



**TE TĀHUHU O TE MĀTAURANGA**

*Ministry of Education*

## Bilingual Education in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Key findings from Bilingual/Immersion Education: Indicators of Good Practice

A summary of a research report by  
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# Bilingual education in Aotearoa/New Zealand

## INTRODUCTION

In 2004, researchers from the University of Waikato, led by Professor Stephen May, who is an international authority on bilingual education, looked at the national and international research on bilingual and immersion education to find out what works best in Aotearoa/New Zealand.<sup>1</sup>

This pamphlet highlights some of the key findings from Professor May's literature review that relate to Māori-medium education.

### Revitalisation and achievement

Between the 1930s and the 1960s, the number of Māori who could speak Māori had dropped from 96.6% to only 26% and a generation grew up not knowing how to speak Māori. This led to fears that Māori would become a "dead" language unless serious efforts were made to revive the language and encourage more people to speak Māori again.

Māori-medium education (schooling provided mainly in te reo Māori) was started in the 1980s to help turn the situation around.

In 2001, about 17% of Māori children of school age were enrolled in some form of Māori-medium education. This includes kura kaupapa Māori (primary schools where the whole school is taught in te reo Māori), other primary immersion schools, and schools with immersion or bilingual units or classes, as well as a few whare kura (secondary schools which teach in te reo Māori).

This has helped revive the Māori language, but there is still a long way to go. There are currently only about 22,000 fluent Māori speakers, many of whom are over 45 years old, and about 22,000 speakers with medium levels of fluency, the majority of whom are under 25 years old. There are also many, however, who know very little Māori – for example, 58% of Māori know only a few words or phrases, and make only limited use of Māori language in homes.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the focus is still on revitalising the language and cultural identity, but it is also on making sure that Māori-medium education is effective and students are successful academically – this was the focus of Professor May's report.

## WHAT IS BILINGUAL EDUCATION?

Bilingual education is where school subjects are taught in two languages and students become fluent speakers and writers in both languages by the end of their schooling.

One key form of bilingual education is immersion education, where students are taught mainly through a second language in order to become bilingual. French immersion schools in Canada are one example of immersion education. Māori-medium education is also immersion education because most students are second language learners of Māori. Immersion education is a highly successful form of education internationally – both in terms of achieving bilingualism and academic success for its students.

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<sup>1</sup> May, S., Hill, R., & Tiakiwai, S. (2004). *Bilingual/Immersion Education: Indicators of Good Practice. Final Report to the Ministry of Education*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

<sup>2</sup> Te Puni Kōkiri. (2001). *Māori Language Survey*. Wellington: Te Puni Kōkiri.

In immersion education, the language least likely to be spoken in the wider society (French in Canada; Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand) is used as the main language of school. The emphasis is placed on these languages because they would not otherwise be spoken outside of the school, where English dominates. Therefore, by promoting Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand or French in Canada, the aim of immersion education is to ensure that these languages continue to be spoken in the wider society.

### **Some more definitions**

Bilingual education is most effective when families, the school and the wider community see it as good for students to learn a second language and to become fluent in two languages. This is called an “additive” approach, because students are “adding” a second language rather than replacing one language with another. Research shows that additive approaches are very effective educationally and result in students becoming bilingual as well as biliterate – being able to read and write in two languages.

The research also highlights that becoming biliterate is the key to academic success. Students who are biliterate are more likely to succeed academically and also often outperform students in English-medium schools. Of course, they also end up knowing two languages rather than just one.

## **MĀORI-MEDIUM EDUCATION IN AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND**

Māori-medium education is immersion education where Māori is used for teaching most of the time.

In Māori-medium programmes, most of the students speak Māori as their second language – most come from homes where English is the first language. So Māori-medium programmes focus on improving the students’ Māori language skills and they also aim to revitalise the Māori language.

