



Tō ringa ki ngā rākau a te Pākehā: A digital platform for Māori language learning.

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Abstract

The Te Whanake series of textbooks and resources, by Professor John Moorfield, is the main resource used by teachers who are teaching Māori as a second language in universities. The past five years have seen these resources grow to incorporate a suite of digital resources available free of charge. These include podcasts, an online dictionary (which is also available as an iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch and android app) and animations with accompanying exercises. The authors have had the privilege of being research assistants for Professor Moorfield and have worked on a number of these resources. As language teachers, the authors have also seen the benefit of the resources to both teacher and student.

This paper will focus on the importance of technology in teaching the Māori language as a second-language and proposes an opportunity to exploit technologies that can contribute to the revitalisation of endangered languages. The paper will begin with a brief overview of the Te Whanake suite of digital resources. This will be followed by a discussion regarding the structure of the language classes and how technology has been incorporated into the programme. There will then be a demonstration of the digital platform used by the language students in Te Ara Poutama, the Faculty of Māori Development at the Auckland University of Technology in Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand. The digital platform was implemented in 2011 for the management of all of the Māori language courses. The demonstration will include an examination of some of the current functions of the digital platform, as well as introducing some features that will be incorporated into future versions of the site.

1. Introduction

The Māori language is the language of the indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand. It is one of three official languages of New Zealand, along with English and New Zealand sign language. However, like many indigenous languages, it is a minority language. In 1979, the loss of the Māori language was so great that it was believed it would suffer language death if nothing was done to save it [1]. Since the late 1970s numerous efforts have been made to save the language through nationwide initiatives such as immersion Māori language education from pre-school through to secondary school. This paper will focus on the efforts to teach Māori as a second language to adult learners.

Te Whanake is a comprehensive system for learning Māori as a second language, created by Professor John Moorfield. The first textbook of the series, Te Whanake 1 Te Kākano, was published in 1988 and quickly became the textbook of choice for teachers teaching Māori as a second language to adults. The teaching methodology reflected in the textbooks is based on the way learners would learn their second language in a natural bilingual situation.



2. Te Whanake series

The Te Whanake Māori language series has evolved out of the need for Māori language resources for adults that reflect modern methods of teaching second languages. The Te Whanake series provides the most comprehensive set of resources for learning Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The resources include a comprehensive set of Māori language learning textbooks, study guides, recorded audio and video listening and speaking exercises, teachers' manuals, and a Māori dictionary for learners and teachers that develops Māori language ability from beginner through to advanced levels.

The website also provides access to a further range of associated free online resources for independent learning and interaction.

3. Te Whanake online

The free online resources include two minute animated movies and associated exercises, podcasts, an online dictionary and a discussion forum for students.

The Te Whanake animation modules consist of short animated movies, with exercises relating to the language covered in the animations. The animations and associated exercises are intended for independent study as part of self-directed learning. Students can complete the exercises when they wish and from wherever they have online access. The animated clips are entirely in the Māori language and students have the option of watching the movies with subtitles in either Māori or English.

The podcasts contain all the exercises and activities of the four Te Whanake textbooks. These exercises provide additional practice with the dialogues, vocabulary and sentence patterns to develop learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in Māori. Originally produced as tape-recorded activities they were then upgraded to CD's. To keep up with the technology, all of the exercises have been converted to a podcast format which is available for playback on Microsoft Windows and Apple computers, television screens, as well as portable media devices such as mp3 players, video iPods and 3G phones.

The online dictionary complements and is indexed to the series of four textbooks and related resources in the Te Whanake series, providing students quick access to topics, grammatical and usage explanations, idioms and colloquialisms, maps and illustrations. The dictionary comprises a selection of modern and everyday language useful for learners of Māori. It has a broader scope than traditional Māori dictionaries and includes encyclopedic entries, place names, idioms and colloquialisms. These entries have been included to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the Māori language. New entries, additional meanings, and example sentences with translations, continue to be added to the dictionary; this is one of the primary advantages of an online dictionary. In 2007 photographs of species, mainly native birds and people began to be added. In 2009 the sounds of native birds were added to the dictionary. In 2010, loanwords from Māori language newspapers, the Māori Bible and other sources of quality Māori language texts were also added.

4. AUT's Māori language classes

The language classes are structured around the Te Whanake series and associated resources in a way that students can easily follow. Whilst the textbooks are used in class, students are encouraged to use the study guides at home for extra practice and exercises outside of class. To help with further practice,



students are often instructed to complete the animation modules as homework. The online dictionary can be used at home over the internet but also incorporated into the classrooms through the use of the Te Aka app, which can be downloaded onto iPhones, iPads, iPod Touch and android devices. For assessments, teachers use the podcasts that were created with the audio and video resources of the series. The podcasts are a key component of the digital platform.

