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From the Editor's desk..

The 2026 issue of New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics combines six comprehensive contributions published in sequence (Articles 1 to 6), advancing scholarship across heritage language teaching, prehospital paramedic communication, in-situ court interpreting, early childhood biliteracy, effective language learning strategies and the assessment of communicative competence in te reo Māori. Two of these papers are methodology papers which give excellent grounding to new and emerging researchers on the meticulous processes which need to be followed in research for both valid and reliable results. The academic articles are followed by a conference report on selected papers from the CLESOL Conference 2026 and two book reviews spanning research on heritage speaker bilingualism and language policies across continents. As part of the research section we also publish the abstracts of the prizewinning PhD and Master's theses which won the 2026 ALANZ thesis competition. As the judges wrote, both pieces of work advanced knowledge and further supported the development of theory in their respective areas, leading to significant contributions to the field of applied linguistics.

In 2026, we publish one comprehensive journal rather than publishing individual journal articles as they have been submitted and reviewed. In 2027, I intend to follow a similar trend, so would welcome articles as they come to hand in the first half of the year. Potential reviewers (of books and articles) are also welcome to write to the journal with credentials and qualifications. You would then play a role on our advisory board which includes people from academia and industry.

I welcome any feedback to this journal, our details are on the website. Enjoy the issue.



Nikhat Shameem

Editor

Journal Articles

Operationalising 'transformative' methodology in an exploration of the professional experiences of heritage language teachers in Aotearoa

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Abstract

This article offers a methodological account intended to illustrate how transformative research principles can be operationalised in heritage language education research. It discusses the theoretical framework and methodological decisions in a doctoral study on the professional experiences of heritage language teachers in New Zealand. The study is in progress at the time of writing, with data collection occurring from July 2025 - July 2026. Analysis and writing stages are expected to be completed in 2027. The research design is framed by transformative research principles including participant agency and reciprocity, within a critical ethnographic sociolinguistic approach. Research design and implementation decisions guided by these theoretical frameworks are described and discussed. While the findings of this study are still emerging, the methodological framework itself offers one approach to conducting research that centres participant agency, reflexivity, and impact. Analysis is ongoing, and findings are expected to contribute directly to participating communities, inform wider responses to language support across New Zealand, and illuminate data that could inform top-down policy decisions.

Keywords: Transformative research; heritage language education; critical ethnographic sociolinguistic approach

Background

Languages in Aotearoa

A decade ago, 40% of two-year-olds were growing up in multilingual homes in New Zealand (Morton, et al., 2014) and the population of multilingual speakers continues to increase (Buckingham, 2024), yet there is no coherent policy coordinating language matters (RSNZ, 2013). This marginalises community languages and undervalues the significant linguistic and cultural knowledge in multilingual communities, leading to broader social, academic, economic and wellbeing impacts (Harvey, 2015; Warren et al., 2023).

Decades of research in New Zealand indicate that despite dedicated family and community efforts, language shift to English occurs at a rapid rate here compared to similar international contexts (Holmes et al., 1993; Rietze, 2026; Umali, 2016). Further studies have found that while most multilingual parents hold positive language beliefs and actively use their languages in the home and community, children are often at the forefront of family language shift (Kim, 2019; Revis, 2015), with very limited access to language education throughout their primary school years (Connelly, 2022; Zhao, 2025). Upon starting compulsory education, students are exposed to a largely monolingual academic environment which emphasises the academic and economic success and social mobility afforded by English, often at the expense of their multilingual identities (Kitchen, 2014). Further compounding this, 'Learning Languages' is the only non-compulsory strand of the New Zealand curriculum, shifting the responsibility for language education to parents and communities.

For parents, community language schools are “a last line of defence” against linguistic and cultural loss (Alsahafi, 2019). These classes support literacy and cultural transmission, and serve as community, social, cultural and religious hubs (Cruickshank et al., 2020; Nofal, 2020). Most heritage language (HL) education occurs outside the compulsory school sector, "in a range of formal and informal venues: school rooms, religious and community halls, sitting rooms and garages" (Shameem, 2003, p.240). Such peripheral positioning imposes funding, resource and time constraints and impacts the professional experiences of educators working in these contexts (Nordstrom, 2020).

Heritage Languages

Heritage language refers to a language to which someone has a familial or cultural connection but which is not the dominant language in their current environment and can include both immigrant languages and indigenous languages (Seals & Shah, 2018). Of multiple terms used to refer to non-dominant languages in research, political and public discourse, each has socio-political nuances. For example, the term 'community language' tends to emphasise "the community's role in maintaining and revitalising those languages" (Seals & Olsen-Reeder, 2018). Although 'heritage language' can carry undesirable connotations of vulnerability and diminished present significance (Mertens, 2022; Seals, 2021), use of the term is increasingly common in New Zealand and Australian contexts, emphasising ancestral connection and agency in self-identification as a heritage language speaker (Hornberger & Wang, 2008; Seals & Olsen-Reeder, 2018).

State support for heritage languages depends on perceived political and economic importance (Shameem, 2003), and in New Zealand, most HL schools receive no government support. Constrained by limited financial resources, HL schools often rely on volunteer teachers and have limited opportunities for pre- and in-service professional development, affecting employment pathways and professional positioning. HL teachers navigate a unique professional landscape influenced by cultural, institutional and interpersonal factors. Research consistently highlights the marginalisation of HL teachers (Hammine, 2020; Nordstrom, 2020; Yang, 2023), both within their communities and in broader educational contexts. HL teachers often report feeling undervalued and constrained by systemic challenges, including a lack of suitable resources or locally relevant curriculum (Alsahafi, 2019), uncertainty about pedagogical best practice, impermanent facilities (Bland, 2021; Chen, 2023) and the perceived low status of HL education (Yang, 2023). This sense of marginalisation is compounded by the perception of HL teaching as a secondary or temporary role, with many teachers lacking the professional recognition afforded to mainstream educators (Hammine, 2020; Wu et al., 2011).

HL teachers' lived experiences within their educational contexts provide insight into the complex systems they navigate to facilitate language acquisition and maintenance. As key actors in HL education, these insights hold significant implications for the effective implementation of HLE (heritage language education) programmes, and the identification of systems that can better support language communities and heritage language education.

Aims of this study

The doctoral study which is the focus of this current article has two primary aims. One is to explore HL teachers' lived experiences within their teaching contexts to examine their navigation of enabling or constraining structural elements such as policy, curriculum, resources and institutions. The other aim is to explore HL teachers' professional positioning (c.f. Ashton & Qi, 2025) and their experiences of teacher education and professional development.

Researcher positionality

I grew up monolingual, sixth-generation Pākehā. I became a late sequential bilingual (c.f. Gharibi, 2016, p.14) in secondary school while studying in Japan and benefitted from additive views of bilingualism that emphasise the social, cognitive and academic benefits of learning an additional language. During my professional career as an English language teacher and teacher educator, I encountered prevailing monolingual ideologies in the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) sector. My Japanese proficiency was not valued; its use was actively discouraged. In an industry dominated by English, the professional pathways, resources and qualifications often fail to address the specific needs and aspirations of HL teachers. Many of the language educators I trained aspired to teach heritage languages within their communities or in schools yet faced marginalisation in the field including barriers to professional recognition and pay inequity. These experiences turned me towards researching HL teacher experiences so as to understand how better to support language education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Fundamentally, I believe research should be done in collaboration with communities such that participants have agency in the research direction to enact positive change. I am guided by transformative research principles (Mertens, 2021) to address systemic barriers faced by HL teachers.

Transformative research

Key theoretical underpinnings of transformative research emphasise stakeholder collaboration, cultural respect and reciprocity, advocacy, and awareness and mitigation of power dynamics alongside a cyclical and iterative research design (Mertens, 2021, p.3).

Transformative principles align with the critical ethnographic sociolinguistic approach as described by Heller, et al. (2017), which is centred on the relationship between social differences and

inequality and grounded in a social constructivist epistemology emphasising the situatedness of research as a participatory and social practice. According to Heller, et al., ‘critical’ means questioning power and inequality; ‘ethnographic’ refers to "in-depth, situated explorations [...] using representative telling cases", and ‘sociolinguistic’ situates research in a conversation about social, political and economic language matters (2017, p. 2).

This research is grounded in an ethical stance that promotes social inclusion and challenges oppressive power structures perpetuating inequality and discrimination. It involves a participatory and reflective process to build trust, address power imbalances, and ensure transparency in goals and strategies. Transformative research design is cyclical, with information from initial phases informing subsequent decisions. Phases for relationship building and contextual analysis, and conscious inclusion of plans for the impactful use of the resulting data and findings are essential throughout the research design (Mertens, 2021, p. 3). The following sections describe the methodology used in this research project, with a discussion of how the transformative framing informed design decisions.

Research methods

To explore the depth of HL teachers' lived experiences of structural constraints, positioning and professional development, I employed a multiple case study design with qualitative data co-constructed using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, and contextual data from field observations and document analysis.

Multiple case study

The multiple case approach enables deep, contextualised descriptions of each participant's lived experiences, cases selected for variation in terms of languages and contexts taught in order to reflect the diversity of HLE provision and to allow for meaningful cross case analysis and comparison (Duff, 2011, p. 105). A case could be a person, group, context or phenomenon; in this study, each case is a teacher and their navigation of their HLE context. This design is primarily exploratory and holistic, seeking not only to describe HL teachers' experiences but to understand how and why structural constraints, professional positioning, and professional development shape those experiences. Consistent with Maxwell's (2005) interactive approach to qualitative design, the case

study structure is not fixed but emergent, allowing the research to unfold iteratively (Maxwell, 2005 as cited in Duff, 2011, p. 96).

Statistical generalisability is not an aim of case study research. Rather, the rich description of each case enables the reader to assess the relevance of findings to their own contexts. Duff (2011, p. 105) recommends three or four participants to yield a richer set of experiences. Cross-case analysis further strengthens the study by allowing patterns, contrasts and shared themes to emerge across participants.

Participants

HL education contexts are diverse and classification of such is complex, so for this study, I chose to focus on teachers of unofficial languages without dedicated government support (c.f. Seals & Olsen-Reeder, 2018) across a range of settings. The participants comprise six HL educators engaged in diverse teaching contexts including community-based HL classes, mainstream education, internationally supported programmes, and adult community education. Community classes include those held by not-for-profit community organisations and informal play groups. Mainstream education programmes are integrated within compulsory education (years 1–13). Internationally supported programmes receive dedicated support from international governments, such as supplementary schools delivering overseas curriculum.

Participants were invited through a recruitment campaign of emails sent through professional networks of language teachers including the Community Languages Association of New Zealand (CLANZ), the New Zealand Association of Languages Teachers (NZALT) and by contacting organisations listed in 'Mapping who's out there', a stocktake report of language matters in New Zealand (Warren et al., 2023). Selection of participants followed a variation selection strategy (Duff, 2011, p. 105) with consideration to teachers' self-identification as HL teachers, and to cases from a range of different educational contexts. Due to my background as a language teacher educator, and professional connections with CLANZ and NZALT, a decision was made to exclude any of my former students in order to best mitigate issues of bias and power dynamics. This impacted the data in that it was not likely there would be many graduates of the New Zealand Certificate in Language Education who were not my former students, thus potentially excluding any HL teachers with New Zealand-based HL teaching qualifications.

Six teachers proceeded with the study, a manageable number allowing for meaningful cross-case analysis while still enabling the depth of exploration required for each individual case (Duff, 2011). Although not the aim of case studies, generalisability is limited by small sample size (Mackey & Gass, 2011). Language communities are diverse and complex, and such generalisation would risk obscuring the individual lived experiences that are central to this inquiry. Consistent with the transformative principles guiding this research, I do not conceptualise the participants as a 'sample'. Rather, participants are co-constructors of the data, and experts within their own domains.

Field observations and field notes

Field observation is vital within the critical ethnographic sociolinguistic framework, as it enables the researcher to engage with participants and communities in their teaching environments and to understand their lived experiences as they unfold in social practice (Heller et al., 2017). As Heller et al. (2017) argue, ethnography is fundamentally about "examining social practice as it unfolds, while it happens" (p. 8), and this principle underpins the observational component of the study.

Given the focus of the study centres on teachers' navigation of macro-structures, professional positioning and professional development, rather than pedagogy or student factors, I chose not to conduct classroom observations aimed at describing or evaluating teaching practice. Rather, I accompanied participants in their teaching contexts to observe the broader professional environment including institutional structures and policies, interactions with colleagues and community members, access to resources, and ways in which participants reflexively and interactively position themselves and others in their teaching contexts. This approach aligns with Borg's (2003) argument, that researchers should explore "what teachers actually do in their natural classroom environment"(p. 81), but extends this to encompass a holistic view of the professional and community context .

I conducted two to four observations with each participant, each lasting several hours. The first visit was a non-data-collection conversation intended for familiarisation with the teacher and relationship building, before subsequent visits were followed by semi-structured interviews. This staged approach acknowledges that moments in the research process including data generation are "recursively interconnected" (Heller et al., 2017, p. 3), allowing for reformulation and deepening of understanding over time. My approach can be described as semi-participant observation. Similarly, in a study of non-Māori teachers' beliefs, practices and influential factors in teaching te reo Māori in

English-medium primary schools, Patrick (2020) describes responding accordingly "on occasions where a teacher or student asked for help, or invited me to participate in the classroom programme" (p. 80). This characterisation resonates with my own experience, where the extent of my participation varied considerably across cases and was determined primarily by participants' preferences and the expectations of each community context.

It was helpful to frame my field observations as 'site visits', particularly for the University Human Ethics Committee, as it emphasised observational data as contextual and teacher-focused, and to clarify that no student data would be collected. Although students are an inseparable element of teaching, student data is outside the scope of this research.

In order to counter issues of intrusiveness and practicality, site visits were not audio or visually recorded. Detailed field notes were taken throughout each visit. These were unstructured, recorded on note paper which included regular visual reminders to note the time. I initially considered a more structured protocol, but ultimately decided against it due to the role of site visits as contextual rather than a primary data collection tool. An unstructured approach also ensured that what was noted in the field notes was constructed as part of my lived experience and interactions while I accompanied the teacher, rather than being constrained within a preconceived scope. This aligns with ethnographic traditions that value experiential, reflective engagement in fieldwork (Rapport, 2010). I also spent time immediately after each site visit to take reflective notes, using a different coloured pen to distinguish these from notes taken on-site. These considerations suggest that for researchers committed to transformative principles, the value of observational data lies not in any claim to objectivity, but in the richness of contextual understanding it affords, the relationships it sustains with participant communities, and the ongoing reflection on power dynamics that it enables.

Interviews, focus groups and document review

"Despite the obvious etymology of the term, most interviews are understood, not as reciprocal or two-way exchanges, but as a mechanism by which one party (i.e. the interviewer) extracts vital information from another (i.e. the interviewee)" (Edley & Litosseliti, 2018, p. 4). This traditional interview structure risks enacting what Bourdieu (1982) termed 'symbolic violence', as a form of non-physical violence arising from unaddressed power imbalances in research encounters, often unknowingly reinforced through 'normal' systems and processes (cf. Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001). As Seals et al., (2026) explain, symbolic violence manifests when researchers with relatively high

social capital and institutional authority interact with participants in ways that create subtle forms of domination. To mitigate this, researchers can draw on strategies including centring participants' agency in shaping the direction and content of discussions (Malpass et al., 2016), viewing interviews as collaborative, interactional events (Edley & Litosseliti, 2018), and reflexive acknowledgement of how their positionality shapes the research encounter (Talmy, 2010).

Semi-structured interviews were the primary interview format for this study because they enable flexibility for participants to emphasise topics of most importance to them (Edley & Litosseliti, 2018). This approach is well-established in heritage language teacher research; Nordstrom (2020) used semi-structured interviews to explore a community language teacher's experiences and challenges in Australia, adapting questions based on themes emerging from observations. Similarly, Patrick (2020) adopted a semi-structured approach described as "akin to an unfolding conversation" where the researcher could follow unpredictable directions in the discussion. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews also enabled me to adapt questions based on field observations and informal conversations held with participants prior to the interview. Approaches such as Talanoa (c.f. Balogh, 2022, Kennedy, 2021) and Hui are also used in the New Zealand context and align well with the collaborative, participant-centred aims of this study. However, as Pacific and Māori research methodologies with specific cultural protocols, they were not appropriate for me to adopt as a Pākehā researcher working with a diverse participant group spanning multiple language communities.

Several prompts were drafted to elicit experiences and thoughts relating to each research question. These were piloted and sent to participants in advance of interviews, a critical form of empowerment and equity for participants as second language English speakers, which influenced the interviews differently across cases. Participants were also invited to suggest any questions they wanted me to take to interviews with other participants which served as a further means of supporting their agency in the research direction, and resulted in some participant-generated questions being added to interview prompts.

There are challenges that arise from interviews, not least for this project, on the matter of our shared and preferred languages. As an English speaker, I am acutely aware that my presence in the research encounter creates an English-dominant environment which may constrain how participants express themselves and what they choose to share. This is a power dynamic embedded in the

research design itself; my linguistic repertoire as the researcher shapes the encounter in ways that may not be immediately visible (Talmy, 2010). To mitigate this, I encouraged participants to respond in ways they felt most comfortable with, including making use of their full linguistic repertoire. Two participants chose to provide written responses to the interview prompts. During our conversations and interviews participants sometimes used intra-sentential code switching to express untranslatable terms. Several participants had research experience in English-medium higher education and were comfortable discussing the epistemological and ontological lens of this research and methodology, in addition to sharing their lived experiences. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that the invitation to use their full linguistic repertoire does not fully resolve the underlying asymmetry; the researcher remains the primary audience, and in our interactions, participants feel they must make their contributions intelligible to me.

Voice data in interviews was transcribed using sonix.ai following a review of their data privacy policy. The transcript was cleaned manually and used primarily for ease of initial coding. Deeper analysis of extracts will be done directly with the audio data to maintain contextual and discourse features. Initially, I offered participants the opportunity to review their transcripts, a practice known as Interviewee Transcript Review (ITR). However, my experience with ITR aligns with Hagens and colleagues' (2009) finding that it provides limited value relative to the burden it places on participants in terms of time and potential discomfort reviewing grammatical inconsistencies or sensitive content. The practice, while well-intentioned, can itself become a form of symbolic violence. I therefore moved away from ITR in favour of ongoing informal participant validation during site visits and follow-up conversations, which allowed participants to clarify or expand on interview content without the formality and labour of transcript review. Participants were still provided transcripts on request but were not asked to provide feedback. This approach better aligns with the transformative research principle of reducing participant burden while still ensuring that participants have agency over how their contributions are represented (Mertens, 2021). Focus groups provided another forum for participant triangulation, further strengthening the interview data.

Focus groups create a collaborative space where participants can assert greater agency over the data, thereby promoting a dialogic approach to meaning-making (Edley & Litosseliti, 2018). Focus groups were intended to shift the dynamic from a researcher-participant dyad to a participant-participant interaction. The group setting allowed participants to respond to preliminary

findings, challenge or build on each other's perspectives, and shape the direction of discussion in ways that individual interviews may not afford. In this study, a focus group comprising six research participants served two key purposes: co-constructing triangulated data through collective reflection and facilitating professional networking among HL teachers who often work in relative isolation. Only one focus group session was conducted. The focus group was designed to bring together participants from across the multiple cases, and with five of the six study participants in attendance, the session drew on perspectives from nearly all the teaching contexts represented in the study. The focus group protocol and prompts were developed by adapting Krueger's (2002) guidelines. Discussion prompts included a word cloud of themes emerging from initial coding of the interviews, when participants commented on any that stood out to them, or any gaps they noticed, then as a group, co-constructed further discussion on those themes. One participant specifically identified a gap in the codes presented in the word cloud, offering vital input into recursive coding and analysis. By treating interviews and focus groups as collaborative, co-constructed encounters, centring participants' agency in shaping the direction and content of discussions and reflexively acknowledging the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship, symbolic violence can be mitigated and participants' voices centred in driving the direction of data collection. The varied ways in which participants engaged with the interview process suggest that this approach was successful in enabling participants to exercise agency over how they contributed to the research. Nonetheless, I recognise that interviews remain inherently asymmetrical encounters; the researcher ultimately frames the questions, sets the agenda, and interprets the data. The strategies described here are not a solution to this asymmetry but an ongoing practice of reflexive attention to it.

Document review was employed as a complementary data collection method to examine the macro-structural influences on HL teachers' experiences. Bowen (2009) describes this as "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents" involving "finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesising data contained in documents" (p. 27). This method was well-suited to addressing the first research question, which concerns the impact of educational policies, curriculum, professional qualifications and institutional structures on HL teachers' experiences. Documents were sourced through two channels. First, I selected policy and qualification documents that shape the broader structural landscape of HL education, including the Ministry of Education's progress report on developing a National Languages Strategy for schooling

and the qualification document for the New Zealand Certificate in Language Education (NZCLE). Participants were then encouraged to identify documents relevant to their teaching contexts. These included coursebooks, lesson outlines, syllabus documents, instructions for parents, and articles on second language acquisition and heritage language education. Documents were provided in heritage languages, and translation for preliminary analysis was done using Google Translate. Document analysis is ongoing involving immersion in the documents, building a coding frame with preliminary categories, and refining categories through iterative engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2018). This process was applied to both documents and interview data and is described in more detail below. Policy documents were also analysed using ethnographic questions considering how texts are written, who writes them, for what purposes, what is omitted, and what is taken for granted about the reader (Silverman, 2006, p. 169). This approach enabled a critical examination of how language hierarchies, professional positioning, and policy are constructed and maintained at the systemic level.

Data analysis and ethical considerations

Rich contextual data from field notes, qualitative data from the interviews and focus groups, and the document review data are being analysed following a systematic thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2018). Systematic thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis approach whereby themes emerge through a recursive analysis of data and theoretical background from literature both inductively and deductively. This is an iterative and recursive process in which data is revisited throughout transcription, coding, and the selection of excerpts and writing of analytical findings, which is not a straightforward sequence. The approach aligns with Heller et al. 's (2017) conception of research as a rhizomic process where different stages (design, fieldwork, analysis and writing) are situated, interconnected and constantly revisited. Nvivo is used to support coding and categorisation of themes across the data set, with the ability to integrate multimedia data such as documents, audio and transcripts. Effective personal knowledge management throughout the project was achieved using Obsidian.md (c.f Reck, 2023), enabling the keeping, linking and searching of literature review notes, annotated bibliographies, daily reflective notes, supervision meeting agendas and draft analyses and writing. These all contribute to the recursive process of data analysis.

This research was granted ethics approval by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, number 2025/HE040151 on Friday 09 May 2025. Participants were provided with an information sheet, frequently asked questions, and signed a consent form prior to participation. The information sheet outlined the research purpose, data collection methods, confidentiality measures, and participants' rights. These were also discussed recursively with participants, many of whom had experiences themselves as researchers and had engaged in discussions of methods and ethical implications. In the presentation of findings, all identifying information will be represented according to participants' wishes. This could range from participants' choice of a pseudonym to represent them and their language communities, to an explicit acknowledgement of them and their contribution to the research. Participant choice will be made following an informed discussion of the implications to anonymity, but allow for participants' expertise and contribution to the project to be acknowledged in a culturally appropriate way. Data is stored securely on password-protected university systems, and will be appropriately destroyed following completion of the project.

Significance, outcomes and way forward

Each stage in the research design, data collection and analysis is framed with the transformative research principles which centre addressing systemic barriers and power imbalances, conducting research in collaboration with communities, ensuring participants have agency in the research direction and using research to enact positive change. This article offers a transferable methodological framework for operationalising transformative research principles in applied linguistics. It demonstrates how small, deliberate shifts in research procedures can meaningfully redistribute power in the research encounter, and how treating participants as co-constructors of data requires ongoing reflexive attention to established research practices.

Transformative methodology centres on several commitments: stakeholder collaboration, respect and reciprocity, advocacy, and mitigation of power dynamics. These are operationalised through a multiple case study design combining semi-structured interviews, focus groups, field observations, and document analysis, each adapted to centre participants' expertise. Practical strategies include sharing prompts in advance, inviting participants to contribute questions, replacing interviewee transcript review with ongoing informal validation, and treating field observations as contextual rather than evaluative. This combination of methods is particularly suited to research contexts

where understanding the dynamics between individual experience and structural factors is central to the inquiry.

Data analysis is ongoing. As requested by participants, results will inform the development of guides for communities, families and educators on heritage language maintenance, pedagogy and language beliefs. At a structural level, data may contribute to language policy and teacher education responsive to the complex needs of language educators.