### **Levels of immersion**

Māori bilingual programmes are grouped into four levels, based on their level of immersion (teaching in Māori). Level 1 has the highest level of teaching in Māori (between 81% and 100%) and in Level 2, the children are taught in Māori for between 51% and 80% of the time. Level 3 is between 31% and 50% teaching in Māori and Level 4 is between 12% and 30% teaching in Māori.

These levels are used by the Ministry of Education for allocating funding to immersion programmes – the higher the level of immersion, the higher the funding.

### **Types of Māori-medium schooling**

Māori-medium, or immersion, education is delivered in a number of different ways, such as kura kaupapa Māori, bilingual schools and bilingual units.

Most full-immersion programmes in Aotearoa/New Zealand are kura kaupapa Māori – that is, separate whole-school te reo Māori programmes. There are also other programmes, such as bilingual classes or units, which generally (but not always) work on a lower level of immersion.

A “whole school” immersion programme has some advantages over other programmes in that it can create a positive environment for children to learn Māori. It creates an “additive” environment which values te reo Māori throughout the school, and where te reo Māori is not overshadowed by English as the mainstream language.

### Setting up a Māori-medium school

The Education Act provides two ways for a Māori-medium school to be set up – through Section 155 and Section 156.

Section 155 of the Act allows for state schools which use te reo Māori as the main language for teaching and the school follows Te Aho Matua.

Te Aho Matua is a philosophy based on Māori values, principles and practices developed for kura. It describes the principles of operation and for teaching in kura. The kaitiaki of Te Aho Matua is Te Rūnanganui o Ngā Kura Kaupapa Māori o Aotearoa.

Section 156 allows for state schools which have a special character which sets them apart from ordinary state schools. Some of these are schools where te reo Māori is the main language for teaching.

### How much bilingual education is needed?

The research clearly shows that the most effective bilingual schools are also those with the highest level of immersion (i.e., Level 1 programmes, where a lot of the teaching is in Māori). However, the research also shows that partial immersion schools can also be effective, as long as at least 50% of the teaching is in Māori (i.e., Level 2 programmes).

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, Māori-medium programmes have been expanded in recent years, particularly in English-medium settings. But some are not using te reo Māori enough as the “language of instruction” – that is, as the language for teaching. This is true for Level 3 and 4 programmes. While these programmes are important culturally, they are not as effective as Level 1 and 2 immersion programmes, which have at least 50% immersion.

The research shows there are significant benefits from having higher levels of immersion. This is because of a key principle in the research called “language interdependence”. This principle is based on the idea that the stronger a child becomes in one language – particularly, if they learn to read and write in that language – the more likely they are to successfully learn another language. Being strong in one language means being strong in another.

This is important to understand because many parents and whānau think that two to three years of kōhanga is enough and then it is better to transfer to English-medium schooling. However, transferring after a relatively short time will mean that students will still just only be beginning to speak te reo Māori, and will not yet have had time to learn how to read and write fully in Māori.

The same applies to parents thinking that one or two years is enough in a kura. There is a feeling that “too much” Māori may undermine the learning of English. However, because of the principle of language interdependence, it is actually the opposite that is true. Learning to speak, read and write in Māori means that students are more likely to succeed academically in both Māori and English. The skills students learn for Māori will also help them with their English.

Leaving Māori-medium education too early means students are more likely to fail in school. They will not yet know enough Māori, and will then be starting again, and trying to catch up, in English-medium schools.

There is a difference between being able to hold a conversation in a second language (what the research calls conversational competence) and knowing the language well enough to be able to learn academic subjects successfully (called “academic language proficiency”). The students may be able to hold a conversation in Māori after two or three years in kura but they need higher levels of language skills to be able to succeed in academic subjects. This requires knowing how to read and write well in Māori.

It also takes longer to learn an academic subject when it is being taught in your second language, and the research shows students need to stay in the bilingual programme for at least six years to know enough to be able to cope well academically. That is, there is a “second language learning delay”, which means students are below their grade level for a subject when they start learning in their second language (in this case, Māori) but then they start to catch up.

