



Language-Culture-Education: Problem and Potential – An Introduction

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Margie Hohepa and Carl Mika

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Abstract

Education plays an enormous role in the regeneration and reconstruction of Indigenous language, culture, and knowledge. Examples span the globe of Indigenous peoples recreating “traditional” Indigenous education institutions of teaching and learning to support the continuation of their respective languages, cultures, and knowledges. Similarly, there are many and varied examples of Indigenous individuals and groups coopting colonial education institutions to establish education initiatives in support of language and culture regeneration. While originally aimed at dismantling and destroying Indigenous language and culture, colonially imposed education systems at early childhood, compulsory schooling, and tertiary levels have become significant sites for their regeneration and reconstruction. It is on the problem and potential of these systems that many writers in this section focus to develop rich and layered examinations of what we refer to in this introduction as the triad of language, culture, and education.

As section editors, along with section authors, we are ourselves very much implicated in the problem and potential across many dimensions of our respective identities. Along with all the authors, we find ourselves continuously engaging with conceptual shifts that are necessary for language and culture, which have been impacted negatively by colonization, to survive within educational spaces and systems that have invariably been set up with a primary goal

M. Hohepa (✉) · C. Mika
The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand
e-mail: margie.hohepa@waikato.ac.nz; carl.mika@waikato.ac.nz

of their destruction. We are both on a personal journey of language and culture regeneration – for Margie, this now includes three generations to her children and children’s children; for Carl, it is the subjective endeavor of theorizing a Maori philosophy of language. We are Indigenous educators who have taught in Indigenous education initiatives that span schooling (Margie) and higher education (Carl). We are now both Indigenous scholars in the “Western academy.” As Indigenous writers we are, in all respects, formed and spurred on by the limits and potential of both colonization and counter-colonial approaches to language and culture. The concern that the Indigenous writer has for these issues overrides any pretense at objectivity that the Western academic convention strives for.

Keywords

Culture · Language Regeneration · Pedagogy · Curriculum · Indigenous Philosophy

An Introduction

The triad of language, culture, and education that sits at the base of much Indigenous concern is so broad that it can be addressed in several ways. That those three aspects can cohabit so intimately should signal to the reader that, for Indigenous peoples, the problem of colonization is far from over and that this colonization ironically opens up possibilities for further approaches. It is our approach in this special section to consider the unlimited ways in which Indigenous peoples are called to describe a problem arising since colonization, but one that addresses elements that have their integrity in precolonial times. How Indigenous peoples are moved to oscillate between these two registers is not necessarily the focus of the authors that follow, but it is inevitable that any Indigenous writer on the theme(s) of language and culture will have at their backs the problem of colonization even as they discuss the liberating potential of language and cultural regeneration.

The inclusion of education moves the problem of colonization into a more direct line of vision. While research has been identified as “probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (Smith 2012, p.1), it could be equally argued that “education” is considered so. Colonially imposed “education” systems were established with a fundamental aim of dismantling and destroying Indigenous language, culture, and knowledge systems (Fournier and Crey 1997; Simon 1998; Smith 2012). The ensuing present-day education systems at early childhood, compulsory schooling, and tertiary levels are sites that can either drive and support, or divert and subvert, Indigenous peoples’ efforts to sustain and strengthen their respective language, culture, and knowledge systems.

Acutely aware of the problem even if not explicitly articulating it, the writers who have contributed so expansively to this section are from communities that are

affected by a language-culture-education problem or potential. On their own, any of these separate elements of language, culture, and education complicate a theoretical description of life; in pairs, they produce even more inconsistencies and complexities. It will be obvious to many Indigenous readers that language and culture together, for instance, capture so much because they are deeply intertwined. Factor in education – and thus complete the triad – and we see the issues plummet to even greater depths. To attempt to signal the intricacy of this relationship, we can deal with language, culture, and education – to some extent – on their own accounts but always as located within the other elements' worlds. To start with “language,” which is the central theme of most of the authors' concerns it is complex, from an Indigenous perspective, and some of the authors allude to its tension with Western views on language. This nuanced complicating of language immediately opens up a set of expectations that cannot be understood by the conventional Western canon: Indigenous peoples are not simply regenerating language as an *item*, a medium of communication, but as a related, coextensive, vibrant entity that constitutes Indigenous selves, is formative, and in its own right educational (Mika 2017). Language can grasp the world according to the view of the Indigenous group, and it is thus a cultural concern. “Culture,” in turn, cannot be reduced to some notion of a social grouping that is preferred by the West, because it abstractly signposts the existence of all things in the world and how they allow one to express anything (and hence we return to the issue of “language”).

