

Learning Yapese in Yap

*Jean Kirschenmann**

Hawai'i Pacific University, USA

When I look back to my high school and university years, I am still amazed that I learned a language other than English and then became a language teacher, not to mention a language teacher educator. It is no exaggeration to say that learning Yapese, a language spoken by only 7000 people, changed my life and shaped my career.

My father grew up in a small German-speaking town in South Dakota. He learned English at school, but German was his home language until he went away to college. My mother did not speak German, so, like many 2nd and 3rd generation Americans, my sisters and I seldom heard and never used our heritage language. We all chose German as our required foreign language in high school, but I did not do well. In my 9th grade year, my teacher emphasized vocabulary building and spoken communication skills. It was great fun. The next year, in a different school, I was placed in a second-year class where my teacher employed a grammar-translation approach. Since I had missed his foundation course, I was lost. My father tried to help, but he had never studied German grammar formally and spoke a non-standard dialect besides. He felt lost, too. At the time, I did not understand why I was so far behind my peers and why my father was unable to help. I was delighted to learn that I could complete a double major in elementary education and secondary math education without needing more language study—something I find embarrassing today—because I knew I would fail.

As I neared my university graduation in 1974, I imagined myself becoming a math teacher in rural North Dakota except that something inside urged me to see a bit of the world first. My family had no money for international travel, so I needed to find another way to get abroad. That led me to the Peace Corps. If I were accepted, I would have a ticket, a (volunteer) job, and a two-year adventure. As it turned out, I was accepted, as an elementary school teacher on the tiny island of Yap in what was then known, officially, as the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, and commonly, as Micronesia. Fortunately for me, Peace Corps made clear that volunteers could be successful even if they did not excel at language learning.

Pre-service training in Peace Corps consists of language, workplace, and cross-cultural training. How and where training occurs has varied over the years, but my cohort trained on the campus of Yap High School during the summer break. We studied and slept on concrete floors in sweltering tin-roofed classrooms, eyes watering in the ever-present haze of mosquito coils. Adjusting to tough living conditions like these, however, did not frighten me nearly as much as



Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs
CC BY-NC-ND

Kirschenmann, J. (2016). Learning Yapese in Yap. *Hawaii Pacific University TESOL Working Paper Series 14*, 125-129.

Website: <http://www.hpu.edu>.

*Email: jkirchenmann@hpu.edu. Address: 1188 Fort Street Mall, Honolulu, HI 96813, USA.

language study did. Since Yapese is a largely oral language, we had no printed study materials—no dictionary, no phrase book, and no written texts. That alone was enough to make some volunteers, including me, very nervous. How was it possible, we wondered, to study a language without a book? Somehow, three months later, we were all deemed prepared to move into remote villages to teach children and live with host families who spoke no English.

We took three two-hour Yapese classes a day—Monday through Friday, morning, afternoon, and evening, with three different approaches and a team of rotating teachers, all Yapese public school teachers. The morning classes were intense. Small groups of 3-5 volunteers sat around a table with one of the instructors. We were drenched in sweat from the tropical heat and the pressure of concentration. Typically, the teacher modeled new Yapese expressions only two or three times using Cuisenaire rods, body language, and everyday items from the environment to help us visualize the meaning before indicating that it was our turn to use those expressions and manipulate the rods. While the teachers clearly understood questions we asked in English, they resisted answering them. Instead, they used the rods to show us, that we were confusing *take* and *give*, for example. We were largely on our own, struggling to say “take a red rod,” “give me three blue rods,” or “the betel nuts are in the basket.” If we got stuck, they might point to the person who was closest, use their fingers to indicate we had missed a syllable, and, at last resort, model the expression one last time.

At the end of Week 2, our instructor placed a box of matches on the table in front of us and said, *Mog e thin* (“Say something about it.”) It took us a few moments, but then we realized we could name the colors on the package, move the box around the room describing where it was, count the matchsticks inside, tell each other to take, give, and put matches in various places, and so on. We were all amazed at how much we could say, in Yapese, about that little box of sticks.

