

PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL REPORT

To investigate the best methods of acquiring a second language
as now required in the New Zealand Curriculum.

John Bangma

Mairehau Primary School, Christchurch
Term 2, 2013

Context:

The New Zealand Curriculum includes an eighth essential learning area being the learning of a second language. This learning of a new language *provides a means of communicating with people from another culture and exploring one's own personal world.* (pg 24)

In the Vision statements, reference is made to being *connected as international citizens.* (pg 8)

The Principles has one section referring to *Cultural Diversity* where we are to *value the histories and traditions of all its (our) people.* (pg 9)

Similarly, the Values include *Students will be encouraged to value: **diversity**, as found in our different cultures, languages and heritages.* (pg10)

The new curriculum provides us with the mandate to ensure a second language is being taught and yet for many schools this is done in a somewhat adhoc manner with some teachers having minimal, if any, professional development to support them in their teaching. Often this has relied on the teacher's secondary education experiences in second languages.

Being ESOL has given me a particular empathy with any student that is struggling to acquire another language. Entering school in an era before any additional support was provided, saw me start primary school with no English and meant my learning journey had an additional facet to it. My experiences have given me a strong interest in second language acquisition, an interest I have had throughout my education and teaching. Although ESOL support has been invaluable, I believe that most classroom teachers do not understand the complexities of acquiring another language. My hope is that through this research I can also better equip teachers in the understanding of that learning.

Key inquiry question:

How are schools structuring their programmes to enhance the acquisition of a second language to ensure the learning is relevant to and engaging for learners, and flexible enough to meet diverse needs within their communities?

From discussions with various primary school principals and teachers from Christchurch and other schools within New Zealand the only method of teaching a second language used in those particular schools was to have the new language taught as a separate subject with the exception of Te Reo Māori. Languages such as German, Japanese, French, Spanish, Chinese etc are being taught by the classroom teacher, or language expert, in an allotted time during the school week. Most of those classroom teachers relied on their own secondary school second language learning as the basis for their own teaching. Some had taken a language into their university study. With changes to the way Professional Learning and Development had been made, there was limited opportunity to upskill in second languages unless through an outside provider. Assessments of this, varied with many teachers expressing a desire to offer a pleasurable experience for the children rather than specific assessment. There was also a feeling that without knowing the second language well enough, the subject was taught as a whole class rather than group work according to need.

However Te Reo Māori was taught in a variety of ways in mainstream schools. Some schools offered a separate subject option within the programme, while some sought to amalgamate Te Reo into the regular programme with the use of words and phrases to replace the English equivalent. Pre-service training provided most of the skills these teachers had to teach Te Reo. Most agreed that this was woefully inadequate to make much impact in actual language acquisition. Again outside providers were often the only source of more intense upskilling.

Visits to schools with attached bi-lingual units again showed a variety of methods being used to teach Te Reo Māori. There also appeared to be a number of philosophies underpinning the organisation within the classes. The greatest issue facing these schools appeared to be the lack of qualified teachers who are fluent in Te Reo. When positions were advertised, there were usually only a small number of applicants, sometimes only one. Sometimes these applicants were not even fully registered. Worse being the level of Te Reo that they offered. This issue however, was not a part of my sabbatical investigation, but does impact on it.

The competence level of the kaiako/teachers in bi-lingual classes was the main determinate of how the language was taught. In some classes a mix of the two languages happened throughout the day with no clear separation of the languages. In one school, which operated 2 classes, there was a very clear distinction made in the way this was taught. The senior class was taught by a more fluent speaker of Te Reo and this class received all its teaching and learning in Te Reo for 4 days of the week. The fifth day was solely in English. The other class, a junior class, was taught by a beginning teacher who taught for 4 days in English and on her release day another teacher, stronger in Te Reo took the class. The school had worked closely with whanau to ensure they were working together to find solutions for how the class should be taught.

Visits to four schools in Guilford, England, showed second languages were also taught, again in a similar style to New Zealand mainstream schools with separate lessons in the language taught to the class as a whole. In all the schools I visited, French was the second language being taught. The head teachers of these schools stated that separate French language lessons were the only methods used in all the schools they had worked in. Their opinion was that while exposing children to the language it didn't really teach them much beyond that aspect.

Likewise in the Netherlands, where the schools taught English as the second language in primary schools, the lessons were stand-alone lessons with the class working through English texts. There was no differentiation of the lessons or groups according to confidence, skill or knowledge. This was the situation in three of the schools I spent time in while in the Netherlands. The fourth school I visited though had a significantly different approach.