Of course, any attempt to neatly define and then make links between the three is difficult, but let us continue the process by starting with “education” from an Indigenous vantage point. It is multilayered and, like language and culture, deviates from what is expected. The emergence of Indigenous-initiated education firmly centered in language and culture across the globe, whether inside colonially imposed education systems (Hohepa 2014; Warner 2001) or founded on traditional Indigenous education (Cajete 1994), illustrates this Indigenous perspective which is always fuelled with the imagining of what might be and what should be. Indigenous education has close ties with cultural, spiritual, physical, social, and economic well-being, with belonging to land, water, sky, and each other (including the so-called nonhuman or inanimate “other”) and with ethics and justice and must therefore be articulated carefully within the local realities of an Indigenous group. Indigenous education's call to be articulated brings us back to the reality of language as a lived and relational experience and therefore as a cultural concern also. It encompasses language as an instrument of enculturation and socialization – language is called upon to help recreate Indigenous culture just as culture is called upon to help recreate Indigenous language (Hohepa et al. 1992). It becomes clear that the possibilities are endless for describing how the three are related.

Chapters in this section exemplify the density of this triad and include themes engaging with Indigenous language and cultural knowledge in the curriculum, Indigenous pedagogy inside and outside of colonial-developed institutions, policy leverages for language learning opportunities, the place of Indigenous language and

culture in teacher and higher education, and the politics and/or philosophies of language use, translation, and expansion. All the authors engage with conceptual shifts that are necessary for language and culture, which have been impacted negatively by colonization, to survive.

Some authors in this section present concrete interventions that involve the pairing of language and culture, in culturally defined educational environments or institutional classroom settings. In ► [Chap. 21, “Aloha ‘Āina-Placed Ho‘omoana ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i: A Path to Language Revitalization,”](#) Kapā (Katrina-Ann) Oliveira does this by highlighting the importance of concretizing interventions to ensure that Indigenous language education reflects the cultural reality of students and draws on traditional Indigenous education institutions. Acknowledging that language cannot be taught in isolation from culture and arguing that Indigenous language learning and teaching should not be confined to “western-style classrooms,” she explores the impact of Hawaiian immersion camps run under the auspices of the University of Hawaii. The camps not only immerse learners in language but also in contexts of “ancestral” practice, grooming them to become leaders within their Indigenous communities and the Indigenous Hawaiian nation.

In ► [Chap. 22, “Materials Development for Indigenous Language Learning and Teaching: Pedagogy, Praxis, and Possibilities,”](#) Candace Galla presents a concrete example aimed at meeting the significant resourcing challenges facing many Indigenous language regeneration enterprises. She discusses the extent to which digital technology can work as an ally to support the development of pedagogically, and culturally, relevant and authentic Indigenous language teaching materials. She also examines how digital resources help to take learning and teaching out of the “western-style classroom” and into family and community settings, normalizing Indigenous languages as part of everyday, as well as global, life.

In ► [Chap. 23, “Still Flourishing: Enacting Indigenous Language Immersion Pedagogies in the Era of US Common Core State Standards,”](#) the focus moves more explicitly to the classroom to examine the impact of the imposition of universalization on Indigenous language immersion schooling in this era of standardization. Mary Hermes and Erin Dyke examine how the so-called progressive common standards and curriculum aimed at the goal of national identity continue to “reinforce the settler state and Indigenous erasure.” Providing concrete examples from Ojibwe language immersion schooling, illustrate how standards attempt to divert and subvert the regeneration agenda in order to (although in their words “never successfully) reproduce students and teachers as colonized subjects.” The chapter exposes the complicated and contradictory challenges that immersion teachers and students have to confront and resist daily as they work to strengthen and grow the immersion schooling movement.

Colonization is a central theme in any discussion of Indigenous language and culture under threat and/or under regeneration. While all chapters acknowledge colonial impacts, a number of authors put colonization to the forefront of their discussions spanning language-culture-education. In ► [Chap. 24, “Listen to the Voices: Informing, Reforming, and Transforming Higher Education for First Nations’ Peoples in Australia,”](#) Jeannie Herbert draws on her lived experience as an Aboriginal woman from the West Kimberley region of Western Australia to reflect on language

and culture within the realities of colonizing institutions of higher education. She proposes that to truly comprehend Indigenous higher education in Australia, one must understand Australian education as a colonial construct. First Nations people's attempts to ground their tertiary education journeys in their own languages and cultures while engaging with Western knowledges and languages can be conceived as simultaneously themed by colonizing/colonized and counter-colonial experience.

Language and culture can also be reconceived within specific educational disciplines or curricula. Roberta and Jodie Hunter raise the possibilities of culturally responsive teaching in mathematics in ► [Chap. 25, "Maintaining a Cultural Identity While Constructing a Mathematical Disposition as a Pāsifika Learner."](#) In their critique of marginalizing practices experienced by Pāsifika students learning mathematics in Aotearoa New Zealand, they also touch on interplaying tensions between Indigenous Pacific identity and the colonial construct of minority immigrant identity in settler societies. They argue that teaching of curriculum can never be "culture-free" and, drawing on voices of Pāsifika students and their teachers, illustrate the potential of pedagogy that is closely linked to students' cultural identities and known worlds.

While also putting colonization to the forefront as a central theme, ► [Chap. 26, "Efforts and Concerns for Indigenous Language Education in Taiwan"](#) signals a shift in focus from Indigenous efforts to colonial government responses and responsibilities. Joy Lin Chen-Feng, Grace Gao I-An, and Debby Lin Pi-I outline the waves of assimilation experienced by Taiwan's Indigenous peoples and then turn to consider Taiwan's colonial government responses to the preservation of Indigenous languages and dialects. While these are described as "top-down projects" in the chapter, international Indigenous movements provided the initial impetus to Taiwan's Indigenous people's activism that brought about legislative change, which in turn leveraged space for concrete language and cultural regeneration efforts. The chapter overviews the language learning opportunities being provided for Indigenous children and youth and resource development, along with growing grassroots activity that has accompanied an increased level of awareness of Indigenous languages.

