

Language, *mātauranga* Māori . . . and technology?

Mereana Selby
(Ngāti Raukawa)
Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa
PO Box 119, Ōtaki
[mereana.selby@twor-otaki.ac.nz]

Abstract

In this paper, I report on a research project involving the creation of an e-learning environment for the teaching and learning of an aspect of *te reo Māori*, that is the preparation of *mihi*. It was found that learning in the context of an e-learning environment in which anonymity was assured, learners could learn in their own spaces and at their own pace and there was no pressure to perform in front of peers and tutors had the potential to reduce the potentially negative effects of *whakamā*.

Introduction

In September 2004, a research team at Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa embarked on a one-year project to develop an innovative e-learning-based *te reo Māori* programme for adults which would, we hoped, have the effect of increasing Māori participation in e-learning. Initially, a pilot programme would be developed and made available free of charge for the duration of the research project.

A research team with backgrounds in technology, education and language teaching came together to work on the project. We set about creating an environment for the testing of new and emerging technologies and techniques in the teaching of *te reo Māori*. In addition to reflecting on, and learning from, the previous language learning experiences at Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa, developing confidence in using a wider range of technological tools in the teaching and learning process, and engaging with people who offer a range of skills and expertise in technology, education or *mātauranga Māori*, team members were involved in the following tasks:

- Investigation a variety of language teaching and learning techniques with Māori learners in mind.
- Development of a theoretical framework for on-line learning for *wānanga* students.
- Exploration of a variety of technological tools for use in language teaching.
- Exploration of the potential of e-learning for the enhancement of learning of *te reo Māori* and for language revival activities more generally.
- Explore the creation of a *tikanga Māori* virtual space and the possibility of expressing a Māori world view in this environment.

Theoretical framework

It was important at the outset to consider the nature and distinctiveness of e-learning. We were interested in knowing how e-learning approaches might improve and enhance the language learning experience, and whether there was potential in an e-learning environment for the reduction or minimising of some of the commonly experienced impediments to language learning.

The learning of a language involves a long and difficult journey, with learners experiencing lots of highs and lows. The fear of failure, especially for Māori learning their own language, can create a high level of anxiety. Since language learning typically involves engaging with others in order to practice and progress, errors are committed in what can be seen as a very public arena. The feeling of being exposed in front of peers, children, elders, family and so on, can have quite an impact on the learner. For most learners, feelings of embarrassment, inadequacy and ignorance can impact negatively the ability to learn effectively. For some, the fear of failing publicly is enough to prevent them from engaging in the learning programme at all. For these reasons, an e-learning environment presents some interesting possibilities. In particular, it could reduce, or even remove, the negative feelings of *whakamā*¹, that can accompany the making of errors in public.

Whakamā

The concept of *whakamā* was further explored in an effort to gain insight into learner reactions to perceived failure or inadequacy through:

- A series of discussions with specific staff at Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa, all experienced language tutors and exponents of *te reo Māori*.
- Sharing the research topic and progress with a class of Master's level students, all trained and experienced Māori teachers.
- Presenting the proposition to a group of undergraduate trainee teachers, currently engaged in a language learning programme, and gaining their feedback on the validity of the research work being done.
- Accessing Māori writing on the subject, including papers available on the Internet and papers presented at seminars at Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa.
- Revisiting the Māori creation stories to seek the origin of *whakamā* as a concept.
- Engaging in a series of informal discussions with well-known and highly regarded Māori academics from a range of *iwi*.
- Engaging with *kaumātua*, in particular, *Purutanga Mauri*² of Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa who have contributed significantly to language revival activity within the ART³ confederation over several decades.
- Taking advice from an internal advisory committee, including Professor Whatarangi Winiata, who provided academic supervision for the project.

The following hypothesis was proposed:

That the rate/ speed and quality of language acquisition can be enhanced through an e-learning environment which focuses on managing the occurrence of whakamā in learning te reo Māori.

A common theme that emerged from all sources was one of strong support for the contention that *whakamā* is indeed a significant impediment to language learning. Further, there was excitement and interest in a research project which aimed to explore ways of reducing or removing a language learning variable considered to be a significant barrier to effective learning. However, some qualified their comments in support of the hypothesis, noting there are times when feeling *whakamā* could have a positive effect as it can motivate people to put more effort in to their learning in order to avoid feeling embarrassment on another occasion. There were anecdotes of people

feeling *kuware*⁴, and also *whakamā*, as a result of performing poorly (linguistically), and then a resolving to never let it happen again.