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Paramedic experiences when communicating with limited English proficiency in the prehospital setting: A systematic review

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Abstract

As global migration increases, more patients experience language barriers when accessing healthcare. The role bilingual paramedics have in patient access to healthcare is increasingly being recognised. A systematic review of contemporary literature between 1st January 2015 and 1st June 2025 examined paramedic experiences when assessing and managing Limited English Proficient patients prehospitally. The articles were reviewed, data was extracted and synthesised. Four articles met the inclusion criteria. Five themes were identified: telephone/bystander interpreting, time on scene, transportation, and impact on bilingual prehospital clinicians. Each theme highlighted that language barriers frustrate paramedics

when conveying sensitive information through a third party, therefore raising concerns about reliance on informal interpreters in the prehospital setting. Language barriers can cause paramedics' unease and may affect healthcare delivery. Delays in care have ongoing consequences for both paramedics and patients. The vulnerability of paramedics who rely on third-party informal interpreters is significant. Further research is required to close the prehospital language barrier gap for Limited English Proficient patients.

Keywords: Language barrier, experiences, paramedics, Limited English Proficient (LEP) patients

Introduction

Increasing migration means paramedics more frequently encounter patients who do not speak the dominant language of the host society (Abubakar et al., 2018; Simon-Kumar et al., 2025). In the prehospital setting, language discordance can limit assessment, treatment explanations, consent, and safety-netting, while also increasing reliance on interpreters, family members, bystanders, or bilingual clinicians (Eser, 2020; Gray, 2019; Kanengoni-Nyatara et al., 2024; Ministry for Ethnic Communities, 2024; Sulaiman-Hill et al., 2025). Unlike hospital settings, paramedics often work unexpectedly in dynamic environments where formal interpretation may be difficult to access, and informal interpretation may not ensure accuracy or confidentiality.

Language barriers can prevent patients from describing symptoms or medical history, increasing the risk of misdiagnosis, delayed care, and dissatisfaction for both patients and clinicians (Adhikari et al., 2021; Mahmoud et al., 2013; Yeo, 2004). These risks are particularly significant in prehospital care, where decisions are often made rapidly and with incomplete information. This systematic review examines current literature on paramedics' experiences when communicating with Limited English Proficient (LEP) patients in the prehospital setting, including the strategies used to manage language barriers and implications for patient care.

Methodology

The protocol for this review was registered with PROSPERO under registration number CRD420251143050. The updated PRISMA 2020 guidelines were used to report this systematic review (Page et al., 2021). A systematic literature search was conducted across EBSCO Health databases, PubMed, Google Scholar, Scopus, Ovid, Wiley, Medline, and CINAHL. Search terms centred on paramedics, language barriers, experience, and qualitative research, with expanded terms developed with a university librarian (Table 1). Searches used Boolean operators and were supplemented by manual citation screening.

Table 1

MeSH Terms

Keyword	MeSH Terms
Paramedic	Ambulance, Ambulance Officer, Ambulance Personnel, EAS, Emergency Ambulance Service, EMS, EMS Personnel, Emergency Medical Service, EMT, Emergency Medical Technician, First Responder, Paramed*, Prehospital, Pre-hospital
Language Barrier	Bilingualism, Cultural Diversity and Linguistic Diversity CALD, ESL, Interpret*, Language Barriers, Limited English Proficient, Linguistic barriers, Low English proficiency, Multilingualism, Translate
Experience	Experiences, Perceptions, Use, Views
Qualitative Research	Focus Groups, Interviews as Topic, Narration, Qualitative Research, Thematic Analysis

Data extraction and quality appraisal

The database search identified 1,656 articles. After duplicate removal, 934 articles were screened; 38 proceeded to abstract screening, eight to full-text review, and three met the inclusion criteria. One further article was identified through citation screening, resulting in four included articles. Study selection was summarised using a PRISMA diagram (Haddaway et al., 2022). Included articles were appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme systematic review checklist

(Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2024). Appraisal considered study design, sampling, data collection, analysis, ethics, reflexivity, reporting, and applicability. Themes were identified during data extraction and synthesis.

Results

Four articles were included in this systematic review (see Table 2). Three studies used qualitative methods, while one article used a mixed qualitative-quantitative approach. Three studies collected data through semi-structured interviews with individuals or groups, and one article used questionnaires followed by focus group interviews. Two articles were conducted in Sweden, one article was conducted in the United States of America only, and one article was conducted in the United States of America and South Africa. Within the four articles, the number of participants interviewed ranged from 8 to 27. All four articles focused on the prehospital clinician's strategies to care for LEP patients where there were language barriers. Two articles also described how ambulance personnel adapted to talking to patients with LEP. All four articles reported barriers in obtaining information at the scene. The findings can be split into five key findings: telephone interpreting, bystander interpreting, time on scene, transportation, and the role of bilingual prehospital clinicians during assessment and management of their patients.

Table 2

Study Characteristics

Article / Origin	Study Design & Analysis	Sample Size	Main Findings
Alm-Pfrunder et al. (2018), Sweden	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews; content analysis	11 Prehospital Ambulance Nurses	Body/tone used for trust; translation devices & bystanders used as interpreters; transport direct to ED expedited due to lack of secure prehospital assessment.
Lundin et al. (2018), Sweden	Exploratory & descriptive design, semi-structured interviews & focus groups; inductive content analysis	46 Healthcare Professionals (8 Paramedics)	In high acuity, family & bilingual staff used; patient status determined interpreter choice; informal/formal guidelines biased interpreting service use.

Stadeli et al. (2023), USA	Qualitative study, semi-structured interviews & focus groups; thematic analysis	39 EMS Providers (26 Firefighters, 13 Paramedics)	Telephone interpreting used as last resort; high acuity facilitated objective care with minimal communication; lower acuity transported due to miscommunication fears.
Tate et al. (2016), USA / South Africa	Mixed-method study, semi-structured & focus interviews; qualitative analysis	125 Telecommunicators, 27 Field Providers	Heavy reliance on multilingual co-workers & bystanders; 3rd-party telephone interpreting effective when available, but time delays and/or frustration caused preference for other methods.

Telephone interpreting

All four articles stated that phone interpreting was an available option but was seldom accessed. Tate et al. (2016) reported that paramedics recognised the benefit of obtaining necessary information but were frustrated by the coordination required when accessing an interpreter. For paramedics to liaise with an interpreter, they must phone into the interpreter service, explain what language interpreter is required, await the interpreter coordinator to connect with the language-specific interpreter before connecting with the paramedic in order to interpret for this patient. This may take a period to co-ordinate the connection between the paramedic on scene and the interpreter on the telephone call. Additionally, this causes the paramedic additional frustration while waiting to contact a specific interpreter if there is an interpreter available. This was also echoed by Lundin et al. (2018) and Stadeli et al. (2023). It was also noted for the paramedic, the rigmarole of connecting with a telephone interpreter became a barrier to communication and took time away from the assessment rather than supporting the evaluation.

Bystander / relative interpreting

All four articles described using bystanders or an informal interpreter to gather information and save time during the assessment stages (Alm-Pfrunder et al., 2018; Lundin et al., 2018; Stadeli et al., 2023; Tate et al., 2016). Tate et al. (2016) stated approximately one quarter of the participants specifically described children, mainly a sibling of the injured or sick child, being used as a bystander interpreter. Alm-Pfrunder et al. (2018) further noted that relatives served as informal interpreters. However, the registered ambulance nurses preferred not to use relatives because of the

uncertainty of the accuracy of interpretation during the assessments as the clinician described a sense of uncertainty. One participant in this study stated, “You never know if everything you say is translated verbatim, or what is being misinterpreted” (Alm-Pfrunder et al., 2018). This was further described as bystanders that were not related to the patient were used in the unplanned environments. In two of the articles, the participants of both studies further described the risk of breaching the confidentiality of patients when using bystanders as interpreters (Lundin et al., 2018; Tate et al., 2016). Tate et al. (2016) stated 33% of participants had also described it as a limitation to employing this common strategy.

Time on scene and transportation

Extended times on scene are often attributed to the need for interpretation, which may require responses to be repeated multiple times before an appropriate response or effective communication with both parties can be reached. Each additional question may further prolong the interaction as both the question and answer may need to be clarified to ensure accurate understanding from both parties (Alm-Pfrunder et al., 2018; Stadeli et al., 2023). As a result, the conversation appears longer and time-consuming for the clinicians on scene. This repetition causes frustration for both the patient and clinician as they must reiterate information to achieve a mutual understanding. Delayed responses may signal to the patient that they may be misheard or misunderstood causing additional distress. Such distress can be exacerbated by the preconceived notion that the ambulance service's primary role is to transport patients to definitive care. This perceived expectation may stem from when the patient was misunderstood on a previous occasion. This was due to perceived expectations from the patient, uncertainty about miscommunication of symptoms, or unresolved issues related to the language barrier (Stadeli et al., 2023).

From the clinician's perspective, the time on scene may be seen as operationally crucial Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The KPIs are usually based on operational time on scene. Stadeli et al. (2023) described being on scene for an extended period of time as a failure in the operational KPIs of the job cycle. Prolonged job cycles increase ambulance turnaround times, reducing the availability for emergent or life-threatening incidents. Additionally, there are perceived delays to getting the patient towards a place to provide healthcare instead of completing an in-depth assessment on scene to manage the patient in the community.

Stadeli et al. (2023) described how LEP patients were frequently transported, regardless of their perceived illness severity. The ambulance was also seen as the next level of care and a means to get further assistance; therefore, patients also attended the emergency department for less urgent presentations (Alm-Pfrunder et al., 2018). Additionally, when the prehospital provider was unable to explain, or there was a perceived lack of understanding or retention of what the provider said, the patient was subsequently transported to the hospital (Alm-Pfrunder et al., 2018). It was also observed that the higher the patient's acuity, the greater the likelihood that transport to a medical facility would be expedited. Objective findings such as vital signs were more emphasised in these situations, and communication was minimised to facilitate transport to a medical facility (Stadeli et al., 2023). All four studies mentioned that due to the language barrier, transport to a medical facility was seen as a solution or to manage the situation, and to ensure the clinician had not missed anything.

Role of bilingual prehospital clinicians

Bilingual clinicians were identified as having a key role in language discordance in the prehospital setting. Lundin et al. (2018) stated that bilingual healthcare professionals were considered a good option due to their accessibility and their presence at the scene. Additionally, bilingual colleagues were able to help the patient receive information quickly and assess their health needs, ensuring the appropriate type of follow-up care was put in place. It was thought that having a bilingual colleague who spoke the other language involved was considered unbelievably valuable (Alm-Pfrunder et al., 2018; Tate et al., 2016). Prehospital clinicians tended to adapt and use a few key words in the native language of LEP patients. This was usually coupled with non-verbal cues, such as speaking in a friendly tone or expressing openness, to create a sense of safety that helped overcome the language barrier. However, Lundin et al. (2018) also cautioned against using bilingual prehospital clinicians as informal interpreters. This may be because a prehospital clinician is not neutral when interpreting and may have less knowledge of accurate medical terms than a formally trained interpreter.

Discussion

This review found little literature highlighting language discordance in the prehospital setting, yet paramedics are often the first healthcare professionals that LEP patients interact with in an emergency setting. It is worth noting that one article only interviewed Registered Nurses who worked as emergency prehospital personnel (Alm-Pfrunder et al., 2018). It is described that the

nurses required at least one year of experience in the prehospital setting prior to being eligible for their study. However, it is unknown if their experience of nursing differed from the perspective lens compared to a paramedic in the prehospital setting. The article was included as it highlighted the experiences of prehospital clinicians in an ambulance setting. This is the first in-depth review that has focused on the importance of LEP patients and language barriers in the prehospital setting. LEP patients are some of the most diverse and vulnerable people in the healthcare setting and not being able to speak the common language of the country can be intimidating and scary (Grow, 2008). This review highlights the factors that both the prehospital clinicians and the LEP patients face in this acutely vulnerable time in prehospital care. Five key factors were raised in the articles in this review: telephone interpreting, bystander interpreting, time on scene, transportation, and the role of bilingual prehospital clinicians.

Prehospital healthcare delivery of assessment and treatment is more complicated in LEP patients. Paramedics depend on the information that is given to them. In an emergency and if an ambulance has been called, there is usually a heightened emotional state, and this may be further complicated by low language proficiency. Accurate, timely, and appropriate interpretation at this scene is key to making a real-life difference for the patient and their healthcare journey. Telephone interpreting is a way that prehospital clinicians attempt to bridge this gap. In Aotearoa New Zealand, paramedics have access to telephone interpreting for patients. Currently, there are no statistics on how often paramedics in Aotearoa New Zealand are calling for interpreting services. Telephone interpretation allows a LEP patient to have a conversation with a prehospital clinician who may not speak the same language and enables the patient to be heard in their own preferred language of medical care (Crezee & Roat, 2019). The use of professional telephone interpreting services can contribute to positive patient satisfaction and improved patient care for LEP patients (Tate et al., 2016). Although telephone interpreting is offered to mitigate and minimise language barriers and discordance, it can still lead to misinterpretation because non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and vocal nuances, cannot be conveyed through the interpreter, which may direct the clinician down a different healthcare pathway (Lundin et al., 2018). This can cause unease for the clinician and the patient in an unpredictable environment. Communication between the patient and the prehospital clinician is also limited by the skills and experience of the telephone interpreter. Additionally, the time required to obtain an appropriate interpreter for a specific language may be seen as a hindrance in a time-sensitive situation. Therefore, it may lead to a delay in care, and the option may be

bypassed in favour of non-verbal objective clinical measures, such as observing vital signs (Stadeli et al., 2023; Yeo, 2004). This may lead to poorer outcomes for LEP patients, possible multiple presentations, and delays to their care.

However, using an informal third-party interpreter, such as a bystander or relative, may risk breaching a patient's confidentiality, and there may be a lack of language competency in accurately conveying medical terms. They may also censor information, or the person may not want to answer questions, for example about terminations of pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases (Keller et al., 2023; Russell et al., 2015; Schouten et al., 2012). There is also a risk that relatives may withhold or may not convey all the information that is interpreted (Alm-Pfrunder et al., 2018). Of note, sometimes there are cultural or social misunderstandings about the role of the ambulance service, which may be seen simply as a means of transport to a hospital or other healthcare facility, rather than as highly skilled clinicians in their own right, assessing and managing the patient (Adhikari et al., 2021).

Infants and small children in a bilingual household are reliant on their parents as interpreters, who may have immigrated to a new country and do not speak the country's dominant language (Crezee & Grant, 2016; Cohen et al., 1999; Hui, 2024). However, as children grow, they are more likely to acquire language skills in a second language, compared to their parents. Due to this, the child is likely to end up interpreting for elders with status above them and becoming the language broker for their family (Chao, 2006). Children are unlikely to understand the context of interpreting for an older family member, or it may be a medical issue that the patient may not want to disclose to a younger family member. When children assume the responsibility of a family language broker, this can place premature stress on the child to understand the gravity of the situation (Dorner et al., 2008). This raises questions about whether children should ever be used as informal interpreters in the prehospital setting, even as a last resort.

Linguistic barriers affect time on the scene, the time that paramedics spend with an LEP patient at their home or at the scene of the incident. As noted earlier, it took time to arrange for a professional medical interpreter to be available on the telephone. Some paramedics clearly thought this extra time on the scene was excessive. Time on scene is a prominent issue in ambulance services, for both clinical and operational reasons. Clinically, some patients can only be treated in hospital and delayed time on scene can lead to clinical deterioration, which can even become life-threatening.

An example of this would be internal haemorrhage, such as from blunt force trauma, which can only be controlled by surgical intervention. Ambulance clinical practice is to spend minimal time on scene with patients who have potentially life-threatening conditions. Operationally, ambulances are a finite resource, and paramedics are expected to manage patients in a timely and expedient manner and then be available for other emergent incidents. Delay with one patient may mean another is kept waiting. Services commonly monitor time on scene as a KPI, a key measure of service efficiency. Interestingly, linguistic barriers affected time on scene in two diverse ways.

In lower-acuity situations or with patients presenting with more complex medical conditions, interpreter involvement enabled prehospital clinicians to engage in more comprehensive discussions with patients. Therefore, more time could be devoted to assessing and providing more succinct, in-depth, and appropriate care for the patient. However, it was also perceived as a delay in gathering additional information and a logistical limitation in getting an interpreter online. Additionally, the prehospital clinicians noted that external coordination, such as extended on-scene times, was perceived as a negative delay to key performance indicators (KPIs); it was unreasonable to address the language discordance at the scene (Tate et al., 2016). The KPIs for paramedics are based around time of arrival on a scene and time to definitive care. In these cases, the time on scene was the KPI that determined the success of management of a patient. Therefore, a delay on scene may be seen as a negative performance indicator and a slowing of the incident cycle. This may lead to other repercussions such as delays in other life-threatening incidents due to clinicians being tied up on scene. However, a study by Tate et al. (2015) showed a shortened or no-delay in time to expedited transport options when clinicians on scene were attending to language barriers.

Caution and attempts to overcome language barriers did not impact expediency in dealing with cases where the clinical diagnosis was potentially life-threatening. This included the example, when chest pain led prehospital clinicians to transport LEP patients even in non-urgent situations, and objective findings showed the patients to be stable. This can be reflective of the clinician being cautious not to misinterpret or misunderstand a LEP patient and therefore the risk of tolerance threshold is lowered. This was due to clinicians perceiving that the patient had miscommunicated their symptoms, that underlying problems had not been addressed, and that the patient expected the ambulance service to serve as a means to next-level care (Alm-Pfrunder et al., 2018; Stadeli et al., 2023). Overall, although there is a perceived notion that getting an interpreter or a third party to interpret may be time-consuming and add delay to the clinical assessment process, evidence shows

there is in reality, a shortening of time on scene and expediting of transportation to a medical facility. This shows the risk tolerance clinicians face in the unpredictable environment; the factor of time on scene does potentially lower the threshold to transport LEP patients. This may be seen as a safety net in the prehospital setting but potentially fills up the hospital beds with patients who may not require hospital-level care and may be more appropriately cared for by primary care. This raises the question of whether there is a better solution for safety netting LEP patients outside of hospital care.

The correlation between the condensed time on scene and patients being transported as a safety net was quite noticeable. There are some concerns with this practice. Because the on-the-scene assessment is truncated, with objective findings based on non-verbal physical examination and checking vital signs given greater weight, this could delay appropriate care and management for the patient. Delays in initial comprehensive assessments and treatments do have an ongoing effect on patient experience and on whether the patient's healthcare needs are appropriately addressed. The LEP patient may see the expedited transport as frustrating as their assessment needs could not be addressed at the scene. Therefore, transportation was seen as a mode of transport to get to care rather than receiving care either on the scene or enroute to hospital. Potentially, that information gathered from the on-the-scene assessment may be sparse or not reflective of what the clinical impression was at the scene. Consequently, the patient may have an extended hospital stay, and appropriate referrals may be delayed simply due to limited language comprehension. Additionally, the influx of low-acuity patients places further strain on a healthcare system already struggling to keep up with demand (Stadeli et al., 2023). Therefore, expedited transportation by prehospital clinicians can lead to unintentional delays in the hospital for the patient and potentially a longer stay in the hospital. The pressure of KPIs plays a role in clinical decision-making for LEP patients. Providing paramedics with more resources on the availability of interpreters may aid clinical decision making for LEP patients and decrease transportation of lower acuity patients as part of the safety net for the patient.

Bilingual clinicians were seen to have a significant role in the patient's ongoing care. Bilingual prehospital clinicians are clinicians who have been taught medical terminology in the primary language that the clinician was trained in, but do not normally have any training in a secondary language nor any formal training as an interpreter. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there are currently no statistics on how many paramedics are bilingual or have any formal education as interpreters.

Therefore, it is difficult to quantify the impact of paramedics who have ad-hoc interpretation experience, in the prehospital setting. Bilingual prehospital clinicians are seen as useful and valuable in filling in as the interpreter. This is due to accessibility and to the fact that these clinicians are already often on scene. The availability of language access through bilingual prehospital clinicians may also provide patients with some reassurance that their concerns have been heard and interpreted correctly. Therefore, it may help gain rapport more quickly than with a clinician who may not be bilingual. It may also have positive benefits within the wider community. Patients that have had a positive experience of being heard and addressed in their own language may pass this narrative to other people in their community (Yip et al., 2014). It may also reassure the broader community that there are clinicians who speak their native language resulting in community members being more forthcoming with information or more likely to call for an ambulance in emergencies.

The clinicians involved in these studies also queried whether bilingual clinicians may have been subconsciously interpreting and filtering information. If true, this may have a significant impact on the patient's healthcare, as prehospital clinicians are likely to lack formal interpreter training or experience. In this case, accurate interpreting would rely on the bilingual clinician being able to separate their role as a clinician from their role as an informal interpreter. Additionally, the interpretation, whether the informal interpreter is a third party or a bilingual clinician, is reliant on the depth of the interpreter's medical knowledge and the interpretative skills of that individual (Crezee & Roat, 2019; Flores, 2005). This was highlighted by Flores et al. (2012), where there was an 18% increase in medical errors and misunderstandings from ad-hoc interpreting by untrained staff compared to hospital-trained medical interpreters. Although this study highlighted the potential harm that can be caused by ad-hoc interpreting, there may potentially be no other option for prehospital clinicians who may not be able to access a trained medical interpreter. This is potentially a gap in the literature, and in practice it represents an opportunity for bilingual paramedics to be trained in formal interpreting. This may have an on-going benefit where the bilingual paramedic becomes more confident in their interpreting skills as well as being better equipped in situations where a telephone or formally trained in-person interpreter may not be available. Therefore, the role of a bilingual paramedic would not only help the LEP patient in front of them, but also countless other lives which may have an altered trajectory in their healthcare needs in prehospital and in-hospital care.

Limitations and conclusion

This systematic review does have some limitations. Firstly, only four articles between 1st January 2015 and 1st June 2025 met the criteria for the impact of language barriers in the prehospital setting. Therefore, any articles published prior or after the time may have removed some potential paramedic perspectives on language barriers in the specific field of prehospital ambulance service. Due to the limited range of articles that met the criteria, conclusions drawn from this article should be interpreted with caution. Secondly, not all the prehospital clinicians discussed were paramedics, which made it challenging to directly compare perspectives regarding the differences in clinical training, despite all being prehospital clinicians on an emergency ambulance. The impact of informal interpreting through bilingual clinicians was the least studied of all the diverse types of interpretation and will still need further review due to the current limited literature available on prehospital clinicians' perspectives.

There were some strengths to this review. Despite the limited number of focused articles on prehospital clinicians, it showed that informal bilingual interpreters are helpful and valuable in the prehospital setting for bridging language barriers. Additionally, the review highlighted aspects in which non-verbal nuances, such as clinicians' tone and recognition of pertinent phrases, were helpful in the prehospital setting.

This review highlights language barriers in the prehospital setting and evaluates challenges from multiple angles to help close the language gap. In regard to the methodology, the rigor of this systematic review was tested. Over 900 articles were reviewed by four blinded, independent researchers. Overlapping of researchers was required for the article to be recommended for the next stage of article selection. Blinding was only turned off for discussion to move forward in the article selection phases. The articles were also appraised for high quality before being included in this study. This resulted in a lower yield of articles. However, it led to showing a gap in the literature in bilingual clinicians' perspectives on language barriers of LEP patients in the prehospital setting. Additionally, the lead author is a frontline prehospital clinician and has experience with LEP patients. The independent researchers involved in this systematic review also have industry-specific experience in medical interpretation, prehospital clinical care, and ambulance research in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Language barriers can delay care for patients with LEP and affect the delivery of their ongoing health care. There can be delays and consequences that impact both the prehospital clinicians who rely on the information provided to them and the LEP patient. Although telephone and bystander interpreting are helpful, they may also break patients' confidentiality and be inaccurate. Perceived delays in understanding the patient and main medical complaint also lead to increased transport rates in lower-acuity patients. Bilingual prehospital clinicians are considered useful; however, they may have internal bias, leading them to interpret the information as they unknowingly process it themselves. It also showed that there is a vulnerability to informal interpreters, as interpreting is limited by the medical knowledge of bilingual individuals. Further studies are needed to investigate the impacts of having to act as interpreters on bilingual prehospital clinicians and the ongoing effects on their patients.

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Developing the biliteracy of young children in twenty-first century Aotearoa New Zealand: A literature review

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Abstract

In this paper I present an overview of the status of languages in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) education, followed by a review of literature on our current approaches to early biliteracy in pre-school, primary school, community schools, and the home. I argue that there is an urgent need for further research on early biliteracy in Aotearoa NZ in light of international research and practice, in order to inform policy decisions to meet the educational needs of our increasingly linguistically diverse population.

Keywords: Biliteracy; young children; Aotearoa New Zealand; literature review

Introduction

It is generally well-understood in Aotearoa NZ that bilingualism and biliteracy confers social, cognitive and educational benefits. This is stressed in Te Whāriki, the curriculum for early childhood education (ECE), which emphasises the benefits of including culture and language in education, particularly for Māori[1] children:

[1] Following the current convention and for consistency, the word "Māori" has been spelt with a macron over the "a" throughout this review, whether or not it was used in the original source.

