

Compulsory Te Reo Māori Education: The Death of the Language?

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Globalization has threatened the survival of hundreds of indigenous languages, including te reo Māori in New Zealand, but revivalists must be careful to support efforts that truly keep these languages and cultures alive. Scholars in both the educational and anthropological communities debate the issue of language revitalization in postcolonial countries, but political leaders in these countries may pass governmental policies that are not necessarily informed by these academic conversations. Many politicians in New Zealand argue for compulsory te reo Māori classes to revitalize the language; however, I argue that the New Zealand government should not support a policy of compulsory te reo Maori classes in schools, as this would destroy, rather than revive, the language.

ALTHOUGH NEW ZEALAND became an independent country over a century ago, the effects of British colonization remain: the pressure to speak English and join in the global economy has led to a decline in the everyday use of te reo Māori, the language of the indigenous Māori people. Consequently, the Māori have found that this decline has weakened their cultural identity, especially considering that Māori culture has an oral tradition. Because language is the heart of Māori culture, scholars and the general public agree that te reo Māori should be revitalized; however, since the revitalization movement in the 1970s and 80s, politicians and educators have been debating the best way to accomplish this goal. Some voices, such as the Green Party and Māori Party, have even called for major educational reform through compulsory te reo curriculum. However, the people who hold this view fail to see the potential flaw in this plan: compulsion can foster apathy, and in some cases, hostility. Therefore, the implementation of te reo Māori as an educational requirement must be done carefully. Perhaps New Zealand can learn from Ireland's example, as Irish has been compulsory in public education for nearly a century. This paper will investigate England's influence on New Zealand, New Zealand's colonial history in comparison to Ireland's, and ideas about revitalization that could work in New Zealand's scenario. After investigating the political and ethical debates surrounding this topic, this paper will conclude that the New Zealand government should not support a policy of compulsory te reo Māori classes in schools; rather, it should support the effort to make these classes available in all schools. Social values, rather than educational policies, must change for true language revitalization to occur.

The Treaty of Waitangi was signed on February 6, 1840 by the British Crown and Māori chiefs to protect the Māori and establish British sovereignty over New Zealand (Binney 98), and it became the colony's constitution. Despite the intentions of the treaty, the government expected the Māori to follow English cultural norms, including speaking English (Paterson 200). The Māori and Pākehā (white settlers) also interpreted the treaty differently due to differences in the English and Māori versions of the treaty (Ballantyne 104). This led to conflict about what rights were actually given to the Māori in the treaty. On top of this, "... the fundamental logic of colonialism enabled by the document proved incompatible with the tino rangatiratanga [self-determination] guaranteed to Māori due to the two key issues of sovereignty and land" (207). Therefore, the Māori often felt that the Crown did not uphold their promises, and this sentiment still exists today. Even after the signing of the treaty, this dissatisfaction caused wars to break out between the Māori and Pākehā (Rabel 247). In response to the warfare, the English enforced an assimilation policy (Wanhalla 460). In 1944, the government introduced an English core curriculum to the school system (Nolan 379). Over time, New Zealand gained more independence from Britain, but the Anglicizing policies remained.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the government settled some grievances of the Waitangi Treaty (Bertram 561); at the same time, a cultural revivalism movement swept across New Zealand (Hill 533). Along with this movement, the government pushed forth language revitalization efforts. In 1987, te reo Māori became an official language of New Zealand, and schools introduced efforts to include classes about the Māori culture ("Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori"). Today,

a variety of informal, nonformal, and formal options to learn te reo Māori exist (Boshier 207). One especially effective nonformal method, the marae, functions as a community center and provides all the resources needed to learn te reo Māori in its cultural context (Boshier 233).

