

Transformative Pedagogy and Language Learning in Maori and Irish Contexts

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Abstract

Establishing positive learning communities in classrooms where pedagogies are socially and culturally responsive and centred on shared life experiences is critical for the revitalisation of minoritised languages such as Irish and Māori, which lack the dominance and power of the wider languages of government and communication. Transformative pedagogy and pedagogical re-positioning of teachers are essential to legitimising and affirming minoritised languages in the classroom. Three small-scale New Zealand studies of emerging literacy in Māori are introduced, exemplifying a responsive and transformative pedagogy that enables teachers to position themselves as socially and culturally responsive participants within classroom contexts. These studies offer strategies that might facilitate the development of similar transformative pedagogy in Irish contexts also.

Background

The impact of colonisation in the Republic of Ireland and in New Zealand was characterised by loss of land, sovereignty, cultural identity and languages, although not all historians and commentators identify the Irish situation with that of non-European colonized peoples (Cleary, 2007). However, in Ireland only three predominant *Gaeltacht* (Irish language) regions remain, and in New Zealand only a few tribal regions remain where Māori is spoken routinely within local communities. While Ireland achieved political autonomy in 1922, Māori in New Zealand continue to struggle to achieve the degree of autonomy promised within the Treaty of Waitangi (1840). Despite this difference, both Irish and Māori people have been engaged in continuing struggle for language revitalisation.

Language revitalisation efforts in both countries have featured strong grass-roots initiatives. In Ireland, these include the 168 Irish-medium primary (*Gaelscoileanna*) and 43 Irish-medium secondary (*Gaelcholáistí*) schools (www.gaelscoileanna.ie). In New Zealand these initiatives include the *kohanga reo*, *kura kaupapa Māori*, *whare kura*, and *wananga*. These are, respectively, pre-school language nests, primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions that deliver their curriculum through Māori language and cultural immersion. In both countries, however, these schools comprise only a very small proportion of the total number.

There are growing concerns among parents in the *Gaeltacht* communities about a serious decline in the use of Irish, even in *Gaeltacht* schools. Many contemporary Māori parents and family members do not speak their language at all and may lack sufficient understanding of the *tikanga* (customary practices) to provide their children with day-to-day cultural contexts in which to hear their language spoken. Similarly, in Ireland, over forty years ago, The Commission on the Restoration of the Irish Language, *An Coimisiún um Athbheochan na Gaeilge*) pointed out that language revitalization would be retarded until such time as the practical day-to-day use of the language outside the schools was encouraged and fostered, a factor that was largely ignored in the earlier planning policies (Ó Laoire, 2005). A recent Council of Europe report observed that many teachers in Irish immersion feel insecure with their own competence and experience in Irish, especially when there seems so little evidence of the existence of a viable speech community outside the school. Consequently, these teachers may resort to traditional formal teacher-directed approaches focussed on written language, rather than facilitating students' oral language interactions around their own life experiences. In his first annual report, the Irish language commissioner, An Coimisinéir Teanga, (COGG 2005) requested that a comprehensive review be undertaken into the teaching and learning of Irish, highlighting the fact that many students have not attained even basic fluency in Irish despite being taught the language for 13 years. The Irish media frequently carry reports such as the following:

Something rotten in the state of the Irish. After spending 1500 hours learning Irish during his or her school career, the average student leaves their *cupla focal* at the school gates. So why, given the time and the financial investment in Irish, are so few of us able to use it? (*The Irish Times*, Tuesday, April 12, 2005).

According to the above report students' home language is not supported in schools, and almost 20% of students leave school with only a reasonable level of language competence, with a further 10% reported to have little or no Irish. While there have been two substantial reports on the teaching of Irish in primary schools (Harris & Murtagh, 1999 and Harris et al, 2006) there has been little research to date into effective classroom pedagogies to counter demotivation and underachievement.

