Bilingual Education in Aotearoa/New Zealand: At the Crossroad

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on recent developments in bilingual education in Aotearoa/New Zealand, particularly, but not solely, Maori-medium education. It also explores these developments in relation to wider issues of language and language education policy and planning, since any developments in bilingual education are *inevitably* situated within these wider discourses (see May, 2001) and need to be directly addressed as such.

In order to focus meaningfully on these developments, however, we must first situate them critically within the wider historical, social and political background from which they emerged. This is important because the development of Maori-medium language education is itself both a product and an illustration of a wider repositioning of identity and minority rights issues within this once 'British settler society' – particularly, between the indigenous Maori and their European colonizers (see Larner and Spoonley, 1995; Fleras and Spoonley, 1999; Pearson, 1990; 2000). Thus a critical historical account is vital to understanding the wider social, cultural and political processes at work here.

2. Historical overview

Aotearoa/New Zealand was colonised by European – predominantly British – settlers in the late eighteenth century, following the voyages of Captain James Cook, although the indigenous Maori people had preceded Pakeha (European)² settlers by at least 500, perhaps as much as 1000, years (Walker, 1990). Colonial relations between Maori and Pakeha were subsequently formalized by the British Crown in the nineteenth century, most notably via the foundational colonial document, Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) – signed on 6 February 1840 between the British Crown and Maori chiefs. A surprisingly progressive document for its time, the Treaty specifically attempted to establish the rights and responsibilities of both parties as a mutual framework by which colonization could proceed. Captain Hobson, the Crown's representative, was instructed to obtain the surrender of Aotearoa/New Zealand as a sovereign state to the British crown, but only by 'free and intelligent consent' of the 'natives'. In return, Maori were to be guaranteed possession of 'their lands, their homes and all their treasured possessions (taonga)'.

Despite this promising beginning, the subsequent colonial history of Aotearoa/New Zealand was to read little differently from other colonial contexts, as highlighted in recent numerous revisionist histories of the country (see Orange, 1987; Kawharu, 1989; Walker, 1990: Sinclair, 1993; Belich, 1986, 1996, 2001). It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail this history in any depth, except to say that it soon became clear that the Treaty of Waitangi, for all its potential symbolic significance, was quickly and ruthlessly trivialized and marginalized by Pakeha settlers in their quest for land; a quest that had resulted in almost all Maori-owned land being in Pakeha hands by the end of the 19th century, mostly via illegitimate means. Not surprisingly perhaps, what resulted for Maori were the usual deleterious effects of colonization upon an indigenous people – political disenfranchisement, misappropriation of land, population and health decline, educational disadvantage and socioeconomic marginalization (Stannard, 1989; Walker, 1990).

The educational approach toward Maori throughout the 19th century and much of the 20th century, as again one might expect, was also resolutely assimilationist. Accordingly, from the establishment of the state education system in the 1860s-1870s, the teaching of English was considered to be a central task of the school, and te reo Maori (the Maori language) was often regarded as the prime obstacle to the progress of Maori children (R. Benton, 1981). As the Auckland Inspector of Native Schools, Henry Taylor was to argue in 1862:

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The Native language itself is also another obstacle in the way of civilisation, so long as it exists there is a barrier to the free and unrestrained intercourse which ought to exist between the two races [sic], it shuts out the less civilised portion of the population from the benefits which intercourse with the more enlightened would confer. The school-room alone has power to break down this wall of partition... (AJHR, E-4, 1862, 35-38)

The inevitable result was the marginalization of Maori, and te reo Maori, within the educational process,³ and over the course of the 20th century, its subsequent decline. The rapid urbanization of Maori since the Second World War⁴ has been a key contributory factor to this language decline. While the Maori language had long-been excluded from the realms of the school, it had still been nurtured in largely rural Maori communities. Urbanization was to change all that. Thus, in 1930, a survey of children attending Native schools estimated that 96.6 per cent spoke only Maori at home. By 1960, only 26 per cent spoke Maori. By 1979 the Maori language had retreated to the point where language death was predicted (R. Benton, 1979, 1983; see also N. Benton, 1989).

Despite significant developments since that time – notably the re-emergence of Maori-medium education (see below) – more recent statistics suggest that the Maori language is still endangered. In 1995, a general language survey found that nine out of ten of Aotearoa/New Zealand's then 3.8 million inhabitants were first language speakers of English – a figure that made it one of the most linguistically homogeneous countries in the world (Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Maori, 1995). Meanwhile, the most recent survey of the Maori language (Te Puni Kokiri, 2001) found that among Maori adults, only 20% (approx. 68,000) spoke the language well, or very well, and that the majority of these were middle-aged or older. More worryingly, 58% of Maori adults could not speak Maori beyond a 'few words or phrases'.