It Twaspan, Terkaple, Fryslân in The Netherlands, is one of a growing number of schools in this province taking quite a different approach to the way second and indeed third languages are taught.

Friesian, or Frysk, is an old language dating back to the Middle Ages when Fryslân stretched from Belgium to Northern Germany. The province of Fryslân is 5,749 km² and in 2010 had a population of 646,000. It is located in the North West corner of The Netherlands. The province is well known for its black and white cattle and large black horses as well as its ice skating competitions skating on the canals between 11 cities and towns across the province.



There is a connection between Frysk and English. The Angles, as in the Anglo Saxons, who invaded England in the 8th Century, came from the Fryslân Province and brought the Friesian language with them. Hence some of the English language has its roots in Friesian. In 1498, Duke Albert of Saxony replaced Friesian with Dutch as the language of government so its use diminished. Dutch speakers do not understand Frysk as it is not a dialect but a completely separate language. According to Wikipedia, 94% of the inhabitants of Fryslân understand Frysk, 74% can speak it, 75% can read it but only 27% can write it.



As Friesian/Frysk is my first language this was an area of interest for me. Both my parents attended school during the 1930/40s and were forbidden from speaking their first language in class. While breaking this rule usually ended up with a telling off, from time to time physical punishments were used to dissuade a repeat of the offence. This treatment of children forbidden to use their first language in their education closely mirrors what happened to our speakers of Te Reo Māori in earlier times here in New Zealand.

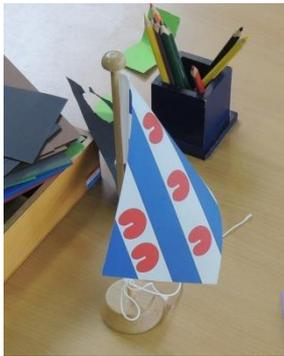
The Provincial Government became increasingly concerned about the apparent death of their language and made the brave decision to actually try to stop this. They worked with school communities to introduce an alternative to the second language subject *add-on*. Whilst learning a language as an isolated subject works for some people, most people who have mastered another language recognise the quickest way is to use the language in a variety of contexts especially being immersed in that language when, for example, living in that particular country. Dutch schools have always taught English as a second language, often adding German and French on at secondary level so teaching another language is not a new concept. Together with a trial number of schools a new programme was developed where the use of Frysk in the Teaching and Learning programme was integral.

The Provincial Government provided euros to support the programme through professional development for teachers and purchase of some resources. All teachers involved in the programme were involved in an intense 10 week programme to upskill in spoken English. Written English was already reasonably well known as it was taught to them throughout their upper-primary and secondary schooling. Most teachers had a reasonable understanding of Frysk. Naturally teachers without this language skill would not apply for teaching positions within this type of school. Over time professional development opportunities were provided to continue the upskilling of staff. These schools were also provided with 3 *Talige Skoalle* logos (*right*) to clearly indicate that the children in these schools were being educated in 3 languages: Frysk, Dutch and English. Expertise was further required to fulfil the expectation that all signs, documentation including the school web-site was required to be written in the 3 languages of the school. Maintaining the web-site in the 3 languages has been a challenge that has become too difficult for this school www.it-twaspan.nl/ however other schools in the programme have managed to maintain this www.folefinne.nl



In the Netherlands, kindergartens are attached to schools so children 'begin' school at 4 years of age. Initially the children speak their mother tongue in general class discussions, however formal lessons originally were conducted only in the Dutch language but after reflection and review the decision was made to introduce a daily 30 minute session in English right from the start of school. To do this a hand puppet, *Tom*, is used (*left*) so the children recognise

that he is speaking in a different language to what they are used to. An advantage many children attending these schools have is that they hear all 3 languages on radio and television, and as they are able to read they see the languages in print. Thus they are trilingually ready for learning.



After 2 years at school the language of teaching and learning is changed to be half the day in Dutch and half the day in Frysk/Frisian. Formal English is introduced the following year. Throughout the lessons, all languages are both spoken and written. While the provincial government's curriculum did have minimum teaching requirements in Frysk and English, each school was free to make the 3 language teaching suit their particular school and community. At *It Twaspan* the teacher informs the class of which



language the teaching and learning programme for that morning/day would be in. For younger children a small flag is put on the teacher's desk to provide a visual reminder of the language of instruction. The small Frysk flag (*left*) was on the desk when I visited the school. The Dutch and English flags (*right*) were there for later in the day/week.

