

Media mix needed for Māori language development

The long awaited Māori Television channel is now beaming into homes throughout Aotearoa/New Zealand, with the televised opening ceremony offering one of the few occasions that all New Zealanders could get an insight into Māori culture.

At the same time, Gerry Brownlee announced the National Party's, as yet unwritten, policy on broadcasting noting that state involvement would be up for review if National got into power. In the context of Māori language revitalisation efforts, he asked whether the \$45 million spent on Māori Television would be better spent on addressing the shortage of Māori language teachers and Māori language literature for children.

But there are many other areas where it could be spent as well - the development of monolingual Māori language dictionaries, continuing lexicon expansion work, Māori language software, Māori language computer games, Māori language games, and more research into bilingual and immersion education practice. That's before we even consider the development of appropriate assessment tools and ongoing professional development for teachers.

Mr Brownlee's question is, of course, rhetorical. What he does raise is the issue of the importance of quality Māori language teachers and Māori language books to language revitalisation efforts.

So what does research tell us about this link and the role television might play in language revitalisation?

In the 1970s and 1980s Richard Benton's research into the health of the Māori language highlighted the decline in the number of Māori language speakers. Something had to be done to arrest the dramatic decline in the numbers of Māori language speakers between World War II and the 1970s. In the 1940s most of the Māori population spoke the language – 30 years on, only a quarter were fluent.

Many factors were responsible for the shift to English. Large numbers of rural Māori moved to the city, where they had greater contact with speakers of English, and developments in communications meant that there were very few pockets where Māori was the main language spoken in the community, even where Māori were the majority.

Television was then, as Benton put it, “an all-English medium [as it was then], that brought English into many Māori homes more forcefully than any other mass media”.

The experience has been similar in other countries with indigenous or minority languages - Wales, Ireland and Sweden are often quoted examples.

Language revitalisation research internationally identifies a number of areas that are necessary to any language revitalisation strategy. They include increasing:

- Language knowledge (the ability to speak, understand, read and write in the target language)
- Inter-generational transmission (target language spoken between generations)
- Language domains (places where the target language can be heard and spoken)
- Language status (official language status, increasing its ‘prestige value’)
- Formal education in the target language (e.g., immersion education)
- Literacy (the production of print media in the target language)
- Mass media (newspapers, radio and television that use the target language).

In the past 20 years, there has been a revitalisation of the Māori language, with increasing language knowledge (Māori language classes - particularly those run by Te Ataarangi and wānanga), formal education (kōhanga reo, kura kaupapa Māori and total immersion schools) and literacy (Māori language newspapers, magazines, children’s readers and journals) all playing a part. Progress has also been made, although to a lesser extent in the areas of intergenerational transmission, increasing language domains, the language’s status, and acceptance in the mass media.

However, the language is by no means safe. Language revitalisation strategies do not work in isolation from one another. Together they make a total language environment. All are necessary. Formal education, for example, results in children acquiring a level of Māori language proficiency, which increases their knowledge of the language, which then increases the language domains, and perhaps the extent of intergenerational transmission. There can be no single strategy - it requires a multi-faceted approach.

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research is currently involved in a longitudinal study of more than 100 students in Māori immersion education. Most of the children (94 percent) in the study watched Māori television programmes.

When we interviewed these children there were only about six Māori language television programmes broadcast on free to air television. Of these programmes, three targeted adult audiences. These six programmes together produced about 5.5 hours of air time, on three channels over a 168 hour week. The children in our study were particularly enthusiastic about watching *Pūkana* (a Māori language youth show televised on TV3 on Sunday mornings). It was also the children's second favourite television programme overall, second only to *Dragon Ball Z*.

The children said that they liked seeing and hearing waiata, kapa haka and te reo Māori on television, they enjoyed the humorous plays, but importantly, they simply liked seeing Māori things on television. *Pūkana* was also perhaps popular with the children because they could see their peers - other students of kura kaupapa Māori or total immersion schools - on television. Just under half of the children also watched *Marae* (48 percent), *Te Karere* (46 percent), and *Waka Huia* (42 percent), all programmes aimed at primarily adult audiences. It will be interesting to see what the children say, when we interview them this year, about Māori Television.

So what of the connection between television and children's development? Television has been shown to have both positive and negative impacts on children's development. Some researchers think that moderate amounts of non-violent television can enhance educational performance, including spoken vocabulary and language development. There is evidence that television watching stimulates discussions with parent viewers and helps children clarify ideas. Other researchers say that language development is not strongly influenced. The NZCER *Competent Children* study (a longitudinal study of nearly 500 children attending English-medium schools in Wellington) found that television watching, if it was replacing other activities that are likely to support literacy development, could harm it. The quality, and variety of the children's total linguistic environment seems to be what is most important in their linguistic development.

Most of the children in our longitudinal study of Māori immersion students read Māori language literature at home and, according to their parents, enjoy reading in Māori. Most of the reading material was accessed from their school, although some families also accessed reading material from a local library.

Despite a recent increase in the production of children's readers, the children in our study tended not to read in Māori for leisure, possibly because while there has been an increase in the number of readers available for classroom use, there is still very little Māori 'leisure' reading material such as magazines, novels and comics.

However, reading is just one part of mastering a language. Language mastery requires being able to speak, understand, read and write in that language. If the whole of the \$45 million spent on Māori Television was spent on Māori language books for children, this would not on its own increase children's Māori language competency. There needs to be a *linguistic environment*, that in its totality supports their Māori language development.

Certainly, there is a shortage of teachers fluent in the Māori language, and a shortage of ongoing professional development for current teachers. The government over the last few years has been trying to address those teacher shortages through scholarships and it has initiated language enrichment programmes. Again however, these strategies on their own will not increase the status of the Māori language nor will they produce the necessary increase in the number of language domains in which Māori is spoken. The mass media, such as Māori Television, is an absolutely critical component of any language revitalisation programme, and the absence of mass media that use the target language is certain to ensure its demise.

It may be paradoxical that the shadow Minister of Māori Affairs and his leader, who have used the media extensively in recent months to get their message to the public, would question the value of Māori Television in increasing the profile and awareness of the Māori language.

ENDS

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This article was originally published in the New Zealand Education Review, June 9-15, 2004, p11.

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