese has no Present, Past, or Future Continuous Tenses to discuss action happening now or action happening in the future. “*I eat*” and “*I am eating*” are said the same, and so are “*He ate*” and “*He was eating*” because Marshallese does not use *am*, *are*, and *is*. Students may also mix different verb tenses such as saying “*We eat*” instead of “*We are eating*.” While this is not an issue that needs to be immediately addressed, after learning how to use *am*, *are*, and *is*, more advanced students may need to be taught when and how to use these tense markers.

Explanation: https://www.englishclub.com/grammar/verb-tenses_present-continuous.htm

Teaching Ideas: <https://www.thoughtco.com/how-to-teach-present-continuous-1212112>

<https://games4esl.com/lesson-plans/present-continuous-tense/>

Marshallese speakers may also struggle with consistently conjugating verbs (preverbal tense- mood- aspect marking) throughout a sentence because the Marshallese language relies more on temporal adverbs or context to tell when something an action is occurring. For instance, if English was structured directly like Marshallese, “*I went to class, and I said _____*” would be structured as “*I went to the office, and I say _____.*”

I (Past)	go	to	class	the	and	I say-
<i>Iaar</i>	<i>etal</i>	<i>ñan</i>	<i>kilaj</i>	<i>ko</i>	<i>im</i>	<i>iba-</i>

Similarly, if English was structured directly like Marshallese, “*We took all of the classes*” would be structured as “*All of the classes I was took.*”

All	class	the	we (past)	took.
<i>Aolep</i>	<i>kilaaj</i>	<i>ko</i>	<i>kōmaar</i>	<i>bōki.</i>

Marshallese also has specific words for expressing when a task is complete (*eṃōj*) versus not yet finished (*ejañin*), somewhat like the word “already” in English. Students may find it confusing to still conjugate verbs when they have already included a time marker such as when saying “*After we have finished, we will eat.*” or when asking, “*Do you already have this recipe?*”

After	finish,	eat.		
<i>Ḷak</i>	<i>ṃōj</i>	<i>ṃōñā.</i>		
It (finished)	your	take it	recipe	this
<i>Eṃōj</i>	<i>aṃ</i>	<i>bōke</i>	<i>recipe</i>	<i>e ke?</i>

Examples like these could be used to juxtapose tense markers and word order between Marshallese and English. For more examples like this, see Buchstaller & Willson (2018).

Phonology

There are several sounds used in English that are not used at all in Marshallese, including fricative phonemes such as *f*, *v*, *sh*, *th*, and *ʋ* that are produced by making a hissing-like sound. [These sounds may be especially difficult for native Marshallese speakers to produce and should be practiced repeatedly until students can comfortably replicate the sounds on their own.](#)

Something very important to keep in mind is that the letters in the Marshallese alphabet, despite looking similar, can produce different sounds than that of the English alphabet.

- In Marshallese, the letter *b* changes to more of a lighter *p* sound at the beginning of words. Similarly, the letter *p* is pronounced like a *b* unless it is at the beginning of a word or directly follows another *p*.
- The letter *d* makes a sound similar to a rolled Spanish *r* with the tongue directly behind the teeth. The letter *r* is also trilled.
- The letter *j* is placed in the mouth similarly to an English *t* and often makes more of a *s*, *sh*, or *ch* sound.
- The letter *t* turns to more of the sound of an English *d* when between two vowels.
- Only the *w*'s at the beginning of a word sound like the English *w*.

[Reviewing the alphabet thoroughly and pointing out where pronunciation differs between letters, using specific words as examples, could help students understand these differences.](#) Beginner-level ENLs may struggle with distinguishing between American and Marshallese pronunciation of letters, so overall, [stressing the basics of phonetics and spelling may be especially helpful to review with struggling students.](#) Using the International Phonetic Alphabet system and tools such as the [Color Vowel Chart](#) may be helpful for helping students understand vowel placement.