It is this background of rapid and significant language loss for Maori that has precipitated the rise of bilingual education in Aotearoa/New Zealand.⁵ The first development in bilingual education occurred in the late 1970s with the establishment of transitional bilingual education programs in a few schools that still served predominantly rural Maori communities. Other schools were to follow – providing, primarily, a 'transition' approach to bilingualism. However, it was the establishment in the 1980s of *maintenance bilingual*, *whole-school* Maori language programs, which were also predominantly *full-immersion*, that has been the most significant development in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the one that has gained most international attention. This began with the establishment in 1982 of Te Kohanga Reo – full immersion preschool programs, initially run independently by parents. It has since developed to *all* levels of education and has subsequently been incorporated into the state education system, thus spearheading the beginnings of what Christina Paulston has described as 'language reversal'; a process by which 'one of the languages of a state begins to move back into more prominent use' (1993: 281).

To gauge the significance and impact of these developments, one only has to look at the growth of this Maori language education movement. In 1982, the first Kohanga Reo was established – by 1996, at its high point, there were 767 kohanga catering for over 14,000 Maori children (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1998). Although there has been some decline in numbers since then, there were still 9,500 Maori students (approx. 30% of all Maori preschool enrolments) enrolled in 560 Kohanga in 2001.

This expansion has also had a 'domino effect' throughout the education system, as kohanga graduates have worked their way through the school system over the course of the last twenty years. This is particularly evident at the primary (elementary) level with the emergence of the first (privately funded) Kura Kaupapa Maori (literally, Maori philosophy school) in 1985 – based on the same principles of maintenance bilingual education and full-immersion. In 1990, 6 Kura Kaupapa Maori were approved for state funding and by 1999, 59 Kura Kaupapa Maori had been established, serving approximately 4,000 students (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1998). These developments are also now beginning to extend to higher educational levels with the establishment in 1993/1994 of the first Wharekura (Maori-medium secondary schools) and Whare Wananga (tertiary institutions). By 1997 there were four such Wharekura and three Wananga.

In addition to these developments in full-immersion bilingual education, and perhaps also as a direct result of their influence, there has been a related expansion of targeted, partial-immersion models of bilingual education in 'mainstream' Aotearoa/New Zealand schools, again predominantly for Maori students. As a result, in 2001, there were 25,580 Maori students enrolled in some form of Maori-

medium education, comprising 17% of the total Maori student population. Of these, the vast majority (22,349; 87%) were enrolled in primary (elementary) programs (Te Puni Kokiri, 2001).⁶

3. Current issues

These specific developments in bilingual education have also been situated within a wider reappraisal of language policy, itself the result of the re-emergence of the Treaty of Waitangi into public life and policy-making in the 1980s (for further discussion of these wider developments, see May, 2002a). This led in turn in 1987 to the implementation of the **Maori Language Act**, which accorded Maori for the first time since colonization with official language status within Aotearoa/New Zealand. Indeed, this stands as one of the *only* examples currently in the world where the first language of an indigenous people has been recognized as a state language (May, 2001). The related exponential rise, and success of Maori language immersion programs at all levels of education is clearly situated within this wider context.

But there are also significant limits to these developments. The Language Act does not extend the right to use or to demand the use of Maori in the public domain beyond the oral use of the language in Courts of law and some quasi-legal Tribunals. Likewise, the use of Maori remains limited in most household and community contexts. Most worryingly, the 2001 Maori language survey found that there were generally few conversations conducted in the home in Maori. In the community, Maori language was highest (not surprisingly perhaps) in those contexts where Maori people were predominant – people spoke Maori for half or more of the time at marae (meeting houses) – 50% (of people), Maori hui (meetings) – 42%, and church-related activities – 32%. Very few people spoke Maori for half or more of the time in the workplace (14%), at sport (10%), shopping (5%), or socializing (11%) (Te Puni Kokiri, 2001).

This suggests strongly that a diglossic situation for Maori (as the more delimited, domain-dependent language in relation to English) still clearly applies in the Aotearoa/New Zealand context, despite the advances in Maori-medium education over the last 20 years. This is further confirmed when one realizes that, while the rise of Maori language medium education *has* been spectacular, it still constitutes only a small percentage of the overall state provision of education in Aotearoa/New Zealand, even to Maori students, let alone all.⁸

There are also, increasingly, specific issues emerging within Maori-medium education itself – particularly with respect to:

- level of immersion and whole-school/targeted programs
- student population / balance of L1/L2 learners

3.1 Level of immersion

In the Kohanga/Kura model, a full-immersion approach to Maori is almost always adopted. This emerged out of a commitment to maintenance bilingual education and an awareness of the precariousness of the wider language context for Maori. In addition, the transitional bilingual programs that were initially developed in the 1970s, as with most transitional programs, were soon found to be relatively ineffective in promoting ongoing Maori language maintenance.