> Learner identity is enhanced when children's home languages and cultures are valued in educational settings and when kaiako (teachers) are responsive to their cultural ways of knowing and being. For Māori this means kaiako need understanding of a world view that emphasises the child's whakapapa (genealogy) connection to Māori creation, across Te Kore (the realm of potential being, The Void), te pō (the realm of darkness, the underworld, night), te ao mārama (the world of life and light, this world, Earth), atua Māori (Māori gods) and tīpuna (ancestors, forebears). All children should be able to access te reo Māori in their ECE setting, as kaiako weave te reo Māori and tikanga Māori (Māori ways of doing, including practices, customs and rituals) into the everyday curriculum.
>
> Increasingly, children are likely to be learning in and through more than one language. Besides English, te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), some 200 different languages are in use in New Zealand, with Samoan, Hindi, Northern Chinese, French and Yue (Cantonese) being the most common. Children more readily become bi- or multilingual and bi- or multiliterate when language learning in the education setting builds on their home languages. (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 12, glosses added)

However, these theoretical understandings are not well-translated into practical support in our education system for either bi/multilingualism or bi/multiliteracy, especially for children who arrive with migrant language backgrounds, many of whom leave school having lost their heritage language (Connelly, 2022, 2024).

In this review I begin with an overview of the current language situation in Aotearoa NZ, highlighting the high linguistic diversity in our population of around five million people. I then describe the numbers of languages currently used in early childhood and primary education, while considering the programmes which support biliteracy in those languages. I focus on the support for home or heritage languages as a path to early biliteracy, rather than English language learning which does not have a focus on supporting biliteracy (Bates, 2016). I take an "integrative" approach to the review, with a range of types of literature and including both qualitative and quantitative studies (Snyder, 2019).

Languages in Aotearoa NZ

For over twenty years Aotearoa NZ has been regarded as a superdiverse population (Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2013), using the notion coined by Steven Vertovec (2007, p. 1024) in the United

Kingdom to describe the complexity of "a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants." In Aotearoa NZ the results of Census 2023 showed that the country continues to become more diverse, with over 150 languages spoken in a population of around five million, of whom 1.4 million were born overseas (Statistics New Zealand, 2024c). The number of people speaking more than one language is around a quarter of the population, at 24.1 percent.

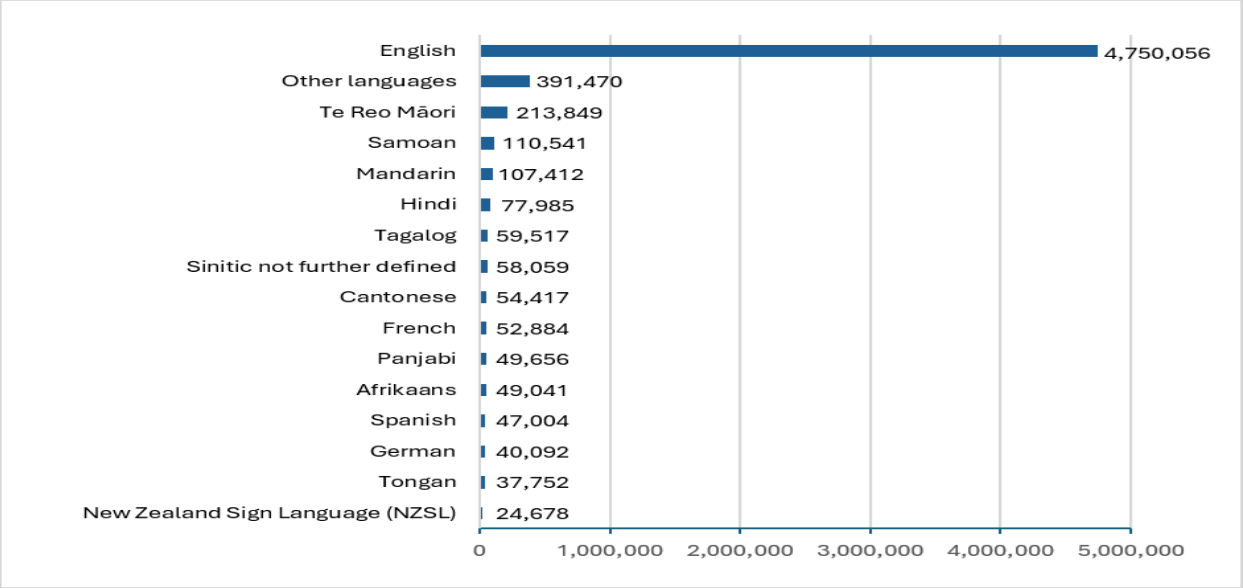
However, of the largest ethnic group, "New Zealand Europeans," or Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent), only seven percent speak more than one language (Statistics New Zealand, 2024d). The number of speakers or users of the largest language groups from the 2023 census is shown in Figure 1, in which languages are grouped according to a classification developed with communities and other stakeholders (Statistics New Zealand, 2026a).

Figure 1

Largest Language Groups in Aotearoa New Zealand, 2023

Adapted from: Figure.NZ (2026) CC BY-A 4.0.

Source: Data from Stats NZ.



English

The graph shows that of the three official languages a large majority of the population spoke English, at 4,750,056 people. As Pākehā speak the majority language English, this means that bilingualism in Aotearoa NZ can be viewed as a function of raciolinguistically minoritised communities (Hornberger, 2022).

Te reo Māori and ta rē Moriori

The Indigenous language of the Aotearoa NZ mainland, te reo Māori (the Māori language), had 213,849 speakers as at Census 2023. Seals et al. (2025, p. 560) point out that te reo Māori " has not escaped the common story of colonization: population shift, disease, land theft, war, and a new government that excluded Indigenous representation, all leading to language loss." Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) was signed in 1840 between the British Crown and Māori chiefs, opening the door to English-based colonisation. The Waitangi Tribunal was established in 1975 to investigate claims that te Tiriti was not being upheld (Waitangi Tribunal, n.d.). In 1986 the Waitangi Tribunal upheld a claim that under the Treaty the Crown was obliged to foster and protect the Māori language as a taonga or "treasured possession" (Waitangi Tribunal, 1986). Benton (1988) gives a historical overview of the place of te reo Māori in education, leading up to the Māori Language Act in 1987 which instituted te reo Māori an official language. He follows up with an analysis of the changes after the Act, which led to an initial "exponential increase" in speakers which plateaued in the early twenty-first century (Benton, 2015, p. 100). Macalister (2026) describes more recent initiatives in radio and television, and the replacement Māori Language Act in 2016 which established Te Mātāwai, to promote the health and wellbeing of te reo Māori. In education, the current Tau Mai te Reo Māori Language in Education 30 year strategy builds on the 2013 document and states that:

> All learners will be able to develop some level of Māori language skills to support our national identity, while learners in Māori Medium education will be able to develop very high levels of Māori language proficiency and use as they undertake their teaching and learning through te reo Māori. (Ministry of Education, 2026b).

The closely related ta rē Moriori is the language of Rēkohu and Rangihaute (Chatham Islands in English and Wharekauri in te reo Māori), 800 kilometres from the Aotearoa NZ mainland. The last

fluent speakers died in the early twentieth century and the language is currently in revival (Middleton, 2023)[2]. Although Moriori was added to the 2023 census classification (Statistics New Zealand, 2024a), language numbers were included in te reo Māori reporting (Te Whata, n.d.).

Since 2006 New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) has been an official language of Aotearoa NZ, with 24,678 users in 2023. Simchowitz and McKee (2026) note that although there has been some marginalisation of Māori deafness experienced historically in both Māori and deaf communities in Aotearoa NZ, there is an emerging critical awareness of identity and use of NZSL. The usage of NZSL sign representations in picture books, both static and dynamic, together with English and sometimes te reo Māori, has been aimed at strengthening literacy for deaf children and equity of resources (Daly & McKee, 2022).

Pasifika (Pacific) languages

The next largest language after English in 2023 was Samoan[3], with 110,541 speakers, and the other Pacific language with a large number of speakers was Tongan, at 37,752. Nicholas and Koku'a (2025, p. 64) point out that although there is a shift to English, Samoan and Tongan are in "a relatively healthy state of affairs" with some intergenerational transmission, largely because there are higher numbers of speakers in their home countries.

The Realm of New Zealand also includes the states of 'Avaiki Nui (Kuiki 'Airini in te reo Māori, Cook Islands in English), which has up to five languages depending how they are categorised: Wale, Southern, Mangaian, Manihiki/Rakahanga and Penrhyn (Nicholas & Koku'a, 2025). In addition, the Realm includes the self-governing territories of Tokelau and Niue which each have one language. Public census results do not include analysis of these languages, and Nicholas and Koku'a (2025) identify the approach towards these languages of the Realm as "linguicide," since their populations are greater in the Aotearoa NZ mainland than in their home territories and the proportions of their communities who report they speak their language is declining. In 2023 there were 7,794 speakers of 'Avaiki Nui and 2,397 of Gagana Tokelau (both up 7% from 2018), and 4,062 speakers of Vagahau Niue (down 3% from 2018) (Nicholas & Koku'a, 2025, p. 61).

[2] A discussion of the history of the colonization and genocide in Rēkohu can be found in Brett (2015).

[3] For consistency, "Samoan" has been spelt without a macron over the first "a" throughout this review, whether or not it was used in the original source.

A survey of 3,039 Pacific people over the age of 15 in Aotearoa NZ was carried out by the Ministry of Pacific Affairs over three months in 2021-2022 (Wilson-Uili et al., 2022). Respondents self-identified 13 ethnicities, including Māori; they could identify as many as they felt applied, and 69.3% identified only one ethnicity. The authors report a "dire picture" resulting when respondents were asked when they first learned their Pacific heritage languages: only 50% of participants reported acquiring their Realm language/s in infancy (Wilson-Uili et al., 2022, p. 30), although all non-Realm languages were acquired by at least half of community language speakers. Participants tended to report being more proficient in reading and listening than writing and speaking, and around two-thirds of participants reported learning English as a first language.

Asian languages

The two largest Chinese[4] languages in Census 2023 were Mandarin spoken by 107,412 and Cantonese 54,417, with another group of Chinese ('Sinitic not further defined') spoken by 58,059 people. The next largest group was Tagalog, at 59,517 speakers. However, Bautista (2026) points out that although the census categorises Tagalog as the default language of the Philippines, this masks the multilingualism in the country where there are 173 languages. The two largest Indian languages were Hindi at 77,985 and Panjabi at 49,656 speakers respectively. Speakers of all of these languages had increased in 2023 from the previous census (Statistics New Zealand, 2024c).

European languages

The largest European languages were French, spoken by 52,884 speakers, Spanish by 47,004 and German by 40,092. Afrikaans was spoken by 49,041. Of these languages, only French had declined in the 2023 census (Statistics New Zealand, 2024c), probably because the census question does not ask whether it is a first or second language, and the number of French learners in schools has been steadily declining along with its position as a language of prestige (H. A. Smith, 2004).

Future projections

While predictions of Aotearoa NZ's increased ethnic diversity will be reflected in higher linguistic diversity, this is likely to be complicated by different fertility rates among populations, with a projected fertility rate by 2048 of 1.45 in Pākehā communities compared with 1.80 in Māori and

[4] Statistics New Zealand (2024c) labels Mandarin as "Northern Chinese" and Cantonese as "Yue". Here I have used the names from Figure.NZ (2026).

1.88 in Pacific communities (Lala et al., 2026, p. 19). Buckingham's (2024) analysis of the three censuses 1996-2018 identified different residential clustering patterns of language speaker groups, reflecting their relative socioeconomic mobility and immobility. These shifting profiles will affect the make-up of the childhood population entering the education system.

Language data

In this section I have largely relied on data from the 2023 national census. The question about languages asks, "In which language(s) could you have a conversation about a lot of everyday things?" and has been in the census since 1996. Statistics New Zealand assigns priority levels to variables in the census, with Priority 1 highest and Priority 3 lowest. The "Language spoken" question in the census was moved up from Priority 3 to Priority 2 in the 2023 census:

> Priority 2 concepts cover key subject populations that are important for policy development, evaluation, or monitoring. These concepts are given second priority in terms of quality, time, and resources across all phases of a census.
>
> The census priority level for languages spoken has increased from priority level 3 in 2018 to acknowledge key statutory duties, use of concept in policy and monitoring, and the importance of te reo Māori data. (Statistics New Zealand, 2024b)

There have been problems with the last two national censuses (Cook, 2026), although these did not appear to impact on the quality of data about languages, which was rated as "High" (Statistics New Zealand, 2024b). Statistics New Zealand is advocating that the field-based census be replaced with an Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), and a law change was proposed in 2026. This was challenged by many people including statisticians (Haslett & Seber, 2026), as well as representatives of language groups who felt that the shift would not provide the data necessary for sound language policy planning and implementation (H. A. Smith, 2026). This change to the census required a "super-majority" of 75 percent of parliament and was not passed (Sachdeva, 2026), but the future of field-based censuses - and consequently the quality of national data on languages - remains under threat.

Biliteracy education for young children

In this section I provide a brief overview of the teaching of language and literacy for young children in Aotearoa NZ, focusing on migrant and Indigenous languages.

I use Hornberger's definition of biliteracy as "any or all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around writing" (Hornberger & Schissel, 2026, p. 4). This is a comprehensive definition designed to include the full range of issues around biliteracy, particularly for raciolinguistically minoritised students.

This section includes data from the Ministry of Education, which is provided in different formats and is therefore presented in different ways. Studies are presented according to the main locations in which the learning takes place - pre-school, primary school, community school, and home - although in many cases these overlap particularly when families are included as part of the research.

Pre-school

Early childhood education in Aotearoa NZ up to five years of age is optional. The Ministry of Education conducts a yearly Early Childhood Education (ECE) census (Ministry of Education, 2026a). Early childhood education and care services are required to account for 100% of their teaching time. Table 1 shows the percentage of teaching time each language was spoken in 2025; services range from home-based care, to teacher-led centre-based day care or pre-schools, and include Māori and Pacific bilingual and immersion services[5]. The table shows that while English and te reo Māori were most widely used, over 87 other languages were also used. This indicates high levels of bilingualism among the carers and teachers.

Given the statement in support of languages in Te Whāriki quoted at the start of this review, there have been surprisingly few Aotearoa NZ studies focusing on biliteracy in early childhood. Mitchell et al. (2025) investigated the use of te reo Māori speaking in 24 English-medium early childhood centres. They found that educators consistently used te reo Māori, normalising spoken language, with the highest number of instances at "kai (food) time", followed by "book time".

[5] For an explanation of the types of early learning and care in Aotearoa NZ, see https://www.education.govt.nz/parents-and-caregivers/early-learning/starting-early-learning/types-early-learning#licensed-and-certificated-services-1

Table 1

Number of Early Childhood Education Services by Language Use, 2025

Source: Data from Ministry of Education (2026a)[6]

Row Labels	1-11%	12-20%	21-50%	51-80%	81-100%	Grand Total
Afrikaans	129	2	1		1	**133**
American Sign Language	2					**2**
Arabic	23	2		1		**26**
Artificial Languages (nec)	1	1				**2**
Australian Sign Language	3					**3**
Bahasa Indonesia	4					**4**
Bantu (nec)	1					**1**
Bengali	4					**4**
Bulgarian	2					**2**
Burmese	1	1	1			**3**
Celtic (nec)	1					**1**
Central Pacific (nec)	1					**1**
Central Pacific (nfd)	7	1				**8**
Cook Islands Māori	36	4	3	7	4	**54**
Czech	5					**5**
Danish	1					**1**
Dutch	9					**9**
English	72	47	164	1358	2276	**3917**

[6] In Table1, languages have been re-ordered alphabetically. The table title has not been changed but might better be rephrased as "Language use in early childhood services," because services using multiple languages are counted multiple times, once for each language used. Column categories are also as in the original.

Row Labels	**1-11%**	**12-20%**	**21-50%**	**51-80%**	**81-100%**	**Grand Total**
Fiji Hindi	44	7	1			**52**
Fijian	33	1	1			**35**
French	51	1				**52**
Friesian	1					**1**
German	51					**51**
Gujarati	13					**13**
Hakka			1			**1**
Hebrew		2				**2**
Hindi	383	28	7	1		**419**
Hindi Bat	2					**2**
Hungarian	1					**1**
Ilokano	1					**1**
Indo-Aryan (nec)	2					**2**
Indo-Aryan (nfd)	1					**1**
Iranian (nfd)	2					**2**
Irish	1	1				**2**
Italian	6					**6**
Japanese	51				1	**52**
Javanese	1					**1**
Khmer	3					**3**
Kiribati	14					**14**
Korean	80	4		1		**85**
Language Isolates (nec)	1					**1**

Row Labels	**1-11%**	**12-20%**	**21-50%**	**51-80%**	**81-100%**	**Grand Total**
Latvian	1					**1**
Malayalam	33		1			**34**
Malaysian	3					**3**
Māori	2372	872	369	41	436	**4090**
Miaow-Yao	1					**1**
Nauruan		1				**1**
Nepalese	8					**8**
New Zealand Sign Language	524	26	3			**553**
Niuean	16		1	4	1	**22**
None (eg too young to talk)	1					**1**
Northern Chinese	416	33	19	10	19	**497**
Not Stated	2					**2**
Other Miscellaneous Languages	81	8	1			**90**
Panjabi	169	13	4	6		**192**
Pashto	3	2				**5**
Persian	4		1			**5**
Pidgin English			1			**1**
Polish	2					**2**
Portuguese	17	1				**18**
Pukapukan	1				1	**2**
Romanian	2					**2**

Row Labels	**1-11%**	**12-20%**	**21-50%**	**51-80%**	**81-100%**	**Grand Total**
Russian	14				1	**15**
Samoan	469	22	14	22	24	**551**
Sign Language (nfd)	95	4	1			**100**
Signed English	34	1				**35**
Sinhala	24	2				**26**
Sinitic (nfd)	3					**3**
Solomon Islands Languages (Non-Central-Pacific)	3					**3**
Somali	8	2				**10**
Spanish	122	2				**124**
Swahili	2					**2**
Swedish	3					**3**
Tagalog	136	8	1			**145**
Tamil	11	1	1			**13**
Telugu	8					**8**
Thai	3					**3**
Tokelauan	4	1	1	1		**7**
Tongan	162	13	14	15	24	**228**
Turkish	1					**1**
Tuvaluan	6		1			**7**
Ukrainian	2					**2**
Urdu	2					**2**
Vietnamese	3					**3**
Welsh	2					**2**

Row Labels	**1-11%**	**12-20%**	**21-50%**	**51-80%**	**81-100%**	**Grand Total**
Wu	1					**1**
Yue	34	2	2			**38**
Grand Total	**5852**	**1116**	**614**	**1467**	**2788**	**11837**

See Statistics New Zealand for details (2026b):

nec - "not elsewhere classified" categories captured detailed responses that were not categorised in the classification

nfd - "not further defined" captured vague responses

Derby (2021) describes a study with eight Māori bilingual preschool children and their families focused on shared book reading, aimed at strengthening children's phonological awareness and stimulating vocabulary knowledge. She incorporated Māori pedagogies "such as singing songs and chants, playing games, using stories to transmit knowledge in oral form from older generations to those younger, and reminiscing about the past" (Derby, 2021, p. 51), resulting in improved interactions with parents and children to support their literacy development.

A study by Podmore et al. (2015) in four centres in Auckland found that the culture of the centres was important in supporting the plurilingualism of the children:

> Each centre was distinctive in nature, whether Samoan immersion, Māori-medium, or English-medium. The findings, together with changes made in the centres, showed how multiple languages may be fostered intentionally in planned and systematic ways by teachers who are fluently bilingual, multilingual, and in one setting, monolingual. Teachers need the professional knowledge, skills, attitudes and understandings to enact additive bilingual approaches and practices, and to engage with the local funds of knowledge. (Podmore et al., 2015, p. 20)

Bates (2016) has a list of practical ways in which early childhood teachers in Aotearoa NZ can incorporate children's different home languages into their programmes. She includes writing, pointing out that multiliteracies should not just be available to children whose first language is English. She states that all teachers need metalinguistic knowledge but notes that there are barriers

against teachers from non-English-speaking backgrounds (Bates, 2016, p. 14): "It is not an exaggeration to say that current policy for entry into e.c. teacher education is discriminatory against bilingual e.c. teachers, unless they have significant academic success already in an English-speaking country."

Primary schools

Education is compulsory from six years old in Aotearoa NZ, although most children start when they turn five (Ministry of Education, 2024). Figure 2 shows the number of students who received language tuition at any time in the academic year, which I have shown in five-yearly intervals from 2002 to 2017, after which Ministry of Education data has no longer been published. It does not include te reo Māori or English language. The data is grouped according to Asian, European, Pasifika (Pacific) and Other. This shows that the biggest increase is of students studying Chinese, which increased from 2,008 to 64,874 over the period. The European languages showed a pattern of increasing then falling. The numbers of students taking all Pasifika languages increased, with the biggest number taking Samoan at 4,230.

Te reo Māori

The amount of time Māori children spent learning te reo Māori in primary school per week from 2004 to 2025 is shown in Figure 3, and amount of time non-Māori children spent is shown in Figure 4. In Levels 1 to 4a, curriculum subjects are taught in Māori, with reducing amounts of time from Level 1 (81-100% of school time) to Level 4a (12-30% of the time). In Levels 4b and 5 Māori is taught as a separate subject, with at least three hours per week and less than three hours per week respectively. The source data also includes Level 6, Taha Māori, where "students learn Māori songs, greetings, and simple words," which overlaps with Level 5 and so was not included in these charts. They show that the amount of time spent learning te reo Māori has increased every year since 2004, with "No Māori learning" less than five percent for Māori children in 2025 and around 10 percent for non-Māori children. However, Level 5, "Less than three hours per week", has remained the largest category for both groups during that time.

May, Hill and Tiakiwai's (2004) review of bilingualism in education focused on Māori language, outlining the cognitive, social and educational benefits of additive bilingualism. They identified five key issues that needed to be addressed for programmes:

The promotion of additive and long-term bilingual/immersion programmes.

Recognizing that a 50% level of immersion is the minimum level of immersion for an effective bilingual/immersion programme.

Consistently using Māori as an instructional (not just organisational) language.

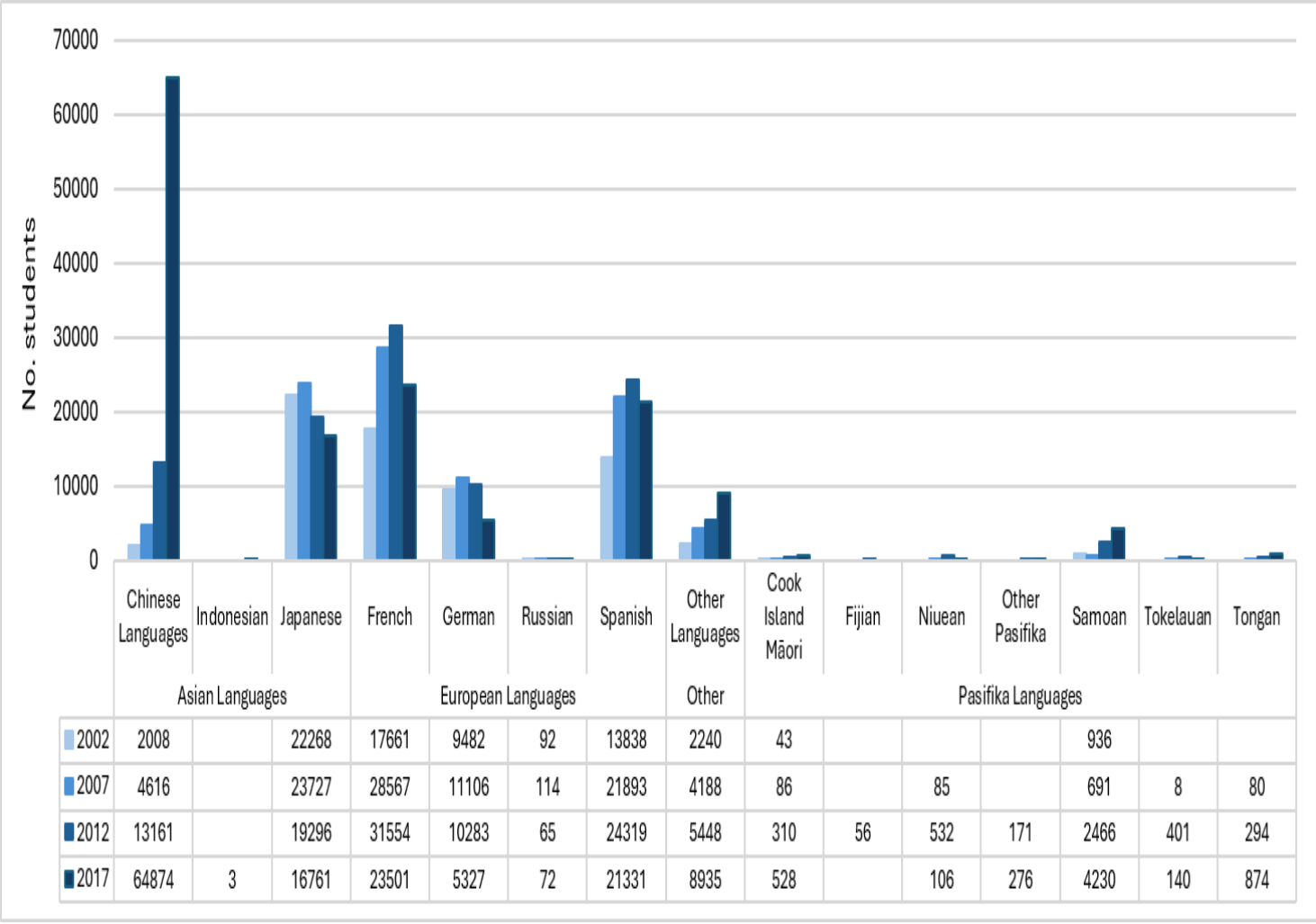
The need to teach academic English language proficiency specifically at some point in Māori-medium programmes, irrespective of the level of immersion.

