The purpose of this essay is to describe the Kohanga Reo movement in New Zealand, to attempt to determine some aspects of its success and limitations, and to point out its relevance for broader interests in language revitalization in general.

The Kohanga Reo (‘the’ + ‘nest’ + ‘language’, language nest) is an early-childhood language immersion program developed by the Māori community in response to the realization that few children were being raised as speakers of the language. Kohanga Reo aim to provide an environment where children will hear only the Māori language and will therefore grow up speaking Māori. As might be inferred from the word “nest” in the English translation “language nest,” the movement focuses on facilitating language revitalization within the context of the whānau (the Māori concept of family).

From its beginnings in the early 1980s the movement had grown by 1998 to include over 600 Kohanga Reo operating throughout New Zealand. Te Kōhanga Reo has been the spearhead of the language revitalization movement in New Zealand, particularly in shaping new educational options for Kohanga Reo graduates. For example, bilingual classes in mainstream schools and Kura Kaupapa Māori (‘school’ + ‘philosophy’ + ‘Māori’, Māori-philosophy schools) are now well established in response to the demand from parents for continued education through the medium of Māori.

The growth of Te Kōhanga Reo and other education-based revitalization strategies has required the development from scratch of an infrastructure, the training of staff, and the development of resources. This has involved Māori people in a phenomenal organizational effort. There is an ongoing shortage of teaching resources in Māori as well as of qualified teachers who can teach in Māori. Owing to the speed of the program’s development and expansion, to date there has been little qualitative assessment of the achievements and role of Te Kōhanga Reo in the revitalization of the Māori language.

There is a distinct Māori terminology which is used in describing Te Kōhanga Reo and its associated concepts. Many of these words are used in this chapter both to reveal the use of such language by participants and to avoid problems of definition. A glossary is included at the end of the chapter.

The use of these Māori words within the movement serves a number of functions. The main one is to convey concepts for which the Māori word is the most appropriate, there being only a clumsy alternative in English. Other words for which there is a translation, such as tamariki ‘children’, are often used in the English of Kohanga Reo parents to signal support for the Māori language (King 1995) and also to reflect a Māori cultural outlook.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Māori is one of the small group of eastern Polynesian languages in the very large Austronesian family. Migration by Polynesian ancestors across the Pacific over several millennia led to the settlement of New Zealand in about AD 1000. Over the following 1,000 years several mutually intelligible dialects of Māori developed throughout the country (Biggs 1968, 65). Rarotongan and Tahitian are the languages to which Māori is most closely related (Biggs 1994, 96).

Initial contact by Europeans occurred in 1642 with the arrival of Abel Tasman, followed in the late 1700s by several voyages by James Cook. At this time the Māori population is estimated to have been around 100,000 (Rice 1992, 11).
European whalers, sealers, and missionaries began arriving in New Zealand from about 1800 onward, and Māori was the language of trade and exchange of ideas between the two cultures at this time. In particular, the missionaries, working at first in the northern districts, decided that their task would be most effective if they were to teach and preach to Māori in the indigenous language. To facilitate their use of Māori, the missionaries produced an orthography as well as grammars and dictionaries of the Māori language.2

The 20 phonemes of the language (10 consonants and 5 vowels, the vowels having both a short and a long form) were represented in an alphabet by a Professor Lee of Oxford University in 1818, when the Ngāpuhi chiefs Waikato and Hongi Hikai journeyed to England (McRae 1991, 4). This orthographical system has remained virtually unchanged.3

Teaching of reading and writing in Māori at the mission schools reached a peak in the 1830s (Rice 1992, 143–44). It is argued that at this time there were proportionately more Māori literate in Māori than there were English people in England literate in English (Biggs 1968, 73). Many catechisms and religious texts were disseminated throughout the country as Māori lay preachers took their religious message and their literacy skills to the farthest regions of the land.

The effect of this widespread literacy amongst the Māori was the production of a prodigious amount of manuscript material written in the Māori language. Much of this survives to this day in private and public collections in New Zealand and abroad. In addition, government, church, and Māori presses produced newspapers and periodicals.4 This written material, ranging in subject from land issues to mythology and poetry, has wider significance as arguably the largest body of writing which survives from an indigenous colonized people produced within a generation of European contact (Orbell 1995, 19, 21).

With the arrival of English settlers from 1840 onward, a colonial government and infrastructure was established. Initially Māori was still the main language of communication between the newcomers and the Māori, with the government employing licensed interpreters to translate letters and documents for official correspondence with the Māori populace. By 1858 a census recorded a total Māori population of 56,000. Until just before the turn of the century, lack of immunity to Western diseases and warfare further reduced the Māori population to 42,000 (Pool 1977, 237).

The progressive change to English as the main language between the two cultures was formalized in the passing of the 1867 Native Schools Act, which made English the language of literacy in schools. The effect of this change was profound: the Māori language was virtually outlawed in schools, and many Māori schoolchildren over the succeeding generations were punished for speaking the language of their home.5

The effect of this policy and the changing social climate is demonstrated in the language of letters in the Taiaroa collection.6 These 2,084 letters, written by both Māori and government officials, cover the period from 1853 to 1937.7

Figure 11.1 shows an accelerated decrease in the use of Māori language after 1885; by 1905 more letters were being written in English than Māori. This trend was led by government ministers and officials, who increasingly wrote in English toward the end of the century, and the replies from Māori began to follow this official lead. This graph illustrates how, for Māori people, English replaced Māori as the language of officialdom and government—the language of power.

However, Māori was still the language of the home and community, with all the estimated 45,000 Māori in 1900 being speakers of the Māori language (Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo Māori 1995a). By the mid-1970s there were about 70,000 fluent speakers of Māori (Benton 1981, 15), but they constituted only 18–20% of the Māori population and were virtually all aged 50 and over. Moreover, there were only a couple of small rural localities where Māori was still the community language.

The gradual shift from Māori to English as the language of the home was linked in various communities to the two world wars, the 1930s depression, urban drift in the 1960s, and the introduction of television (Benton 1991). Those centers of Māori population closest to larger towns and cities were affected sooner than remote heartlands. However, in general, Māori was still the predominant language in most Māori homes until World War II (Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo Māori 1996, 19).

During this time there were also many Māori parents who believed that a good knowledge of English was essential to their children’s ability to obtain work and status within the now dominant and pervasive Pākehā (New Zealanders of European background) community. As a result, many Māori parents consciously chose not to speak Māori to their children in the home.