

He rautaki whakaako hei whakatō te reo Māori ki ngā whare kōhungahunga: Teaching strategies for the embedding of te reo Māori within the early childhood education programme at Toi Ohomai

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Abstract

As part of honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi, kaiako (teachers) in Aotearoa New Zealand are expected to embed te reo Māori in their teaching practice. Therefore, students in the Bachelor of Teaching Early Childhood Education (BTECE) and Master of Teaching Early Childhood Education (MTECE) programmes at Toi Ohomai receive te reo Māori lessons to prepare for this responsibility. To meet Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, kaimahi (staff) must understand strategies for embedding te reo Māori effectively. This study used a mixed methods approach, collecting data through an online survey of BTECE and MTECE students, followed by a focus group using whakawhiti kōrero (exchanging of ideas) to

Keepa, C., Warren, K., Burke, R. S., & Tomsett, M. (2025). He rautaki whakaako hei whakatō te reo Māori ki ngā whare kōhungahunga: Teaching strategies for the embedding of te reo Māori within the early childhood education programme at Toi Ohomai. *ATLAANZ Journal* 8(1), Article 1.
<https://doi.org/10.26473/ATLAANZ.2025.1/001>

explore students experiences in learning te reo Māori in and outside of the classroom. Findings identified learning waiata, teacher-initiated activities, and interactive tools as effective strategies. Students also requested te ao Māori knowledge during their studies. This research hopes to inform kaimahi teaching strategies in the embedding of te reo Māori to ensure graduating teachers honour Te Tiriti in their practice. Many of these practices may also be of interest to Tertiary Learning Advisors and student support teams as they may help to inform their work with academic staff in co-delivery, or pre-semester workshops related to te reo Māori and tikanga.

Keywords: te reo Māori, early childhood education, teaching strategies

As per the obligations set by the Teaching Council in *Our Code Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017), kaimahi (staff) teaching on the Bachelor of Teaching Early Childhood Education (BTECE) and Master of Teaching Early Childhood Education (MTECE) programmes at Toi Ohomai want to ensure that students graduate with a high-quality, diverse set of teaching practice skills. The Ministry of Education prioritises Māori student success, emphasising achievement as Māori (Katoa Limited, 2017), and teachers play a pivotal role in the sector. To ensure success for tamariki in Aotearoa New Zealand, BTECE and MTECE kaimahi are expected to provide graduating teachers with appropriate tools to incorporate the knowledge and skills developed to meaningfully implement te reo Māori and tikanga Māori within everyday learning (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2019).

In January 2022, Early Childhood Education (ECE) kaimahi at Toi Ohomai developed a te reo Māori self-development tool for BTECE and MTECE courses outlined in the programme document. Upon entry to the programme, the tool assesses students' te reo Māori competency, followed by progression throughout the programme tracking student progress in whakarongo (listening), pānui (reading), kōrero (speaking), and tuhituhi (writing) with difficulty increasing yearly (BTECE) or by semester (MTECE). A language development plan (LDP) is also assessed to support self-directed learning, encouraging students to set and achieve goals both inside and outside of the classroom. The LDP extends students' engagement beyond classroom hours by incorporating monthly SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely) goals. These goals were co-constructed with

students to support their individual te reo Māori learning journeys. By regularly setting and reviewing personal goals, students are encouraged to take ownership of their language development in a structured and purposeful way.

The self-assessment strategy and LDP extend over the three years for BTECE students and three semesters for MTECE students, reflecting the respective duration of the programmes. To further tautoko (support) the progress of te reo Māori, an ECE te reo Māori Moodle (the institution's learning management system) page was developed, providing resources including kaiako PowerPoints, quizlets, kēmu (games), waiata (songs), pūrākau (legends), history of te reo Māori, readings and other tikanga based materials. The page also provides links to websites, podcasts, and tools for language development.

Previous self-progression assessment showed BTECE and MTECE students improved in tuhituhi and pānui; however, kaimahi were not seeing evidence of students improving or demonstrating confidence in kōrero or whakarongo when visiting them during their practicum. Kaimahi deliver 3-hour kanohi-ki-te-kanohi (face to face) te reo Māori lessons reflective of the self-assessment strategy, accompanied by 30-minute revision in each course of the programme. To contextualise, kaimahi sought student feedback on the effectiveness of said teaching strategies, identifying barriers, and evaluating whether these strategies build confidence in students to implement te reo Māori authentically in teaching practice..

