

A National Maori Language Institute: Looking To Cyberspace

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Abstract

In this paper, it is argued that many of the problems associated with the lack of coordinated research and development activities relating to the revitalisation of Maori language could be resolved by establishing a Maori Language and Literacy Institute. The possibility of establishing such an Institute in cyberspace is an attractive one in that it reduces overheads, allows for an immediate link between researchers, educational providers and iwi, and provides opportunities for wide dissemination of findings and for ongoing discussion.

Introduction

Ministry of Education statistics (Education Statistics of New Zealand) indicate that the number and percentage of students studying Maori in Years 9 and above in mainstream schooling in Aotearoa / New Zealand has been declining since 1996 (See *Table 1* below).

Table 1: Number and percentage of course entries for Maori as a subject in mainstream schooling in New Zealand (Year 9 and above) from 1995 - 1999

1995		1996		1997		1998		1999	
Number studying Maori as a subject	% of year total	Number studying Maori as a subject	% of year total	Number studying Maori as a subject	% of year total	Number studying Maori as a subject	% of year total	Number studying Maori as a subject	% of year total
25134	10.62	25278	10.62	22325	9.285	21462	8.75	20189	8.20

The number of students who sat University Entrance examinations in Te Reo Rangatira from 1995 – 1999 is as indicated in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Number of students who sat examinations in Te Reo Rangatira from 1995 - 1999

1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
695	699	630	630	616

At 1 July 1999 there was a total of 727,396 students attending New Zealand schools (all levels and types). Of these, 22,222 students (3% of all students) were involved in Maori medium education for more than 30% of the time (7.5 hours or more per week). A total of 4,805 students (4,796 Maori) attended immersion schools (including Kura Kaupapa Maori), 10,421 (8,122 Maori) attended bilingual schools, a further 3,946 (3,845 Maori) were in immersion classes and another 11,621 (10,089 Maori) were in bilingual classes (New Zealand Ministry of Education site <http://www.moe.govt.nz>: visited 3 July 2000). Even taking all of these figures together, the number of young people who are learning te reo Maori in New Zealand appears to be depressingly low. *Table 3* following gives the number of degree completions with Maori as a subject between in 1997 and 1998 Education Statistics of New Zealand).

Table 3: Number of students who achieved tertiary qualifications with Maori as a subject in 1997 and 1998

	Doctorate	Masters/ Honours	Post.Grad. Dip./ Cert.	Bachelors/ Adv. Dip.	Dip.	Cert.	Inter- mediate Cert.	Intro- ductory Cert.	Total
1997		10	2	199	102	422	117	53	905
1998		22	2	230	103	561			918

Of course, there are other contexts, in addition to formal educational settings, where Maori is being leaned or acquired. Even so, those of us who are concerned for the future of the language need to be concerned. Not only does there appear to be some sign of a reduction in take-up of the language at the higher levels of mainstream schooling, but it also seems that it is increasingly difficult to attract candidates for teacher training courses who have a high level of proficiency in the language. Unless there is long-term planning in this area to back up shorter term initiatives, the problems are likely to continue. However, attempts to ensure that this planning happens have never been more than marginally successful. What appear to be needed is integrated planning, planning that is based on a solid research foundation.

Planning for Maori Language

In 1987, a Committee set up to review the school curriculum (Department of Education 1987) recommended that a national policy on languages “embracing Maori, English, Pacific Island languages, foreign languages, English as a second language; and including first language learning” should be established (p. 41). In 1992, a study of the factors involved in establishing a language policy that was commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education was produced (Waite 1992a & b). That report lists Maori language revitalization as the top priority in any such policy “because the time factor is critical – for the Maori language, the next few years are crucial” and “New Zealanders as a whole have a responsibility to support Maori language revitalisation efforts” (Waite, 1992a, p. 18). In relation to Waite’s work, Kaplan made a list of recommendations. These included establishing a “National Languages and Literacy Institute . . . empowered to pursue languages policy implementation in cooperation with a range of agencies and organizations in New Zealand (Kaplan 1992, reported in Kaplan 1993, p. 3). This did not happen. If New

Zealand is not to have a National Language Policy or a National Languages and Literacy Institute, Maori need to take the initiative and establish for themselves a National Maori Language Policy and a National Maori Language and Literacy Institute. Only then will we be in a position to determine exactly what needs to be done to ensure that the Maori language, which is, after all, an official language of Aotearoa/ New Zealand, is available as a living language for future generations.