Keeping languages of instruction separate. (May et al., 2004, p. 3).

Figure 2

Language Tuition at Primary Schools, 2002-2017 (Excluding te reo Māori or English)

Source: Data from Ministry of Education (n.d)



	Chinese Languages	Indonesian	Japanese	French	German	Russian	Spanish	Other Languages	Cook Island Māori	Fijian	Niuean	Other Pasifika	Samoan	Tokelauan	Tongan
	Asian Languages			European Languages				Other	Pasifika Languages						
2002	2008		22268	17661	9482	92	13838	2240	43				936		
2007	4616		23727	28567	11106	114	21893	4188	86		85		691	8	80
2012	13161		19296	31554	10283	65	24319	5448	310	56	532	171	2466	401	294
2017	64874	3	16761	23501	5327	72	21331	8935	528		106	276	4230	140	874

Figure 3

Time Spent on Te Reo Māori Learning in Primary Schools 2004-2025: Māori Students

Source: Data from Ministry of Education (2025)

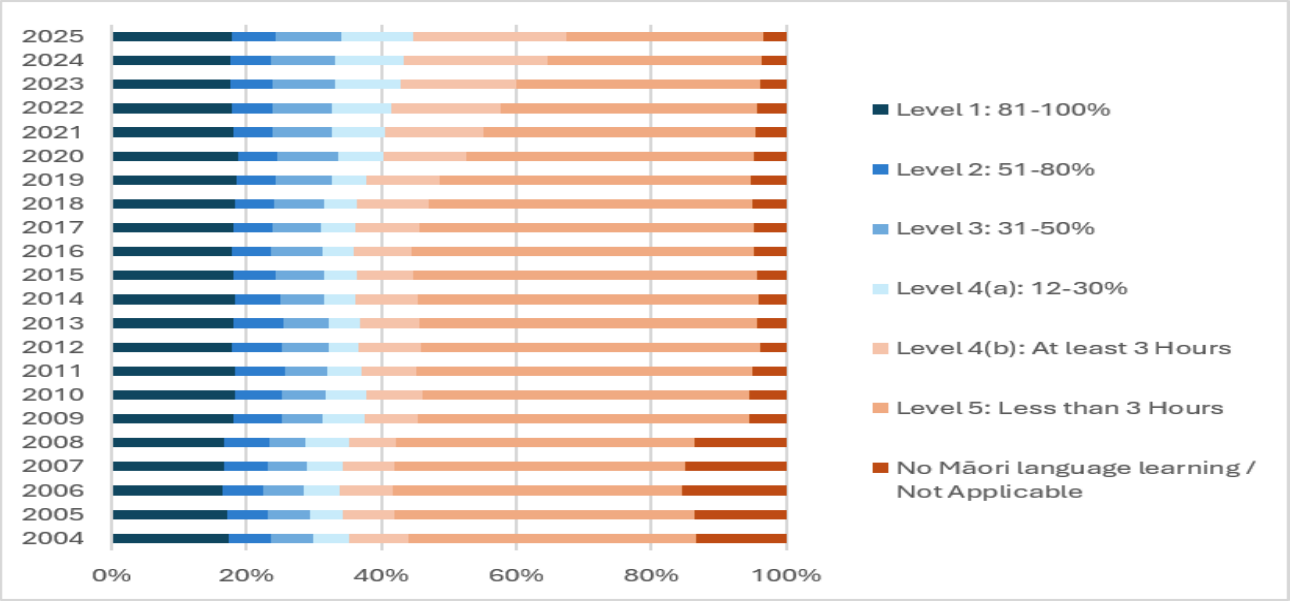
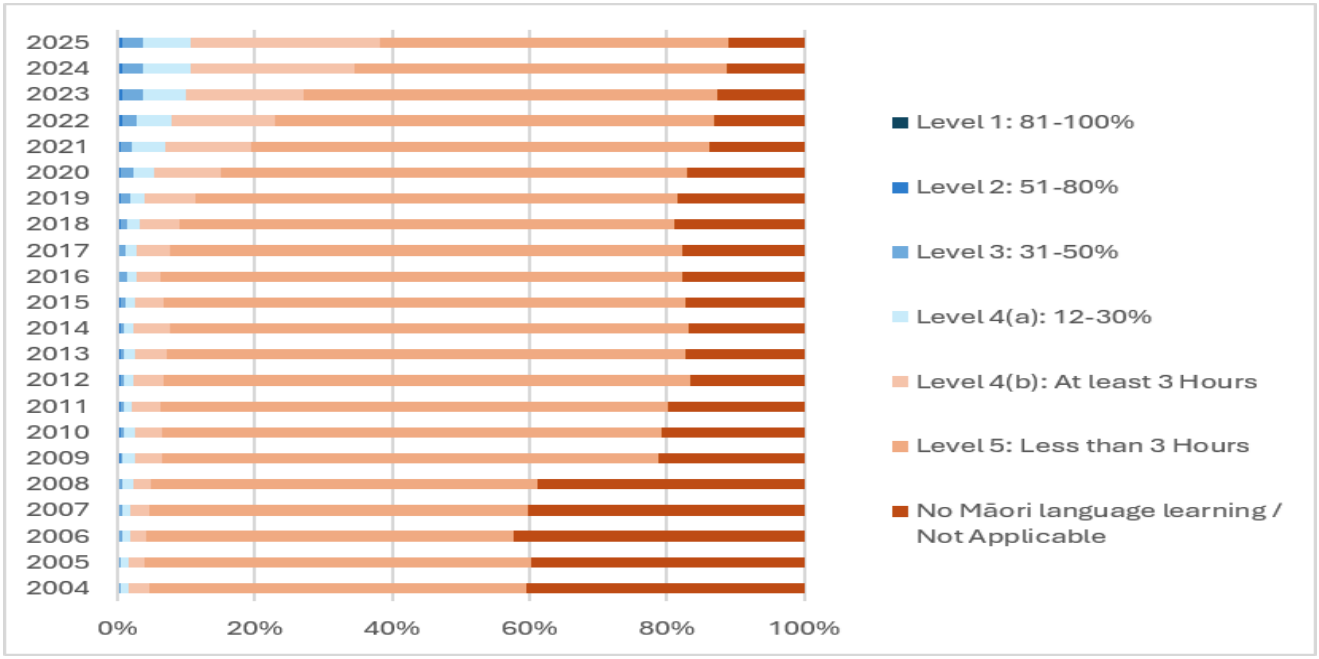


Figure 4

Time Spent on Te Reo Māori Learning in Primary Schools 2024-2025: Non-Māori students

Source: Data from Ministry of Education (2025)



Hill's 2022 study of Level 2 partial bilingual te reo Māori programmes found that although parents of partial immersion had "wavering commitment" in comparison to the kura kaupapa[7], or Māori immersion schools, there were also advantages in a more flexible approach than the implementation of a strict separation of languages. He noted (Hill, 2022, p. 898) that "partial immersion offers options and opportunities to develop a unique form of highly productive bilingual education that kura kaupapa is not willing to experiment with." Hill found a wide range of pedagogical approaches, but teaching curriculum subjects in te reo Māori was not widely implemented. Bilingual outcomes were low, and he identified the need for teacher development in both language fluency and knowledge of bilingual education theory and practice. Denston et al. 's (2024) research with te reo Māori and English bilingual classrooms in rural Canterbury schools reports on a programme which included phonological awareness and vocabulary. Correlational analyses found a positive relationship between te reo Māori skills and English language skills, and they concluded that "teaching and learning strategies within bilingual spaces could support literacy acquisition across both orthographies" (Sutton et al., 2023, p. 1094).

Pacific/Pasifika

The number of Pasifika language programmes and students in the programmes at primary school level in Aotearoa NZ in 2026, in both Pacific medium and English medium, is shown in Table 2. This shows that Gagana Samoa (Samoan language) has the largest number of programmes in Pacific medium, at 38 with 2,687 students, as well as five programmes in English medium with 300 students.

An area of research for Pasifika languages has been the academic success of students learning – or learning in – Pasifika languages. McCaffery and Tuafuti (2003) describe a bilingual programme O le Taiala in Finlayson Park Primary School in Tāmakimakaurau Auckland for Samoan children from low income Samoan-speaking homes, in a collaborative approach with parents, communities and the school. They found positive academic results in both languages. In a study of children from 21 Samoan and Tongan nearly total immersion early childhood centres transitioning into mainstream schools in Auckland, Tagoilelagi-Leota Glynn et al. (2005) found that the children were developing incipient bilingualism and biliteracy until they entered school, after which their home languages plateaued or declined, while their English developed rapidly.

[7] A more literal translation of Kura Kaupapa is usually "Māori philosophy schools".

Table 2

Students in Primary School Pacific Language Programmes, 2026

Source: Data adapted from Ministry of Education (2026c)

Language	**Pacific medium**		**English medium**	
	No. programmes	No. students	No. programmes	No. students
Cook Island Māori	1	23	3	75
Fijian	1	17	2	3
Kiribati	1	32	0	0
Niuean	3	103	1	1
Samoan	38	2687	5	300
Tokelauan	1	14	0	0
Tongan	10	650	4	49
Total	**55**	**3526**	**15**	**428**

Note: Primary schools include Full primary schools (Year 1-8), Contributing primary schools (Year 1-6), and Intermediate Schools (Year 7-8).

A further area of research has been on books to support Pasifika language learning. Si'ilata et al. (2023, p. 34) report on the Pasifika Early Literacy Project using dual language books with families and teachers of children in the first two years of school and early childhood settings, to "reconceptualize cultural practices as valued literacies." These include the same story in English and the Pacific language and have been published in five languages: Cook Islands Māori, Niuean, Samoan, Tokelauan, and Tongan[8]. Although the authors state that improvements cannot be attributed to this project alone, they find that more than 86 percent of children who participated in

[8] These resources, together with audio files and family support materials, are available for download at; https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/te-whariki/learning-resources/pelp-resources/5637145230.c

the project increased their book levels. Further, they show that incorporating cultural aspects such as dance and drama as "embodied literacies," as well as power sharing and affirmation of spirituality, support "teachers and families to reconceptualise family practices as valued literacies" (Si'ilata et al., 2023, p. 34).

Community schools

There are many community language schools organised and administered outside the mainstream schooling system in Aotearoa NZ.

Shameem's (2003) Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland study of 79 community leaders and language teachers with 29 languages found that there is no comprehensive list of schools or enrolment numbers, and they are characterised by diversity:

> Community schools are mainly held at weekends, and have varied functions. Most importantly, they provide an additional domain for language use. Some schools teach the mother tongue of community members, while others teach a religious language to students who may not all share the same mother tongue. The programmes vary in their emphases on oral and literacy skills; for example, among the Wellington Gujaratis, although conversational Gujarati is most important, literacy skills are also in demand for possible visits 'home'. (Shameem, 2003, p. 230)

Many participants in Connelly's (2022) study of parents of school aged children, representing 40 heritage languages, reported being unaware of or unable to access community language classes. These classes tend to be largely the responsibility of individual communities themselves (Berardi-Wiltshire, 2016). This marginalisation of community language education contributes to the children's ambivalence towards their heritage language which leads to a rapid language shift towards English (Connelly, 2024).

Wang (2021) charts over 70 years of Chinese language teaching and learning, reflecting changing patterns of settlement since the first arrivals in the nineteenth century. She notes that formal Chinese language classes for children are thought to have begun in the 1950s. Programmes in the formal school sector began with increased immigration in the 1980s, although community language schools then became less popular. The third stage began in 2008, when Chinese community schools began to thrive. However, Wang (2021, pp. 177–178) notes that "their methods for encouraging

Chinese migrants' interest and engagement with Chinese learning were questioned," due to their "traditional" styles of management and teaching.

Nofal's (2020) study of Indian families involved in a Hindi language school found that teaching and learning literacy in Hindi was part of a wider function of uniting Indian people of different backgrounds and faiths (Nofal, 2020, p. 96).

Although Tabata-Sandom's (2020, 2022) exploration of the metaphors parents and children used in relation to their Japanese language learning showed that literacy is valued, she highlights the need to increase children's motivation to learn the demanding aspects of reading and writing Japanese (Tabata-Sandom, 2020, p. 66). She also notes that parents are worried about their children's English proficiency as a result of focusing on Japanese.

Languages at home

Although the home domain has long been recognised as crucial for intergenerational transmission of languages (Fishman, 1991), there appear to be few recent studies in Aotearoa NZ on biliteracy in the home, other than those focusing on home-school partnerships with Pasifika communities mentioned above.

Vaccarino and Walker (2008) carried out a biliteracy project with children, initially with five families with pre-school and school children speaking Chinese, Spanish, French, and Cook Islands Māori, and then extending to a group with German, French and Spanish home languages. Through a "shared practice" approach which included thinking, talking and sharing, as well as reading and writing, the children developed their abilities in bilingualism and biliteracy. Nofal's (2020) study of Indian families mentioned above found that their heritage language is not always used at home no matter how committed the families are.

Discussion

The increased recognition of te reo Māori through the Māori Language Act 2016 (Te Ture Mō Te Reo Māori 2016 Māori Language Act 2016, 2016) has more recently been undermined by the English Language Act (English Language Act 2026, 2026) and other political actions, reinforcing the "monolingual bias" of Anglocentric views around language and literacy highlighted by writers such as Bautista (2026), Crosby (2026), and Daly (2024). This reflects a hierarchy of importance of

all languages, which has long been a feature of language policy in Aotearoa NZ. In advocating a national languages policy in 1992, Waite ranked six priority areas for policy development, in a proposal commissioned by the Ministry of Education which was not followed up (Waite, 1992, pp. 18–22):

1 Revitalisation of the Māori language

2 Second-chance adult literacy

3 Children's ESL (English as a Second Language) and first language maintenance

4 Adult ESL

5 National capabilities in international languages

6 Provision of services in languages other than English.

In a study comparing attitudes towards different languages in education, I found pre-service teacher educators were more likely to have positive attitudes towards the use of te reo Māori in school than Korean, Samoan, Somali, Russian or French, representing the different types of language community in Aotearoa NZ (H.A.Smith, 2004). More recently, de Bres (2015) also found a hierarchy of acceptance of minority language promotion for the Māori language, followed by New Zealand Sign Language, then Pacific languages, and finally (other) community languages. She found that community representatives "tend to further language ideological positions in line with their own group interests, often at the expense of those of other groups" (de Bres, 2015, p. 691).

While these hierarchies may make sense in terms of responsibilities at a national level, such as for te reo Māori as the Indigenous language, or English as the language of wider communication, they are problematic when it comes to a more micro level, such as for the other languages of the New Zealand Realm. Other rankings occur between varieties of languages, such as the Hindi spoken and written by migrants from India, and those from Fiji (Hundt, 2019). All such hierarchies are meaningless for the language and literacy development needs of any individual child in an early childhood or primary school classroom.

In Aotearoa NZ, there is a tendency to conflate "literacy" with "literacy in English." May (2023) states the ideology behind this:

> (T)he need to know/use English is elided with English monolingualism – a language replacement ideology, arising out of the linguistic homogeneity imperative of modern nation-state formation, which underpins arguments for dominant national languages and against the maintenance of minoritized and/or Indigenous languages. (May, 2023, p. 672)

As a result, research on literacy is often research on English literacy with no mention of possible early literacy ability in their home languages. Examples include Gillon's (2023) study of English language learners' "foundational literacy," the Ministry of Education's Te Poutāhū Curriculum Centre's "considerations and recommendations that the Ministry of Education is using to inform ongoing work to strengthen literacy supports and outcomes for children" (2024, p. 1), and a more recent article by Arrow et al. (2026) reporting on the behaviour of beginning readers and their literacy development.

One aspect of this narrow approach to literacy has been the overlooking of other modes of visual literacy such as epistemology encapsulated in Māori carvings and weaving (Hetaraka et al., 2023). Māori visual literacies are also discussed by J. Smith et al. (2026), who stress the need to incorporate both Māori and non-Māori knowledges (J. Smith et al., 2026, p. 698): "Understanding that literacy is a decisive protective factor for later life success, it is essential that we support educators to find an optimal intersection between cultural connection and structured literacy instruction."

A further area which has had little focus has been the consideration of supporting the biliteracy of children in communities whose spoken language currently has no widely accepted orthography such as Fiji Hindi (Shameem et al., 2022), or where the parents are themselves becoming literate in their language/s (Svensson, 2024).

However, an area where biliteracy and multiliteracy is gaining ground is in children's books. In addition to the research by Si'ilata et al. (2023) discussed above with dual language books in Pasifika languages, Seals et al. (2020) have developed a set of translingual books in Māori-English and Samoan-English, from research with teachers using both languages in their everyday teaching discourse. They show that "sustainable translanguaging" methods in the classroom are "possible, positive and meaningful", and the "softening boundaries" between languages which occurs in translanguaging need not limit the language learning of the language being revitalised (Seals & Olsen-Reeder, 2020, p. 8). Daly and colleagues at the Waikato Picturebook Research Unit explore

the pedagogical value of picture books, including multilingual books, in supporting language learning and learning about language (Daly, 2024). Daly's research has focused on the linguistic landscapes of picture books, to analyse the relative status of languages as they are reflected on the pages of bilingual and multilingual books. By inverting power structures through use of relative font size and space on the page, she states that picture books can act as a Trojan horse to promote minority languages in classrooms and homes (Daly, 2024, p. 111).

Gaps in the literature

In Aotearoa NZ there is a growing recognition of the value of different models of bilingual education, or specific approaches such as translanguaging noted above to support the biliteracy of young children. However, there is little literature exploring the approaches such as those used in Spanish-English bilingual programmes in the United States, where the two languages are explicitly compared and contrasted in order to make metalinguistic connections. Examples are Beeman and Urow's (2017) Bridge model, or Escamilla et al.'s (2021) Holistic Biliteracy Framework.

Although simultaneous biliteracy approaches have also been shown to be effective in other international contexts, French-German in Alsace (Velasco & Fialais, 2018) and Luxembourg (Kirsch & Kemp, 2024), as well as in Aotearoa NZ such as Denston et al.'s (2024) study reported above, current education policy in Aotearoa NZ does not support this (Gerritson, 2025). There is a pressing need for more studies in both bilingual and multilingual educational contexts. Although beyond the scope of this review, further studies about the incorporation of knowledge into teacher education for supporting biliteracy would also be valuable.

Conclusion

While the increased recognition of bilingualism for te reo Māori has increased the understanding of biliteracy in Aotearoa NZ education, this also creates a tension when other children's home and heritage languages can be seen as less important (Chan & Ritchie, 2023). In the context of superdiversity, and in the absence of policies to support biliteracy (Si'ilata, 2020), there is an urgent need for research to explore opportunities for supporting the biliteracy of all children in Aotearoa NZ who have home or heritage languages instead of – or in addition to – English, so that they are supported to reach their cognitive, educational and social potential. As stated by Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester in their advocacy of biliteracy in education, this has an ethical dimension:

> (I)nclusion of learners' voice and agency is the only ethically acceptable solution when it comes to educating a linguistically and culturally diverse learner population. In today's world, that means every learner in every classroom (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2000, p. 118).

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Alive and kicking: Further lessons from good language learners and their strategies

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Abstract

The year 2025 marked the 50th anniversary of Joan Rubin's landmark article which introduced the strategy concept to the field of language learning. The years since have been marked by controversy, but strategies remain a very active area of research interest to the present day. This article traces the evolution of the strategy concept and explores the way the various controversies have shaped the development of the current definition and classification, as well as research activity, methodology and theory. A number of suggestions are made for further studies, especially in regard to establishing conceptual clarification and consensus, the question of strategy effectiveness, and issues with strategy instruction, teacher education and artificial intelligence. The article concludes with the hope that, after half a century of scholarly debate, greater clarity and consensus across contested domains will emerge, paving the way for more effective promotion of strategies as a powerful tool for successful language learning.

Keywords: Strategy definition; strategy classification; strategy effectiveness; research methodology; strategy instruction; teacher education; narrative review; complex/dynamic theory.

Introduction

When Rubin (1975) published her good language learner study, which introduced the language learning strategy concept to the field, she almost certainly did not expect it to ignite a controversy which is still not entirely resolved half a century later. In the same year, Stern (1975) also published a good language learner study, and in the decade that followed, other academics contributed to the discussion (e.g. Cohen & Aphek, 1980: Hosenfeld, 1976; Naiman et al., 1978), resulting in "an explosion of activity" (Skehan, 1989, p.285). By the middle of the 80s, O'Malley et al. (1985, p.22) were complaining that there was "no consensus…[and]…considerable confusion" regarding terminology and definition.

Nevertheless, the activity continued, driven by the promise of a powerful new tool to contribute to learning success. Chamot and O'Malley (1986), for instance, introduced a strategy-based instructional programme which they called the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach or CALLA. Then in 1990 Oxford produced what would become probably the most widely used instrument for measuring strategy use: The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL, used in numerous studies in the years since.

The lack of consensus and confusion persisted, however. Ellis (1994, p.533) described the strategy concept as "ad hoc and atheoretical", while Cohen (1998, p.3) talked of "conflicting views". Then Dörnyei (2005, p.168) landed the strategy concept a body blow, suggesting that it functioned in a "theoretical muddle" and recommending the alternative concept of self-regulation, as favoured by psychologists (e.g. Winne, 1995; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997).

Strategy protagonists reacted with predictable outrage, but the attempt to research and promote strategies "remained vibrant" (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014, p.1). Rather than offering an "all-encompassing definition of a strategy", Macaro (2006, p.320) proposed "a series of features essential to describing a strategy". A year later, Gao (2007, p.615) asked the desperate-sounding question: "Has language learning strategy research come to an end?". Like Macaro (2006), Gu (2012, p.330) also concluded that language learning strategy "is not a clearly definable concept" arguing instead for a "prototypical core and dimensions of variation". In the same year Rose (2012, p.92) advised against "throwing language learning strategies out with the bathwater".

Then in 2015, in a rather spectacular U-turn, Dörnyei and Ryan concluded that in spite of the controversies, language learning strategies remained “alive and kicking” (p.141).

So, what has happened in the language learning strategy battlefield since 2015? Perhaps rather surprisingly, our strategy baby seems to be still firmly in the bathwater, and “strategies have continued to be a fertile area of research and publication” (Griffiths, 2020, p.610). But issues remain. In this narrative review, a comprehensive, critical, and interpretive synthesis of existing research into language learning strategies is presented, driven by experience with, knowledge of, reading about, and research in the field.

Strategy definition

According to an early definition by Rubin (1975), learning strategies are "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (p.43). Cohen (1998) added the dimension of conscious choice to his definition, while Griffiths (2003) added the dimensions of action, purposefulness and goal-orientation.

More recently, Oxford (2017, p.48), attempting to accommodate the self-regulation concept, produced a very comprehensive definition of language learning strategies:

> L2 learning strategies are complex, dynamic thoughts and actions, selected and used by learners with some degree of consciousness in specific contexts in order to regulate multiple aspects of themselves (such as cognitive, emotional, and social) for the purpose of (a) accomplishing language tasks; (b) improving language performance or use; and/or (c) enhancing long-term proficiency. Strategies are mentally guided but may also have physical and therefore observable manifestations. Learners often use strategies flexibly and creatively; combine them in various ways, such as strategy clusters or strategy chains; and orchestrate them to meet learning needs. Strategies are teachable, but the learner in context is the ultimate authority regarding strategy choice. Appropriateness of strategies depends on multiple personal and contextual factors.

Thomas and Rose (2019, p.248), however, made the observation that this “definition” by Oxford (2017) is “much more than just a definition”.

In an attempt to reduce the strategy definition to the absolute essentials, beyond which it could not be called a strategy, Griffiths (2018) produced a parsimonious definition of language learning strategies as actions chosen by learners for the purpose of learning language. In other words, they are active (the learner has to DO something), learner-selected, purposeful (as opposed to random) and goal-oriented. This definition omits the idea of consciousness, since the term has a variety of meanings (Schmidt, 1990) and strategies are often quite automatic or habitual, especially for more experienced learners, who do not need to choose them deliberately every time.