In traditional times, the fear of feeling *whakamā* worked as a deterrent to people behaving poorly. Hence the oft heard *whakataukī: Waiho mā te whakamā e patu*⁵. Clearly, the shame experienced as a result of an inappropriate act or failure to meet an expectation had a powerful effect on the perpetrator, and, often, those close to or associated with them. This is captured in the *whakataukī: Ko te taunga o te whakamā kei te ūpoko hīna*⁶. The desire to avoid the experience worked well as a form of social control, particularly when living communally.

There appeared to be a clear message that *whakamā* is a human response which has a form particular to Māori. There were also indications that the traditional understanding and potency of *whakamā* has changed over time. *Whakamā* is a culturally bound concept which, like *te reo Māori* itself, has been threatened and weakened through contact with another set of cultural norms. Even so, it appears that *whakamā* can still have a major influence on the learner.

There were discussions about levels of *whakamā*, and the view was expressed that the more one knows, the higher is the potential to feel *whakamā*. This comes about as a result of increased understanding of *tikanga*⁷ and cultural norms. Thus, it was felt by some that those who are less familiar with *tikanga* are also less likely to feel *whakamā* as a result of language errors.

We are convinced that the language learning journey involves students experiencing *whakamā*. We also believe that often, but not always, the impact is a negative one. Hence, team members set about exploring the idea that an e-learning environment, by significantly reducing the need to interact with ‘real’ people, could reduce the negative effects of *whakamā*, and therefore speed up the learning process. Furthermore, even where feelings of anxiety, embarrassment or inhibition do not impede learning, an e-learning environment may nevertheless have the potential to lead to better language learning outcomes, including learning more quickly.

In reflecting on local language learning experiences, the researchers drew on past experience of language learning and teaching associated with approximately thirty years of language revival activity within the ART confederation, and the twenty-five year tribal development plan, *Whakatupuranga Rua Mano*, which was launched in 1975. This experience provided the context for the research.

Research methodology

There were two strands to this work; the technology strand and the education/ *te reo* strand. From the outset, the principle was adopted that these two strands should, as much as possible, work side by side, maximum benefit being gained by each team working to understand and complement the activities of the others. In order to achieve this, regular team meetings were held involving all *Reo* Pilot staff. During these meetings, the work of each team was outlined and explained so that everyone was kept well informed about progress as a whole. The working hypothesis outlined above was developed during meetings.

- It was decided to use material from *Te Tū Marae*, a teaching resource published by the Reo Department of Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa. The material was familiar to the research team. This content had been taught to many students in the past, so there was an opportunity to compare conventional teaching methods with e-learning.
- In the first version of the experiment, the aim was to trial a range of different technologies as teaching tools to enable the learning of a *mihi*. Five quite different technologies were chosen.
- The challenge was to match content appropriately to each of the five technologies. Effective discussions between the education and technology teams were essential to this being done well. Some content gathering involved the filming of Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa staff as language exemplars.

Programme structure and content

Essential to a *Wānanga*-oriented programme is the fact that students are in an identifiably Māori learning space. The technology team worked hard to achieve this effect, not only by using Māori graphics, but also in terms of the way that the programme behaved.

The Mihi⁸

In testing the hypothesis, the selection of language content became key. It was decided that it was preferable to choose a single genre that contained a wide range of language features, hence the decision to focus on the learning of a *mihi*. The learning activities were to be pitched at intermediate level.

The ability to *mihimihi* is an essential language skill for learners wishing to engage in a *tikanga Māori* environment. It may be described as a mandatory part of the Māori language survival kit. The varied content of *mihi* enabled the testing of a number of language elements. A *mihi*:

- is an essential skill for those wanting to engage in a *tikanga Māori* space;
- has a structure and purpose that reflect principles of *tikanga Māori*;
- contains traditional and contemporary language;
- requires the use of formal and informal language patterns;
- involves both literal and figurative use of language (e.g., *whakatauki*⁹ and *kīwaha*¹⁰);
- includes a range of sentence patterns;
- requires students to research their *iwi*, *hapū*, *whānau*, *marae*, and *whakapapa*;
- improves in quality as the learner's competency develops;
- involves demonstration of productive rather than receptive language skills;
- involves attention to phonology, syntax, semantics and lexicon.