In New Zealand, there is also little published research on effective classroom pedagogies for teaching Māori. There are several reasons for this. Until recently there was a dearth of professional quality reading texts where Māori students could find legitimate representations of their contemporary culture, and there was no systematic framework for grading what texts were available in terms of overall difficulty levels. Both concerns have now begun to be addressed through the *Nga Kete Korero* system for levelling reading texts (Berryman, Rau, & Glynn, 2001), and through successful initiatives by publishers such as *Huia Press* and *Learning Media* to stimulate Māori authors and artists to produce children's books that celebrate their contemporary experiences as Māori, as well as connecting them with their traditional heritage.

Also, until recently, there were few tools for assessing students' progress in spoken Māori. A study of 47 Māori medium programmes reported in 1992 (Hollings, Jeffries, &

McArdle, 1992) concluded that classroom assessment was largely anecdotal and intuitive, because of the lack of appropriate assessment practices and accompanying professional development. Because of increasing demands for accountability from the mainstream education system, many Māori medium teachers were pressured into having their students' literacy assessed in English, despite the fact that these children were being taught in Māori! This often led to disrespect for and belittlement of the achievements of teachers and students in Māori medium. These issues are now being addressed through the development and trialling of several assessment tools that are based on the performance of students in Māori literacy learning contexts, and do not depend on inappropriate and inadequate translations of English language assessment tools, (Berryman & Glynn, 2003; Berryman, Togo, Woller, & Glynn, 2007; Rau, 2003; Rau, Whiu, Thomson, & Glynn, 2001).

There are concerns about the declining motivation and increasing boredom of students learning Irish, perhaps resulting from teachers resorting to traditional, formal, de-contextualised, written approaches to language teaching. Students may come to perceive themselves as being “no good” at languages, to believe that their home language is of little value in the real world. There are concerns among Māori medium teachers about the number of parents who remove their children, seemingly arbitrarily, from immersion programmes before their children have attended long enough to benefit. It is unclear whether this reflects parents' unrealistic expectations about the time needed to acquire a second language or their concerns about children's boredom or discomfort in their classroom language learning environment, or both.

The presence of such motivational and affective issues for teachers, students and parents raises the question of the appropriateness of pedagogies employed. Little, if any research seems to have been carried out on the external and internal dynamics of student-teacher relationships in Irish language classrooms, and May and Hill (2005) conclude that the next phase in the development of Māori medium education in Aotearoa/New Zealand “...requires a closer, more consistent examination of pedagogical issues...” (May & Hill, 2005, p 400.)

A paradigm shift in pedagogy is needed to transform classrooms into sites where teachers can work culturally, socially and linguistically with students' knowledge, needs and feelings, and where student self-esteem and relationships with teachers can be enhanced. Classrooms might then become more effective communities of practice for language learning.

Transformative Pedagogies

At the heart of sociocultural understandings of human development and learning, is the interdependence of interpersonal and intellectual learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bruner, 1996; Glynn, Wearmouth, & Berryman, 2005; McNaughton, 1987, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Learners are construed as active agents who come to know the world in terms of their own operations upon it, especially through their use of language in contextualised *social* interactions with others. Vygotsky (1978) conceived

of children as learning through supportive scaffolding provided by an adult, which is then gradually removed, leaving the child working independently. Others have allowed children greater agency in their own learning. Rogoff has proposed the concept of 'guided participation' to highlight the different ways in which children learn as they take part in, and are guided by, the practices of their own communities. Lave and Wenger (1991) construe learning as a process of change in the degree to which individuals can actively participate in 'communities of practice' where there is regular and sustained interaction with more-skilled individuals around genuinely shared activities. Genuinely shared activities are those which are meaningful and authentic for students *and* for their "scaffolders", guides and collaborators. Regular interactions around these shared activities lead children to develop and refine their knowledge and skills within specific literacy domains (speaking, reading and writing). Sustained participation in these activities also affirms and extends positive social relationships. These important interactive and social learning contexts have been described as *responsive social contexts* (Glynn, 1985, Glynn, Wearmouth, & Berryman, 2005).

