
Languages in Aotearoa

Statement on Language Policy

This Statement on Language Policy is intended to promote discussion on language policy and to provide a simple framework for greater government and community action to protect and promote language diversity in New Zealand. It is a project of Te Waka Reo, the Language Policy Network of the New Zealand Diversity Action Programme, facilitated by the Race Relations Commissioner and the Human Rights Commission.

Introduction

New Zealand is a diverse society in a globalised international community. It has an indigenous language, te reo Māori, and a bicultural Māori and Anglo-Celtic foundation. It is located in the Asia Pacific region and many people from the Pacific and Asia have settled here. Languages are an important national resource in terms of our cultural identities, cultural diversity and international connectedness. They are vitally important for individuals and communities, bringing educational, social, cultural and economic benefits. They contribute to all three national priorities of national identity, economic transformation and families young and old.

English is the most widely used language in New Zealand, and the ability to communicate in English is important for all New Zealanders. Te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language are recognised by law as official languages. The number of speakers of te reo Māori is now increasing, but much remains to be done to secure its future as a living language.

A majority of New Zealanders currently speak only one language. There are however significant communities who have a heritage language other than English.



Māori, Pacific and Asian communities alone make up nearly a third of the population. The most common community languages other than English are te reo Māori, Chinese languages, Samoan, and Hindi.

Human Rights and Responsibilities

The right to learn and use one's own language is an internationally recognised human right. Human rights treaties and declarations specifically refer to rights and responsibilities in relation to indigenous languages, minority languages, learning and using one's mother tongue, the value of learning foreign languages, and access to interpretation and translation services. The New Zealand Bill of Rights Act provides that 'a person who belongs to an ethnic, religious, or linguistic minority in New Zealand shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of that minority, to enjoy the culture, to profess and practise the religion, or to use the language, of that minority'.

New Zealand has a particular responsibility under the Treaty of Waitangi and international law to protect and promote te reo Māori as the indigenous language of New Zealand. It also has a special responsibility to protect and promote other languages that are indigenous to the New Zealand realm: Vagahau Niue, Gagana Tokelau, Cook Island Māori, and New Zealand Sign Language. It has a regional responsibility, as a Pacific nation, to promote and protect other Pacific languages, particularly where significant proportions of their communities live in New Zealand.

Economic Development

A significant and growing proportion of New Zealand's trade is with Asia, and learning the languages of our key trading partners is an economic imperative.



Human Rights
Commission

Te Kāhui Tika Tangata

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LANGUAGES

English

All New Zealanders should have the opportunity and support to achieve oral competence and literacy in English through school, adult literacy programmes, and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) programmes.

Te Reo Maori

All New Zealanders should have the opportunity and support to learn te reo Māori and use it in the home, in education and in the community. The importance of maintaining te reo Māori as a unique indigenous living New Zealand language should be publicly promoted as part of our national heritage and identity.

New Zealand Sign Language

All Deaf people should have the opportunity and support to learn and use New Zealand Sign Language in the home, in education, and in the community, including having access to interpreters. Other New Zealanders should also have the opportunity and support to learn and use NZSL.

Pacific Languages

All Cook Island Māori, Niuean and Tokelauan people living in New Zealand should have the opportunity and support to learn and use their heritage language. Other Pacific peoples in New Zealand should have the opportunity and support to learn and use their languages through public and community provision.

Community and Heritage Languages

People whose community or heritage language is other than English, Māori or Pacific should have the opportunity and support to learn and use these languages through public and community provision.

International Languages

New Zealanders should be encouraged and given opportunities and support to learn international languages, including those of New Zealand's key trading partners.

STRATEGIES

Within a general languages policy framework specific strategies are needed for both priority language groups and priority sectors. All such strategies should recognise that:

- New Zealand is a country with a small population and limited resources to support language diversity
- Choices have to be made about the relative priority of providing for the various languages, sectors and objectives based on the degree of endangerment, human rights, government responsibilities, economic benefits and the population base
- Strategies and programmes for these languages and sectors must be coordinated to make the most effective use of available resources.

Language Strategies

There should be specific national strategies for English literacy and ESOL, te reo Māori, New Zealand Sign Language, Pacific languages, community and heritage languages, and international languages. Such strategies should address the dual goals of language maintenance and development within minority communities, and wider public acceptance of language diversity.

Sector Strategies

There should be sector strategies for languages in the home, the community, education (early childhood centres, schools, tertiary), public services (including translation and interpretation services), business and broadcasting.

Priorities

Priorities in the implementation of a national languages policy are to:

- Establish an appropriate coordinating and monitoring mechanism for language policy, and identify lead organisations for specific language and sector strategies
- Develop and maintain strategies for the identified languages and sectors
- Promote cooperation and sharing between agencies and communities in the development of strategies, resources and services
- Promote positive public attitudes to language diversity and increase the number of people learning languages
- Train and support more teachers of languages
- Develop resources to support language learning and use.

Note: Current Strategies and Initiatives

There are existing strategies for English literacy, ESOL and te reo Māori. The te reo Māori Strategy is currently being updated. There are no comprehensive strategies for any of the other languages or sectors identified, but there have been a variety of initiatives within these areas. New Zealand Sign Language was declared an official language in 2006. The new schools curriculum adopted in 2007 includes languages as a learning area for all students, and a languages in schooling strategy is under development. The Ministry of Education has recently completed curricula for a number of Pacific languages and the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs has piloted a Mind Your Language programme for the Niuean, Tokelauan and Cook Island communities. There are a variety of supports for Māori, Pacific and other community language broadcasting.

Key government agencies with responsibility for aspects of language policy include the Ministry of Education, the Tertiary Education Commission, Te Puni Kokiri, the Māori Language Commission, the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, the Office of Ethnic Affairs, the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, the Ministry of Social Development, and the Department of Labour. The Human Rights Commission facilitates a language policy network, Te Waka Reo.