The programme methodology is based on the philosophy of "*onderdompling*" or immersion. Hence the entire curriculum is delivered in the 3 languages. Pupil assessments of the 3 languages are able to be made using information from a variety of sources.

As a new initiative, resources to support this 3 language system were non-existent and so teachers had to make their own. This was a very labour intensive task and teachers expressed some delight when this changed. After the success of the programme was clear to see, resources were developed. Teaching resources in the forms of kits were published and provided. Also appropriate reading materials in all 3 languages. Resources such as *Tom*, above, were provided as were flags and especially name cards labelling items in the 3 languages with matching flags.



As a new method in teaching languages, the Provincial Government ensured that rigorous research was undertaken to ascertain the effect this new teaching methodology would have on the children's primary language learning; for these children it was the Dutch, not their own first language. The research results added support for continuing the changed method with children not only maintaining their level of learning in the Dutch, but actually showing greater results in some cases. As well as the results in Dutch, good progress was made in the other two languages too.

One of the major challenges for the 3 Talige Skoallen was educating parents. While some parents were totally supportive of the initiative, many were not. Those parents who were not speakers of Frysk and those who could speak it but chose not to speak it with their children, saw no need to learn a dying language. Some were sceptical, others openly hostile to the proposal so the Provincial Government and the schools had to work closely with the parents, taking them along the journey. The research findings helped allay some of the concerns and the pleasure gained by the children also helped greatly. Now, parents enrolling their children are aware of the programme and if they choose not to support it are free to enrol elsewhere.

Another issue that has to be overcome is the situation for these children when they start at secondary school. The methodology in the local secondary school brings children back to the start in English! Primary staff have been told by secondary teachers that when they reach secondary school they "need to unteach the children!" With not all primary schools in the area teaching the 3 language method it makes for a difficult conversation to try to get the secondary schools to change their practice.

A clear indication of the success of the programme is that since its instigation, each year more and more schools are being added to the 3 Talige Skoallen. Initially only smaller schools serving small townships and rural communities were a part of the programme however this is now spreading to incorporate some larger primary schools in the main cities of the province. This bold move by the Provincial Government has certainly turned the death knell for the Frysk language. Reading how many people in Fryslân now comment on Facebook in Frysk also indicates a growing use of the language of the province.

So what now for Mairehau Primary and for New Zealand? While the progress made in these 3 Talige Skoallen is undeniable, the staff had to be committed to the programme but the defining influence of the Provincial Government's commitment to this ensured its success. While any school can show a commitment to developing and instigating a programme it is with central support and funding that real progress can be made including sustainability. As indicated by principals of schools with attached bilingual units, there is a shortage of qualified and experienced teachers capable in both Te Reo and English. There is the opportunity to train in Te Reo through such programmes as Hoaka Pounamu however places are limited and without a study award potentially teachers cannot afford to undertake the course. Simpler courses such as Te Ara Te Reo through the Wananga o Aotearoa are available however if there was a commitment to teach all children bilingually, teachers would need a reasonable level of Te Reo to teach successfully.

Government support was imperative for the viability of the programme and hence the success of reversing the slow death of a language. Whilst a number of successive governments have claimed a commitment to increasing the number of speakers of Te Reo Māori, recent census data indicates that we have less speakers than the last time we collected such data. Clearly what has been tried in the past hasn't worked, perhaps it is time to try something different – this could be a good starting point.

Illustrations:

Map, flag and coat of arms – copied from Fryslan Provincial Government web-site
<http://www.fryslan.nl>

Photographs – 7 photographs taken on visit to *It Twaspan*, Terkaple, Fryslân

With sincere thanks to:

- Halbe van der Kooi and Aafke Reinders, Directeurs along with the teachers, especially Pyt and Tetsje Hibma for their openness, generosity and kindness in my visit to It Twaspan school.
- The principals and teachers in the many schools in Christchurch, the Netherlands and England whom I visited and who gave so generously of their time and experience.
- The Board of Trustees of Mairehau Primary School for allowing me to take this sabbatical.
- TeachNZ, Ministry of Education, NZEI and STA for granting me this sabbatical.
- My parents, Charlie & Nel for keeping my first language alive and my family for their ongoing support.