After years of controversy, Griffiths (2018) hoped that the definition proposed above would be the final one, but it was barely in publication before Thomas and Rose (2019) made the logical point that strategies may not always be chosen by the learner. In other words, an activity suggested by a teacher or more knowledgeable other for the purpose of achieving a goal might still be called a strategy, although it has to be taken on board by the learner for it to be of any actual use from a learning perspective. This point of view is supported by Fung and Lo (2025), who concluded that strategies are not always self-regulated: they can be prompted by someone else (the teacher in the case of this study). So, we seem to be left with an increasingly concise definition of strategies as:

actions selected for the purpose of achieving a goal.

According to such a broad definition, the criticism has been made (e.g. Dörnyei, 2005) that any action can therefore be labelled a strategy. However, this ignores the role of goal orientation. For example, if students have a goal of improving their English grammar, spending time reading and replying to friends' Facebook pages (especially if it is in their own L1) is unlikely to achieve this objective. Consequently, this action is not goal-oriented, and is therefore not strategic for the purpose of the stated goal.

In addition to the succinct definition offered above, we do need to consider Gu's (2012, p.330) "dimensions of variation". These might include individual differences (such as age, gender, affective factors, motivation, willingness to communicate, etc.), context (such as nationality, ethnicity, culture, geographical location, socio-economic factors, English as a medium of instruction (EMI) , task requirements, primary/secondary/tertiary levels, etc.), or learning goal (such as further education, employment, business, travel, etc.). These variables might need to be

added to the "prototypical core" (ibid) for a particular study, but cannot be assumed to apply to every study.

Another highly contentious strategy issue has been regarding strategy classification. Rubin (1981) suggested two categories (direct and indirect), while O'Malley et al. (1985) proposed three (cognitive, metacognitive and social/affective), and Oxford (1990) included six groups (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social) in the well-known and widely-used Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL).

As with definition, strategy classification has proved to be controversial, with numerous criticisms being made and alternatives suggested, before Griffiths (2018) reduced the categories to two: cognitive and metacognitive. According to Griffiths (ibid), the cognitive group includes strategies that in one way or another involve direct mental interaction with the material to be learnt (e.g. by memorising, understanding meaning, figuring out rules, developing skills, etc.). The metacognitive group is concerned with managing, supervising or controlling the learning process (e.g. planning, evaluating, orchestrating, controlling emotions, managing social interaction, etc.).

In general, there has been a move away from rigid strategy classification in recent years. Cohen and Wang (2018) suggested that strategies can fluctuate from one classification to another during a task. Others, however, suggest that it is not the strategy but the learner that fluctuates, a view of learner agency which seems to be supported by Amerstorfer (2020), who argues that learners adjust strategies based on individual needs, preferences, and situational conditions.

Strategy effectiveness

As with issues of definition and classification, there is little consensus on the question of how well strategies support language learning. Some early studies concluded that strategies were not related to successful learning. When Porte (1988), for instance, interviewed a group of under-achieving learners, he concluded that most reported frequent use of language learning strategies, similar to more successful learners. Vann and Abraham (1990) came to a similar conclusion with their trio of under-achieving learners. Both Porte and Vann and Abraham, however, noted that although their under-achievers reported frequent strategy use, the strategies they chose were often not appropriate to the task at hand. Inappropriate strategies are also noted

by Wenden (1998) as a reason for unsuccessful learning. More recent examples of unsuccessful strategy use include a study by Alharbi (2021) who concluded that the students' lack of successful strategy use could be attributed to the fact that they failed to activate their own schemata, and as a result they were unable to contextualize or infer meaning, which led to shallow processing. And a case study of a successful and an unsuccessful learner by Vu (2023) concluded that the unsuccessful learner's lack of success was attributable to low motivation, and she used fewer strategies than the successful learner.

Of course, there are also examples of successful strategy use. Successful examples include Green and Oxford's (1995) study of students at a university in Puerto Rico, which found that successful learning was positively statistically correlated with frequency of strategy use. Griffiths (2003) also found that higher level students used more strategies more frequently than lower level students, and in a comparative study of effective and ineffective learners Wong and Nunan (2011) found that the more successful learners used self-directed strategies such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, and independent practice outside class. More recently, Hanafiah et al. (2021) found that their most successful learners used metacognitive strategies most frequently and affective strategies least frequently, while Bai et al. 's (2025) most successful students had higher growth mindset and strategy use than the less successful learners.

Taken together, these studies illustrate that the relationship between strategy use and successful language learning is neither linear nor uniform, but dependent on a complex interplay of factors. While some learners fail despite reporting frequent strategy use, their difficulties often stem from how strategies are selected, deployed, or aligned with task demands, as well as from broader affective and motivational factors. Conversely, successful learners tend to demonstrate not only higher frequency of strategy use but also more appropriate, self-regulated, and goal-oriented strategic behaviour. The contrasting findings therefore suggest that it is not strategy use per se that predicts success, but the quality, relevance, and contextualised application of strategies within a broader range of learner characteristics. This nuanced picture underscores the need to move beyond simple frequency counts toward a more sophisticated understanding of strategic competence as a complex, dynamic feature of language learning.

Recent research activity

So, if our strategy baby is still "alive and kicking" (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p.141), and remains in the bathwater (Griffiths, 2020), what are the areas in which s/he has been active? A search of recent publications on the topic of language learning strategies reveals a steady stream, especially in the areas of language skills and knowledge, and the relationships to other variables such as individual and contextual differences. Recent examples (since 2020) which illustrate ongoing research activity include the following:

Language skills

This has always been an active research area, covering all four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), and this continues to the present day. For reading, examples include Robb and Ewert's (2024) article which investigated the realities of using extensive reading as a strategy to produce intrinsically motivated readers; they found that considerable teacher guidance and supportive transitional activities were required. Wang et al. (2025) found that metacognitive strategies together with collaborative writing significantly improved students' writing scores. Statistically significant positive correlations between listening strategy employment and listening comprehension achievement were found by Kök (2023) (more frequent use was reported by higher achievers). And while validating a speaking strategy questionnaire, Wang and Sun (2024) found that focus-oriented strategies, language awareness, and social-affective strategies were significantly related to language learners' speaking competence.

Language knowledge

Like language skills, language knowledge (including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and pragmatics) has also been a fertile area of strategy research and publication. For example, when Ibrahim and Norliana (2023) investigated the relationship between grammar learning strategy use and grammar competence, they found significant relationships between grammatical competence and cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, with cognitive strategies contributing most of the variance. Supported by research evidence, Nation (2024) discussed principles of effective vocabulary strategy use, emphasizing the importance of focused attention, accurate processing, repeated encounters, sufficient time on task, elaboration, analysis, motivation, and self-efficacy as the foundations of durable vocabulary learning. Sardegna (2022)

found that various strategies could be usefully employed to enhance achievement in pronunciation, including goal-setting, self-monitoring, guided practice, and targeted feedback, all of which helped learners take greater control of their own pronunciation development. And,when investigating learners' use of pragmatic learning strategies, Tajeddin and Malmir (2024) found that students with longer experience as language learners tended to employ more pragmatic strategies than less experienced learners.

Individual differences

There are an enormous number of individual differences which have attracted attention, and many of them have been researched in relation to learning strategies. Four such topics attracting contemporary interest (motivation, emotion, style and grit) are noted here. Lee et al. (2022) found that motivation was related to strategies, and intrinsic motivation had a stronger influence on strategy use than extrinsic motivation. When Wang et al. (2024) investigated the complex relationships among negative emotions, maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, and burnout, they found that these variables were intertwined rather than independent. With regard to style, Hattie and O'Leary (2025) argued that aligning teaching styles with students' learning styles does not promote achievement; the emphasis needs rather to be on teaching students strategies for adapting their styles to task and goal demands. And in a longitudinal study, Dong (2024) found that grit (the ability to persevere long-term towards a goal) played an influential role in shaping motivational regulation strategies over time.

Context

Although long overlooked as a factor in language learning, the importance of context (including national, online, EMI and AI environments), often also called an ecological perspective, has more recently been recognised and researched. For instance, Hajar (2017) explored the identity, investment, and language learning strategies of two Syrian students \in Syrian and British contexts, finding that their strategy use was deeply shaped by shifting identities, changing levels of investment, and the contrasting sociocultural affordances of each learning environment, suggesting that language learning strategies (LLS) are situated practices, not stable traits. Hapsari et al. (2023) found that online learning could be improved by strategies for control, organisation and motivation. In recent years, EMI has become extremely popular all over the world, and when Xiao and Zou (2020) investigated related strategies they found that communication

strategies were most effective for overcoming speaking difficulties, cognitive strategies best for dealing with reading and listening problems, while metacognitive and cognitive strategies were helpful with writing. At the time of writing, the generative AI context is relatively new, but AI research is starting to appear, such as the piece by Yang (2024) which addresses concerns about AI and emphasises the need for efficient learning strategies to cope with an AI environment.

The relatively few examples noted above illustrate the point that LLS remain "alive and kicking" (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p.141) in spite of the controversies noted in previous sections. Taken together, these studies indicate that contemporary LLS research is ongoing, shifting toward more nuanced examinations of how strategic behaviour emerges, adapts, and interacts with broader constructs such as self-regulation, identity, motivation, and context. This continued research activity suggests that LLS remains a productive area of inquiry which increasingly captures the complexity of learner strategic behaviour.

Research methodology

As with almost everything else in the strategy field, research methodology has been controversial. Since the early days of strategy research, a favourite research method has been questionnaires, including those with general strategy items such as the SILL (Oxford, 1990), as well as those focused on particular areas. These include vocabulary (e.g. Gu, 2018), grammar (e.g. Wang et al., 2024), pronunciation (e.g. Sardegna et al., 2018), pragmatics (e.g. O'Grady, 2023), speaking (e.g. Wang & Sun, 2024), reading (e.g. Mokhtari et al., 2018), listening (e.g. Rashtchi et al., 2019), and writing (e.g. Shen & Wang, 2024).

Many strategy questionnaires have used Likert scales, which have been popular because they are relatively easy to administer, can produce a lot of data in a relatively short space of time, and the data they produce is relatively easy to analyse (e.g. Nunan, 1992). However, such questionnaires have also had their critics. One of the earliest was Reid, who developed the Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (Reid, 1987). Partly as a result of her experiences with this study, she published an article which she called "The dirty laundry of ESL survey research" (Reid, 1990, p.323) in which she criticised such studies on the grounds of reliability, validity and analysis methods. Gu et al. (1995, p.19) pointed out the problem with reference ambiguity ("How often is often?"). Jamieson (2004) discussed how Likert scales can be (ab)used, in particular by subjecting the ordinal data produced by such scales to parametric tests (such as Pearson

correlations, ANOVAs and t-tests on SPSS) rather than non-parametric tests (such as Spearman, Mann-Whitney and Kruskall-Wallis), a practice which remains very common, even today. Dörnyei (2005) pointed out that questionnaires like the SILL consist of discrete behavioural items which are not cumulative (meaning they cannot be added together to produce a total score or a mean – another practice which remains common, even though it has long been recognised as inappropriate). Standardised strategy questionnaires were criticised by Woodrow (2005), since learners from different backgrounds may interpret items differently, while Plonsky and Gass (2011) pointed out the potential for response bias if participants respond according to what they feel is expected rather than according to their own genuine perceptions. These criticisms, and the practices which have given rise to them, persist to contemporary times. Uher (2022), for instance, argues that rating scales embed 12 interlinked conceptual and methodological fallacies, including the assumption that numbers accurately represent psychological phenomena. And Darnton (2023), like Jamieson (2004), challenges the widespread misuse of Likert-type data, especially the application of parametric statistics to ordinal-level results.

Nevertheless, in spite of these criticisms, others point out that questionnaires can be useful if administered and interpreted with care (e.g. Cohen, 1998). In defence of the SILL and similar instruments, Amerstorfer (2018) suggests that it remains useful, especially if combined with other research methods in mixed-method studies to provide triangulation. Pawlak (2021), while recognising that the use of questionnaires may be controversial, acknowledges that they have produced large quantities of useful data, and Peytcheva and Yan (2025) defend the use of questionnaires on the grounds of their cost-effectiveness, scalability, flexibility, comparability, and compatibility with AI (an increasingly important consideration).

Mixed methods have gained popularity in recent years because of the potential for triangulation, where results from one method can be compared with other results (e.g. Flick, 2018). Some of the methods used in strategy studies include interviews (e.g. Derakhshan & Bai, 2025), which are capable of probing issues more deeply and personally, and think aloud protocols, which can track moment-by-moment changes (e.g. Cohen & Wang, 2018). Structural equation modelling or SEM (e.g. Lee et al., 2022), which is able to analyse complex relationships, has also become popular, while experiments, which can be difficult to set up, but which are capable of providing inter-group comparisons, remain useful (e.g. Wang et al., 2025). Other methodological options

currently in use for strategy research include ethnography, which is capable of offering deeply personal insights (e.g. Dasli & Sangster, 2023), and latent profiling (e.g. Zhang & Zhang, 2025), which is able to uncover hidden characteristics even if they are not directly observable. Although quantitative methods have tended to predominate in strategy research, qualitative approaches, which Thomas et al. (2024) describe as capable of contributing depth and nuance, have been gaining acceptance. Although cross-sectional methods have tended to be more popular over the years, longitudinal studies, which, although difficult to set up and maintain, can reveal the way constructs develop over time (e.g. Dong, 2024) and are also beginning to be more common. These various methods can either be used independently or in combination with other methods. And, of course, very newly on the horizon at the time of writing is the use of AI in language learning strategy research (e.g. O'Grady, 2023; Yang, 2024).

Each of the methodological options noted above has the potential to contribute usefully to a study. But each also needs to be considered carefully in terms of its limitations and appropriateness when designing a research project.

Strategy instruction

The assumption of strategy teachability has been part of the LLS scene from the beginning. According to Rubin (1975), the reason for observing what good language learners do (i.e. their strategies), was so that these actions could be taught to less successful learners in order to enable them to also learn more effectively.

Consistent success in strategy instruction, however, has proven elusive. In the early years of strategy research, a number of studies into the effects of strategy instruction were conducted. When O'Malley (1987) randomly assigned 75 students to one of three experimental groups, a significant difference in favour of the treatment group was found for speaking, but not for listening, while the vocabulary control group actually scored slightly higher than the treatment group. This inconsistent finding was explained as resulting from the persistence of familiar strategies and unwillingness to use the new strategies presented during instruction. When Wenden (1987) conducted a strategy instruction programme, a questionnaire revealed that fewer than half of the students thought that the training had been beneficial, and some were so resistant that one of the classes was dropped after only three weeks. A similar result was reported by Griffiths (2003). In the face of results such as these, Rees-Miller (1993) questioned whether the

time spent giving instruction in strategy use might be better spent directly teaching the subject matter. A similar argument has been made more recently by Swan and Walter (2017, p.228) who have suggested that students' comprehension problems are often not related to inadequate strategy use but to "low-level decoding and parsing" (in other words, the problem is language-related, and this is where the time should be spent).

Belief in the teachability of strategies and the importance of undertaking strategy education has continued, however. A year after Rees-Miller's negative assessment was published, Chamot and Rubin (1994) published comments which asserted that strategy instruction (sic) can facilitate learner empowerment. After the initial burst of enthusiasm, however, interest in researching strategies-based instruction seemed to lose impetus. Chamot (2005) suggested that this might be simply because of the sheer difficulty of setting up research studies in normal classroom environments. A search for books directly on strategy instruction revealed only three so far in the 21st century. One of these is a book with 49 strategies for pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading and writing by Tang and Griffiths (2014), aimed at equipping teachers with instructional materials. Another is edited by Psaltou-Joycey (2015) with classroom-ready activities designed to help teachers understand, teach, and integrate strategy instruction into everyday classroom practice. The other, edited by Chamot and Harris (2019), includes contributions by well-recognised strategy experts on designing instruction for language learners across different age groups and learning contexts.

A relative trickle of strategy instruction articles has continued in journals, but results are rather mixed. Reviews into the effectiveness of strategy instruction have tended to produce vaguely positive (e.g. Hassan et al., 2005) but "inconclusive" (Plonsky, 2011, p.993) results. When Graham (2017) claimed that recent investigation into strategy-based instruction had provided evidence of its benefits, Haslett (2020) countered that her own findings were far more mixed, with outcomes varying considerably across learners and contexts. And according to Pawlak (2024, p.174), "there is a paucity of studies examining the effects of pedagogical interventions in this area".

Teacher education for strategy instruction

If studies on strategy instruction itself remain relatively scarce, research on preparing strategy-aware teachers (those who possess the conceptual understanding and pedagogical skills

needed to implement strategy instruction effectively in the language classroom) is even more limited. Only a handful of publications address this dimension explicitly. One of the very few is the chapter by Chamot et al. (2019), written by experienced teacher educators, which examines both pre-service and in-service preparation for delivering strategy instruction. Their work highlights the complex knowledge base teachers require: understanding the theoretical foundations of language learning strategies, modelling and scaffolding strategic behaviour, integrating strategy instruction into content lessons, and assessing learners' strategic development.

The paucity of research in this area is striking given that teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and instructional repertoires are central to the success of any strategy-based intervention. In the face of this lacuna, Nyikos et al. (2025) issue a clear call to action, arguing that "it is imperative to integrate LLS training into preservice teacher and professional development programs" (p. 6). Their position underscores a growing recognition that without systematic preparation, teachers are unlikely to feel confident or competent in teaching strategies, and strategy instruction risks remaining peripheral, inconsistent, or absent from classroom practice.

Language learning strategy theory

Language learning strategies can be theorised through multiple lenses. These include cognitive, metacognitive, sociocultural, affective, motivational, ecological, agentic and identity-based perspectives. Each of these highlights different mechanisms through which learners regulate, adapt, and enact their learning behaviours. But, given the variability noted in the sections above, perhaps the most useful theoretical base is Complex/Dynamic Systems Theory, introduced by Larsen-Freeman (1997).

From a Complex/ Dynamic Systems perspective, language learning strategies can be understood as behaviours arising from the complex interaction of cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, affective, social, goal-oriented and ecological subsystems. Strategy use varies across tasks, goals, individual differences, contexts and timescales, reflecting the emerging characteristics of dynamic systems. This complex/dynamic framing offers a theoretically coherent explanation for the heterogeneous and often contradictory findings in language learning strategy research.

Directions for ongoing research

Although Gao (2007) expressed the anxiety that language learning research had come to an end, as can be seen from this article, strategy research has in fact continued undiminished, and as it reached the 50-year anniversary of its introduction by Rubin (1975), it shows every sign of still being a very active research area. Areas still needing research, however, remain. These include:

1. Definition and classification remain in need of refinement and consensus. A clear definition is essential for valid research, and confusion over classification terms and systems also reduces validity. Work on clarifying and achieving consensus on these basic concepts needs to continue.
2. As noted above, the strategy field has been over-reliant on Likert scale questionnaires, which have not always been analysed according to sound statistical principles. Work needs to continue on diversifying research methodologies and ensuring rigorous and appropriate analysis procedures.
3. Numerous research topics have been noted above, but "dimensions of variation" (Gu, 2012, p.330) are almost infinite. There are many more areas of strategy use waiting to be explored, perhaps independently, or maybe in combination.
4. A major black hole as far as strategies are concerned is the issue of strategy instruction. Although, as noted above, a number of strategy instructional programmes have been proposed and researched, a truly effective strategy instruction programme remains elusive. But strategies have the potential to be "an extremely powerful learning tool" (O'Malley et al., 1985, p.43), suggesting that strategy instruction has been and remains worthy of ongoing research.
5. We do not have much research on strategy instruction, but we have even less on teacher education for strategy instruction. It would seem to stand to reason that if language learning strategies are ever to reach their potential as "a powerful learning tool" (O'Malley et al., 1985, p.43), teachers need to be on board. Research therefore needs to be done both at pre-service and in-service levels into how to produce strategy-aware teachers who can guide their students into effective strategy deployment.

6. And, of course, at the time of writing, artificial intelligence has taken the world by storm and left educators struggling for answers. Questions abound: How can strategies be used to ensure learning with the help of AI? What strategies can teachers use to prevent the use of AI to answer immediate questions, the answers to which are almost immediately forgotten for lack of consolidation? How can students be provided with motivational strategies to self-regulate their own AI use? There are so many questions at this point in time that almost anything relating strategies to AI is going to be new and worthy of attention.

Conclusion

In response to Dörnyei's (2005) provocative question about whether strategies actually exist, Griffiths (2018 p.ix) responded: "Of course they do! We need strategies for everything we do in life…Why should developing a language be any different?"

It is usually Rubin's (1975) study which is credited with introducing the concept of strategies to the field of language learning, sparking scholarly attention and debate which has persisted to the present day. The late '70s and '80s saw a surge in strategy research, though confusion about definition and classification quickly emerged, some of which remains until the current time. The strategy concept received heavy criticism from Dörnyei (2005), who proposed self-regulation as a preferable alternative. Nevertheless, ten years later, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015, p.141) reversed earlier critiques, declaring strategies "alive and kicking".

Although language learning strategies have been around for half a century, and although they have aroused interest and hopefully helped many learners to learn more effectively, there is still a lot of work to be done to address some of the fundamental issues which remain, and the new ones that are developing. Decades of work have established that learners do, in fact, engage in a wide repertoire of different strategies, and that these behaviours can support language development under the right conditions. What is now needed is a renewed research agenda which is theoretically and methodologically sound, and which brings these perspectives into dialogue with individual and classroom realities. Doing so will help to ensure that language learning strategy research remains relevant and pedagogically impactful into the future.

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Observing Court Interpreting in-Situ

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Abstract

The Common Law principle of open justice means that courtrooms and court proceedings are open to the public and public scrutiny. While this may be the case in theory, conducting research in these hierarchical spaces, which are entrenched with protocol and prestige, can be a daunting task. The paths of entry for conducting empirical research in this environment can be unclear for many researchers, particularly those without previous experience in the legal domain. Because of this, prior research on court interpreting in New Zealand has not employed fieldwork-based methods, leading to a dearth of empirical research on this topic. This article outlines the processes I undertook in conducting fieldwork in New Zealand courtrooms as part of data collection for my doctoral study, which examined interpreting mode practices in New Zealand criminal trials. It is intended that the documentation of and critical reflection on my own experiences will provide a useful and practical foundation for other researchers seeking to use fieldwork-based methods in investigating courtroom practices in New Zealand.

Keywords: interpreting, fieldwork, court, forensic linguistics, legal

Introduction

New Zealand is a small, yet highly linguistically and culturally diverse country. In a country of around 5.3 million people (Stats NZ, n.d.), more than 150 languages are spoken (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2016), and Auckland, the country's largest city, has been considered to have greater cultural diversity than cities such as New York and London (Tan, 2016). This linguistically diverse landscape is reflected in the country's need for language interpreting services in the courtroom context too, with around 10,000 hearings every year requiring such services (Nichols, 2021; see also Chen, 2019). When interpreting is required, often the interpreter themselves is the only person in the room who understands everything which is taking place in both languages (Nartowska, 2015). As such, the interpreter's role is crucial for ensuring the limited English proficiency (LEP) person is able to be linguistically present within this high-stakes context.

By law, in New Zealand all persons charged with an offence have the right to the assistance of interpreting services. This legal right is one which is codified in the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act (NZBORA) (New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990, s24(g)), highlighting the importance of these services. However, despite the crucial nature of court interpreting and the frequency in which these services are required, there is currently little in the way of official guidelines or empirical research on this area of practice in New Zealand. In fact, during preliminary research stages when investigating this area of practice, I was unable to locate any New Zealand based court interpreting research which made use of in-situ observations (see Jannink, 2026, pp. 55, 63–67). This lack of existing, in-situ based research is likely, in part, due to difficulties and uncertainties as to how to obtain appropriate permissions from the court to do so (see Mason, 2000; Wang, 2014). My doctoral thesis addressed this gap. My thesis investigated interpreting mode use in New Zealand criminal trials given the discrepancies around mode use that I had encountered between official practice guidance and anecdotal evidence from interpreting professionals. As well as interviews with judges, lawyers and interpreters, I also included observation of six interpreted criminal trials as part of my multimethod approach.

In terms of my own positionality, unlike many who come to research this area from an interpreting background (see Gile, 2018; Hale, 2021), I began this research after practicing as a lawyer in New Zealand. In addition to being an enrolled barrister and solicitor, I also speak

French and conversational Mandarin, hold a Masters of Intercultural Communication and Applied Translation (which included an interpreting paper) and have experience working as a Translator. This positionality provided a unique perspective, given my practical experience in both the legal and language services domains.