The ability to *mihi* well is likely to lead to a significant boost in learner confidence.

The content was taken from year two material, and adapted for the purposes of this project.

The context

The context chosen was that of a *hui rumaki reo*¹¹ at Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa. Typically, the evening *mihimihi* session occurs after dinner, and is preceded by *karakia*. Students are encouraged to participate in *mihimihi* and all are offered the opportunity to do so as the *rākau*¹² moves around the room in a clockwise direction. Each participant, on receiving the *rākau*, chooses whether they will pick up the challenge to stand and *mihimihi*, or pass it on. All are expected to *mihimihi* at least once during the six-day language immersion seminar.

Students experience varying levels of anxiety when performing a *mihi*. Many take the opportunity to sit and listen to others for an evening or two before they take the plunge. Nevertheless, one important determinant of successful participation at these *hui* is the performance of a *mihi*. It must be done, and students feel a huge sense of achievement on completing this activity well.

Programme implementation

Version 1

Fifteen students studying *te reo Māori* at level 2 or 3 (intermediate level) participated in this trial. Five different technologies were tested over a three day period. In order to maximise the opportunity for students to maintain anonymity and minimise the potential for *whakamā* to affect the learning process, each student chose an on-line alias by which they became known for the duration of the programme. They were then allocated an avatar which became the representation of their new image. Identities were kept confidential so that students were able to engage in the programme without fear of exposure.

The language activities

Students were charged with learning a substantial *mihi* in three days. Although a rather daunting challenge in a relatively short space of time, the trial aimed to use technology in such a way that it would enhance and speed up the learning process. The first day's activities were characterised by the fact that students worked independently and were not required to engage with other students or tutors. The activity involved a 3-D flyover, where students went on a simulated geographical journey over Aotearoa, collecting information for their *mihi* as they went. Having gathered phrases and sentences, they then constructed the *mihi* they were to learn.

The second activity was a game where students had to manoeuvre a figure (person) as it explored a *marae*, surrounding bush and foreshore, and to find all the hidden phrases and sentences as they went. The aim of this activity was for students to have fun while practicing the components of their *mihi*.

Day two was cellphone day. Students received text messages which were personalised and designed to jog or trigger their memories of the *mihi* they had constructed. Each student received twenty text messages at varying intervals over a 5 hour period. A Māori 'quick-text' was created that allowed for a longer message to be sent and introduced a fun element to the communication. This technology is characterised by its ability to reach the learner anytime, anywhere.

Day three required on-line engagement with other students. First, students entered a

forum where they were given three exercises to complete over a one hour period. One of those exercises involved students applying the *mihi* they had been learning to a new context. The final activity required students to audio record their *mihi*, then to sit together to listen to everyone's performance. This was enjoyed by all participants who gave a great deal of very valuable feedback which assisted the research team in its preparation work for the final version.

Version 2

This more ambitious 3 week trial set out to test more technologies and to provide for learning to occur in the students' homes, and at times they chose. Twenty participants agreed to give at least 30 minutes a day to accessing the programme on line and following the instructions.

- Anonymity was maintained through the use, again, of avatars.
- On logging in (by responding to an animated *wero*¹³) students entered a virtual *marae* where they were able to choose from a group of *whare*¹⁴. On entering a *whare* they could engage in the activity there. Activities included a traditional game (*Pōtaka*)¹⁵, where students had to manoeuvre a spinning top in order to access a multi-choice language question. There was a more sophisticated 3-D fly-over and a forum where each student was given a task requiring them to apply the *mihi* they were learning to a new context, and to post it for other participants to read.
- One *whare* contained videos of *mihi* exemplars. Participants could view these as often they as wished.
- Cellphones were, again, used. The quicktext constructed for *Version 1* was further extended. Texting was used to remind students to keep up with activities, alert them to the fact that a new activity was coming up, and to assist with the learning of their *mihi* by giving regular cues as memory joggers.
- A *karakia*¹⁶ and *waiata*¹⁷ were added to the language content to be learned.
- The 'ako player' was trialled. This was a tool for assisting with the learning of *karakia* and *waiata* which gives audio and visual stimuli, and allows the student a range of manipulations of the recordings to assist with learning.