I remember fewer specific details about the afternoon class, possibly because, despite the lack of traditional language teaching texts and materials, it was less demanding. It resembled our previous language classes; we could ask questions in English, and the teachers used some, but not much, English in responding to them. We often asked questions of clarification about the morning lesson—the difference between X and Y and the pronunciation of words and phrases that we had heard only a few times in the morning. We wanted to take notes, but this was difficult. Yapese did not have a widely-accepted orthography which meant that our teachers were reluctant to spell for us, and besides, theirs was a largely oral society anyway. They did agree on one form of notation that was a mystery to all of us—a consonant followed an apostrophe as in *t'uf* contrasted with *tuf*, for example. The specially marked consonant was uttered with more force than its plain form. This was one of my first lessons in phonetics. Here, I was also introduced to syntax (VSO word order), morphology (complex possessive suffixes), sociolinguistics (only 7000 speakers but three dialects), and all the other subfields of linguistics although I was years away from realizing it or having the vocabulary to discuss it. Our teachers tended to respond to our questions with examples and patterns of use rather than explanations. In retrospect, I realize they also did not have formal training in or vocabulary for linguistic phenomena, but they were keen observers of language use in both English and Yapese.

Our evening lessons were individualized tutorials. We had to come prepared with a clear objective, something specific that we wanted to be able to say or do using Yapese. We were paired with one of our teachers or an in-service volunteer who acted as our tutor. One evening, for

example, I told my tutor that I felt like I could make many simple sentences, but they sounded like baby talk. I wanted to know how I could connect people, actions, or sentences. I didn't have the vocabulary to say that I wanted to learn about coordination and subordination in Yapese, but my tutor understood what I meant and I felt much more grown up as a Yapese speaker after that lesson. Review, practice, and consolidation of our morning and afternoon lessons were also an important part of our evening tutorials. At first, it was a bit difficult to articulate good objectives, but gradually we began to see how valuable our one-on-one tutorials were. We often spent break times, teaching each other what we had learned as individuals in these evening lessons.

While I had survival level Yapese when I moved into the village, I was still a beginner. My host family consisted of two brothers, their wives, seven children (aged two to twenty-two), and an elderly "aunty" who was unrelated but kindly looked after by the family. I typically rose early, walked a mile to the village school where I worked, and returned about 5:00 p.m. For the next five hours, I was immersed in spoken Yapese. During those afternoon and evening hours, life centered around food preparation, eating, tending children, playing *hanafuda* (a popular card game imported during the Japanese colonial era), and, of course, talking. When they weren't talking, my family was listening to the radio, particularly after dark when the limited light from a kerosene lamp made other activities difficult.

At first, I could only silently respond to requests and commands like *grate the coconut*, *feed the pig*, *light the lamp*, *give the betel nut to aunty*, and *hold the baby*. However, given my previous experience, I felt a huge sense of satisfaction with each successful event. Soon I was able to respond to requests and even make my own. Gradually, as my listening comprehension grew, I learned to notice the structure of various forms of discourse that made up those evening conversations and radio broadcasts. From listening to my family, I learned the sentence frames and verb forms I needed to summarize daily activities, give advice, and repeat gossip. From the radio, I learned how Yapese stories, riddles, and news reports are constructed. On Saturdays, I accompanied the adult women to their chores in the taro patch, dryland gardens, and roadside cleaning, working alongside them but mostly listening. On Sundays, village life revolved around long Catholic masses and village meetings afterward—more opportunities for listening to fixed expressions in various social settings.

Gradually I developed the courage to speak. In the early mornings, as I walked alone to school, I rehearsed expressions I had learned the evening before, visualizing who had said what to whom, in what context, and with what posture or body language. This helped me recall vocabulary, structure, and intonation. Then, during recess, I tried to use these new expressions with my students. They were amused but patient with me. About half way into my first year, during a roadside cleaning day, my four-year-old host brother asked me in a voice loud enough for the whole village to hear, "Jean, why are you pulling up sweet potato vines?" Everyone howled, and I was mortified, but only briefly because I was able to reply, "Maybe I can't recognize useful plants from weeds yet, but I did understand your question!" At the one year mark, I took a two-week vacation to Japan where I felt lost all over again. It was wonderful to observe that returning to Yap and using Yapese felt like coming home.