This article will provide an overview of some of the key processes undertaken during my doctoral study in gaining access to authentic courtroom data. The article will first provide relevant background information as to existing empirical court interpreting research in New Zealand. It will then briefly review some of the key literature which touches on the benefits and challenges of conducting such research, before discussing my own experiences in conducting in-person observation and obtaining recordings of authentic court proceedings.

Existing empirical court-interpreting research in New Zealand

As noted above, there is very little in the way of empirical research on court interpreting in New Zealand. Aside from the few articles providing an overview of court interpreting (see Burns, 2001; McKenzie-Bridle et al., 1999) and studies about interpreter training for this context (Burn & Crezee, 2017, 2020; Crezee et al., 2017; Teng et al., 2018), the two key sources which researched the practices of New Zealand court interpreters are that of Wang (2014) (Wang's master's thesis) and the report of the Superdiversity Institute for Law, Policy and Business (Chen, 2019) (CALD report). This section will provide an overview of some of the key points from both Wang's master's thesis and the CALD report respectively and situate my doctoral study and its methodology in light of this existing context.

Wang's master's thesis discusses the results of surveys completed by 30 individuals with court interpreting experience in New Zealand, as well as 11 interviews of Auckland-based court interpreters (Wang, 2014). The focus of both the survey and the interviews was on the challenges faced by court interpreters in New Zealand (Wang, 2014). The results of Wang's study covered a number of challenges, including but not limited to: interpreters not being provided background information in advance; interpreters' need to keep themselves up to date with developments in the legal field regarding new terminology; and interactional management challenges, in part due to the variability of knowledge around how to work with interpreters during such interactions (Wang, 2014). In light of the challenges discussed, Wang's master's thesis recommended further tertiary level training for practicing court interpreters, particularly in relation to discourse-based

challenges in this context (Wang, 2014, pp. 181–182). It also recommended a law amendment so that interpreters would be provided with relevant background information in advance of court hearings (Wang, 2014, p. 182). Wang's master's thesis, which comprehensively examines challenges faced by court interpreters, appears to be the only one of its kind in New Zealand. Despite being around 12 years old, Wang's work provides a number of invaluable insights into ongoing realities of interpreting in this context. However, a methodological limitation of the study identified within the thesis itself, is that the data was based on surveys and interviews, both of which involve self-reporting by the participants (Wang, 2014, p. 181).

Another key study is the CALD report (Chen, 2019). The CALD report examined the importance of cultural awareness during court proceedings in which culturally and linguistically diverse litigants are involved (Chen, 2019, p. 12). This was investigated by researching the experiences of Chinese participants in this context (Chen, 2019, pp. 12–13). The methods used for data-collection in this study involved (Chen, 2019, pp. 15–17):

a. interviews with 14 judges, 20 lawyers and six interpreters;

b. document analysis of 2,000 cases involving challenges in part due to a Chinese party being involved in the proceedings; and

c. a literature and data review.

While not the focus of the report, interpreting practice at the time was also discussed in multiple places throughout the document. Some of the key findings which related to interpreting included: variability in the standard of interpreting; the importance of dialect considerations; inadequate time; and varied expectations as to the interpreter's role (see Chen, 2019, pp. 26–28; 85–86). Based on the various findings, the CALD report made 36 recommendations targeted at a number of stakeholders, including judges, interpreters, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), the New Zealand Law Society, lawyers, and legal education institutions. The report's recommendations around greater qualification requirements for interpreters and developing an interpreting protocol have since been addressed by the New Zealand government by way of the Language Assistance Services Programme (an initiative which was underway prior to the publication of the CALD report) (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2025) and MOJ's 'Interpreter Services Quality Framework' (Ministry of Justice, 2023).

Both Wang's master's thesis and the CALD report provide crucial insights into the realities and

challenges faced by court interpreters in New Zealand. However, as outlined above, neither of these studies implemented in-person fieldwork observations as part of their methodologies. Building upon these two existing studies, I similarly implemented interviews as part of the methodology for my doctoral study, but added in-person observation of authentic interpreted criminal trials, as well (Jannink, 2026). Taking this additional step was important not only to address the existing gap in empirical, situated research, but also to investigate the apparent discrepancy I had encountered between official practice guidance and anecdotal evidence from interpreting professionals.

Prior court interpreting literature on undertaking in-situ fieldwork research

In situations where there is a lack of empirical research to substantiate anecdotal information on the realities of practice, descriptive research techniques can be highly valuable (Liu, 2011). Such techniques can assist in bringing to the fore previously unknown trends of practice (Hale, 2021), as well as provide useful starting points for further development (Liu, 2011).

Internationally, the use of fieldwork-based approaches has been undertaken in a few key court interpreting studies, notably the seminal work of Professor Susan Berk-Seligson in the United States (see Berk-Seligson, 2002), and work undertaken by the Aarhus School of Business in Denmark (see Christensen, 2008; Martinsen & Dubslaff, 2010) and Professor Sandra Hale in Australia (see Hale, 2004). Such studies have provided crucial, empirically-based insights into interpreted interaction in a number of areas, including the varying priorities of different parties in the interaction (see Martinsen & Dubslaff, 2010), perceptions of the interpreter's role (see Berk-Seligson, 2002), and perceptions on the credibility and competence of interpreters in these contexts (see Hale, 2004). The implementation of fieldwork-based methodologies, particularly when used as part of a multi- or mixed-method approach, strengthens the validity of the study by providing insights from authentic, empirical data (Hale, 2021).

In Common Law jurisdictions, such as New Zealand, many court appearances are open to the public, making observational fieldwork in courts more feasible in comparison to other contexts where legal interpreting occurs, such as lawyer-client meetings or police interviews (Goswell, 2024; Hale, 2021). However, gaining access and permission to collect data in public courts is not without its challenges. As noted by Berk-Seligson (2002), the courtroom is an unpredictable environment, where often events which have been scheduled to take place may not do so for a

number of reasons (Berk-Seligson, 2002, pp. 45–47). Additionally, while there are many hearings requiring interpretation in our courts, these are but a small percentage of court fixtures. Berk-Seligson herself reported minor difficulties in obtaining permission to undertake in-situ observations and analysis of authentic recordings. However, internationally, many researchers have encountered major challenges in being able to record such proceedings (see Mason, 2000). This is a challenge which has also been identified in the New Zealand context (Wang, 2014, citing personal communication with Crezee, 2013, p. 49). In my own doctoral study, I found conducting in-person observation in court, while not without its own challenges, to be more accessible than obtaining audio recordings of criminal trials for data collection.

The following sections will first discuss the processes I undertook to prepare for collecting data through in-person trial observations, before then discussing my experience in obtaining recordings of trials during my doctoral study.

In-situ observations

Between November 2023 and January 2024, I contacted 18 district courts to scope the feasibility of undertaking in-situ observations to collect data on court interpreting practice. Each court was contacted by way of email. An email address for each of the courts was located through using the 'Find us' search function on the New Zealand Ministry of Justice website (New Zealand Ministry of Justice, n.d.). This 'Find us' search page allows the public to locate the contact details for different courts throughout the country by searching based on court type and location. Publicly available email addresses for these courts are then accessible via the 'More details' link which appears next to the court's phone number after undertaking the initial search.

In each of these scoping emails, I provided a brief introduction, gave an overview of the project and inquired as to whether there may be any trials at that particular court between then and the end of April 2024, which I could potentially observe. It was also noted in this email (and the attached information letter), that I sought permission to: observe the trial in person; take handwritten notes during the observation; access the recording of the trial; and make inquiries with the lawyers and interpreters involved as to whether they would be interested in partaking in a subsequent interview. Given that permission relating to these various elements was at the discretion of the judge, it was also noted in the letter that one, some, or all of the aspects requested could be used for data collection purposes. For example, if only in-person observation

was granted, I was still interested in undertaking such observation without note-taking, access to the recording or being able to approach individuals about potential interviews. This proved to be a useful approach, particularly given half of the trials that ended up being observed involved sexual violence charges where recordings are a lot more challenging to gain access to, given the sensitive nature of the matters being discussed.

While it now appears to be the case that taking notes with pen and paper in courts is permitted, this change only came into force on 1 June 2022, which was relatively recent at the time of data collection (see Courts of New Zealand, n.d.-a). Interestingly, one of the contacted courts informed me that permission to take notes during trial observations would need to be obtained from the Chief District Court Judge. However, when contact was made with the Chief District Court Judge's Chambers, I was advised that this was not something for the Chief District Court Judge to approve, but rather that permission should be sought from the presiding judge of the particular trials I hoped to attend. While it may be the case that legally, note-taking in this manner is permitted, I would still recommend future researchers seek permission from presiding judges in relation to doing so. This should be done by first emailing the court in advance, as well as approaching the court registrar in the specific courtroom on the day, before court begins. Doing so is likely to be perceived as courteous and respectful by the judge and should hopefully avoid potential embarrassment if the judge were otherwise to question such practices during court proceedings. Responses from the contacted courts came back at varying times. Over half of the contacted courts either responded noting they did not have any trials requiring interpreting services set down for that period (eight courts) or never responded (two courts). Several courts responded stating that the request would be put through to the trial liaison judge (for two of the courts, this was where the process ended). One court advised of two potential trials that could be observed; however, unfortunately the two trials fell outside the scope of the data collection period for the research.

Of the total 18 courts initially contacted, I was in active contact with five of these regarding potential observations and attended four of these courts for observation opportunities. However, the trials which went ahead, and I was able to use for data collection purposes, came from only two of those courts: Auckland and Wellington District Courts.

As suggested by Berk-Seligson (2002), a certain level of flexibility was required in planning the

observation of trials. It was not uncommon during data collection to be advised by the courts of an upcoming suitable trial only a week before it was to take place. Further, even with cases where the courts were able to give me additional notice as to when they were scheduled, registrars often recommended I get in touch again the week prior, due to the unpredictable nature of court proceedings, as touched on in the prior section. This presents a hurdle to undertaking such data collection, particularly when the researcher is limited to a specific time period and/or has financial constraints on arranging out-of-town travel to attend court proceedings.

The first few trials I attempted to observe were judge-alone trials set down for one day or less. When the first three of these were each adjourned to later dates, it became clear that such trials appear more likely to be re-scheduled than jury trials. This is likely due to the additional people and respective scheduling involved with juries in comparison to judge-alone. It should also be noted that while jury trials appeared more likely to go ahead, they did not always do so for a variety of reasons. As such, I would recommend that future researchers attempt to observe jury, rather than judge-alone trials, for feasibility and practicality. Judge-alone trials would still be important to observe so as to avoid research gaps in this area, though if looking to research specific types of judge-alone trials (e.g. ones which involve interpreters) researchers should be prepared for a high degree of flexibility and unpredictability regarding observation timing.

In the trials which were observed as part of this study, I aimed to approach the observations in the most professional, transparent and context-appropriate way I could. For each of the trials, I would arrive before court began at 10am. On the first day of observation (if a multi-day trial), I would first approach the information desk to introduce myself and seek confirmation as to which courtroom the proceedings would be heard in. I would then go into that courtroom, once able to do so, and approach the registrar at the front of the courtroom, again to introduce myself and explain what I was doing in the public gallery. The registrar would then typically leave the room to inform the judge of my presence and upon their return to the courtroom, would usually confirm that the judge approved of me being there or noted any of the judges' concerns. When the judge later entered and court began, the Judge would also note my presence to the lawyers and confirm with them that they were happy for me to be observing the proceedings. Sometimes the judge would also inform the lawyers that I had inquired about undertaking interviews and that the lawyers were welcome to consider whether they may be interested in being interview participants.

During the proceedings, I would take handwritten notes on mode usage and any contextual factors which I perceived as potentially relevant for my study. Prior to observing the trial, I had printed out pages which were divided into four sections: three columns, one for time, one for mode, and one for contextual factors, as well as a fourth section at the bottom of each page for additional notes. The extent of how many notes I took varied, but would usually range between 22 and 63 pages. After each of the trials had ended, I would then review my handwritten notes and condense salient points into a summary document per trial. In general, each of these summary documents included sections on: background information; the courtroom layout; discourse types; modes used; contextual and interactional factors; as well as any additional notes. I then used these summary documents for undertaking my thematic analysis using the coding software NVivo (Lumivero, 2023), but could refer back to the more detailed in-situ notes as and when needed.

From going through official channels and ensuring the registrar and the judge were aware of my presence and purpose for being there, I found that all of the legal professionals I interacted with, both judges and lawyers, were very welcoming. None of the lawyers involved in any of the observed proceedings objected to my presence. A couple of lawyers, in some of the more sensitive cases, approached me during breaks to let me know that the matter involved name suppression. In such instances, I assured the particular lawyer that I would not be mentioning any names in the write-up of the research.

I chose not to approach lawyers or interpreters about potential interviews during court breaks, as I did not want to make anyone feel 'put on the spot' with this request on the day of the trial itself. However, several lawyers did approach me during this time, to express their interest in being interviewed, or mentioned that they would be happy to answer any questions off the record. Instead, after the trial had ended, I would email the court registrar to inquire whether the court would be happy for me to contact MOJ's Central Processing Unit (CPU), (the unit within MOJ responsible for the hiring of interpreters for different court events) and/or particular lawyers. I felt, again, that inquiring whether such individuals would be interested in doing an interview would be better coming from these official channels. Each time I got in touch with the registrar around this, they consistently confirmed that they were happy for me to contact the CPU, and that they would inquire with the lawyers if they consented to the court passing on their contact details to me.

Accessing court recordings

While the process of gaining permission to undertake in-situ observation involved several layers of administrative complexity, it was found, in this study, to be more feasible and timely for the purposes of data collection compared to obtaining audio recordings. Following the landmark case of *Abdula v R* 2011 NZSC 130 (*Abdula*), all New Zealand criminal trials which use interpreting services for the accused should be recorded (*Abdula*, para. 60). Such recordings are publicly accessible, but not publicly available, and require special permission to be granted access (*Centralised Services, Ministry of Justice,* personal communication, September 6, 2021; District Court (Access to Court Documents) Rules 2017; Senior Courts (Access to Court Documents) Rules 2017. Obtaining such access proved challenging, both in terms of knowing who best to contact, as well as getting access to recording files once the correct permissions had been obtained.

The process of ascertaining who to contact regarding such requests itself took several months. In the first instance, I tried to find out whether I could obtain a list of all recent cases which fell within the parameters of the research. The hope was that after obtaining such a list, several specific cases could then be identified, which I could then approach specific courts about, rather than undertaking fishing expeditions with individual courts. To try to obtain such a list, I first contacted the Research, Evaluation and Modelling Unit of MOJ on 25 July 2023, inquiring about this possibility. This specific unit was contacted, as they were identified online as the correct body to contact regarding MOJ records (Courts of New Zealand, n.d.-b). Around a month later the unit advised me that they did not hold these types of records.

The request was then passed on to MOJ's Official Information Act (OIA) team, who got in touch with me in August of 2023. MOJ's OIA team provided me with several documents noting the languages for which interpreters had been booked at various courts for criminal matters during the 2019 – 2022 period, though it was not specified which were for trials specifically (for example, see Jannink, 2026, Appendix D). These lists did not include case identifiers and the OIA team advised they did not hold such case numbers or identifiers associated with these court events. In an attempt to gain further specificity regarding relevant appearances, I asked MOJ's OIA team whether they were able to advise for which of these events the interpreter or interpreters were booked for more than one day, and if so, the exact dates the interpreters were

booked for. The OIA team responded in October 2023, noting they could provide information regarding the length of the bookings, but not more exact dates, due to privacy reasons. In response, I inquired as to whether it would be possible, in light of privacy concerns, to be provided with information on court location and date (but exclude the language required for interpreting) for trials involving interpreters, which were set down for more than one day. In November, I was advised to make this request to the Chamber of the Chief District Court Judge, given the information being sought would be considered court information. The MOJ OIA team suggested including my prior correspondence with them as part of this request.

A few months later, I attempted to observe a trial in person, which, unfortunately, was adjourned on each of the days I tried to attend. In advance of attending this trial, the presiding judge had indicated that access to the transcript and audio recording of the proceeding would likely be granted, if requested. I then pivoted slightly in my approach for obtaining recordings. I chose to use this trial as somewhat of a pilot for assessing the audibility of recorded trial data, before lodging a formal request to the Chamber of the Chief District Court Judge seeking to obtain recordings of other trials. As both the transcript and recording of criminal trials are considered to be part of the court record, I submitted an application for court documents to the court where the relevant trial was held a few weeks after its conclusion. The relevant form for making this request was located on a webpage on the District Court of New Zealand website, entitled 'Accessing court documents' (see District Court of New Zealand, n.d.). Around two months later it was confirmed that this application had been successful, with the following conditions:

1. That no further copies were to be made or distributed to any other person without further order of the court; and
2. That the parties and/or witness names were to be anonymised in any published research paper or article.

These conditions were agreed to on the same day, and the registrar sent me a copy of the written court record the following day. However, when sending this through, the registrar noted via email that they were unfamiliar with how to provide court recordings and would need to consult their colleagues as to how best to go about doing this – potentially highlighting how infrequently such recordings are provided to members of the public. The recordings were eventually obtained at the end of August 2024, around six months after the

trial had taken place. The recordings were shared by way of a USB stick, which I collected from the court where the trial had occurred.

However, upon listening to the recording, it was found that only parts of the interpretation were audible and it was often not possible to ascertain whether interpreting was taking place or not. Given the focus of this research was on the mode of interpreting being used (which could include whispered interpreting), as well as the administrative hurdles and time involved in obtaining such recordings, I decided not to pursue further recordings for the purpose of this research.

Conclusion

Courtrooms, although generally open to the public, can be challenging institutions to navigate as a site of research in terms of identifying relevant events, obtaining permission to collect data, and actually implementing data collection. While my legal background provided some knowledge around the processes and expectations in this context, there were still several layers of administrative complexity I had to navigate. It is hoped that outlining my own processes and experiences in this article can assist in providing a roadmap of sorts for future researchers who may be interested in studying language use and interaction in this domain. While some of the methodological challenges I encountered echoed those described by other scholars internationally (see Berk-Seligson, 2002), it should also be noted that many of the professionals in this space, including court registrars, judges, lawyers and interpreters were most accommodating and willing to assist with the research. Overall, I found undertaking empirical courtroom research in New Zealand to be highly rewarding and such research is crucial in advancing critical understanding of practice in this space.

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Indigenous Communicative Proficiency: Te Reo. A discursive literature review.

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Abstract

This preliminary study investigates a proposed proficiency framework to support adult learners of the Māori language in evaluating their own levels of communicative competence. No empirical data or a self-assessment tool that is calibrated to the linguistic and cultural features of the Māori language exists. Due to the lack of supporting data underpinning the evaluation tool, adult learners of te reo Māori are limited to subjective guesswork in determining their own proficiency. The study draws on Hymes' (1972) theory of communicative competence and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), a pioneering work that evolved out of language research and studies conducted by the Council of Europe (CoE). It sets out international proficiency standards particularly focused on what learners can do with a language by using it for communication rather than what they know about it. The principles governing the CEFR can be adapted for the Māori language. The paper argues that rigorous and detailed data to validate a self-assessment tool is needed for successful adaptation. The study proposes a Māori Language Proficiency Framework (MLPF) to address these issues and to provide a compass to help adult learners of te reo Māori navigate their own proficiency.

Keywords: te reo Māori, language proficiency frameworks, CEFR adaptation, communicative competence, indigenous language assessment.

Introduction

For adult learners of te reo Māori, determining their language proficiency based on guesswork can be a challenge in the absence of verified data underpinning the self-assessment tool. Overestimating their current language skills or underestimating what they have learned could lead to self-conscious feelings of unpreparedness, failure, or a stall in learning. When taken together, the CEFR architecture and the MLPF could reduce a lot of the issues associated with those challenges. This is not a learner's failing, but rather a lack in the system of language assessment to provide adequate measures to help them progress along the proficiency continuum towards communicative competence.

Barrett-Walker et al. (2020) demonstrated that, at the current rate of learning, te reo Māori is heading towards a projected decline. They recognised that the proficiency rates at which individual learners progress from formulaic language to more advanced levels play a key role in reversing that outcome.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which evolved out of language research conducted by the Council of Europe (CoE), provides a robust model of proficiency descriptions that is used by language teachers, researchers, and educational institutions on a global level. The CEFR's most critical mechanism, the language-neutral feature, is designed to facilitate the linguistic descriptions of the target language. However, this feature has not been adapted appropriately for te reo Māori in terms of Can-do descriptors written without Reference Level Description (RLD) validation. This feature carries an obligation on the people using the CEFR to describe their own language.

The proposed MLPF aims to address this gap by helping adult learners of te reo to gauge their own proficiency within a framework of three interdependent components: the proficiency band consisting of different User levels (Basic User A1-A2, Independent User B1-B2, Proficient User C1-C2), Can-do descriptors, and Reference Level Descriptions.

The adult learners are people learning te reo Māori, regardless of ethnicity, Māori, Pākehā or otherwise, who did not acquire the language through kōhanga reo or kura kaupapa Māori educational pathways.

The CEFR: Architecture and design principles

The premise of communicative competence emphasises that language teaching should incorporate methods that empower learners with knowledge about language use for communication, a significant shift from the rigid forms of linguistic-based teaching (Hymes, 1972). The premise was categorised into grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences in language performance rather than language knowledge (Canale & Swain, 1980). Hymes' (1972) work influenced a shift in the Council of Europe's research on curriculum design and language assessment, taking it from structuralism to more communicative approaches that focused on meaning rather than form. That shift was represented in the Council of Europe's CEFR document.

The proficiency band: User levels

The CEFR's proficiency band comprises the general User levels: Basic User, Independent User, and Proficient User, where each one corresponds to a paired scale: A1-A2, B1-B2, C1-C2. This provides a system that allows learners to be placed appropriately at the right level and scale, and to navigate their progression across this continuum. It provides the basic infrastructure to which Can-do descriptors and the RLDs are mapped.

The A1-C2 scales act as placeholders waiting to receive the written descriptors once they are validated by the RLDs, which describe the linguistic features of the target language.

Can-do descriptors and Reference Level Descriptions: An interdependent architecture

The Can-do descriptors and Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs) are mutually dependent features of the CEFR that necessitate the validation of language specifications placed at each level and corresponding scale on the proficiency band (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 28).

Can-do descriptors provide the front-end statements, written in the first person singular that learners will immediately encounter ("I can say a simple greeting and farewell"). The original descriptors were developed in a Swiss national research project while drawing on the threshold specifications (North, 2000).

Reference Level Descriptions provide the back-end data such as grammar features and culture-specific register of the language community, and this provides the evidence for

justification of the Can-do descriptors and their placement along the proficiency spectrum. Descriptors placed without evidentiary support are unvalidated assumptions. Consequently, the entire interdependent framework fails.

The adaptation of the CEFR has been used to help people gain work through certification needing only one pass mark rather than descriptors at every level. It has also been used to evaluate what learners can do at the end of a course, which is measured against curriculum objectives, not proficiency levels. A third use assesses the language skills of people based on proficiency descriptions, which the RLDs would validate at each scale (A1-C2). Only the third needs RLDs, and it is the purpose the MLPF is designed to serve.

When applied correctly, the CEFR could provide a valuable framework for language teachers in designing syllabus courses, classroom lessons, and educational resources. As the Council of Europe (2001) states, "such a simple 'global' representation will make it easier to communicate the system to non-specialist users and will also provide teachers and curriculum planners with orientation points" (p. 24).

Language neutrality as design principle

The CEFR's signature feature, its language neutrality, means that it does not describe any language; the community adopting it has to build the Reference Level Descriptions based on their own linguistic and grammatical specifications. It can also be used for languages other than the European languages for which it was originally designed. Communities that adopt the CEFR without RLDs are overlooking the fundamental requirement of the language neutrality feature.

The CoE states that the User levels and scales should in no way limit how different sectors and teaching traditions choose to organise or describe their own system of levels and descriptors. These can be presented in different ways for different purposes and can develop over time (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 23–24). The language neutrality facility allows for the adaptation of the CEFR for te reo Māori.

CEFR and te reo Māori: The case for authentic adaptation

This section demonstrates that the obligation established in the previous section has not been met for te reo Māori. It examines engagement with the CEFR in the New Zealand context, identifies a gap in how it has been applied, and explains why an investigation is needed to address it.

The theoretical anchor: Communicative competence and te reo Māori

Establishing an authentic adaptation of the CEFR for te reo Māori must begin from its own theoretical base, communicative competence. This starting point is congruent with the teaching and learning of te reo Māori, which is currently experiencing a revitalising period across public and professional sectors in New Zealand. Te reo is sustained through use, in formal and informal settings such as whānau, marae, kura, and wānanga. Communicative competence is therefore the critical foundation for any adaptation of the CEFR for te reo Māori if it is to be applied successfully, and the standard against which existing attempts are judged.