However, what seems to have transpired is that full-immersion has actually come to be *elided* with maintenance bilingualism in the thinking of many advocates of Maori-medium education. Or to put it another way, *all* partial-immersion bilingual programs, including the burgeoning number in mainstream school contexts, have tended to be viewed simply as *subtractive* and/or *transitional* programs.

This clearly runs counter to the international literature on bilingual education, particularly with respect to the success of dual-medium/two way bilingual programs in the USA. It also leaves the partial-immersion programs in mainstream Aotearoa/New Zealand schools with little access to positive models of maintenance bilingualism and to research-based indicators of good practice in these contexts.

Indeed, such mainstream bilingual education programs have tended to be rather ad hoc in terms of their educational approach, with little consistency, or underlying theory, to their pedagogy and practice. This is compounded by a funding formula for schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand that recognizes 4 levels of immersion: Level 1 (81-100%); Level 2 (51-80%); Level 3 (31-50%); Level 4 (12-30%). While the clear majority of the 25,580 students in Maori-medium education are in Levels 1 (11, 064)

and 2(5,073) - 16,137 – it is equally clear that Levels 3 and 4 do not reach the minimum threshold criterion of 50% instruction in the target language which is regarded as a necessary condition for effective bilingual education in the research literature.

Relatedly, there is little discussion in Aotearoa/New Zealand, at least as yet, as to how to make targeted programs in mainstream contexts (as opposed to the whole-school model adopted by Kohanga and Kura Kaupapa programs) work effectively. Again, the research literature available is quite clear in identifying key criteria here, including issues of educational leadership, school organization and more specific issues of instructional design. However, this research has not been widely drawn upon, given the generally negative view of such programs up until now.

3.2 Student population

More generally, there is a still largely unresolved issue about the influence of L1/L2 characteristics in Maori-medium education.

Given the generational language loss of the Maori language that we described earlier – particularly post-WW2 – the majority of students in Maori-medium education, and indeed many of the teachers, are actually second language learners. In this sense, while full-immersion Maori-medium education is specifically underpinned by the principles of a maintenance bilingual education approach, its student population is closer to an enrichment bilingual education context. The complex interplay between these maintenance bilingual principles (which usually apply to L1 speakers) and the predominantly L2 language context, is one that has yet to be fully addressed, although this is also an ongoing issue for many other indigenous and/or heritage language education programs where generational loss of the language has already occurred.

3.3 Other language groups

Returning to the wider language context, there is the ongoing question of the provision of bilingual education (or rather, the lack thereof) for other language groups in Aotearoa/New Zealand. These groups comprise most obviously Pasifika peoples, many of whom are now 2nd or 3rd generation and New Zealand-born, having first settled in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 1960s. There has also been a significant growth of South East Asian economic migrants to Aotearoa/New Zealand over the course of the 1990s – bolstering long-standing, but previously very small Asian groups – along with the increased presence of refugee groups, initially from Vietnam and Cambodia and more recently from Somalia.

At present, the language and education provision for such groups remains very limited, the result largely of the predominance of English in Aotearoa/New Zealand and, the re-emergence of Maori aside, the ongoing valorization of English as both the pre-eminent national and international language. Consequently, an assimilationist imperative and a subtractive view of bilingualism are still clearly apparent in the majority of language policies, and language education policies, aimed at ethnic minority groups (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1994; R. Benton, 1996: May, 2002b).

These ongoing negative attitudes towards bilingualism and bilingual education for these groups can be seen, for example, in the deliberate delay in recent years in providing Pasifika students with any meaningful access to bilingual education. This, despite the fact that many remain first language speakers of Pasifika languages, and despite a recent assurance by the New Zealand Ministry of Education that 'students whose mother tongue is a Pacific Islands language or a community language will have the opportunity to develop and use their own language as an integral part of their schooling' (1993: 10). That said, Maori-medium education does appear to have provided a template for the nascent emergence of comparable Pasifika preschool language nests, modelled on Te Kohanga Reo,⁹ and, more recently, a limited number of primary (elementary) programmes. Meanwhile, a draft Pasifika bilingual education policy has finally been developed and is currently before the Minister of Education although whether any positive outcome will ensue is uncertain.

3.4 Resourcing and support

Finally, there is the ongoing issue – faced by Maori-medium education, and even more so by other language groups – of adequate resourcing and support. While there has been a rapid expansion of Maori/English bilingual training programmes within teacher education in recent years, there is an ongoing dearth of applicants with sufficient Maori language skills for such programs. Thus, these programs often end up spending much of their time on improving the participants Maori language skills, with insufficient attention paid to key issues such as instruction in second language teaching methodologies.

