

Study on motivations of non-Māori to learn te reo

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A study on the motivations of non-Māori to learn te reo Māori suggests

Pākehā identity is increasingly tied to acquiring a deeper knowledge of, and ability to speak, the indigenous language.

A [research article](#) by Dr. Arianna Berardi-Wiltshire and Dr. María Celina Bortolotto, from the School of Humanities, and senior lecturer Hone Morris, from Te Pūtahi-a-Toi, titled "Motivation as ethical self-formation in learning te reo Māori as a second [language](#)," was published recently in the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*.

Their study focussed on non-Māori staff who undertook a voluntary, 10-week te reo course offered through Massey University. The researchers embarked on the study because they say; "little is known about what drives non-heritage learners of indigenous languages."

"Such an interest in te reo from non-indigenous New Zealanders is in many ways remarkable and prompts the question as why non-Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand might want to pursue the language," they write.

The context for the study is the growing interest in learning te reo across the population, Māori and non-Māori—a trend reinforced by strong support and engagement for campaigns such as the recent Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori. It aims to celebrate, promote and encourage greater use of te reo across numerous contexts—home, school, work, hospitality, health, public transport and in the media. Te Reo Māori was made an official language of New Zealand in 1987 and New Zealand Sign Language in 2006.

The researchers explored the topic within the framework of 'ethical self-formation' through which learners shape aspects of their selves to "develop, design and live a life they consider meaningful based on their ethical and esthetic convictions."

Te reo enhances Pākehā connections to Māori world

Participants told the researchers that learning te reo was partially linked to their [professional lives](#)—for instance, some felt they would be better placed to support and encourage Māori students to succeed at university by developing their te reo skills and knowledge. Others said it was important in terms of aligning with the university's Te Tiriti-led goal and principles.

A [mental health](#) academic and clinician who took part in the study said she was alerted to the necessity of being familiar with te reo and the related tikanga (customs and traditional values) to be able to help Māori clients, and to fulfill the ethical dimension of her professional role by creating a 'culturally-safe' practice.

However, for most participants their interest extended beyond the professional sphere to encompass social, cultural and emotional aspects of their lives—often to fulfill a long-standing desire to embrace te reo. Another participant linked her desire to learn te reo to growing up in a predominantly Pākehā farming community imbued with cultural values which she traced back to the local Māori population.

"Growing up in that sort of collective farming community I actually feel like I have a spiritual connection to my mountain and to my river and to my land, so I feel like a white Māori. A lot of those beliefs and values are just the same and I feel like I'm missing a big part of it because I don't understand the language," she told researchers.

Another acknowledged the current nation-wide shift towards a "more Māori New Zealand," while new migrants viewed a knowledge of te reo as; "inextricably linked to one's legal status as a New Zealand citizen."

One participant explained his motivation as "the result of his many years of service in the New Zealand Army, where his interest in the language grew while in close contact with Māori soldiers, a process facilitated by

the fact that 'Māori culture is an integral part of the New Zealand Army.'"

While the authors acknowledge the sample size of 10 is small, they say it offers unique insights on an under-researched area—insights that may prove valuable well beyond the shores of Aotearoa for nations also seeking to revitalize indigenous languages. They say the te reo Māori language revitalisation experience in Aotearoa/New Zealand is groundbreaking and an inspiration to others on a similar journey, including in Brazil and North America.

More information: Arianna Berardi-Wiltshire et al. Motivation as ethical self-formation in learning te reo Māori as a second language, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/01434632.2020.1804573](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1804573)

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