Traditional pedagogies, as experienced in many language learning classrooms, focussed on learners as *individuals*. But this may have come at the cost of understanding the learner as a member of different social and cultural *communities* of practice. When engaging in any classroom language activity, children and teachers bring to that activity not only their own prior experience and understanding, but also the experience and understanding they have shared with others in their families and communities. Certainly many Māori students enter classroom language learning contexts as already competent and literate performers of tribal chants, haka, action songs, and customary forms of greeting, as well as being able to recite genealogy and oral history. Students, particularly in *Gaeltacht* areas would probably also possess a certain repertoire of local knowledge that largely remains underutilised or ignored. However, students' success in the classroom may depend upon whether or not their language knowledge and lived experience could safely be brought into classroom, safely talked about, affirmed and legitimated through interactions with teacher and peers.

Four characteristics of responsive social learning contexts have been identified (Glynn, 1985; Glynn, Wearmouth, & Berryman, 2005).

1. Learner initiations in responsive social contexts

Whether learning to speak their first language, or their second language, if students are to have agency over their own learning, they must be able to *initiate* interactions with others, around learning activities, and not simply respond to questions and directions. In a responsive social context for language learning, students not only learn how to use language to obtain information, and to access materials and activities, but they also learn a powerful generic strategy for engaging and maintaining language interactions with others, that is, how to have a conversation.

2. Shared activities between less-skilled and more-skilled learners

A responsive social context provides opportunities for learners to engage in shared activities with more-skilled performers with whom they have a positive social relationship. *Shared* activities are functional, enjoyable and authentic experiences for all

involved. When parents and family members are ‘captured’ by children into reading or telling a favourite family story, or into helping them to reply to an invitation, the activity is clearly authentic and enjoyable for all. Children learn much about the reading or writing process, but also how to engage parents in conversation. Parents learn how much their child *really* wants to go to a friend’s birthday party, but also how to turn an incidental request into an interesting conversation.

In the classroom, student-led conversations can be authentic and enjoyable too. Both participants are positioned to find out about what the other knows, thinks, feels and does. Such conversations affirm and strengthen the relationship between participants. Language interactions which minimize the opportunity for student initiations are unlikely to lead to authentic and enjoyable conversations.

3. Reciprocity and mutual influence

Responsive social contexts are characterised also by reciprocity and mutual influence as exemplified in studies of successful peer tutoring of reading which report substantive reading gains for both tutors and tutees, (Glynn et al., 1996; Houghton & Bain, 1993; Houghton & Glynn, 1993; Limbrick, McNaughton, & Glynn, 1985; Wheldall & Mettem, 1985). Helping other students learn also benefits your own learning (Dineen, Clark & Risley, 1987).

4. Amount and type of feedback

A fourth characteristic of responsive social learning contexts is the quality of feedback provided. Underachievement in written language in some classroom settings may stem from feedback that is excessively delayed, excessively negative, and contingent mainly on errors in surface features and language structures. It is not uncommon for students to receive *only* this type of feedback, and no feedback at all on the content or “message” they are writing. Continued exposure to this feedback regime is likely to result in students “saying” and writing less and less. They learn to minimize the risk of negative feedback by avoiding challenging words and language structures - hardly a socially responsive context for writing!

Medcalf and colleagues report a study in which seven 10 year-olds tutored seven 6 year-olds in writing over 10 weeks, providing responsive written feedback, rather than evaluative or corrective feedback (Medcalf, Glynn, & Moore, 2004). Gains were recorded for tutors’ own writing as well as that of their tutees. Tutor gains occurred in writing rate, accuracy and clarity and audience enjoyment. The success of this responsive, written feedback procedure was due partly to the more naturalistic “conversational” nature of the ongoing writing exchanges between tutors and tutees through the medium of writing.

Transformative Pedagogies in Practice

This section presents three New Zealand research studies concerned with young students learning to write, to read and to speak in Māori. These studies offer teaching strategies that might also be explored within classroom language learning contexts in Ireland. While no similar-type research has been completed in Ireland to date, apart from small-scale studies (e.g. Ó Laoire 2007), the sociolinguistic similarities in historical and contemporary language shift situations in both countries would suggest that the application of similar studies in the Irish situation would be meaningful.