Like New Zealand, Ireland was colonized by the English and experienced similar issues resulting from Anglicizing policies. With the establishment of the National Schools in the nineteenth century, the British forced Irish people to learn English and give up Gaelic. As a result, by the time Ireland won its independence in 1921, most people spoke English as their vernacular. A few Irish-speaking communities, called the Gaeltacht, remained, but they were poorer areas compared to the rest of Ireland and thus struggled to keep Irish alive. At this time, Irish nationalism was prevalent, and many people saw the Anglicization of the country as a threat to national identity. Irish nationalists argued that Ireland would never be truly independent if the country lost its language, and many people agreed with this sentiment. Because of this, in 1922, Irish became compulsory in the national schools. It then became necessary for the Intermediate Certificate in 1927 and the Leaving Certificate in 1934 (Kelly 18). Education was carried out through the medium of Irish, meaning that subjects other than the language were taught in Irish, such as history and arithmetic. Consequently, the government sacrificed the quality of education because most students spoke English as their vernacular (Kelly 46). As a response to this situation, “In 1936 Shán Ó Cuív...spoke out about the ‘repressive’ atmosphere of the Irish-medium class leading to a slowing of the mental development of the pupils and an impaired power to express themselves or to learn” (Kelly 48). This atmosphere resulted from the fact that children who had a poor grasp of Irish struggled to learn subjects, such as arithmetic, in Irish-medium classes (Kelly 49), leading to a life of “repression, confusion, and unhappiness” (Kelly 50). The Council of Education reported in 1950 that hardly any progress was being made in reviving the language; however, throughout the 1960s, the government rejected scientific evidence of this unhealthy atmosphere, saying it was “part of a plot to subvert the language revival” (Kelly 42).

In response to the failure of compulsory Irish, the Language Freedom Movement was established in 1965 to push for an end to compulsory Irish (Kelly 140). By this point, the issue of language revitalization had become a polarizing and divisive issue (Kelly 141). In 1973, “...the necessity to pass Irish in order to pass the Leaving, Intermediate and Group Certificate examinations was

dropped” (Kelly 38). Since then, Irish has remained compulsory in education. In 2006, the *Government Statement on the Irish Language* listed thirteen policy objectives, including Objective 5: “Irish will be taught as an obligatory subject from primary to Leaving Certificate level...This will be supported by...provision of textbooks and resources, and support for innovative approaches to teaching and learning” (20-Year Strategy 4).

With these histories in mind, the question of compulsory te reo Māori education in New Zealand can be addressed. The idea of compulsory education has sparked a highly political debate in New Zealand. Although politicians are not academics, they will nonetheless have a greater impact on the education system because they will create government policies. For example, the liberal Green Party is pushing for compulsory te reo in schools. Their strategy includes having te reo Māori classes in the core curriculum in all public primary and secondary schools by 2030. However, this may not motivate students to learn the language for the right reasons. In Ireland, students view Irish as prestigious because it can get them into good jobs, such as translating and teaching positions, so students learn Irish to get these jobs later in life, (Pecníková 5-6). If forced to take te reo Māori, students in New Zealand may learn it for these reasons and not because they actually want to make it a part of their everyday lives. Also, this goal is logistically unrealistic and may cause more harm than good. New Zealand currently lacks the teaching force necessary to implement compulsory te reo Māori in all public schools. Ireland faced the same problem in the 1920s but ignored the issue, leading to poor quality Irish classes. Dr. Adrian Kelly, author of the book *Compulsory Irish*, explains the inefficiency of the classes:

Had realism been the guiding force behind the language revival policy in the schools, then some degree of success could well have been attained...At most, the generality of students received a passing oral knowledge of Irish and a more indepth written knowledge of it. Yet, this could have been achieved through the simple teaching of Irish as a subject, and with a hugely reduced educational and financial cost to the State and the students. (141)

Also, reports from inspections in the 2000s show:

...Irish was taught to a good or very good standard in only half of the primary classrooms inspected, and that in a third of classrooms, Irish was taught through the medium of English. Pupils in just over half of lessons were able to express themselves satisfactorily in Irish... At post-primary level, reports on a third of schools

refer to limited oral ability among students at junior cycle.” (*20-Year Strategy* 11)

Even today, compulsory Irish education has failed to revitalize the language, despite nearly a century of using this system.

