

# Our spoken diversity

**H**OW should we react to claims that New Zealanders are linguistically impoverished? New Zealand and Australia both have high rates of immigration from areas that are not classified as ENT (where English is spoken as a Native Tongue) but, surprisingly, we still show little linguistic diversity.

Very few New Zealanders by birth acquire a second language, irrespective of what our census figures might have suggested since 1996, when the foreign language knowledge item was introduced.

In the *Dominion Post* of April 1, 2008, Danielle Teutsch regretted that learning a language is a long and sometimes painful process, but generously and optimistically offered us information about overseas language courses where we could travel and acquire Italian, Spanish, Japanese, Mandarin, French and German. That's very seductive, but unrealistic for many of us, with rising airfares, consideration of carbon miles, etc.

While learning another language generally becomes more difficult as one ages, bilingualism is relatively straightforward to infants and young children acquiring speech. But what opportunities do young children have to learn another language at school? Not many at primary school yet, but plenty, it would seem, at more senior levels.

In the New Zealand school curriculum, one can learn English, and our two official languages, te reo Maori and New Zealand Sign Language. There is a cluster of Pacific languages taught: Samoan, Cook Islands Maori, Vagahau Niue, Tongan and Tokelauan. European languages include French, German, Spanish and Latin. Finally, Chinese, Korean, Indonesian, and Japanese are offered at some schools. Of these, Chinese, Ger-



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## WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

man, French, Spanish, Latin, and te reo Maori are offered by the Correspondence School, Te Kura-a-Tuhi.

Arguments for inclusion of languages other than English in a school curriculum include commercial, educational, and cultural reasons, all widely recognised in many other countries, and integrated into their national curricula. If the demand for the teaching of languages other than English exists, teachers could surely be trained and employed. So what barriers are there? According to New Zealand research carried out by Dr Sandra Shearn at Victoria University, the barriers are political, cultural, and economic, with a general lack of awareness among the general public of the cognitive value in the learning of another language.

Dr Shearn found that what is offered in schools in the choices of languages varies considerably. Language classes are an option taken more often by female students and the more able, and it is possible that there is generally little encouragement by parents for male students to opt for languages.

**M**ORE significant to our reticence to acquire another language and share another culture is what is often regarded as the comparative lack of

honour and prestige awarded to our official te reo Maori. The celebration of Maori Language Week 2008 will soon take place, and it will be interesting to see what afterlife will be maintained from it. Radio New Zealand National continues some of the initiatives that were part of last year's Maori Language Week. Last year, Maori TV ran a trilingual gardening show, *Kiwi Maaara*, presented in Maori, English, and NZ Sign Language. Last month, New Zealand's 100 per cent Maori language channel Te Reo was launched. Beginning with just three hours a day for seven days each week, the channel caters not just for fluent speakers of te reo and full-immersion Maori language households, but will be of inestimable value for those learning te reo. But following Maori Language Week last year we were also treated to a rash of letters from *Dominion Post* readers calling for an English Language Week and the dropping of what was dubbed Maori Indoctrination Week.

These sentiments were treated with much derision, indicating that significant numbers of readers appreciate the cultural, spiritual, and cognitive value of what is a unique part of our New Zealand identity and heritage. As a local language adviser put it, "a person growing up in a monolingual, monocultural environment is deprived of the wonders of new worlds". And if we want to be purely pragmatic about it, it would also be economically enriching for New Zealanders in the twenty-first century to be fluent in another language.

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