Literature Review

Te reo Māori, the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand, is an integral part of the nation's culture and identity. ECE teachers must implement te reo Māori in their practice, however research continues to point to varied degrees of delivery (Williams et al., 2023). Limited policy enforcement often leads to tokenistic or absent use of te reo Māori (Skerrett & Ritchie, 2021) resulting in some kaiako (teachers) and some early childhood centres implementing minimal or no use of the language. The national curriculum for early childhood education, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) is underpinned by Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), a foundational document signed in 1840 between the British Crown and Māori chiefs agreeing to tino rangatiratanga (sovereignty), taonga tuku iho (treasure passed down; for example, land, fisheries, cultural practices), as well as equal partnership in agreeance for peace between both parties to live in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ross, 1972). Due

to the unfulfilled obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, subsequent policies and practices of the British government have had adverse impacts on Māori language, culture and identity.

In 1996, the ECE curriculum, Te Whāriki was first published and later revised in 2017 and 2019. Te Whāriki is internationally recognised for its approach to biculturalism in early childhood education (Lee et al., 2013; MoE, 1996; Ritchie, 2002). Te Whāriki emphasises the importance of weaving te reo Māori me ōna tikanga within teaching practices throughout Aotearoa New Zealand (Ritchie, 2018).

Professional standards outlined in Our Code, Our Standards (Education Council New Zealand [ECNZ], 2017) further mandate that certified kaiako embed te reo Māori and te ao Māori perspectives into their teaching practice, and upon certification, kaiako make a commitment to upholding these teaching requirements. ECE kaiako play a crucial role in normalising te reo Māori and contributing to revitalisation efforts (Pine, 2018). Despite only 3.7% of Aotearoa New Zealand's population speaking te reo Māori (Statistics New Zealand, 2022), Mahi Karauna (Crown) strategy aims to support te reo Māori revitalisation, aligning with Our Code, Our Standards (Simmonds et al., 2020). However, it is important to acknowledge that such commitments can be influenced by political and ideological shifts. Recent changes in government policy have seen some rollbacks in support for te reo Māori and te ao Māori, illustrating the ongoing vulnerability of revitalisation efforts to the broader political landscape.

Skerrett and Ritchie (2018) maintain Initial Teacher Education (ITE) as critical in enhancing te reo Māori use in ECE. Pre-service kaiako must develop cultural competence and integrate te reo Māori authentically into their practice ensuring kaiako can advocate and role model for generations to come (McMillan et al., 2017). Student kaiako should approach their teaching with genuine commitment to understanding and honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Gaches et al., 2022).

This is reinforced by the *Growing Up in New Zealand* longitudinal study (GUiNZ, 2015), which investigated the barriers and enablers to the acquisition, retention and implementation of te reo Māori across 7,000 children. The study found that tamariki Māori achieve better outcomes where te reo Māori is actively implemented in education (MoE, 2003; Tuuta et al., 2004). Similarly, Pine's (2018) research with 47 student teachers highlighted widespread recognition of te reo Māori importance in ITE due to the cultural and

linguistic importance of te reo Māori, particularly in fostering a deeper connection with Māori tamariki and communities. In the study, participants emphasised the need for more than surface-level phrases, advocating for deeper integration of language into their daily practice (Pine, 2018). Skerrett and Ritchie (2021) argue that in accordance with language acquisition theory, te reo Māori needs to be woven into practice authentically and not segregated as a subject, therefore requiring more than simple phrases to be used in everyday practice.

While websites such as Te Kete Ipurangi and the Ministry of Education provide resources for effective teaching of te reo Māori, few articles have been found regarding effective strategies for the teaching of te reo Māori within ITE programmes. Research shows every student has different learning experiences and therefore brings with them different learning styles and knowledge (Rona & McLachlan, 2017). With te reo Māori being the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand, “it is integral to the identity of *all New Zealanders*” (MoE, 2009, p.11) and therefore will strengthen cultural awareness and development for all students (Taani, 2019).

Framing the Research

This research emerged from the experiences and kōrero of Toi Ohomai kaimahi teaching on the BTECE and MTECE programmes. These programmes include a three-hour te reo Māori session aimed at developing and implementing te reo Māori within students’ teaching practices. While students showed progress in their te reo Māori knowledge, it was unclear if they could apply this in practice with tamariki and kaiako. Kaimahi within this research sought to explore students’ perspectives on the effectiveness of current teaching strategies to identify how ITE can better support authentic embedding of te reo Māori, ensuring its survival for future generations in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Methodology

The research employed a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research as an evaluation of real-life teaching initiatives within the BTECE and MTECE programmes at Toi Ohomai. A quantitative survey was disseminated to over 100 students to gather their feedback anonymously, allowing their voices to be heard. Following

the survey, participants had the option to join whakawhiti kōrero, utilising qualitative methods to delve deeper into their thoughts. Mixed methods research integrates both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, allowing research to address a broader range of research questions and gain more nuanced insights (Caruth, 2013; McKim, 2017). This approach allowed the research team to evaluate current implementation strategies in the 3-hour kanohi-ki-te-kanohi delivery format and explore potential modification to their teaching practices. Mixed methods further validated findings by providing complementary insights, challenging assumptions, and refining research questions (Caruth, 2013).