New Zealand faces a similar situation as Ireland did, with similar practical concerns. If these problems are not solved first, compulsory te reo Māori in schools will become just as much of a disaster as the language revival movement in Ireland. At least for the present time, pushing for the availability classes on te reo Māori is the farthest government policy can go. Meanwhile, teachers must be trained and te reo Māori must gain a desirable standing in New Zealand’s culture. Dr. Kelly states that “The reality is...schools tend to follow society rather than vice versa...” (Kelly 139), so societal views must change before a compulsory policy would have even a chance of being successful. People must be willing to make te reo Māori a part of everyday life in order to allow the next generation to have opportunities to use it both inside and outside of school. Revitalization must be done carefully so that it fosters a positive attitude toward te reo Māori.

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, a politician named David Seymour, the leader of the conservative ACT party, calls compulsory te reo Māori “social engineering” (@dbseymour). With this statement, he is saying that the government should not support obligatory te reo Māori classes in schools because doing so would be too invasive, infringing upon people’s individual rights. However, some consider the British colonization of New Zealand “social engineering” because of the assimilation policies; as a result, every student must learn English in schools for its economic usefulness. This may lead some to believe that compulsory te reo Māori education is justified because it seeks to undo the damage caused during colonial times. Looking to Ireland’s example, however, reveals that trying to reverse history ends up causing more problems. For example, forcing language revival through schools “...damaged perceptions of the language while the policy of compulsion—in the education system and elsewhere—did not sit easily on the shoulders of the people” (Kelly 134). Also, although some people did become bilingual or at least reasonably skilled in Irish, “...the policy of compulsion in the schools and elsewhere alienated some people from the language or at least turned enthusiasm for the revival into apathy” (Kelly 133). Therefore, Seymour’s statement correctly reflects the negative aspect of compulsory language education—compulsion may have effectively destroyed the indigenous language, so that does not make it a healthy approach to revitalization.

The political debate brings up the underlying ethical debate about language revitalization. The real conflict behind the political arguments is whether the government has the right to force a language on its people, even if the reasons are different than they were during colonization. Along this line, we might ask if choosing to speak a language is an individual right. According to the Bible, the kingdom of heaven includes all nations and cultures, so morally, one culture (including its language) is not more valuable than another. Even though globalization makes English more economically helpful in today’s world, it does not eliminate any value of te reo Māori. Therefore, te reo Māori should be promoted in order to keep it alive. However, the language will only be a living language if people learn it for the right reasons. Everyone must be given the option to learn te reo Māori, but the motivation to learn it should come from seeing the value in the language and culture and desiring to preserve that. Otherwise, apathy instead of respect will grow, as shown in the example of Irish in Ireland.

Compulsory te reo Māori classes can also potentially isolate the language from the culture, taking it out of context and opening doorways to cultural misunderstanding. In Pecníková and Slatinská’s research on Irish language teaching, they conclude that “...language learning intertwines with culture. One without [the] other cannot exist during language classes” (11). They also conclude that “...no language should be minimized to just an economic asset. Language is part of our identity, culture and heritage” (11). Similarly, if students do not see te reo Māori as part of their identity or an important part of the nation’s identity, they will miss the point of making it a living language. Students may also fail to develop a respect for the Māori culture if language classes only focus on grammar and vocabulary without the cultural context.

Both New Zealand and Ireland had similar colonial histories, and their indigenous languages both suffered due to Anglicization. In an effort to revitalize the language, the Irish government has made Irish an obligatory subject in the public school system. Some political parties in New Zealand have been pushing for compulsory te reo Māori classes for the same reasons. However, compulsory Irish has massively failed to revitalize the language in Ireland in multiple ways: it has created apathy, allowed people to learn Irish for the wrong reasons, and proved to be inefficient in teaching the language. Therefore, the New Zealand government must avoid compulsory te reo Māori education if it wants true language revitalization to occur. Communities must work to change the social attitudes and values toward

te reo Māori so that students willingly learn it for the right reasons. That way, te reo Māori will become a spoken language in everyday situations. A government policy that works toward providing high-quality te reo Māori classes available as an option in schools may be helpful, but only if the teacher shortage can be solved. This conversation transcends these two countries, however, as social attitudes toward compulsory education and language revitalization impact most postcolonial countries. Globalization threatens the survival of hundreds of indigenous cultures and their languages, so language revivalists must ensure their efforts do not create more harm than good.

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