Study 1: Learning to write in Māori

This study (Glynn, Berryman, O'Brien, & Bishop, 2000) employed responsive written feedback to provide emergent writers with written responses from an interested 'audience' rather than from a corrective evaluator. 24 Māori students from two schools participated. The 12 *tuakana* (tutors) ranged from 8 years 4 months to 11 years 5 months and attended Year 4 - 5 Māori immersion classes within a mainstream school. They had between nine months and five years of Māori immersion education. The 12 *teina* (tutees) ranged from 7 years to 9 years 3 months and attended a Year 3-4 Māori immersion class within a Māori immersion school. *Tuakana* read writing samples from their *teina* and provided responsive written feedback in weekly 15-minute sessions over four to 12 weeks.

Writing samples showed that *tuakana* shared quite complex messages with their *teina*, for example, dealing with the sadness and grief following the death of a close family member. Students wrote about what was happening in their everyday lives. Most themes emerged from within Māori cultural contexts. Stories about the sea were likely to be about the gathering of *kai moana* (seafood). Stories about special occasions were likely to be about *tangi* (funeral following appropriate Māori protocols) or birthday celebrations. Stories about food were likely to be about the making of *paraoa rewena* (leavened bread). Few stories represented non-Māori events. Over time, increases in personal disclosures and sharing information about students' families occurred, and a close, positive relationship developed between *tuakana* and *teina*.

Teina increased their correct writing *rate* with only minimal impact on writing accuracy. Qualitative ratings by fluent native speakers of audience impact and Māori language competence also increased. Taking the time and trouble to assist their *teina* not only had no adverse effects on *tuakana* writing, but also resulted in positive gains in both rate and quality of their own writing. These findings are consistent with those from studies of peer tutoring of reading which report measurable gains for both tutors and tutees (Wheldall & Mettem, 1985; Limbrick, McNaughton & Glynn, 1985; Medcalf, Glynn & Moore, 2004).

Study 2: Learning to read in Māori

The second study (Glynn et al., 1996) developed and trialled responsive and interactive reading tutoring procedures with students learning to read Māori as a second language. These procedures, known as *Tatari Tautoko Tauawhi*, were reconstructed (not merely translated) from the English procedures: *Pause Prompt Praise*; (Glynn, McNaughton,

Robinson, & Quinn, 1979; McNaughton, Glynn, Robinson, 1981;1987). They were designed to break into the cycle of tight instructional control and teacher-dependence, whereby low-progress readers, on encountering unknown words, “cue” their teacher (usually through eye contact appeal) to tell them the correct word immediately. In contrast, *Pause Prompt Praise* and *Tatari Tautoko Tauawhi* tutors assist readers to draw on all available information, including their own experiences, to work out the meaning of unknown words. Tutor prompts prioritise word and text meaning over letter and sound information.

13 Year 6-7 *tuakana-teina* (tutor-tutee) pairs, as well eight control students from several Māori medium classes participated (Glynn et al., 1996). All students read exclusively Māori language texts, and the tutoring procedures were implemented predominantly in Māori, but reading comprehension was assessed on both Māori and English texts. After ten weeks of tutoring, tutees gained between 1.5 and 2.0 years in reading level, increased their correct reading rate by 15 words per minute, lowered their incorrect rate by almost two words per minute, and increased their comprehension scores between 20 and 46 per cent.

As in the previous study, tutors benefited from their tutoring role. They gained between 0.5 and 1.3 years in reading level, increased their correct reading rate by 7.0 words per minute, lowered their incorrect rate by 0.8 words per minute, and increased their comprehension scores between 19 and 41 per cent.

Gains made by *tuakana* and *teina* in learning to read Māori did not occur at the expense of reading in English. *Teina* gained 1.0 year in English reading level and 20 per cent in English comprehension. *Tuakana* gained 0.5 years in English reading level and 25 per cent in English comprehension. Also, as in the writing study, important cultural learning took place. Students learned to experience, understand and value the cultural significance of the *tuakana-teina* relationship (an obligation both to care for and pass on knowledge to younger or less-experienced family members).

Study 3: Learning to speak in Māori

The third study (Kururangi, 2008) introduced collaborative drawing, as a responsive, interactive oral language activity, based on the work of Berryman et al., (2002). Effective first language reading and writing programmes are predicated upon students’ understanding and competence in speaking their first language. In New Zealand, the great majority of students learning Māori are L2 learners, living in contexts where there are few regular opportunities for them to practise speaking Māori or hear it spoken. It seems that greater emphasis should be made on building their oral language competence. This approach might better promote students’ Māori literacy achievement rather than relying so heavily on reading and writing strategies alone.