During the second year, my comprehension, vocabulary, and confidence grew. I was able to do errands independently without having to take a sibling along as language backup. There were still ups and downs, however. Once, my host mother asked me what a fellow teacher had

said about a particular event. I was pleased that I could respond without hesitation using my own words, but she was not. She wanted me to report the speaker's exact words. At the time, I wondered whether she did not quite trust my command of the language or whether, because it was an oral society, quoted speech was more important than reported speech. Perhaps both were at play. In any case, I learned the structure for introducing a quote that very day, and I listened much more carefully for exact words in situations that I thought she might ask me about!

When my two-year Peace Corps commitment was near its end, I felt that I was on the verge of becoming fluent and did not want to miss out on that possibility. I was fortunate to be offered a two-year contract with the local Department of Education (DOE) to develop Yapese language teaching materials. At the time, I did not fully understand why there were few Yapese language materials in print when I had arrived and why two years later, I could be paid to help produce them. All I knew was that I could now support myself doing something I loved.

Working for the DOE meant I had to move out of the village and into the district center. My host family sent two high school-aged sons to stay with me so that they would be closer to high school and, I suspect, so that they could keep an eye on me. I soon realized how valuable their presence was for maintaining my everyday spoken Yapese since I had given up all those evening hours with family. For the next two years, I worked on projects related to promoting bilingual literacy skills for middle school students in both Yapese and English. Yapese writers and illustrators created place-based materials ranging from myths and legends to ethnobotany and geography. I wrote activities designed for teachers using the materials. In order to write suitable materials, I needed to read and fully understand the texts. Thus, doing my job meant continuing to build my Yapese language skills. It was wonderful. It also meant that I came in more frequent contact with speakers of Yapese outside "my" village. One day, I met a new colleague who laughed when we were introduced. Of course, I was used to people laughing at my language goofs, but this time was different. She was laughing because my speech told her where I was from, in Yapese terms. She saw me, not as a foreign speaker of Yapese but as a speaker of a particular regional variety. By the time my contract had ended, I knew I wanted to build a career around literacy or language teaching. I began to apply to graduate schools certain that my adventure with Yapese was coming to an end.

In 1979, I enrolled in the M.A. program known today as Second Language Studies at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa. Immediately, I began to learn vocabulary to describe the methods I had experienced like *Silent Way* and *Total Physical Response*, sounds of Yapese like *ejectives* and *word initial eng*, and phenomena experienced by language learners around the world like *immersion* and *silent period*. Every day brought vivid new connections to my language learner experience. It was not long before I also learned that UH had programs dedicated to promoting bilingual education for the American affiliated islands of Micronesia. A semester later, I had a federally funded teaching assistantship to help Micronesian teachers, like my former colleagues, who were studying linguistics, bilingual education, and materials development at UH. I could not believe my good fortune—to be in Hawaii and (modestly) paid to continue studying and using Yapese for a few more years.

It is now more than 40 years since I became a student of Yapese and began my career teaching both English and language teacher education courses. In retrospect, I see that the training I received in that summer of 1974 would have met expectations for a well-balanced

language curriculum as described by Nation (1996) over twenty years later (and still promulgated today). In addition, it addressed individual differences, activated multiple intelligences, utilized learning strategy instruction, incorporated student-centered instruction, and was mindful of the cultural context where we were living and working. At present, my contacts with Yapese are infrequent and active vocabulary is fading. I have never been as successful with a new language as I was with Yapese. (Of course, I have never invested the same amount of time in them either.) Learning Yapese changed my life, guided me to a career, and informed my life's work. I silently, gratefully reflect on this in nearly every encounter I have with language learners and language teachers, hoping that I might, in some small way, contribute to their adventure with language as so many good people have contributed to mine.

Reference

Nation, P. (1996). The four strands of a language course. *TESOL in Context* 6(2), 7-12.

About the author:

Jean Kirschenmann teaches in the TESOL program at Hawai'i Pacific University. In addition to teaching English and teaching methods in the United States, she has also taught in Yap, the Marshall Islands, Japan, China, Romania, and Vietnam.