

# FROM A LANGUAGE LEARNER'S DIARY

*In February and March of last year, Scott Thornbury, of IH Barcelona, was in his native New Zealand running a Diploma course, and took time off to attend a weekly Maori class. These are extracts from the diary he kept.*

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## Lesson 1

The usual apprehension as when any new grouping of people are about to meet - like a party - fear of arriving too early and having to make conversation with a total unknown, who you may be stuck with for the rest of the evening. As it happens, P. and I time it quite well; neither first nor last to arrive. Room very small for number of people (15) and quite a lot of initial kerfuffle with chairs. We sit round a table, and with no room to move. I wonder (over-optimistically, as it happens) how the teacher will manage group work.

Teacher is incredibly young but seems relaxed. Then she introduces herself - Juliet - and tells us that she hasn't actually done a course before, has only substituted for other teacher's absences. I admire her candour but am cross and disappointed: great start. This is not the way to instill confidence! At least she is Maori, although not a born Maori-speaker (is anyone?)

We introduce ourselves and our reasons for wanting to learn Maori. A range of types, ages and motives. Two of the older women did a course last year, but got lost. There's a doctor who needs some Maori in his work, and a young policeman who I assume has been sent along in the name of interracial relations - these are the only two who seem to have an instrumental reason for being here. Then there is Ben, a Maori himself, and a bone-carver, who knew a bit of Maori when he was a kid but 'let it go', and his daughter, Tirini. Integrative motivation, definitely. The rest of us, without so much as saying it, subscribe to a 'feel-good' factor - a mixture of curiosity and guilt has impelled us, and now we hope to feel a bit better about it. People are impressed that P., the only non-NZer and a temporary visitor, should be bothered.

No book - but well prepared handout which includes all the lesson content. Once formalities are over, lesson begins with a *karakia* or prayer, beamed up on OHP. Interesting. Don't know what it means: perhaps "If we don't understand, God help us". Pronunciation practice of tricky sounds

follows. We sort of drill them, by repeating the sounds, although there is no obvious cue to do this from her. She laughs and blushes when people are wrong, as though it were her mistake, and makes no attempt to correct them. In fact, she says "Good". We do some work on greetings, reading from the handout. This is obviously familiar territory to most, and people take opportunity to show off by asking, "Can you say...?" etc. Teacher seems very happy to be distracted, and we don't get to anywhere near the end of the material in the handout. We finish with a song - again, words on OHP, no translation, but most seem familiar with it. We stand up to sing along - I feel a bit self-conscious singing uncomprehendingly in such a confined space with total strangers.

## Lesson 2

We start with the prayer. This time Jay (who I have discovered is an ESL teacher) solicits a translation by asking, politely, if 'te aroha' means *love*. It does. The prayer translates as: 'Oh Lord/ Give to us/ The strength, the knowledge and the love/For everything/ Amen'. Nice way to begin a lesson.

Review of last lesson - she has us practise the greetings with our neighbour, taking turns, going round the class pair by pair. This way I guess she can control and check but it would be nice to go into closed pairs.

Into the lesson proper, neatly presented on a handout which she talks us through: 'What's your name? what's his name' etc. Immediately run into overload trying to grapple with complicated possessive pronoun system, kinship terms, and unfamiliar word order. Juggling three balls at once - drop many. She has us asking each other in threes - 'What's your name?, her name? her father's name?' etc, but again only lets one group speak at a time. Lot of laughter when Ben asks Tirini "What's your father's name?" Note importance of laughter as a release: what in real life might just raise a smile, in class is hugely funny. Finally, Jay suggests we continue in 'closed threes' and Juliet seems to realise that it makes sense: she seems to be learning to teach at

the same time as we are learning the language: a shared voyage of discovery! Her lack of assertiveness is in fact a blessing as it allows us to take some initiative.

Different personalities starting to emerge - policeman and his girlfriend form a tight pair, supporting each other but not very friendly to anyone else. Nora (older woman) happy to make a fool of herself, fluffing her lines and having a good laugh... End with song.

### Lesson 3

Prayer. Revision of last lesson. Numbers 1 - 20 - we were meant to study these and some obviously have (P. and I spent all week chanting them). She sets up a bingo activity to do in pairs - this is the first indication of a consciously applied activity type. I'm surprised how well it works and how much I like doing it - I've never done this in class before (as a teacher) but will definitely take it on board.

More personal information language. Then it becomes clear that this 'I come from... My father's name is ... My mother's name is...' etc is part of a ritual greeting routine called a *mihī*, used, for example, during the welcoming ceremony on the marae. This is a brilliant way of contextualising personal information, and we all set about writing and rehearsing our own *mihis* with a veneer. We choose our own mountain and river, but are challenged to come up with a *waka* - the canoe that first brought us to NZ. Perhaps Air NewZealand flight 197? We are to rehearse our *mihis* for homework and to 'perform' them in the next class.

Song - we are now more emboldened to ask for translation and she is happy to accede.

### Lesson 4

Juliet is late to class - her flat was broken into. There is genuine consternation - starting to realise how much we like her. Also first absence today - Peter the doctor is not here. Is this the beginning of the end for him? There are two counterweighted dynamics - the inner group bonding (we talk now before lesson and on the way down in the lift) - while the same time there is a fraying of the outer circle as people break away.