Collaborative drawing begins with teacher and students selecting a theme. On a large sheet of paper or whiteboard the teacher draws a first image and at the same time makes a conversational statement. For example, “*he maunga tino teitei*”, (Here is a very tall mountain). The first student draws another image that will complement the first, and then repeats the first statement before adding their own, pointing to the appropriate image. For

example, “*he maunga tino teitei, he awa kōpikopiko,*” (Here is a very tall mountain. Here is a winding river). The next student draws a further image that will complement the first two, and adds another statement, pointing to the appropriate image. For example, “*he maunga tino teitei, he awa kōpikopiko, he tuna kei roto i Te awa*”, (Here is a very tall mountain. Here is a winding river. Here is an eel in the river). The activity continues in this manner until a collaborative picture and story have been completed.

Kururangi recorded and transcribed the oral Māori language interactions of six Year 3-5 Māori students in a bilingual class at a mainstream school, over a period of two months of daily 15-minute sessions. Students were between eight and nine years old and had been in bilingual classes for two years. Kururangi is exploring whether, over time, students’ oral language might become more conversational and more elaborated within this kind of responsive social context. Students worked in two groups of three, and took turns to draw and talk about images they contributed to their collaborative picture. Their teacher adopted a non-directive but responsive role. After assisting students to select a theme, she participated only intermittently in a session, and always through the conversational openings initiated by the students.

As this study is ongoing, the following language examples are presented simply as illustrations of oral language change across two months in this context, for two students, Manaea and Te Puhi. Samples come from audiotapes of session 10 (early in the project) and session 33 (near the end). Students’ own words have been retained, to show that language structures *attempted* are not always totally correct.

Manaea

Session 10: Anei tetahi awa.

He wheke i roto i te awa.

Here is a river.

There is an octopus in the river.

Session 33: I nga hararei, kei te haere ahau ki Waikaremoana ki te kite oku Whaea Keke. Kei te haere matou me toku whanau ki te eke hoiho.

Ko tetahi ingoa o nga hoiho ko Chester, me Flok, me Mana, me Huru.

In the holidays, I went to Waikaremoana to see my Aunty. I went with my family to ride the horses. Some of the horses’ names are Chester, Flok, Mana and Huru.

Te Puhi

Session 10: Ka haere a Qubyn raua ko Kennan ki te whutupaoro.

Qubyn and Kenna are going to the football.

Ka wini a Qubyn.

Qubyn is winning.

Session 33: Ka haere a te kapa haka ropu ki runga i te waka rererangi ki Ahitereiria ki te parakatihi i runga i te atamira.

The kapahaka group is going on the plane to Australia to practise on the stage.

These samples show that both Manaea and Te Puhi spoke more fluently and used a wider range of simple structures at session 33 than they did at session 10. They suggest that the collaborative drawing and talking activity is effective in facilitating oral language interaction among young Māori L2 learners. However, this exploratory study is purely descriptive, and does not permit causal links to be argued between the collaborative drawing strategies and oral language outcomes.

All three studies illustrate the interdependence of language learning, cultural learning, and the development of interpersonal relationships. Students brought their own language and cultural experiences into these classrooms. Students participated on the basis of their existing knowledge and strengths, and found that these were legitimated and affirmed.

Conclusion

This paper argues for a paradigm shift to transform minority language education classrooms into sites where teachers can work socially, culturally and linguistically with their students. Such a transformative pedagogy should draw on elements of socio-cultural theory, such as the interdependence of intellectual and social learning, the nature of responsive, social contexts for learning, and the development of effective communities of practice for language learning. This pedagogy needs to be grounded within the language and cultural experiences of students and their families and communities. Transformative pedagogy should enable the language teacher to shift from a controlling and directive “expert” position to a position that is interactive and responsive to students lived experiences, and to shift from holding total responsibility for students’ language learning to sharing that responsibility with students.

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