Likewise, there is a growing expansion of Maori language teaching material, and assessment practices, particularly at the elementary school level, but there is still much to be done here as well, particularly in establishing empirically-sound Maori language benchmarks for the predominantly second language learners of Maori in these programs.¹⁰

4. Conclusion

To conclude, it has not been our intention to present here an overly negative picture of bilingual education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Rather, we have wanted to highlight that, even when there have been significant advances made in bilingual education, as is clearly the case in Aotearoa/New Zealand, there remain ongoing and equally significant challenges. Moreover, these challenges are not just educational – indeed they never are just educational – but are invariably framed within the wider language, social and political context.

In this respect, it should not be forgotten that the stakes are enormously high – in Aotearoa/New Zealand's case, the possibility of moving from a predominantly monolingual, colonising context to a genuinely bilingual and bicultural country, founded on the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, and which is genuinely open to other language groups as well. This possibility still seems some way off – perhaps it will never be achievable, given the level of Maori language loss that has already resulted and the wider, ongoing dominance of English. However, the fact that it remains even a possibility, no matter how remote, is in no small part due to the significant advances in bilingual education outlined above.

Education may well not be able to compensate for society, or for wider language shift and loss, but it can still make a significant, even crucial, difference. In this respect, we are reminded of James Tollefson's observation, over ten years ago now, that:

the struggle to adopt minority languages within dominant institutions such as education ... as well as the struggle over language rights, constitute efforts to legitimise the minority group itself and to alter its relationship to the state. Thus while language [education] planning reflects relationships of power, it can also be used to transform them. (1991: 202; see also 1995)

Notes

- ¹ Aotearoa (land of the long white cloud) is the indigenous Maori name for the country now known as New Zealand. Maori first settled in New Zealand towards the end of the Pacific migrations which occurred from the second to the eighth centuries AD (Walker, 1990). The term New Zealand itself derives from the Dutch origins of the 'first' European explorer to sight the country in the seventeenth century. The conjoint use of the two names is becoming increasingly common and specifically recognizes the bicultural origins of the country.
- ² 'Pakeha' is the Maori term for New Zealanders of European origin. Its literal meaning is 'stranger', although it holds no pejorative connotation in modern usage.
- ³ This was not always so. The early mission schools which, while they taught only the standard subjects of the English school curriculum, did so through the medium of Maori. As a result, the period in which these schools were most influential 1816 to the mid 1840s saw a rapid spread of literacy among Maori *in both* Maori *and English*.
- ⁴ Prior to the Second World War less than 10 per cent of Maori had lived in cities or smaller urban centres. Currently, 82 per cent of Maori live in urban areas (Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Maori, 1995). Maori have thus undergone what is perhaps the most comprehensive and certainly the most rapid urbanization process in modern times.
- ⁵ This is, in turn, the product of a broader realignment of Maori/Pakeha relations since the 1980s which has seen the re-emergence of the Treaty of Waitangi as a central document in shaping Aotearoa/New Zealand public policy, including language education (May, 2002a; see also below).
- ⁶ Provision for Maori-medium education at the secondary and tertiary level remains very limited, due to the very small number of Maori-medium providers here. Most students at secondary level take Maori as a subject (In 2001, 33,203 took Maori as a subject for less that 3 hours a week; 8,075 for more than 3 hours a week), with the usual limitations that such a subject-based approach entails (lack of interest, lack of communicative fluency etc). In 2001, there were 1693 Maori language EFTS (equivalent full time students) at the tertiary level, 58% located in the three whare wananga (Te Puni Kokiri, 2001).
- ⁷ The Act also provided for the establishment of a Maori Language Commission, Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Maori. Closely modeled on the Irish Bord na Gaeilge (see Ó Riagáin, 1997), the Commission's role is to monitor and promote the use of the language, although its staff and resources are limited. A recent Draft National Languages Policy has continued these positive developments by highlighting, as its top priority, the reversal of the decline in the Maori language (Waite, 1992), although as yet further action in implementing the Draft report has not been forthcoming.
- ⁸ In 1996, for example, only 2.3 per cent of Maori school students were enrolled in a kura; the vast majority remain in the mainstream, predominantly monolingual education system (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1998).
- ⁹ In 1993, 177 such language nests, catering for 3877 children, were receiving government funding (R. Benton, 1996).
- ¹⁰ A Maori language method of organising reading materials into various levels of reading difficulty Nga Kete Korero was developed in the mid-1990s, although this applies predominantly to beginning and early readers in junior classes. For students working beyond the Nga Kete Korero levels, there is currently no empirically based method of identifying difficulty levels of Maori language texts, although there is work in progress to extend the framework to include reading material appropriate to middle and senior schools.

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