We perform our *mihī* - I offer to go first since no one else does, and manage quite well, with only one or two stumbles. I am really chuffed, but

wonder if I would be able to 'turn it on' on the marae - i.e. in 'real' life. I have the appearance, in a classroom, of being a good language learner, but know from experience that this does not transfer well away from the nest (Maori immersion schools are called language *nests*, incidentally). I am (in technical terms) an active-studial type learner (as opposed to active- experiential, for example): the classroom provides a secure environment that is relatively risk-free. Outside in the real world my ego is too impermeable - 100% second-language-proofed.

### Lesson 5

Prayer. Review. Input. Song: there is something very satisfying about this predictable structure - a sort of rhythm is set in motion from the outset. I would criticise these lessons, if I were assessing them, as lacking pace and a sense of urgency (among lots of other things). But, looking around the class, I see no indication of boredom - in fact the pace seems well- judged given both the learning styles, motivations, time of day, and general ambience of this class. There doesn't seem to be a great deal of urgency about learning to speak Maori, and people are happy to stop everything to discuss some quirk of the language - why a monkey should be called a 'makimaki' or whether it is right that women should be not allowed to dance the *haka*. Maybe that's why Peter dropped out, since his is an instrumental rather than vaguely integrative motivation.

### Lesson 6

Because of some administrative reason we are in a different room today, with much more space - amazing the effect it has - feeling of novelty and emancipation.

Pairs practice of prepositions - where is the chair? etc. Even in this new room it's very difficult to come up with many examples - if only we had a wall chart or two to work from. I now always try and engineer myself to sit next to Jay, because she knows how to make the best use of pairwork time, being a teacher herself, I suppose. Other students just stop when they've done their bit - following the script but not departing from it to play with the language. (Of course, I've noticed this in my own classes). Instead, Jay and I manage to recycle the recently studied vocab of parts of the body, and combine it with prepositions to ask questions like 'where is my mouth?' and 'where is your knee?' It makes perfect sense to us!

## Lesson 7

Peter is back! But the class is split between the quick and the dead. Poor old Nora - she's finding it all uphill (except the songs - it turns out she was a primary school teacher and taught these songs herself). P. and I are among the quick - but we don't let on that we spent all last weekend practising as we drove to Okarito and back - asking each other inane questions like 'what colour is that sheep?' as we drive along. (I even made my first Maori joke: "What colour is the sheep?" Answer: Ma (white). "What does the sheep say?" Answer: Maaaa). But this simply supports my conviction that you can't learn a language in the classroom, at least not at the rate of two hours a week - the classroom is really a pit stop where you check in for a change of oil before heading off again to find any excuse to use it. Don't lose it, use it.

We have also been trying out Paul Nation's word card technique (Maori word on one side, translation on the other - test yourself in both directions - L2-L1, L1-L2 - test each other, keep shuffling them). As Nation says, it doesn't seem to matter whether the words are semantically linked or not - in fact the more random the better, as this really tests your power and speed of recall more than if you are already situated in a particular lexical area, i.e. it's much more life-like to have to recall numbers out of order, and more life-like still to recall a number in the context of talking about sheep.

## Lesson 8

As much as I am reconciled to Juliet's method (or lack of it) I am frustrated by the nit-pickiness of the content of the lessons - constantly grappling with niceties of grammar (the pronoun system for example) which reminds me of IQ test rubrics: If 'Ko wai tau tama' means 'Who is your son?' and 'Ko wai ona matua' means 'Who are his parents?', how would you say 'Who are their children?' etc. It does seem that, in real time, there is no way that the complex decisions you have to work through (is it my, yours, his? is it singular, plural or dual? is it a big thing or a small thing?) could be operationalised in time. But nor does practice seem to help automatise fluid production if you don't already know it. The alternative - memorising formulaic chunks - well that's fine for the mihi expressions, which are formulaic almost by definition - you learn it by heart - but there are just too many chunks - my little sister, your elder brother, his two cousins etc. (I remember some of

the formulae by making them sound like something in English or Spanish. So 'kei te pehea koe?' (How are you?) starts off like 'Que te parece?' and the answer - 'kei te pai' sounds like Katie Pie.)

I wonder if a lexical approach would work here. I am curious because of the description Murray gave me of *his* Maori teacher: "We just do masses of words - around a theme, for example, family, or food etc. We have to learn these before the next lesson. Then we come back and have a conversation - about family, food etc, and we use the words. The teacher feeds in the grammar that we need to stick the words together". Murray thinks the technique works and wonders what I - a language teacher - think of it. Pure Michael Lewis is all I can say. I certainly feel that all this possessive pronoun business is a waste of time - if we were ever to use Maori in real life contexts, the context itself would clarify the reference. What I would prefer would be a canter through the grammar, but with masses of vocab to get going with. Community Language Learning, I am convinced, would get us there quicker.

## Lesson 9

Our last lesson! It's not the end of the course (one more lesson after this) but P. and I are going back to Spain. (Nora is amazed: "What, you both live in Spain, what a coincidence!"). I am genuinely sorry that it is over. I feel real warmth to the group, and attribute it mainly to Juliet, her charm, warmth, enthusiasm, and principally her pride in the language and what it stands for. It hasn't really mattered that she is totally unformed as a teacher - if anything, it has endeared us to her more than if she were a technical whizz. And it's not really the language we have been learning, but something about a people, and also something about ourselves, as pakeha in a country that is awkwardly coming to terms with its ethnicity. All the more reason why I regret having to miss the class excursion to the marae - I'll never be able to perform my mihi in real operating conditions! But I did use some Maori outside of class: I went to visit Ben in his shop to buy a bone pendant for my brother. "Kei te pehea koe?" I asked, self-consciously. "Kei te pai!" That was the long and the short of it, but it was something. And worth all that slog through the pronoun system 🍷