The anonymous online survey provided a list of different activities and approaches that have been used within the programme, and participants were asked to rate their preferences about each one on a 5-point Likert scale. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Research Ethics committee of Toi Ohomai. The online survey included an overview of the research project, with participants providing informed consent by ticking a box in the online survey before proceeding.

The survey was designed to be comfortably completed according to students' availabilities and locations. Researchers not directly involved with teaching students presented the project to prevent power imbalances and invited voluntary participation. The survey was shared on the student Moodle page to maintain anonymity. This design ensured candid responses, contributing to the research's understanding of teaching practices. However, despite a relatively large potential pool of participants and user-friendly survey design, only seventeen students completed the survey, and four students took part in the subsequent focus group kōrero. Most of these survey responses (14) were from international students enrolled in the MTECE programme, with only three responses from domestic students enrolled in the BTECE.

To ensure that the student voice was being heard, comment boxes were available which allowed students to expand on their responses and provide more detailed feedback on their rating. It was planned that the first fourteen students who provided their email address would be invited to take part in whakawhiti kōrero, a process which aimed to empower participants to engage in honest discussions about their learning of te reo Māori. Due to the low level of interest, researchers decided to conduct the focus group in person at a time and place convenient for the four students who responded. Respecting the mana (power, essence, or presence) of participants was important to minimise power imbalances (Rodriguez et al.,

2021). Mana enhancement was created through whanaungatanga (relationships) practices during kōrero. Moreover, karakia (prayers) fostered a supportive mana enhancing atmosphere for sharing thoughts on teaching strategies.

The research involved quantitative data collected through an Excel spreadsheet, providing statistical analysis (Gaciu, 2021; Sukamolson, 2007). Qualitative research, focusing on te reo Māori sought to understand how these teaching strategies support students in their practice. Kōrero were transcribed using Otter, a real-time transcription platform. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) allowed themes to be identified from the data. Researchers first individually reviewed the data to become familiar with it, and then analysed the transcribed kōrero and survey responses to generate initial themes. Finally, the research team met to discuss their analysis collectively, discussing and refining the thematic framework as a group (Thomas, 2006).

Findings

Useful Teaching Strategies for Developing te Ao Māori

Participants highlighted various teaching strategies that supported their te reo Māori development, including PowerPoint presentations, multimedia resources, Māori language books, small group activities, interactive games and waiata. PowerPoint presentations were particularly valuable for independent study: “Having access to the PowerPoints outside the classroom significantly helps my learning.” Multimedia tools like Quizlet enhanced engagement and reinforced language skills: “Quizlet is useful in class as it supports my language recognition and structure.” Moodle provided a platform for accessing resources mentioned above, therefore aiding self-directed learning.

Māori pukapuka (books) were found to reinforce pronunciation and fluency: “Simple words in pukapuka Māori supports our pronunciation” and “the use of pukapuka helps us speak te reo Māori at a faster speed.” Small group activities with props, such as puppets, helped with language retention:

The use of puppets is a good teaching method for te reo Māori because these methods can be used in practice with tamariki. It really helped me to remember locative structures and words of te reo Māori. It was such a useful strategy.

Interactive games were effective for kinaesthetic learners: “Playing games in class really helps me to remember,” while waiata supported sentence structure understanding and practical application: “Waiata is very helpful. It helps me recognise so many kupu and the structure of sentences.” Participants further noted the value of waiata for pronunciation, memory retention, and engaging tamariki in real-world teaching contexts. Zealand.

Desire for Cultural Immersion and Cultural Understanding

Participants expressed a strong desire for deeper immersion in te ao Māori culture to enhance their language learning. Participants highlighted the importance of engaging with kapa haka (performing art form that combines song, dance, and chanting), marae (place where formal greetings and discussions take place) visits, and understanding tikanga, kawa (protocol and etiquette), and te ao Māori mātauranga (knowledge). The participants emphasised these elements as vital for becoming culturally responsive kaiako. Exposure to these practices was seen as fostering a connection to te reo Māori and enhancing its integration into teaching, as this student notes: “Learning about Māori culture and Māori ceremonies can support us as teachers as we can transfer that knowledge to those tamariki we teach.”