This means that at primary school level, a student needs to be in Māori-medium education (e.g., a kura or bilingual unit) for at least six, and preferably eight years, and they need to be “taught Māori” as well as being “taught in” Māori.

If students do not have good basic literacy skills in Māori they will struggle with academic English and with learning more generally; this is why it is so important to allow sufficient time for students to master te reo Māori first.

This difference between conversational and academic language also applies to learning English. Knowing how to speak English is not the same as being able to use classroom or academic English successfully. So, just like academic Māori, academic English also needs to be taught. This is why even very high level immersion programmes – where most of the teaching is in Māori – should also teach English at some point. Language learning will not just “take care of itself”. Students need to be taught how to read and write in English – they do not just “pick up” these skills automatically, even though English is spoken widely outside the school.

Teaching academic English helps students to understand how this is different from ordinary conversational English. It also helps students to understand more clearly the similarities and differences between Māori and English.

One way of ensuring students become fluent in Māori and in English is to start their primary schooling with a split of 90% of teaching in Māori and 10% in English and to move this to a 50/50 split over four to six years. This is a common approach overseas. Another way is to begin with a 100% immersion in Māori, but to introduce English as a subject a few years later.

There is no set year for starting English language instruction, although most bilingual schools outside of Aotearoa/New Zealand start in Years 4 or 5. Some Māori-medium programmes start English at this level for one to two hours a week, others leave it to Year 7 and 8.

The research shows that Māori-medium primary students who then go on to an English language secondary school need to be prepared for this move and need the chance to practise “academic” English literacy skills. Learning English as a subject in Māori-medium schools will help students to be better prepared for this.

## TEACHERS

Teachers must consistently use Māori for teaching. As noted above, for a bilingual programme to be effective, at least 50%, and preferably more, must be taught in Māori.

Teachers need to be able to speak, write and read fluently in Māori and in English, as they must be able to teach subjects in both languages and they are also acting as models of how to speak Māori – the students will copy their teachers, so the teachers need to be speaking correctly. It does not matter which is their first or second language – as long as they are fluent in both.

However, being fluent, on its own, is not enough. Teachers must also understand how children and young people learn a second language and they must know the best methods for teaching a second language.

Bilingual speakers often “mix” languages, and there is nothing wrong with this. However, the research shows it is best to keep the two languages separate when teaching. This helps

students to learn the languages more easily. This can be achieved in different ways, such as one language in the morning, the other in the afternoon, or one language for a subject one day and the other language for that subject the next day.

Because there is a lack of fluent Māori speaking teachers, teachers need special pre-service and in-service programmes that combine learning Māori with how to teach in Māori.

## SUMMING UP

For bilingual education to be effective, the whole school, led by the principal, needs to believe in, and promote, the value of being able to speak and write fluently in both Māori and English. That is, they need to adopt an additive approach.

Effective Māori-medium education means teaching must be in Māori for at least 50% of the time, and preferably more, as in Level 1 and 2 programmes.

Research shows that it takes longer to learn a second language at school to the same academic level as a first language – at least six years. The end result, however, is being able to read and write well in two languages (biliteracy). Research also shows biliteracy is associated with wider academic success.

Becoming biliterate, or being able to read and write in two languages, is the key educational advantage that students in Māori-medium education will have over students in English-medium contexts. This also means that Māori-medium schools should teach academic English as a subject at some point in their programmes. This is because, like academic Māori, it is not just picked up naturally – academic English also needs to be specifically taught.

The research shows that ideally teachers are fluent in both languages and that they also know how to teach a second language.

To be successful, bilingual programmes also need strong support from whānau and the community. Even if parents and whānau do not know much Māori themselves, they can still encourage their children to speak and read to them in Māori at home, wherever possible. This will help everyone at home to learn more Māori!

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For Professor May's full report, go to:

[www.minedu.govt.nz/goto/bilingual](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/goto/bilingual)

If you or your school want to talk about these issues further, you can contact Professor May in the School of Education at the University of Waikato, or by email at [s.may@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:s.may@waikato.ac.nz)