Some fundamental research questions

If a Maori Language and Literacy Institute were established, we could begin to address systematically and in an integrated way a number of research questions that urgently require answers. These include:

- What proficiency level in Maori is achieved by learners in bilingual, immersion and mainstream settings at different stages in their schooling?
- What level of proficiency in Maori is achieved by students who learn the language in tertiary education settings at different stages?
- Which methods appear to be the most successful in terms of proficiency achievements?
- What is the best way to provide Maori language maintenance and development opportunities for practicing teachers and others?
- For the purposes of academic writing and official documentation, should a single variety of Maori be used and, if so, should that variety be taught in schools alongside the local dialect?
- How best can we help our learners to develop beyond spoken day-to-day transactional competence into the realms of complex, authentic spoken and written discourse construction and comprehension?
- What types of errors are occurring in the speech and writing of learners at various stages in their development and are these errors attributable to developmental factors?
- In what ways is the Maori language changing and are these changes consistent with those language changes that occur in languages that are not at risk?

The Maori Language Act (1987) established a language Commission whose function is to promote the Maori language and report on issues relating to it. However, that Commission is not charged with overseeing research and development in the area of Maori language and so, although it does oversee some research, it has neither the mandate nor the budget to take responsibility for ensuring that research and development are coordinated. Nor is it in a position to establish research and development priorities. In the absence of an agency charged with this responsibility such an agency, research and development are likely to continue to be patchy and uncertain and standards across the country may vary considerably.

Seeking a solution: A Maori Language and Literacy Institute in cyberspace?

There have been repeated calls for the development of a Maori Language Institute. There are, however, problems. These include:

- Determining how such an organization should be funded (particularly in view of the need to ensure that as much as possible of the available resources are spent on development activities rather than administration).
- Ensuring that such an organization could be effectively linked to all of the other agencies involved in the preservation and development of the language.
- Ensuring that the views of all iwi were effectively represented,
- Convincing everyone concerned that a degree of centralization would not impede local initiatives (and ensuring that it did not do so).

At least part of the answer is already available. Technological advances over the last few decades have made the prospect of a Maori Language and Literacy Institute in cyberspace a real possibility. There is no longer any need to be concerned about the physical location of such an institute, or about the possibility of major establishment costs. All that is really required now is the will to succeed, the will to transcend boundaries and work together for a common goal:

The Information Marketplace will . . . increase the prospects for forming virtual alliances across hierarchical lines within an organization . . . and between sister organizations (Dertouzos, 1997, p. 204).

We already have a Commission whose function is to promote the Maori language and report on issues relating to it. That Commission could establish with very little difficulty, informally in the first instance, a Maori Language and Literacy Institute in cyberspace. All that is really required initially is:

- A mailing list of those involved in research, development and teaching activities relating to Maori Language and Literacy and of all iwi.
- Ask everyone on the list to report on any research, development and innovative teaching practices (including teaching materials) of which they are aware (including local initiatives) and to indicate what they believe to be the research and development priorities.
- Make up a publications database from sources currently available.
- Establish an internet site where research and development findings can be posted.

Taking the initiative in this way would cost very little in time and resources. If that initiative were successful, it is likely that the relatively small amount of funding required to sustain and develop that initiative in the early stages would be forthcoming from government. After all, the eventual advantages, in terms of coordination of research and development efforts and the dissemination of research findings and teaching materials and resources would be in the best interests of everyone.

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