In ► [Chap. 27, "Sámi Language for All: Transformed Futures Through Mediative Education,"](#) Erika Sarivaara and Piggja Keskitalo continue the assimilation theme with a historical description of its Sámi legacy. The chapter proposes a mediative role for Sámi education in order for language regeneration to counter that legacy of assimilation and its deleterious impact on Sámi peoples. They tease out the problem and potential of "Sámi education" that transverses colonial and national borders crisscrossing Sámi territory(s). The chapter's premise that language regeneration will support the development of "social harmony in a postcolonial situation" is coupled with warnings against problems of essentialism and ethnocentrism, which may not only engender racism against but also within Indigenous peoples.

While ► [Chap. 27, "Sámi Language for All: Transformed Futures Through Mediative Education,"](#) posits a postcolonial future in which regeneration of Sámi languages plays a pivotal role, Mere Skerrett calls for a sovereign future in ► [Chap. 28, "Colonialism, Māori Early Childhood, Language, and the Curriculum."](#) She seeks to unsettle perceptions that the visibility of te reo Māori (the Māori

language) in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system particularly in curricula such as the early childhood document *Te Whāriki*, is an indication of its legitimization and a reflection that colonization is over. She reminds us that imperialism and colonialism are not located in the historical but remain ideologically and politically imbued within education via policy curriculum and pedagogy, even in the sites we identify as Indigenous language schooling. In those sites where children are the priority, there is much to gain and much to lose. The regeneration of *te reo Māori* is more than a resistance to colonial rule, more than a counter to assimilation and injustice, and more than a dimension of decolonization. Mere Skerrett argues that is "the assertion of Māori sovereignty" in "'our place'," providing clear "pathways to liberation and self-determination."

The final three chapters turn to forefront language itself. ► [Chapter 29, "Elaboration and Intellectualization of Te Reo Māori: The Role of Initial Teacher Education"](#) focuses on the necessity of expanding the scope of an Indigenous language in order to disclose the world that is important at the time. In ► [Chaps. 30, "Ka unuhi a me ka ho'okē: A Critique of Translation in a Language Revitalization Context,"](#) and ► [31, "A Term's Irruption and a Possibility for Response: A Māori Glance at "Epistemology"'](#)", the phenomena of language and culture are paired by placing particular emphasis on language as a carrier of tradition and/or colonization.

In ► [Chap. 29, "Elaboration and Intellectualization of Te Reo Māori: The Role of Initial Teacher Education,"](#) Tony Trinick advocates for an acceleration of "language intellectualization" to provide new linguistic resources and to support the ability to operate in deeply cognitive ways in an Indigenous language. This is not only important for language regeneration and language vitality argues that, in particular, this is crucial for preparing teachers to teach (and learn) in Indigenous languages at the high levels of abstraction required in schooling and higher education today. Developing a teaching workforce that can teach effectively through a regenerating Indigenous language presents complex challenges. This chapter examines factors that impact on Indigenous language teacher education programs, illustrating pedagogical and curriculum-related tensions that they face, and discusses implications for language planning for Māori medium initial teacher education.

Laiana Wong and Kekeha Solis address the immediate problem of translation and the sorts of worlds that are transported within translation in ► [Chap. 30, "Ka unuhi a me ka ho'okē: A Critique of Translation in a Language Revitalization Context."](#) In this chapter they explain their refusal to translate a weekly publication written in the Hawaiian language to English. They argue that translation of Indigenous language text works against language regeneration efforts. Translation of an Indigenous minority language to the colonial language of power carries with it implicit messages of dominance and subordination. Given that language expresses and reflects cultural views of the world, translation from Indigenous to non-Indigenous has potential to undermine the Indigenous cultural lens through repackaging the message to reflect dominant cultural understandings inherent to the translated word.

In the final chapter, Carl Mika further explores the nature of language in his examination of how language needs to be paired with the world philosophically. He

examines how the understanding of language, analysis of an utterance or evaluation of a term, encompasses layerings of personal and collective experiences, relationships, histories, and contexts. In doing so he articulates in greater depth the proposition we foreshadowed above: that language is a far from straightforward phenomenon in Indigenous thought and has very little to do with dominant Western views of language.

As a final word of introduction when we sent out the invitation for contributions to this special section, in line with the handbook editors' wishes we deliberately kept these separate concepts of language, culture, and education broad so that contributors could outline, examine, and theorize the concerns and solutions, problems, and potential, from specifically local experiences. Yet what this section also reveals is the possibility for further dialogue on the understandings emerging from the different communities. While language and cultural regeneration emerges as an agenda in common, chapters in this section weave a rich and intricate tapestry of the many and diverse ways Indigenous peoples engage with, challenge, and create "education" to advance this shared agenda.

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