Programme evaluation

It is important to reflect on the past 30 years of language learning and teaching activity as a basis and context for developing new learning methods. Our language learning and teaching activities of the last thirty years provide an essential backdrop and a huge amount of data that can assist us with the design of future language learning programmes. There is great benefit in taking the time to consider the learning that needs to take place and the reason for adopting an e-learning approach prior to discussing technological tools for learning: learning packages should be guided by learning theory rather than technology.

Key findings of this experiment were as follows:

The language learners were able to learn without a tutor in an e-learning environment.

The option of learning language in the privacy of their own homes and at their own pace, without the pressure of being required to express/ perform publicly, was attractive to all participants and appeared to reduce the potentially negative impact of *whakamā*, something that is likely to be relevant to learning more generally.

Using some technologies to be more enjoyable than using others. Students who participated in *Version 1* reported that they most enjoyed learning by cellphone. Students who participated in *Version 2* reported that they most enjoyed using the Ako Player for learning *waiata* and *karakia*.

Students who were not technology savvy were unable to fix glitches when they occurred and this caused frustration. Therefore the level of technology competency required should be specified before students embark on e-learning packages. In addition, there should be a technology orientation session, easily accessible technology support systems (ideally provided by staff skilled in Māori language and *tikanga*).

Conclusion

There is potential for e-learning to make a significant contribution to the revival of *te reo Māori*, through well-researched and designed e-learning programmes. Not only do e-learning packages have the potential to offer learners the opportunity to learn at their own pace and in their own spaces, but they also have the potential to make the learning accessible to others (not just enrolled learners). More language learning activity in our homes can only assist in the revival of *te reo Māori*. However, the e-learning space must be identifiably Māori in its appearance and behaviour. Thus, for example, on entering the site, students were greeted by an animation of a *wero* which preceded their logging on. They were then encouraged to begin the learning journey through a *karanga*¹⁸, whereby they entered a *marae*. A *karakia* text then appeared with an audio playing. This was followed by a video of a tutor *mihi*. The *marae* offered a range of *whare* that students could choose to enter, each containing an activity. The game concept through which students could play and practice their *mihi* was based on a traditional Māori pastime, the *pōtaka* or spinning top.

In experimenting with the use of recently developed technologies to create a virtual learning environment, we have seen opportunities for managing one of the biggest obstacles to the learning process, *whakamā*. This work is in its infancy but early indications are that there is much potential in a language learning environment which offers limited contact with others, is self-directed and contains manageable learning chunks.

Endnotes

1. *Whakamā* = 'Williams Dictionary gives among its definitions "shame, abasement, shy, embarrassed, ashamed".'
2. Purutanga Mauri: This is the name given to a group of *kaumātua* (elders) who comprise the *kaumātua* council of Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa.
3. ART: refers to Te Āti Awa, Ngāti Raukawa and Ngāti Toarangatira. These 3 *iwi* occupy areas of land stretching from the Rangitūkei River in the north to Wairau and Nelson in the

south. They have develop strong ties from having collaborated in a number of projects, ventures and activities for more than 150 years.

4. *Kūware*: Williams Dictionary give the following three definitions: 1. ignorant; 2. low in the social scale; 3. Held in no estimation.

5. *Waiho mā te whakamā e patu*: Punishment will be exacted through shame.

6. *Ko te taunga o te whakamā kei te ūpoko hina*: One interpretation of this proverb is as follows: It is one's elders who feel the responsibility for (bear the burden for) acts of shame.

7. *Tikanga*: cultural practices.

8. *Mihi/ mihimihi*: extending greetings – a Māori cultural practice may involve acknowledgements of people, extending of thanks, identifying oneself through genealogical and geographical links, discussion of current issues.

9. *Whakataukī*: proverbial saying.

10. *Kīwaha*: colloquialism.

11. *Hui rūmaki reo*: language immersion seminar. Typically these are 5 to 6 days long where students are in residence and only Māori is allowed to be spoken.

12. *Rākau*: in this context the rākau refers to a carved piece of wood the holder of which has the right to choose to stand and address the assembled group.

13. *Wero*: challenge.

14. *Whare*: house, building.

15. *Pōtaka*: traditional Māori spinning top.

16. *Karakia*: prayer/ spiritual acknowledgement.

17. Traditional song (in this case).

18. *Karanga*: traditional call.