Participants further acknowledged the significance of learning Māori history, pūrākau, and values, viewing these as essential for contextual understanding of the language. They recognised their responsibility to meet the teaching profession’s standard of honoring Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnerships by embedding Māori culture meaningfully into their pedagogy: “I think if we gain more Māori culture, we will be able to gain the Māori language. As a teacher, it is my responsibility to use the Māori culture with tamariki.” Overall, the data underscore the importance of cultural immersion and contextual learning, reflecting the interconnection between language and culture. Participants viewed these experiences as critical to their personal growth and professional readiness, supporting the revitalisation of te reo Māori in educational settings. The research employed a mixed method Zealand.

Tools for Assessing and Feedback

Participants valued self-assessment tools, end-of-semester/year testing, and the LDP for their roles in supporting te reo Māori implementation. These tools provided structured opportunities for reflection, enabling students to track and apply their language learning. The

self-assessment tool, linked to language skills like whakarongo, tuhituhi, pānui and kōrero, was especially helpful in preparing students for practicum placements: “The self-assessment paper supplies me with the systematically learned words and sentences. I can use these expressions in placement.” Assessment data across the academic year demonstrated progressive growth within student te reo Māori language and knowledge. For example, data demonstrated clear upward trends in tuhituhi and pānui by 40%. In Year One, students averaged 50%, indicating foundational levels of understanding. By Year Two, this increased significantly to 80%, reflecting improved competence and confidence. By Year Three, students averaged 90%, showing consolidation of learning and effective application of te reo Māori in context. End-of-semester/year testing received mixed responses – motivating for some but stressful for others. Meanwhile, the LDP extended engagement beyond class time with monthly SMART goals focused on activities like ‘pānui’, ‘tuhituhi’, and ‘kōrero’, fostering continuous language practice: “I feel like it is a good comprehensive plan now so that it isn’t just about when I am in practicum but also when I am at home. I am extending my knowledge.”

While the tools were effective, participants requested simpler, context-appropriate language structures for practical application with tamariki. Regarding the 3-hour kanohi-ki-te-kanohi te reo Māori session, 71% of participants found the duration appropriate. However, others suggested breaking down content into shorter, more frequent sessions: “Each lesson felt like a lot of content, but the time was so compressed that it felt like a lot to cover in three hours.” Participants emphasised that developing te reo Māori proficiency requires immersion in Māori culture, highlighting the importance of integrating language with cultural experiences. These tools, alongside cultural engagement, were seen as critical to building confidence and authenticity in their teaching practices.

This is potentially an area of opportunity for Tertiary Learning Advisors and Kaupapa Māori support teams, who are often well-placed to coordinate inter-disciplinary workshops and courses. Language skills like mihi (formal greeting and welcome) and kōrero are often more about personal development rather than course-specific, and could also fit with programmes focused on building interpersonal skills and work-readiness for learners about to enter our increasingly diverse, and inclusive work environments.

Barriers to Developing Proficiency

Barriers to learning te reo Māori were highlighted in the data, with 29% of participants emphasising the need for opportunities to interact in te reo Māori outside of the 3-hour kanohi-ki-te-kanohi sessions. One participant noted: “Te reo Māori is a language that is learnt through speaking and listening... Having an environment where you can speak to others is really important. Outside of our 3-hour lessons, this isn’t available.” Practicum placements and workplace interactions were identified as critical for applying te reo Māori skills, with some students expressing frustration over the lack of such requirements. One participant shared: “The biggest challenge for me is we have no requirement to use it... I think we need more environments to speak it.”

In accordance with the comments above, students expressed their desire for te reo Māori to be woven through other courses outside of their te reo Māori classroom environment and to have opportunities to practice their new skills with a range of tutors. As suggested by this participant: “Students can have te reo Māori conversations in any subject, and teachers can correct grammar and extend related phrases.” Confidence issues, fear of mistakes, and insufficient practice emerged as personal barriers. Participants also acknowledged the importance of self-directed learning and commitment to embed and retain te reo Māori knowledge in their practice. Here again, Tertiary Learning Advisors with specialist te reo expertise are well-positioned to support ākonga (students) on their te reo journey with complementary individual or small group support and practice opportunities. However, as many Tertiary Learning Advisors may not have competency in te reo Māori, there is a need to ensure that these skills can be fostered and developed at an institutional level – indeed, other academic/professional staff may also have the same need. Assisting busy lecturers and building their learners’ confidence and competence will also grow collegial relationships with the wider staff and showcase the value Tertiary Learning Advisors bring to the institution.