A pattern of incomplete engagement: The New Zealand evidence

Bruce and Whaanga (2002) made the earliest documented attempt to apply the CEFR to te reo Māori, which was based on a pre-publication draft. This was the first engagement of adaptation in the New Zealand context, and focused mainly on curriculum development and achievement objectives. It did not include any study on the proficiency aspect of the CEFR, or develop RLDs and validated Can-do statements for te reo Māori. They referred to their work as "living documents that will be regularly revised and updated in the light of experience" (p. 12). That revision did not occur.

Crombie and Whaanga (2003) produced a draft Learning Progression Framework for Māori in the New Zealand curriculum. Their descriptors were aligned to achievement objectives that described what students should be taught, and included no validated descriptors telling them what they can do with language communicatively. In addition, no RLDs were developed, and no analysis of the grammatical or sociolinguistic features of te reo Māori was conducted to support the descriptors. The framework never went beyond draft. These earlier attempts were carried out using the CEFR materials available at the time, and in good faith.

Johnson (2010), a principal writer of the New Zealand curriculum, in delivering a conference paper at the 2010 AILA Congress in Brisbane, explained how the descriptors were worked out. She noted that the CEFR descriptors were adapted across the eight levels of the New Zealand curriculum framework, and teachers of French and German who were consulted agreed with how they were placed. Māori language teachers "reached the same conclusions". The bands were broad enough to cover every language taught in New Zealand schools. She admitted, however, that "we were also beginning to have the uneasy feeling that this was because the descriptors were actually telling us very little that would be of any genuine use". She concluded that "in general educational contexts, such as those associated with schooling, any attempt to use the CEFR as a basis for designing language curricula whose objectives are more specific than those associated with general language proficiency is doomed to failure".

In their doctoral theses at the University of Waikato, Valax (2011) and Nock (2014) also examined these curriculum documents in detail. Valax (2011) found "no evidence of any specific studies relating to the descriptors" and further concluded that the alignment with the CEFR levels was "more rhetorical than real" (p. 255). Nock (2014), using part of Valax's analysis, found that the drafts of the curriculum guidelines for te reo Māori included examples, focus points, and vocabulary. However, these details were removed and did not make it into the final published version in 2009, even though those who trialled them had requested more of the same material at the higher levels (p. 50). The foundation on which RLDs for te reo Māori could have been built was removed.

Subsequently, the NZQA document (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2026) maps the English qualification levels against the CEFR bands but does not include te reo Māori. The Te Reo Māori Emergent 2 document (Ministry of Education & Te Poutāhū Curriculum Centre, 2025) was still in draft in October 2025. It does not mention the CEFR or align with it in any way. It uses the same template for 13 languages, and it describes what is to be taught, not what learners can do communicatively.

The critical flaw: Descriptors without validation

This paper is not criticising the curriculum work, but rather highlighting the role it played in adapting the CEFR over the last 24 years, though without RLDs. Attempts to adopt the proficiency bands and Can-do descriptors in the absence of RLDs did not apply the

interdependent function that the CEFR requires. As demonstrated in the section 'CEFR: Architecture and design principles', the CEFR treats Can-do descriptors and RLDs as mutually related (the front-end and back-end). Together they provide the critical foundation that validates the CEFR as a whole. This paper argues that these components must work in unison to produce an accurate description of te reo Māori for communicative proficiency.

A descriptor, for example, that says "I can use simple kīwaha in informal exchanges" without RLD validation makes it difficult to determine which linguistic and grammatical features a learner would need to use kīwaha at the Basic User level. Thus, there is no evidence verifying whether that descriptor belongs there.

The stakes: Language survival

Barrett-Walker et al. (2020) demonstrate that increasing the learning rate at which speakers progress from basic to proficient levels would play a key role in reversing the current decline of te reo Māori. The language's revitalisation depends on learners having a clear understanding of their own proficiency to inform their current position and next move. Without these orientation points, learners cannot progress through levels they cannot see clearly. This can result in learners becoming discouraged, forgoing their learning, or abandoning it altogether. At the population level, this reduces the number of speakers and, in turn, threatens the survival of te reo Māori. This is an urgent matter, not only of pedagogical reform and language maintenance, but of language survival. If this is not addressed, te reo Māori will remain on a trajectory towards long-term decline (Barrett-Walker et al., 2020). The absence of an empirically verified, communicative self-assessment tool for adult learners of te reo Māori creates a gap in assessment, and a barrier to its revitalisation.

The Māori Language Proficiency Framework: Theoretical foundations

The CEFR has been used in New Zealand for the last 24 years mainly to inform the design of curriculum documents and qualifications. However, no work was carried out to validate proficiency descriptors for te reo Māori. The Māori Language Proficiency Framework (MLPF) is a proposed model to address that gap. This section sets out the infrastructure of the MLPF, comprising User levels (Basic, Independent, Proficient), scales (A1-C2), Can-do descriptors, and the Reference Level Descriptions. It also describes the principles on which the framework will

operate. These parts, taken together, provide the mechanism for how adult learners of te reo Māori will evaluate their own reo proficiency, and lay the foundation for designing the self-assessment tool.

The MLPF is to be used within Māori cultural engagements, in differing social contexts such as in te kāinga, on the marae, at a hui or tangi. It describes learners' communicative performance in those settings, and informs them of their current levels. Other contexts include the health, legal and government systems, and educational institutions. The framework provides the necessary RLD specification features and context-specific terminology related to each of these social domains.

Design principles

The design and function of the MLPF will be based on the principles as set out below.

The first principle refers to communicative performance. It focuses on what a learner can do with the language rather than what they know about it (Council of Europe, 2001).

The second principle refers to language specificity. The MLPF must be built on the language features of te reo Māori, and not on European frameworks. The features, for example, include passive and active sentence constructions, ā-ō possessive specifications, prefix and inflectional variations, the function of particles, and tense aspectual markers. The MLPF is designed to facilitate learners' performance, not only communicatively but also culturally.

The proposed framework is not designed to evaluate what learners know about te reo Māori. Knowledge of language (I understand that the particle *e* marks the agent in a passive sentence) is not the same as the learners' ability to use the grammar competently for communication (I can say simple sentences about who or what did something). The grammar provides the validating back-end data to build the proficiency levels (A1-C2). It does not test the learner.

The third principle refers to mutual dependence. The infrastructure of the MLPF, including the proficiency band levels (Basic, Independent, Proficient), the Can-do descriptors, and the Reference Level Descriptions, operates on an interdependent level to validate meaning across each one. Can-do descriptors that are not supported by RLDs are unjustified assumptions, and

scales (A1-C2) without both become placeholders. The MLPF interdependent requirement is critical to its design and function.

The fourth principle refers to learner empowerment. The MLPF is built specifically to empower adult learners of te reo Māori rather than practitioners in the language education sector. The Can-do descriptors are written in simple non-technical language expressed in the first-person singular for learners without specialised linguistic understanding. Can-do statements explicitly state what a learner can do communicatively (I can use simple language to recite a karakia). When descriptors are stated in clear and accessible language, they can play an influential role in the development of motivation and confidence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This is a vital part of the empowerment process. The role of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and learner autonomy (Little, 1991) is equally important to this process. As a result, the MLPF serves the purpose for which it was designed, specifically as a self-assessment tool to measure language proficiency rather than professional certification for employment or evaluation at the end of a course.

The proficiency band: User levels

The MLPF uses the three-tier User levels of the CEFR and locates learners of te reo in an internationally recognisable model oriented towards proficiency. The Reference Level Descriptions are calibrated to the grammar specifications of te reo Māori and provide the evidentiary data to place content appropriately at each level. That data is not derived from European models of grammar. The MLPF characterises Basic Users as learners who utilise formulaic language at the introductory stage of acquisition and can produce simple utterances that are common in daily contexts (Ellis, 2003; Wray, 2002). This will involve phrases such as mihi greetings, personal introductions, telling the time, the weather, and asking and answering simple questions. When descriptors are transposed appropriately to culturally specific RLDs, they might be exemplified in the following ways: a Basic User, reciting a pepeha; an Independent User, speaking about whakapapa; a Proficient User, recounting a pūrākau.

Can-do descriptors: Requirements

The proficiency descriptors must satisfy four requirements.

The descriptors must express communicative performance, stating what learners can do with language rather than what they know about it. Every descriptor is written in performative terms: "can understand basic conversation around familiar everyday topics" characterises language use, whereas "understands the particle *ai*" demonstrates grammatical knowledge.

The descriptors must be based on the language features of te reo Māori that represent it appropriately in social engagements such as family gatherings or public events that are culturally meaningful in te ao Māori. Communication that includes kōrero on general topics in the home or at work is more helpful for learners of te reo. European language features are inadequate to represent Māori settings.

The descriptors must be adjusted to their exact Reference Level Descriptions to ensure each descriptor maps correctly to its corresponding scale (A1-C2) based on evidence and not subjective guesswork. Where descriptors lack evidentiary adjustment, they become assumptions.

The descriptors must be designed for the express purpose of self-assessment; written in the first-person singular, each descriptor personalises the learner's own communicative ability.

Reference Level Descriptions: Requirements for te reo Māori

The RLDs elevate the MLPF from a proposed framework into an infrastructure that can be tested and verified across all its interdependent components. The RLDs must meet the requirements of the language features specific to te reo Māori in the following categories.

The morphosyntactic features must match the appropriate scale to ensure that each one is placed at the correct level based on evidence and not assumed. The specifications can include passive and active voice structure, ā/ō possessive categories, verb classification, or TAM (tense-aspect-mood) markings. The language features do not rely on RLDs that were written for European languages.

The sociolinguistic and pragmatic features must account for how language is used across differing social identities and meaning in context, such as karakia and whaikōrero in formal

settings. Dialectal variations unique to different iwi must be described at each level. Register is critical to map RLDs to Can-do descriptors.

Text types and discourse genres must be accounted for at each level of description. The inclusion of spoken and written text types related to authentic Māori settings that draw from the language itself plays an important role in describing the productive and receptive language skills for community discourse.

The self-assessment tool

The interdependent infrastructure establishes the self-assessment tool that addresses the issue in the previous section 'CEFR and te reo Māori: The case for authentic adaptation'. The Can-do descriptors are the performative tasks that learners will use to measure their current proficiency. The RLDs provide the evidence that underpins and validates each descriptor, and this allows for self-assessment based on accurate measurement rather than on intuition. The self-assessment tool is designed to reduce the guesswork that learners of te reo Māori often encounter when trying to gauge their current level of communicative proficiency.

Research on self-assessment in second language learning, reviewed over the last 30 years, found that specific descriptors reflecting learners' experience result in more accurate self-assessment. Where lower-proficiency learners overestimated their own communication skills, those learners exhibited an instance characteristic of the Dunning-Kruger effect (Butler, 2024, p. 44). Butler was reporting on a study of adult learners of Finnish which was adapting self-assessment tools based on the CEFR infrastructure.This finding highlights that a proficiency model which suits a majority of users must be built. The MLPF's purpose to serve adult learners of te reo Māori as a self-assessment tool requires the same adaptation of the CEFR to its language-specific features that are grounded in culturally oriented descriptors, a finding underpinned by research in self-assessment.

Bachman and Palmer (2010, p. 47) noted that the way in which affective schemata influence language learners' emotions can "either facilitate or inhibit" language use in real time. The learners' communicative performance in similar contexts "may be affected as much by their affective schemata as by their language ability" (see section on 'Affective schemata'). The self-assessment tool empowers the learner to judge not only their proficiency but also

communicative performance. In this sense, they are both the performer and assessor of their own communication skills, with affective schemata playing a key role in that judgement. By providing accurate descriptors that learners can use without whakamā, the MLPF can reduce the emotional barriers experienced by learners, making self-assessment more accurate.

Discussion, implications, limitations and the future

Discussion

This paper argues for the CEFR's mutually dependent infrastructure (proficiency band, Can-do descriptors, and Reference Level Descriptions), a validation mechanism as the model for establishing principles to evaluate current and future indigenous language proficiency frameworks. The third section of this paper 'CEFR and te reo Māori: The case for authentic adaptation' demonstrates that these principles have not been applied. The fourth section 'The Māori Language Proficiency Framework: Theoretical foundations' provides the theoretical model to meet that need.

Implications

The MLPF would provide the foundation on which learners are able to self-assess their proficiency. The MLPF applies the CEFR's validation mechanism to te reo Māori to facilitate that evaluation as learners progress through each level supported by the Can-do descriptors and RLDs.

The MLPF would also support kaiako in designing language curriculum documents, syllabus planning, and resource development in their own teaching practices.

The MLPF would provide a principled model for other Pacific indigenous languages such as Gagana Samoa, Lea Faka-Tonga, and Te Reo Māori Kūki Āirani from which to design proficiency frameworks oriented to their own language features. Te reo Māori would serve as the founding case in an emerging field of Indigenous Communicative Proficiency Frameworks.

Limitations and future directions

This paper is entirely theoretical in scope, proposing a concept for designing the MLPF. The next critical stage in that design would be conducting empirical research on corpus-based and ethnographic studies for RLD development. The psychometric analysis would be used to

calibrate the Can-do descriptors with RLDs providing the evidentiary descriptions. The interdependent infrastructure of the MLPF would be trialled with adult learners of te reo Māori across different social settings.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the language neutrality feature of the CEFR places an obligation on the adopters when adapting it to the target language of different cultures. This paper shows that this obligation in the New Zealand context has not been met. The MLPF is a theoretical response to that gap. It has been designed for adult learners of te reo Māori to judge their proficiency in communicative performance as they develop through the different levels: Basic, Independent and Proficient. When learners of te reo Māori are unable to track their progress accurately, the survival of the language is threatened. The MLPF is proposed as a model for removing that threat, not as a final solution but as a foundation.

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Research Reports

Report on the CLESOL (July 2026) conference: Back to the Future: Celebrating the Past to Shape the Future

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The 2026 CLESOL conference featured almost 100 individual papers on diverse themes. These included teacher education and professional development, assessment and standards, community, heritage and indigenous languages, digital innovation and learning technologies, language education across sectors, language learner identity, agency and diversity, and language teaching and pedagogical practices.

Since it is difficult, or even impossible, to generalise meaningfully across so many individual contributions, I will focus on the four plenary presentations.

1. Creating connections: The role of storytelling in fostering social cohesion – Melissa Derby

Dr Melissa Derby has been a senior lecturer at the University of Waikato, teaching early literacy and human development with a specialist interest in Māori education. As the Race Relations Commissioner, she leads the Commission's work in the race relations priority area promoting racial equality and cultural diversity.

Melissa Derby opened her presentation by tracing her personal and scholarly engagement with storytelling, emphasising how narrative has shaped both her intellectual trajectory and her understanding of literacy. In responding to the foundational question, "What is literacy?" she offered a range of definitions that move beyond conventional notions of reading and writing.

Literacy, she argued, encompasses the interconnected abilities to read, write, speak, listen, view and present—capacities that together enable individuals to communicate effectively in diverse contexts. Importantly, she highlighted that this broader concept of literacy must include indigenous forms of storytelling, which carry cultural knowledge, identity and ways of seeing the world.

Dr Derby underscored the idea that stories form a powerful basis for lifelong learning because they accompany us across the lifespan, shaping how we understand ourselves and others. She noted that storytelling sits at the heart of education, health and wellbeing, with particular emphasis on the role of reading for pleasure as a protective factor that supports cognitive, emotional and social development. Stories, she suggested, have the capacity to cultivate harmonious relationships by strengthening social cohesion and shared understanding. In this sense, storytelling is not merely a pedagogical tool but a social force—one that can influence how communities imagine possibilities, negotiate differences and ultimately shape their collective futures.

2. A potted history of the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP): Some critical perspectives on a promising past, turbulent present and uncertain future – Douglas Bell

Professor Douglas Bell currently works for the University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China, where he supervises doctoral students and serves as the Course Leader and Admissions Tutor for the MA TESOL. He has numerous publications, including *English for Academic Purposes: Perspectives on the past, present and future* (Multilingual Matters, 2024).

In his plenary address, Professor Bell observed that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) remains a comparatively young discipline, and like any emerging field, it continues to evolve in uneven and sometimes unpredictable ways. Yet, when considering the state of EAP in 2026, he suggested that the optimism that once characterised its rapid expansion has given way to a far more precarious reality. In several international settings, EAP is already confronting challenges that cast doubt on its long-term viability.

Professor Bell offered a reflective examination of EAP's trajectory—its formative past, its current pressures, and its possible futures—by outlining the discipline's core strengths as well as the vulnerabilities and external forces that now threaten it. He argued that sustaining EAP will

require a willingness to adapt rather than cling to familiar practices. This may involve relinquishing longstanding operational norms and engaging seriously with alternative theoretical and pedagogical models. He further proposed that EAP may need to undergo a broader structural reimagining, expanding its remit beyond traditional boundaries. Such a shift could position EAP to play a more inclusive and influential role within global educational systems, ensuring that it remains relevant and resilient in the face of ongoing change.

3. Immutable truths and big ideas in teaching language and literacy learners – Margaret Franken

Dr Margaret Franken began working in the area of language learning in the late 1970s, supporting new Dutch migrants at her school in Auckland. She studied for the Dip TESL at Victoria University of Wellington before working in various locations and on various projects in Aotearoa, Asia and the Pacific.

In her plenary presentation, Margaret noted that the conference theme, Back to the Future, offered a valuable chance to revisit the past and consider how earlier experiences can inform both present practice and future directions. Drawing on more than four decades of professional learning as a teacher, researcher, curriculum developer, supervisor and mentor across school and tertiary settings, she outlined her personal response to a central question: Which "Immutable Truths" or enduring "Big Ideas" have emerged over this period, what aspects of practice are at risk of being forgotten, and what elements remain essential and must be safeguarded?

Although her reflections were shaped by her recent work within the school sector in Aotearoa and the Pacific, Margaret emphasised that the principles she discussed are broadly applicable. Because these ideas are fundamentally transferable across educational contexts, she expressed the hope that her insights would resonate with educators working in diverse settings and support them in considering their own professional histories, priorities and non-negotiables.

4. What comes after AI literacy? – Tim Gander

A former classroom teacher turned researcher and sector leader, Tim Gander has led postgraduate teacher education and served in leadership roles. He has published research on AI literacy, pedagogy, and equitable outcomes. He currently works with educators and learning support professionals on AI, inclusive practice, and equitable outcomes.

In his plenary address, Tim noted that although the education sector has spent three years discussing generative AI, the dominant narrative still assumes that the main obstacle is literacy – and that improving students' AI literacy will naturally lead to better use. However, findings from research carried out across Aotearoa New Zealand suggest a more complicated reality. Learners who demonstrate strong AI literacy are often the ones most reluctant to use AI in highstakes academic work, and their explanations for this hesitation raise important questions for language educators.

Drawing on original survey data and classroom studies, the keynote explored what happens when AI eliminates not only effort but also the productive struggle that underpins genuine learning. Tim argued that when this struggle is removed, the learning process itself may be compromised. The presentation also introduced a practical three-question framework designed to help teachers evaluate when and how AI supports—or undermines—learning. Participants were invited to test this framework through an interactive activity grounded in the everyday realities of ESOL and community language classrooms, encouraging them to consider how AI might reshape both learner behaviour and pedagogical decisionmaking.

Final remarks

All of these plenaries by well-known professionals adhered to the overall conference theme of using past research, theoretical insights and experience to inform future directions. Melissa Derby emphasised the importance of recognising the role of indigenous storytelling in shaping future education and social cohesion. Douglas Bell focused on EAP (English for Academic Purposes), how it has evolved from its early manifestations to what it is now, and how teacher agency will be required to direct its future. Margaret Franken questioned the "Immutable Truths" and "Big Ideas" which have emerged in the past, and which are essential and need to be retained into the future. And Tim Gardner addressed the issue of AI literacy, its current status and challenges for the future.

If, in spite of what I said above, I were to attempt a pervasive theme which ran through many of the presentations, it would have to be AI, since it was mentioned at least indirectly in many of the plenaries (and directly so in the case of Tim Gardner's talk, of course). In addition, it was mentioned in many of the individual papers, whether included in the digital innovation strand or elsewhere. Without a doubt, the arrival of generative AI platforms such as ChatGPT in 2022

brought fundamental changes to the field of applied linguistics and, more broadly to education, and in fact, the world. As educational professionals, we are struggling to cope with this unprecedented invasion of our territory, leaving us unsure how to deal with its many challenges, especially relating to assessment reliability and ethical issues.

In the past, we have had to cope with new ideas and methodologies (e.g. communicative language teaching, post-method, learner-centred learning, etc.), new theories (e.g. Behaviourism, Cognitivism, Constructivism, etc.), new challenges such as global migration patterns, language "ownership", and so on. But somehow, nothing has been as fundamentally challenging as GenAI. In spite of (or, perhaps even because of) its advantages, the threats are real and deep-rooted. These include loss of student autonomy and critical thinking, cognitive decline, demotivation, misinformation, and shallow learning. But knowing what to do about it is perhaps the main current challenge facing educators and, indeed, the world.

The simple fact is, in spite of the challenges, Gen AI is here. The proverbial genie is out of the bottle, and getting it back is the next best thing to impossible, even if that were actually the best thing to do. So, for the future, it would seem that the most urgent need is to find a way of dealing with it, of utilising AI's undoubted advantages while avoiding its potential negative consequences. Unfortunately for those of us struggling to find equitable and workable answers to help us deal with GenAI, looking to the past is absolutely no use. Any problems such as there might have been with practices such as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) pale into insignificance compared with the ubiquitous and all-powerful GenAI. Nevertheless, ways must be found. Worthwhile education for the future depends on it. And so, for the immediate and perhaps foreseeable future, the question of how best to manage the GenAI phenomenon must take centre stage for research and conferences.

Winners of the 2025 ALANZ Thesis Competition

PhD category:

Hanna Svensson, Massey University
"But we're just the same humans as you": Refugees negotiating exclusions, belonging and language in Sweden and New Zealand.

The judges wrote:

The thesis reports on an excellent study that contributes to the generation of theory and findings that have major implications for our understanding of refugee and migrant displacement in Aotearoa New Zealand and Sweden, and beyond. Meticulously designed and implemented, the study makes a major contribution to research in this field. The thesis is beautifully written, with sensitivity and enormous insight into the lives of the researcher's participants. An original study that fully deserves the ALANZ Best PhD Thesis Award.

Master's category:

Yining Wang, Victoria University of Wellington

An investigation on formative assessment practices of EAP writing in pre-sessional courses in a New Zealand university.

This study examined how formative assessment is used in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing classes at a New Zealand university. It found that both formal and informal assessment practices support student learning but also present challenges. The study recommends combining both approaches to improve learning and classroom engagement.

Book Reviews

Book Review: Language policy across continents: Decolonisation, language rights, and multilingualism in education

Kretzer, M. M., Makoni, S., & Kaschula, R. H. (Eds.). (2026). *Language policy across continents: Decolonisation, language rights, and multilingualism in education* (Contributions to the Sociology of Language, Vol. 142). De Gruyter Mouton.

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Overview

The promise of the title of this large volume holds true. Published within the Contributions to the Sociology of Language series, founded by Joshua Fishman, the book delivers a fascinating exploration of contemporary linguistic planning around the world. Following a conceptual introductory essay by the editors, it comprises 18 country chapters presented in alphabetical order: Australia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Fiji, Finland, India, Jamaica, Japan, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Paraguay, the Philippines, Poland, São Tomé and Príncipe, Spain, the United States of America, and Zambia.

The case studies present an extensive array of contexts, from considerations of high-level national policy developments in major nations like the United States and Spain, to micro-level initiatives to reclaim an endangered creole with around 100 speakers in the tiny island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe. Due to its sheer scope and size, this is not a volume that even the most

avid scholar will sit down and read from cover to cover, but its utility lies in the historical, descriptive, and analytical depth characterizing the individual profiles. Each chapter stands as a self-contained, historical, and contemporary critical review of regional language situations, exploring how themes of colonialism, linguistic human rights, and shifting educational frameworks intersect. To aid researcher navigation, each paper concludes with its own references, and the volume finishes with a detailed 15-page composite Index. Each chapter begins with an abstract, and these are also translated into one of the languages covered in the chapter. This is a nice symbolic touch, even if of limited value, but in some cases the name of the language or the reason for the selection of the language is not given. The reader is also assisted with short summaries of each paper that are presented in the editors' introductory essay, and there are sizable paragraphs providing the background and credentials of each of the 40editors and contributors. Each person's ORCID identifier is given (www.orcid.org), although in a number of cases there is no displayable data.

Themes

Perhaps the most dominant theme of the book is the marginalisation of local, indigenous, or regional languages in the face of systemic stigmatisation and neglect, due to dominant national language policies. This is often related to post-colonial legacies and issues of cultural identity. Many chapters also reveal a contrast between formal monolingual policies which promote a single standard language and the rich and diverse multilingual realities that prevail in communities and classrooms.