5. The digital platform

The 'Te Ara Poutama Intranet' is the name given to the online digital platform that is being used by AUT's Faculty of Māori Development Māori language classes. This platform was developed in conjunction with VO2 Web Design to manage the growing use of technology in the teaching of te reo Māori. As previously outlined, the video and audio resources of the Te Whanake collection were upgraded into podcasts. The next step was to provide a place for students to submit their audio responses to many of the exercises on the podcasts.

Up until 2011 teachers were using AUT Online; a platform based on a learning management system called Blackboard. This system was insufficient to deal with the needs of the language programme, which were 1) to provide an area where students could have access to the digital resources on and off campus and 2) to manage the interactivity between the students and the digital resources.

Through the Te Ara Poutama Intranet, teachers can create assignments from the podcasts and videos, students can now submit the exercises they complete (including audio recorded exercises), and teachers can mark the assessments, provide feedback and post these for the students to see. The system is paperless and immediate.

The Te Ara Poutama intranet was launched at the beginning of Semester One, 2011 (February 2011). The following is a short overview of the initial features available when the digital platform went live.

5.1. Welcome screen

This is what appears when students first log into the digital platform. It is on this page that students can navigate through the course. Initially, students only had access to the 'My Courses' tab and the 'My Assignments' tab. In the courses tab, students are able to see all of the courses they are currently enrolled in; they can also click on a course to take them to the course overview page. In the assignments tab all assignments are listed for all of their courses, including when assignments are due. By clicking on one of them they are taken to the outline page where they must submit their online assignments.

5.2. Course overview

Here the students can read a descriptor of the course and can see who the lecturers are. This is also the page where teachers can upload links to other resources, class handouts and more importantly the course handbook. To the side of this page is a menu leading to other sections of the course including the content for each module or where to submit assignments.



5.3. Modules

The content of the Te Whanake texts is divided into chapters. These chapters have been translated into modules for the course. This page gives students access to the digital and online podcasts relevant to each chapter of the textbooks by clicking on the necessary module.

5.4. Assignments

This is where students must record, upload and submit their assignments. The majority of the online assignments have the students practising their listening and oral skills. The student responses are recorded and uploaded for the teacher to listen to and assess.

6. New features of the digital platform

Throughout the first semester of the course, we were constantly liaising and working directly with the web developers to prepare and include features that would better help us to 1) deliver and teach the course and 2) provide more online interactivity between the students and the teachers. This has resulted in new features and functions being added to the platform for second semester enrolments. Outlined below are the new features to date.

6.1. Messages

One of the main features first introduced in the second phase in the development of the digital platform, was a message or email facility. This feature allows communication between students enrolled in Te Ara Poutama Māori language classes. Students have the option of sending a group mail to all enrolled students, or the ability to filter the system to specific classmates. Students can also contact the teachers through this system, and there is also the facility for attachments to be added, so students can work together on assignments. A message tab has also been added to the main welcome screen that will show new and recent messages in the inbox. Importantly, language teachers and developers are working together to create a feature where students and teachers can communicate live online in the form of a Te Ara Poutama chat room.

6.2. Announcements

On the welcome screen that students log into, an announcements tab has been added. This feature allows the teachers to post important notes and reminders that students will see immediately when they log on. Only teachers and administration staff have the ability to create announcements.

6.3. Blog entry

This is one of the more recent additions to the Te Ara Poutama Intranet. This feature is used purely as a teaching tool. This allows the students to make blog posts about a particular topic the teacher has assigned in class. This feature is an initiative by the teachers to be more modern and forward thinking in terms of the use of the digital arena for teaching. For example, in higher level classes where students have a sound knowledge of the language, blogs provide a digital space to encourage critical thinking in the Māori language on topical issues.



6.4. Course administration feature

Some of the new features that have been implemented into the system are not student specific, but are there to help teachers manage the course. One of these is the 'edit streams' feature which is normally handled by administration staff. But due to the influx of new enrolments during the first two weeks of each semester, it was necessary for staff members to have the ability to add students into the system as well as maintain the management of course streams. This feature is important to ensure the smooth running of the course, because, students can potentially miss out on access to the online resources while they wait for their enrolment to be completed. This means that teachers are able to assign login details and provide course approval immediately enabling students to keep up with their class work.

7. Conclusion

As language teachers, we must constantly think about how we can improve the way we teach. More importantly, we must think about ways we can better help students to learn. The Te Ara Poutama Intranet will continue to be an ongoing project as both teachers and web developers work together to maintain its systems, and look to new ways of incorporating dynamic and relevant technology into the classroom. The features mentioned above are only a starting point for the teaching of te reo Māori (the Māori language). The potential for this system to aid in the teaching of the Māori language is infinite.

References

- [1] Walker 1990: 147-8