Discussion

This study highlights students’ strong desire to learn te reo Māori through diverse and meaningful strategies to embed the language into ECE practice. Central themes include cultural immersion, practical application, and adaptable language tools to support learning

outcomes. Brouwer and Daly (2022) emphasise the importance of incorporating te reo Māori into English-medium settings to ensure language preservation, while Simmonds et al. (2020) note the cognitive and social benefits of bilingualism, including literacy and identity development for tamariki. These findings align with Te Whāriki, which positions te reo Māori as a taonga and underpins curriculum delivery in ways that are both meaningful and context-specific (MoE, 2017). Participants in the study advocated for resources tailored specifically to ECE settings, echoing Greenwood and Te Aika's (2008) assertion that Māori content must be situational and practical for learners to feel a sense of belonging.

Cultural Immersion

Students highlighted the importance of learning about Māori history, pūrākau (traditional narratives), and te ao Māori mātauranga to enrich their understanding of te reo Māori. Immersion in cultural practices such as kapa haka and marae visits was seen as critical for fostering confidence and authenticity in language use. Thomas et al. (2017) stress the value of engaging with tikanga and traditions to instil a sense of identity and belonging, which aligns with our study participants' desires to deepen their engagement with Māori culture.

Teaching Tools and Pedagogy

Participants found structured tools such as self-assessment and LDP to be valuable in fostering continuous engagement with te reo Māori. These tools allowed students to set goals, monitor their progress, and reflect on their learning. Klenowski (2013) highlights self-assessment as a key element of reflective practice, promoting autonomy and self-directed learning, while Bishop and Glynn (1999) emphasise culturally responsive pedagogy and flexible goal setting for authentic integration of te reo Māori into teaching practices.

Challenges and Limitations

The condensed nature of the Master's programme was identified as a barrier, with limited opportunities for in-depth cultural and language studies. Hill and Thrupp's (2019) work advocates for rich, meaningful opportunities for learners to practice and apply new skills, a sentiment echoed by participants who called for more targeted and context-specific teaching resources. Additionally, while the study's small sample size, predominantly

international participants, limits more general applicability, the findings offer valuable insights into effective teaching strategies and the potential for te reo Māori growth in ECE. Finally, while this study was specifically grounded in an ECE programme, there are a host of transferable findings, tools and techniques. These could inform the work undertaken not only by Tertiary Learning Advisors but also by educators of other cohorts and different disciplines seeking to encourage integration of te reo in practice. Preparing students for success happens within and adjacent to the classroom and should surely include practitioners working together to harness their multiple spheres of influence. Therefore, a rich area for future research could be the formal implementation of a learning centre pre-course, or ‘summer school’/ ‘study skills’ te reo familiarisation course, with ongoing support sessions throughout the year adopting the approaches described in this paper.

Conclusion

This research highlights the importance of integrating te reo Māori within ECE programmes at Toi Ohomai, focusing on student teachers’ experiences and the teaching strategies that facilitate authentic use of language. Participants emphasised the value of practical, culturally immersive strategies such as waiata, tools such as the LDP self-assessment strategies, and the need for 3-hour weekly teacher-directed learning sessions to focus on context-specific content relevant to the ECE environment. An essential finding was the participants’ desires to capture Māori culture through learning pūrākau, kapa haka, and the history of Aotearoa New Zealand, which in turn supports the embedding of this knowledge and acknowledgement of Māori culture.

To align with Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership, student teachers must develop and implement te reo Māori me ōna tikanga in their practices to ensure that future generations have opportunities to hear, feel, and see te reo Māori in their education throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. This underscores the interconnectedness of language and culture in the acquisition of te reo Māori. By adopting practical, culturally immersive approaches and tools that encourage continuous learning, ECE programmes can address identified gaps and contribute to the renaissance and sustainability of te reo Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The integration of te reo Māori is essential for fostering meaningful language acquisition and cultural understanding within ECE programmes. This research highlights the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, practical and context-specific curriculum delivery and learning support, and the benefits of bilingualism. Self-assessment tools and the LDP support students in tracking their progress and authentically integrating te reo Māori into their professional practice and within the wider context of their day-to-day lives. The ongoing revitalisation of te reo Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand requires ECE programmes – and education in general – to prioritise cultural immersion and provide continuous support for students to engage with and incorporate Māori language and culture into their practices. There is a baton here, ready for Tertiary Learning Advisors to grasp, as we help all our kaimahi and ākonga to move forward, together.

He pai te tirohanga ki ngā mahara mō ngā rā pahemo engari ka puta te māramatanga I runga I te titiro whakamua.

It's fine to have recollections of the past, but wisdom comes from being able to prepare opportunities for the future.

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