Institutional barriers and implementational gaps that result in language policies failing in practice are explored. The volume demonstrates the sobering sociolinguistic reality that top-down formal language policies, status planning decisions, and corpus planning activities are necessary conditions, but they are clearly seldom sufficient to guarantee the successful development of balanced and equitable multilanguage polities. Across the diverse contexts profiled, structural interventions routinely falter in the face of continuing implementational constraints, embedded linguistic ideologies, and entrenched language hegemonies. Common obstacles in education include a lack of standardized teaching materials, severe shortages of trained bilingual teachers, ambiguous legal documents, and rigid school structures.

Many chapters also address how the modern global economy shapes language choices and favours global powerhouse languages with the greatest market value. Another dynamic that is addressed in several papers is how modern migration patterns are introducing new linguistic diversity to nations and their schools, putting urgent pressure on existing systems to adapt to migrant, refugee, or displaced populations. In many cases, the situations described are full of challenges. But a further theme that emerges in many of the descriptions is a positive message of resistance and hope. There are some promising situations where non-state actors, educators, and community-led "bottom-up" initiatives are successfully pushing back with language reclamation, revival, and development activities.

While the editors indicate that the papers do address the impact and role of technology, there is only limited connection with the current realities of social media and the prospects for digital technology, and how this relates to language shift and language learning and teaching. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is mentioned in passing in only two country papers, so further opportunities are needed to explore how large language models, and machine translation might disrupt or support indigenous and minority language planning in the near future. The individual case studies are now reviewed, beginning with those located in Oceania, as these will be of the most immediate interest to readers of the journal in which this review is appearing.

Oceania: Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand

The chapter on Australia (chapter 1) covers the history of language policies in relation to the indigenous minority languages and the languages of the modern migrant community. However, a significant omission is that there is no awareness of one of the saddest periods in language education in Australia. The Northern Territory's (Aboriginal) Bilingual Education Program, developed in 1973 with funding from the Whitlam government, was a globally-recognized program that initially advanced well, through fruitful collaborations between linguists, anthropologists, and local educators who produced rich learning materials in multiple first languages. However, a turbulent clash with shifting government ideologies saw these programs systematically defunded and scrapped by 1998. The historical trajectory concluded in a 2008 mandate requiring the first four hours of every school day to be taught entirely in English, completely undermining any continuing attempts to conduct a sound bilingual approach. This lesson in policy vulnerability could have strengthened the chapter's historical review.

For Fiji (chapter 4), the volume confronts the friction between post-colonial nation-building and linguistic human and children's rights. The authors critique a "resolutely monoglossic mindset" (p. 118), privileging English, driven by an overriding administrative concern for national equality and the avoidance of ethnic division at all costs. However, the cost of this policy is the marginalisation and minoritisation of the indigenous language spoken by the majority of the population, alongside the suppression of internationally recognized best practices for mother-tongue-based early childhood education. While the recent introduction of Chinese language courses into the curriculum is celebrated as a major advance, there is still uncertainty over how to deal with the mother tongues of the two main language communities, the indigenous Fijians and the descendants of introduced Indian labourers. The authors pose a series of insightful but challenging questions which must be answered before a credible Language Policy and Planning framework can be developed.

The survey of language planning developments in New Zealand (chapter 11) comprehensively covers the indigenous Māori language, NZ Sign Language, and community and heritage languages, especially the Polynesian languages spoken by the Pacific Island diaspora. These language communities from Sāmoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Tokelau, and Niue are undergoing language shift to English, even as the movement to reverse this shift in the Māori community is now internationally lauded for its success. This success evidences the combined strength resulting from bottom-up and top-down initiatives empowering each other. It is encouraging that the author considers some very recent apparent legislative setbacks as simply "bumps on the road" that will not deflect the inclusive trajectory now well under way.

South America: Brazil, Paraguay

The chapter on Brazil (chapter 2) focuses on the contestation between Portuguese and English within the higher education sector. The chapter presents results from a survey, which was sent to 63 institutions, but there was a critically low return rate of only 13 responses, not affording adequate statistical certainty or accuracy regarding institutional language operations. A data table (p. 48) mentions as a "peculiarity" of Brazil that there are "several indigenous and heritage languages," yet notes the total number of languages in the country as 238. The endangerment status of these languages is obscured when readers are told later (p. 55) that there are "several" minority groups that do not use Portuguese as their mother tongue. This wording implies,

counterintuitively, that Portuguese has become the mother tongue of the remaining 200-plus minority groups. Furthermore, the chapter notes a national literacy rate of 93% but fails to specify the language or languages in which this literacy is achieved, severely limiting the utility of the statistic for language planning analysis. The focus was on the role of English in the higher education system, but more information regarding the status and vitality of the minority languages spoken across the country would have been welcome.

In describing the language situation in Paraguay (chapter 12), attention is given to an explicit legal commitment from 1982 to dual-language Spanish-Guaraní governance and the goal of universal bilingualism for students. However, the chapter suffers from a fragmented structure and text repetition, with analytical insights based on dated resources. The chapter contains some anachronisms, suggesting that significant parts of it are drawn from some kind of earlier research proposal, or the author's own 2008 doctoral dissertation. While various conclusions are drawn that sound like they apply nationally, the reader must keep in mind that the study is heavily skewed toward urban, monolingual Spanish contexts where Guaraní is taught strictly as a second language. Nevertheless, the chapter usefully juxtaposes structural constraints with grassroots possibilities, and captures the reality of educators who find themselves navigating through "the middle of an implementation storm" (p. 298).

Africa: Burkina Faso, São Tomé and Príncipe, Zambia

Chapter 3 on Burkina Faso offers an excellent, nuanced review of experimental bilingual projects across 10 local languages. This empirical data demonstrates that instruction in a pupil's first language, followed by a gradual shift toward French, is primarily associated with greater inclusivity, reduced school dropout rates, positive learning outcomes, quality education, and the active promotion of African languages. The text outlines the historical trajectory of policy U-turns post-independence, illustrating how France's monolingual policies functioned as tools of imperialism and ethnocentrism. Despite growing evidence of educational failure since the 1970s, local languages were excluded from schools until the mid-1990s. Today, despite clear signs of hope, mainstreaming these bilingual programs remains severely hindered by a lack of political will, negative societal perceptions of local-language instruction, limited teacher training, and scarce educational resources. The chapter highlights the enduring challenges of balancing

cultural reclamation and local empowerment with the pragmatic economic power and cultural capital of the former colonial language.

The profile of São Tomé and Príncipe (chapter 15) provides a rare, deeply encouraging example of promising attempts to reverse language shift. The chapter highlights Lung'Ie, a Portuguese-based tonal creole spoken by as few as 100 people and classified as one of four highly endangered creoles in the island nation. The author's direct, long-term involvement in grassroots advocacy and corpus planning demonstrates the vital role that linguists can play in the development of targeted, high-quality educational resources. Directly empowering local communities and injecting tailored materials into the classroom has resulted in an inspiring model of how intentional, localized collaboration can actively rescue a critically endangered language.

The chapter on Zambia (chapter 18) profiles a linguistic environment characterized by a vital, fluid, and dynamic multilingualism where trilingualism is the lived social norm. This complexity sits in sharp tension with formal state mechanisms, where English remains the sole official language since independence, despite being known by only 26% of the population and used as a first language by a meagre 2%. The state recognizes seven regional official languages for educational and regional administrative purposes, a model reinforced by the landmark 2024 Education Language Policy which robustly affirms the value of mother-tongue education and mandates the teaching of a Zambian language throughout primary and secondary schooling. While the chapter includes a nice use of language-mixed speech extracts as rich qualitative data, it misses an opportunity to provide comprehensive statistical breakdowns and deeper demographic profiles for the seven primary languages and the country's other vernaculars. The discussion of the extracts draws on translanguaging as a socio-cultural theory or lens, but engagement with the question of how this contrasts with traditional notions of "code-switching" or "code-mixing" would have been interesting. Looking forward, the authors advocate for the development of practical, inclusive frameworks that could allow official state communications to become genuinely multilingual, integrating regional varieties and underrepresented languages and representing grassroots and rural perspectives; perhaps through modern digital tools. The chapter embraces the message of hope, arguing that Zambia's rich multilingual resource should not be treated as an administrative challenge to be managed, but rather as a profound cause for national celebration (p. 461).

Europe: Finland, Malta, Poland, Spain

The chapter on Finland (chapter 5) focuses on the three highly vulnerable Sami languages, which have faced a long history of language shift toward Finnish—an active dynamic that has already resulted in localized language extinction. The authors show that despite the historic establishment of the Sami Parliament in 1996 to grant degrees of autonomy and self-determination, language maintenance remains deeply problematic. While Sami language rights and educational access are legally well-established within designated homeland areas, the authors present the stark reality that more than 70% of Sami children now live outside these zones, where policy implementation is highly variable and legally limited. The chapter identifies universal structural bottlenecks, including acute teacher shortages, lack of materials, and assimilationist societal pressures, but offsets these critiques by providing a helpful explanation of how a 'linguistically responsive teaching' (LRT) framework can operate within teacher education to prepare instructors for multilingual classrooms. There is no exploration of the 150+ other immigrant and minority languages spoken in contemporary Finland.

Malta (chapter 10) has a policy environment committed to a balanced bilingual curriculum featuring Maltese and English. However, the chapter exposes major implementational hurdles to ensuring that Maltese maintains genuine prestige and status in public life, aiming for it to become "a language of real-world opportunity" (p. 247). This balance is currently being challenged by rapid, fast-paced immigration, with non-native children now constituting a massive 20% of the total school population. Maltese teachers report feeling entirely untrained and unsupported in managing these highly diverse, multilingual classrooms. Furthermore, because the state delegates a high level of devolution to individual schools and teachers in regard to how English and Maltese are configured in class, the educational landscape has become highly fragmented. With some schools becoming entirely English-speaking and extensive Maltese-English code-switching occurring everywhere, the chapter stresses the urgent need for clear frameworks regarding Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and translanguaging, particularly to establish a stronger presence for Maltese within digital spaces and STEM subjects.

A key issue in the chapter on Poland (chapter 14) is the rapid, contemporary demographic shock resulting from the intake of Ukrainian refugees. This is creating a profound change in Poland's

traditionally homogeneous language profile. However, little detail is given of current educational policy or how Polish schools are structurally accommodating the needs of the more than 200,000 Ukrainian refugee children enrolled since 2022. It is noted that English can function as a lingua franca in such situations. There is some rather opaque terminology in this chapter, with concepts like “diatopic” versus “diastratic” variation, and “linguistic vulgarisation.”

For Spain (chapter 16), the picture of diversity that is presented is usefully broader than the standard institutional focus on Spanish and the four co-official regional languages (Aranese, Basque, Catalan, and Galician). The authors critique the dominating "monolingual model of sociolinguistic citizenship" (p. 388), arguing that a multitude of secondary minority languages, non-standard vernaculars, and new migrant tongues are being "systematically invisibilised" by state frameworks. While significant grassroots language activism has pushed back against this uniformity, the political backlash remains intense. The chapter also evaluates the ongoing, highly contested debates surrounding Spain's three main regional educational models: total immersion (critiqued by centralists as inhibiting Spanish), language-tracking (which risks creating socio-economic inequality), and mixed distribution (which often weakens the minority language). The authors look to the emerging arena of ‘family language policy’ as a space for resistance, urging a move toward a more ‘critical sociolinguistics’ where administrative affirmation can finally be translated into actual structural transformation.

Asia: India, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines

Chapter 6 looks at India, examining its staggering linguistic diversity and the complex history of its Language Policy and Planning frameworks, culminating in the 2020 National Education Policy (NEP). The chapter frames India’s sociolinguistic management as a system of "negotiated coexistence" (p. 150) across 22 officially recognized national languages. The NEP is a progressive, mother-tongue-first framework that promotes broad multilingualism, safeguards endangered languages, and advocates for technology-based learning solutions. However, the chapter successfully captures the ongoing systemic tensions that threaten this model, most notably the continuous political friction surrounding the promotion of Hindi as a potential national unifying language, and the logistical challenges of maintaining national integration within an educational landscape that officially recognizes 3,592 distinct mother tongues as a baseline fact.

In Japan (chapter 8), the policy landscape is characterised as a rigid, enduring balancing act between state-enforced monolingualism and isolated grassroots reclamation efforts. The authors focus firstly on the severely marginalized Ainu community, and secondly on the Ryukyuan minority community, where natural intergenerational language transmission ceased more than half a century ago. While Japan has offered minor forms of official recognition to these indigenous groups as cultural entities, it continues to explicitly deny legal or educational recognition to their languages. Paradoxically, the authors observe that Japanese state frameworks currently offer more direct language support to heritage speakers from various migrant groups than to its own indigenous tongues, which remain relegated to the absolute periphery of public life. Because many of the reported revitalization initiatives cited in the text are from decades past, the chapter offers little evidence of significant contemporary activity, underscoring an urgent "need for an ideology of multilingualism" (p. 204) if these languages are to survive.

The chapter on Malaysia (chapter 9) introduces an innovative methodological tool by employing economic Game Theory (language choices and regimes) to explain why rapid language shift occurs even within communities that maintain highly positive attitudes toward their ancestral tongues. The authors show that multilingual equilibrium and code selection are heavily dictated by perceived utility and socio-economic returns. This framework is applied to the Hakka-speaking community, which, despite its numerical strength, faces a "dismal" future social value (p. 262). Driven by high rates of social mobility and intermarriage, Hakka is rapidly being drowned in a sea of pan-Chinese identity dominated by Standard Mandarin in the home, alongside English and Malay in public spheres. While the conclusions may be valid, it should be noted that the data set used in the study might demand scrutiny, as it features a heavily skewed sample where 66 out of 200 participants are male (implying a 67% female bias), and while intermarriage is cited as a primary driver of language shift, 97% of the surveyed sample identifies as single, creating an unresolved statistical issue.

For the Philippines (chapter 13), the volume highlights how progressive educational policies remain dangerously vulnerable to ideological reversals despite holding robust empirical support. The authors track the landmark 2009 Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy, which was championed not just on cultural grounds, but through non-political advocacy, deep pedagogical evidence, and children’s linguistic rights. However, a major legislative rollback via a 2024 Act effectively dismantled these gains. This reversal was

politically justified by citing systemic implementational issues and structural challenges as evidence of a perceived 'failure' of the vernacular model. As of August 2026, this policy rollback remains tied up in a high-stakes, rights-based legal challenge. The chapter demonstrates how local school administrations and teachers actively resist, subvert, or repurpose restrictive state policies, yet notes that as long as national educational assessments are conducted exclusively in English, vernacular languages will remain systematically marginalized and classroom realities will constitute a highly contested terrain.

North America: Jamaica, United States of America

For Jamaica (chapter 7), the socio-historical evolution of Jamaican Creole is tracked as it actively emerges from the historical stigma of its post-colonial origins. An insightful conceptual subtype of diglossia is used, "conquest diglossia." The chapter illustrates a strong bottom-up development, driven by linguists, academics, and community advocates, which has resulted in increasingly positive public attitudes toward the creole and growing resistance against the hegemony of English. Yet, institutional barriers remain entrenched. The 2011 Bill of Rights explicitly failed to include language as a protected ground against discrimination, leaving Jamaica's 40% monolingual creole speakers structurally marginalized. Furthermore, while the 2018 national curriculum statement progressively prescribes first-language education to achieve bilingual competence, the chapter concludes that these policies are a long way from being implemented in the classroom (p. 193). The author anticipates that Jamaican will eventually achieve co-official status with English under pending constitutional re-arrangements to transition Jamaica into an independent republic; however, while this process was active during manuscript preparation in 2023, no tangible constitutional progress has manifested as of mid-2026.

The coverage of the United States of America (chapter 17) captures a highly decentralized language policy landscape. Following shifts in federal governance, individual states retain total autonomy over determining language(s) of instruction. While federal courts regularly affirm the rights of linguistic minorities to access public education, they consistently stop short of legally mandating home-language instruction in public schools. While dual-language bilingual immersion programs have become widespread—allowing native English speakers to acquire Spanish or Chinese—these programs remain highly localized and socio-economically segregated. Consequently, most bilingual immigrant children entering the American school

system have no choice but to undergo subtractive English-only education. Despite this, the authors find hope in the rapid, nationwide popularity of the grassroots 'Seal of Biliteracy' for graduating students, though they caution that it remains unclear how popular 'translanguaging' pedagogies can be systematically translated into actual fluency in target minority languages.

Conclusion

Language policy across continents is a worthwhile contribution to the sociology of language and to the study of language planning and policy. The geographical reach and the depth of the individual regional and national critiques entice exploration. The book will undeniably serve as an essential reference volume for institutional libraries and specialized scholars tracking the evolving politics of multilingual education and language rights globally.

While it is commendable that the descriptions critically survey the history of language planning in each country, this seems to generate unusually exhaustive bibliographies. For several chapters, the citation pages constitute 33% or more of the overall chapter length, and on average, there is one full page of references for every five pages of text. While this provides a high-density bibliographical jumping-off point for future historically-oriented research, it might have crowded out the opportunity for deeper empirical or descriptive information on the contemporary language situations within each country.

So far, this review has only interacted with the content of the volume, but it cannot be concluded without mention of a large component of presentational factors. A disappointingly lengthy list of items that would require editorial intervention was compiled. A certain quantum of minor and inconsequential errors can go without comment, but the value of this contribution is marred by a frequency of error that is disconcerting and distracting, with sometimes up to five items per page needing attention. There are sentences that are not well-formed, non-standard English renderings, global inconsistencies in capitalisation, punctuation and the representation of multi-digit numbers, and many other matters including layout and formatting. Some language names are variously written with different spellings. The frequency of error varies greatly across chapters, suggesting that individual contributions have been published largely as received, without further careful oversight or stylistic uniformity crafted by the volume or series editors. Providing a map for each country chapter is worthwhile, but there are many maps with wrong shading and some

unusual projections, and providing locations within the maps of key languages or areas discussed would have been useful.

Despite this unfortunate lack of polish, the volume will function as an invaluable reference compilation and a foundational resource for sociolinguists, language educators, and policy specialists.

Book Review: Research in heritage speaker bilingualism: Theories, methods, and designs

Tseng, A., Chang, C. B., Leal, T., Lee, J. S., & López, B. G. (2026). *Research in heritage speaker bilingualism: Theories, methods, and designs.* Routledge.

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Introduction

Research on heritage language bilingualism has expanded considerably over the past two decades as scholars increasingly recognize that heritage speakers represent a unique bilingual population whose linguistic development cannot be adequately explained through traditional first- or second-language acquisition theories. *Research in heritage speaker bilingualism: Theories, methods, and designs* provides a comprehensive overview of this growing field by integrating theoretical perspectives with practical research methodologies. Rather than focusing solely on linguistic competence, the authors adopt an interdisciplinary perspective that incorporates linguistic, psychological, educational, and sociocultural dimensions of heritage language research. The volume serves not only as a methodological handbook but also as a critical examination of the assumptions underlying heritage language studies. This review summarizes the book's major contributions, evaluates its organization and scholarly value, and discusses its strengths and limitations.

Brief summary and evaluation of the chapters

The opening chapter establishes the conceptual foundation of the book by defining heritage speakers and examining the evolution of heritage language research. The authors challenge deficit-oriented perspectives that have historically compared heritage speakers with monolingual norms and instead advocate for understanding heritage bilingualism as a legitimate linguistic system with its own developmental characteristics. This chapter is particularly effective because it combines historical development with contemporary debates surrounding terminology, identity, multilingualism, and social justice. The discussion successfully demonstrates that heritage speakers should not be viewed as incomplete bilinguals but as individuals whose language experiences differ from both monolingual and second-language learners.

Chapters 2 through 5 examine linguistic research methodologies. Chapters 2 and 3 distinguish between online and offline methods for investigating morphosyntax, explaining how different experimental designs measure implicit and explicit grammatical knowledge. The authors carefully discuss the advantages and limitations of various techniques while emphasizing the importance of selecting methods appropriate for heritage speakers' linguistic backgrounds. Chapters 4 and 5 extend this methodological discussion to speech production and speech perception, illustrating how phonological research contributes to understanding bilingual language processing. These chapters successfully bridge theory and practice by explaining complex experimental methods in accessible language while encouraging readers to critically evaluate methodological choices.

Chapter 6 focuses on statistical considerations in heritage language research. Although statistical methodology is often overlooked in introductory research texts, this chapter demonstrates its importance in producing reliable and valid findings. The authors explain issues related to participant variability, sample size, mixed-effects modelling, and data interpretation. By emphasizing methodological rigor, this chapter strengthens the overall quality of the volume and prepares graduate students to critically evaluate empirical research.

The remaining chapters shift attention toward the social dimensions of heritage bilingualism. Chapter 7 examines language brokering, highlighting the experiences of heritage speakers who regularly translate or interpret for family members. Rather than treating language brokering merely as a communicative activity, the authors analyze its cognitive, emotional, and social

implications. This chapter broadens the understanding of heritage bilingualism by illustrating how bilingual abilities develop within family and community contexts.

Chapter 8 explores heritage language maintenance within families and communities. The authors argue that language preservation depends upon complex interactions among family practices, community support, educational opportunities, and broader social ideologies. The discussion effectively demonstrates that language maintenance cannot be explained solely by individual motivation but must be understood within broader ecological and sociocultural contexts.

Chapter 9 addresses heritage language education by reviewing instructional approaches designed specifically for heritage learners. The authors critique educational models that assume heritage speakers possess either native-like proficiency or second-language learner characteristics. Instead, they advocate differentiated instruction that acknowledges the linguistic diversity among heritage learners. This chapter provides valuable implications for educators seeking to create equitable and culturally responsive language programs.

Chapters 10 and 11 examine identity, language attitudes, and ideology. These chapters emphasize that heritage language development is deeply intertwined with identity formation, social belonging, and experiences of inclusion or discrimination. The discussion of raciolinguistic ideologies and linguistic insecurity is particularly compelling because it demonstrates how societal beliefs influence both language learning and research practices. By integrating critical sociolinguistic perspectives, these chapters move beyond structural analyses and highlight the human dimensions of bilingualism.

The concluding chapter synthesizes the major themes presented throughout the book while identifying future directions for heritage language research. The authors encourage scholars to adopt interdisciplinary approaches that integrate linguistic, educational, psychological, and social perspectives. They also call for greater methodological diversity, increased attention to underrepresented languages, and more inclusive conceptualizations of bilingualism.

Critical evaluation

One of the book's greatest strengths is its interdisciplinary approach. Instead of treating heritage bilingualism solely as a linguistic phenomenon, the authors integrate insights from psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, education, and applied linguistics. This broad perspective

enables readers to appreciate the complexity of heritage language experiences and encourages researchers to examine language within its social and cultural contexts.

A second strength is the balance between theory and methodology. Many research methodology books focus primarily on technical procedures without adequately explaining the theoretical motivations behind them. In contrast, this volume consistently links research questions, theoretical frameworks, and methodological choices. Graduate students and novice researchers therefore gain both conceptual understanding and practical guidance.

The accessibility of the writing further enhances the book's value. Despite discussing sophisticated research designs and statistical techniques, the authors present complex concepts in clear language supported by numerous examples. The inclusion of research activities, methodological reflections, and suggestions for further reading makes the book particularly useful as a graduate textbook.

Another notable contribution is the authors' critical stance toward traditional assumptions about bilingualism. Throughout the volume, they reject deficit models that evaluate heritage speakers according to monolingual standards and instead promote a strengths-based perspective emphasizing multilingual competence, identity, and social justice. This critical orientation reflects contemporary developments in applied linguistics and significantly strengthens the scholarly contribution of the book.

Despite these strengths, several limitations deserve consideration. First, the volume emphasizes research methodology more strongly than theoretical innovation. Readers seeking extensive discussion of emerging linguistic theories may find some chapters primarily descriptive rather than theoretically groundbreaking.

Second, although the authors strive for an international perspective, many examples and research findings are drawn from North American contexts, particularly heritage Spanish speakers in the United States. Greater inclusion of heritage language communities from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe would further strengthen the global applicability of the book.

Finally, because the book covers numerous research domains, some topics receive relatively brief treatment. Readers interested in specialized areas such as multilingual identity, digital language learning, or heritage language policy may need to consult additional sources for deeper analysis.

Conclusion

Research in heritage speaker bilingualism: Theories, methods, and designs represents a significant contribution to heritage language scholarship. By integrating theoretical perspectives with methodological guidance, the authors successfully demonstrate the complexity of researching heritage bilingual populations while advocating for more inclusive and socially responsive approaches to bilingualism. The book's interdisciplinary orientation, methodological rigor, and commitment to challenging monolingual assumptions make it an outstanding resource for graduate students, researchers, and educators interested in bilingualism and heritage language education.

Although the volume could benefit from broader international representation and deeper exploration of certain theoretical debates, these limitations do not diminish its overall scholarly value. The book succeeds in advancing heritage language research by encouraging rigorous methodology, critical reflection, and greater sensitivity to the lived experiences of heritage speakers. Consequently, it is highly recommended as both an academic reference and a graduate-level textbook for courses in bilingualism, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics.