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The lecturer doesn't have a rewind button — addressing the listening difficulties of mainstream L2 students at a New Zealand university

ABSTRACT

This article details an attempt to produce tapes of academic lectures to enable mainstream L2 students to improve their listening skills. Very little material for second language speakers is developed in New Zealand, and almost all material available to improve listening skills is produced in Australia, Britain or America. Students are not being exposed to the kind of English they hear in most lectures in this institution. The project was an attempt to meet the need for material aimed at the particular needs of L2 students studying in New Zealand. However, student feedback indicated that even provision of schema and guiding questions was not sufficient to overcome the difficulties they experienced with the tapes. The difficulties involved in using authentic material and providing adequate schema are discussed. Research indicates that videos of short introductory lectures would probably better meet the needs of L2 students who wish to develop their comprehension of academic lectures.

Key words: listening difficulties; accompanying material; schemata; worksheets; tapes

Introduction

The last few years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of L2 students enrolled at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Although these students have ostensibly demonstrated their ability to cope with the demands that the courses will place on their linguistic abilities – either by passing international or internally-assessed language tests or by attending New Zealand schools – many are not equipped to cope with Academic English. Beasley (1989) notes that although there are considerable differences in the educational and language backgrounds of these students, they are in the main from non-Western cultural traditions and often display a number of common language and learning problems in adjusting to the demands of studying in English at tertiary level. Dong (1999) points out that “students from different educational and cultural systems often bring with them a whole set of expectations ...” while Zou (1998) refers to

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the enormous difficulties L2 students face in overcoming the lack of appropriate linguistic and cultural knowledge so essential for meaningful interaction.

Rationale behind the development of the tapes and accompanying material

One of the common problems faced by students is an inability to follow what is being said in the classroom. Oxford (1993: 205) says that listening is perhaps "the most fundamental learning skill". Brett (1997) notes that many language learners experience and report difficulty in mastering this skill. Young (1994: 159) speaks of the difficulty L2 students experience "in processing academic discourse". This inability to follow academic discourse is likely to have serious consequences for the students. Flowerdew (1994) points out that it is widely recognized that one of the most important parts of university study is the lecture. Benson (1994) describes listening to lectures as "a major part of the culture of learning". The acquisition of academic listening skills is then essential if a student is to succeed at tertiary level. Despite this recognition there has, however, been relatively little research in this specific area (Flowerdew, 1994).

Goh (2000) conducted a study in which she investigated the learning difficulties of a group of tertiary level students from the People's Republic of China. At the time of her study they were learning English in preparation for undergraduate studies. Goh studied the diaries kept by 40 students in which they described the problems they experienced in trying to understand spoken English. Flowerdew (1994) also identified listening difficulties experienced by L2 students in an academic environment.

Many of the issues that Flowerdew's and Goh's students raised were also identified by L2 students who reported to the Student Learning Centre at AUT for assistance. Students indicated that they:

- were unable to remember certain words and phrases they had just heard
- did not recognise a word when it was spoken although they were able to identify the same word in print
- could not get the full meaning of the lecture although they understood individual words
- tended to miss parts of the lecture because they were trying to make sense of earlier text
- could not distinguish between what was relevant and what was not

Obviously much of students' misunderstanding or lack of understanding was because they did not possess the relevant schemata, or while they might be aware of the literal meaning of a word were not aware of its colloquial or figurative meaning in certain contexts. However, in some cases students could simply not hear what was being said. Flowerdew (1994) argues that often lecturers accept that L2 students will not experience any real difficulties with the purely linguistic processing of the material, but assume that the only real problems will lie in assimilating the knowledge imparted. The general feeling is that if students are exposed to enough English they will soon be able to follow the spoken word. This idea has been challenged on a number of fronts. Ellis (1993) refers to Skuttnab-Kangas who describes the type of educational situation these students are experiencing as submersion where learners are instructed through the medium of a foreign majority language where some (often a majority) of the students are native speakers of the language. Ellis notes that submersion is associated with low academic performance.

The implementation of the project at the Auckland University of Technology

At the same time this project was initiated a self access learning centre was opened in the library on the AUT campus. This centre provides mainstream L2 students with access to self study

material designed to address their language needs. This material includes videos, tapes and software. The only difficulty with the material is that very little of it is from New Zealand. There is very little material for second language speakers developed in New Zealand, and almost all material in the centre is produced in Australia, Britain or America. Students are not being exposed to the kind of English they hear in most lectures in this institution. Lecturers at AUT pride themselves on the relaxed and friendly atmosphere of the lecture rooms, and in keeping with this philosophy the language of the lecture is often informal and colloquial. This is very different from the previous experience of many of the L2 students and the use of colloquial language and the New Zealand accent have been identified as major stumbling blocks for many of them. Another difficulty is that the subject matter of material produced overseas is not particularly relevant to L2 students in New Zealand. The project was an attempt to meet the need for material aimed at the particular needs of L2 students study in this country.

The tapes produced would expose students to the kind of English they were hearing in the lecture room. Benson (1994) maintains that one way to help L2 listeners is by providing them with opportunities for content learning in English. By exposing them in this way to the learning culture they are being introduced to the manner in which knowledge is made available and to how this knowledge can be selected, recorded and integrated with their existing knowledge. It was also argued that tapes could expose students to the classroom experience in a way that would remove the time pressure that L2 students are under in mainstream classes which Flowerdew (1994) speaks of as real-time processing. Giving the students the ability to rewind the lecture would allow them to address two of the issues already mentioned. If they had forgotten any key phrases or words they would be able to listen to the lecture again. Similarly if they found that they had lost the gist of the material they would be able to listen to various parts of the lecture as often as they wished.

In effect the project aimed to give the students some control over the way in which they listened to lectures. Dupuy (1999) speaks of a similar approach when he describes making use of tapes to improve the listening skills of L2 students in ESL classes. Dupuy's students were encouraged to listen as many times as they liked to a tape recordings of proficient speakers. Aust (1998) argues that what L2 students really need is "ample and regular practice...to develop the skill independently".

In order to aid students' perception that the proposed listening practice was meaningful it was necessary to select material that would recommend itself to the students by its relevance and interest. It was also recognised that simply taping the lectures was probably not sufficient to improve the listening skills of the students. By repeating the tapes often enough some students would probably gain an understanding of one specific tape but that did not necessarily mean that the student was developing skills that he/she could transfer to other material. Researchers like Krashen (1981) and Prabhu and Carroll (1980) have long maintained that linguistic skills are best acquired when the learners focus on the message and not on the form. To encourage this focus on the message worksheets were devised. Dudley-Evans (1994) argues that the various generic strategies which L2 students are taught to apply while listening to lectures do offer certain advantages but he maintains that students need to be helped with the specific features of the actual lectures that they attend. Prawatt (1991: 9) points out that this transfer of knowledge is "the Achilles' heel of the thinking skills approach".

The guidance provided for students would be aimed at supplying the necessary schemata and encouraging students to use the listening skills they had practised or had been exposed to in other lectures.

Development of worksheets

Powers (Flowerdew: 1994) surveyed nearly 150 faculty members of universities in the United States to determine the relative importance of lecture listening skills. The following were rated as the nine most important:

- Identifying major themes
- Identifying the relationships among these major themes
- Identifying the topic of the lecture
- Retaining information through note taking
- Retrieving information from notes
- Inferring relationships between information
- Comprehending key vocabulary
- Following the spoken mode of lectures
- Identifying supporting ideas and examples

Making the tapes

Lecturers in departments that had indicated an interest in the pilot project were approached and were asked to identify lectures which served as introductions to various courses of study. Permission was then obtained from the lecturers for the lectures to be taped. The project team then listened to the tape and evaluated its suitability. If a tape was selected then one member of the team would volunteer to develop the worksheet that would accompany the tape. This worksheet was tested, reviewed and edited by the other team members. The worksheet was finalised and the tape and worksheet copied and filed for later testing in the pilot study.

Difficulties encountered with the making of the tapes

A number of difficulties soon presented themselves to the team. These difficulties can be divided into two broad categories:

- The material selected for taping and
- The material accompanying the tapes.

The material selected for taping

Lecturers found it difficult to find suitable material. As has been noted lectures at AUT are informal and interactive. Lecturers felt that they had little material that would lend itself to straightforward lecture style presentation. While recording an interactive lecture with exchanges between students and lecturers might have been beneficial to our target audience, ethical constraints made this approach very difficult, and the advantage of such an interactive approach has been questioned. Mason (1994) quotes an L2 speaker commenting on this interactive approach. The student observed that interruptions and discussions made it difficult for him to follow the gist of the lecture. The obvious solution to the problem of finding suitable material would be to edit, or write the material for taping.

This proposed solution placed the team in a dilemma. The initial reasoning behind the project had placed great emphasis on the use of authentic material. Wiesen (2000) defines authentic texts as texts that appear in their original format and are produced by L1 speakers for L1 speakers. She argues that although authentic texts might not be as interesting as edited or artificial material, learners are more motivated by authentic texts. This argument influenced our decision to use

authentic lectures. However, practical and ethical considerations forced us to revise our approach. The use of material that did not provide L2 students with an opportunity to practise their listening skills could not be justified simply on the grounds that such material was authentic. We needed to place students in a position where they were able to make sense of the text.

The other issue concerned the actual subject of the tapes. Initially it had been planned to tape lectures in disciplines that had a large number of L2 students, or in areas in which L2 students had indicated that they were experiencing difficulties. However, despite an initial indication of interest, lecturers were reluctant to allow the taping of their classes. One staff member withdrew her permission to use the tape of her lecture once she had heard it, saying that she was embarrassed by the quality. It was decided that members of the team, who have expertise in some of these areas, would prepare "lectures" and have the material vetted by other lecturers who were comfortable with the idea. One such tape was directed at L2 students who wished to study early childhood education. In this area an understanding of Maori philosophy and of some key terms is essential. This is often problematic for L2 students. A short introduction of the most common terms and expressions, and a brief introduction to basic Maori educational beliefs were researched and written up by a team member, and reviewed by a lecturer in early childhood education and a lecturer in Maori. The tape was then given to the Maori lecturer to read. The worksheet was designed to add additional information and to assist students in their understanding of the material. (Appendix A)

This was very time consuming and it was decided to use material of a more generic nature as well. For example it was felt that material relating to study skills, assignment writing, academic reading and exam preparation would be of interest to L2 students, although it was recognised that the transference of listening skills to other subject areas was problematic. Of the eight tapes used in the initial trial, two covered exam skills and note taking skills, and six covered material in early childhood education, sociology, accounting, career counselling and communication studies.

The material accompanying the tapes

The development of the worksheets was underpinned by schema theory which asserts that comprehending texts is an interactive process between a listener's background and the text (Anderson and Pearson, 1988). The worksheets were intended to guide the students through the tapes, provide them with the necessary background knowledge to understand the material, and pose a variety of questions that would help them to identify the gist of the lectures. The types of questions set were varied and included flowcharts, tables, the matching of words and phrases, maps, charts and diagrams.

However, what had appeared to be relatively straightforward in the discussion stage proved difficult in practice. As has already been noted, L2 students experience great difficulty simply hearing the words of the lectures because of the tempo of delivery and/or the accent of the speakers (Flowerdew, 1996). It was debated whether questions should be posed that merely required the student to listen carefully to the material. The questions would only require students to rewrite the words he/she had heard. Initially it was argued that this type of exercise did not present students with any real challenge and it was felt that the questions should require them to demonstrate their understanding of the subject matter and the way in which it could be applied in various situations.

After discussion it was decided that the taped material could be exploited on a number of levels. The first level could require students to answer the type of questions that required recall only, while another could require students to integrate the material with their own life experiences

and/or to analyse and evaluate the material. One of the tapes trialed by students presented them with two different worksheets for the same tape – one with straightforward recall questions and the other calling on far more complex skills. One scenario would be to suggest that students do both sets of questions. Answering the easier set would ensure that they had listened carefully enough to make reasoned arguments for the second series of questions.

The Pilot Project

Seventy students enrolled in various English language programmes took part in the pilot project. They were all classified as post intermediate students, most of whom intended to enrol for mainstream courses within the next six months or the next year. All the students were second language speakers of English and the majority (82%) came from China or Korea. The rest were drawn from a number of language groups including Thai, Tamil, Japanese and Arabic. The purpose of the project was briefly outlined to the students in the various classes and those interested were given further information and asked to sign letters of consent, allowing the researchers to use the data. Each of the volunteers selected one of the tapes. The students were asked to complete the worksheets and the questionnaires, and return them within a week.

Students' feedback

Students were given questionnaires (Appendix B) consisting of twelve statements. They *were* asked to respond to the statements indicating their level of agreement. The feedback from the students was then scrutinised and as a result of this scrutiny it was decided that the project needed to be reviewed. The responses to the following four statements were regarded as being of particular importance:

- I would like to listen to more lectures on tape. (1)
- I found the contents of the tape useful. (4)
- The tape helped me to understand what my lecturers are saying. (6)
- It is useful to be able to listen to the tape more than once. (7)

Overall the response to the statements was very positive with approximately 76% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with statement 1; 70% with statement 4 and 82% with statement 7. However, the response to statement 6 was disturbing. 36% of the students mostly disagreed or strongly disagreed with it. As improving students' ability to understand academic lectures was the point of the research, this response indicated that it was necessary to rethink our approach.

The feedback indicated that the students found the idea of the tapes a good one, liked the fact that they could listen to the lectures more than once and approved of the contents, but a significant number did not find that the tapes honed their listening skills. It was obvious that the approach would need to be changed.

Discussion

While it was possible to supply background knowledge to enable students to build up relevant schemata, it was not always possible to provide sufficient clues to enable L2 students to follow lectures without the accompanying body language. As Conium (2001) points out the listening process is enhanced when listeners can see the speakers' faces as they can glean clues about what is said or going to be said. Khuwaileh (1999) observed lectures delivered in English to a group of L2 students. He concluded that the body language of the lecturers played an important role in the

learners' understanding of academic lectures. Students involved in our pilot programme confirmed this impression. One student said simply, "I could not understand much because I could not see the lecturer's gestures."

Gruba (1997: 336) refers to Rubin who defines listening comprehension as "an active process in which listeners select and interpret information which comes from auditory and visual clues in order to express what is going on and what the speakers are trying to say". Conian (2001) notes that video as a medium affords "considerable enhancement" over simple audio alone. He further points out that many L2 speakers have more contact with visual media than with purely audio media and argues that as far as modern L2 students are concerned the use of video cannot be ignored. Video, Conian claims, "lends a degree of authenticity in terms of context, discourse, paralinguistic features and culture which are somewhat lacking in purely audio medium". Kress (2001) argues that students today are used to more pictures and less script – a kind of "quick fix" approach – and they expect education to be entertaining.

The feedback of the students and current research indicate that video tapes of academic lectures would better meet L2 students' need to practise their comprehension skills. Such an approach would allow them to make use of paralinguistic clues and would allow them to observe the lecturer's use of charts, diagrams and other visual aids. Suitable introductory lectures could be filmed, and students could then borrow the tapes to view at their leisure. Accompanying worksheets would then require students to interpret paralinguistic clues as well as audio input.

Initially videos had been considered by the team but were rejected because it was argued that the tapes would force students to concentrate on listening. This compartmentalizing of skills does not appear to be a well thought out approach. If L2 students make sense of what they hear in an academic lecture, how they do so is of relevance only insofar as we wish to show others how to follow their example.

Making videos of lectures will be a more costly exercise and the ethical implications of filming students will need to be carefully considered. However, these difficulties can be overcome and the experience of this project seems to indicate that such material will be more beneficial for L2 students in developing their comprehension of academic lectures. The type of worksheet developed in this project could easily be adapted for use with videos. A set of introductory lectures in a number of disciplines could be used not only to assist the understanding of academic material but could also be used diagnostically to identify those L2 students who might be at risk in tertiary institutions.

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Tape of Early Childhood Education

New Zealand is a bicultural country which embraces the ways of the Pakeha, the white settlers from Europe who arrived here in the 19th century, and the Maori who came to this country a thousand years before the Pakeha. Both these cultures are seen as being of equal importance in New Zealand. Early childhood education is one of the areas where you will encounter the traditional beliefs and cultures of the Maori people.

The Maori believe that the family *whanau* is all important. It is the task of the whole family to protect and cherish its children. When the Maori first arrived in New Zealand they discovered the flax plant as it is known in English and called it *harakeke*. This plant which has very strong fibres, was very important to them. They used it to make their shelters and their clothes, it was woven

into baskets to carry babies and food. Because the Maori had no nails it was used for the building of houses and canoes. It was essential for their well being. It was so important in their lives that this plant became the symbol of the family. The outermost leaves represent the wider family, aunts and uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces. The next set of leaves represent the grandparents, then come the leaves representing the parents, and finally in the centre of the plant protected by all the other leaves is the child.

When the Maori harvest the *harakeke*, the flax, they take the outer leaves first, leaving the leaves in the centre of the plants. This is the natural order of things, Eventually the grandparents will die and the parents will take their place, they in turn will be replaced by the child in the centre. If the centre of the *harakeke* is harvested the plant will die.

The *harakeke* is also used to weave mats *whariki*. These mats are used to decorate houses, to sit on and to work from. The weaving, *raranga*, of these mats has much symbolism for the Maori. The flax must follow the direction or pathway that the weaver decides on. If these pathways are not carefully followed, the weaving will not be strong and decorative and the mat will not fulfil its function. The mat is representative of society and the people are the strands of flax that are woven together. If a person strays from his or her pathway or *ara* he or she will upset the balance of the mat. The weaving will not be strong and beautiful and the mat will not fulfil its function. So too, the Maori believe that we all have our pathways to follow. If we follow them correctly the mat binds us together. We are still separate people just as each strand of flax can be clearly seen, but together like the mat, we form a whole that is stronger than the individual pieces. We form a strong healthy society.

While we are alive we are weaving our relationship with ourselves, with our parents, with our children, with other members of our family, with our friends and with those with whom we work, our work *whanau*. So the *whariki* is a symbol of the *whanau*.

In our *whanau* each of us follows our own pathway or *ara*. This following of the pathway is known as *Te Ara Poutama*; the means “the”; *ara* is “pathway” and *potuma* is “a pattern of steps”. In your worksheet you will see the traditional *Te Ara Poutama* pattern.

This is the symbol of this pathway and is very often seen in Maori designs. The Maori believe that we must all try to climb the steps to achieve our potential but that we must also think about others. It is good to drop back a step or two to help others who are having difficulty climbing.

In the 1980s this co-operation of the Maori society was put to the test. Their language *Te Reo Maori* was under threat. If something was not done it would die out completely. The Maori decided to form *Te Kohanga Reo*. *Kohanga* means “nest”, *reo* means “language”, so the Maori built “language nests” where young children would attend kindergarten before they went to school. Here the Maori language and culture would be fostered. The Maori understood only too well that if the language was lost their culture would also die. So *kaupapa* strategies, were developed to ensure that the language and culture would survive.

Today the people of New Zealand are committed to their bicultural country and the government tries to ensure that the wisdom and beauty of the Maori language and culture is preserved for the coming generations of New Zealanders.

Glossary

Pakeha – is commonly used but it is difficult to define its meaning. From early records it is clear that the term was used in New Zealand before 1815 to mean “white person”. At first a Pakeha was that person who came from England, and settled or worked in New Zealand. With time, Pakeha was the fair-skinned person who was born in New Zealand. Later the term was even more general.

It was applied to all fair-skinned people in New Zealand, no matter who they were of where they came from. By 1985 an important development occurred when King defined Pakeha as meaning non-Maori New Zealanders. There is nothing in the definition referring to colour.

Maori – Until about 1885 the word “Maori” was still used to describe something that was usual or ordinary. The Maori used the word to describe themselves, as opposed to the “different”, European settlers, during the nineteenth century, and the Europeans in turn also used this term. Before the time of the arrival of Europeans, Maori had no name for themselves as a nation, only a number of tribal names. The word refers to the descendants of the country’s first Polynesian immigrants.

Whanau – family

harakeke – flax

whariki – mat made from flax

raranga – weave

Te Ara Poutama – The pathway, step design

tethe ara – pathway

poutama – step design

Te Reo Maori – The Maori language

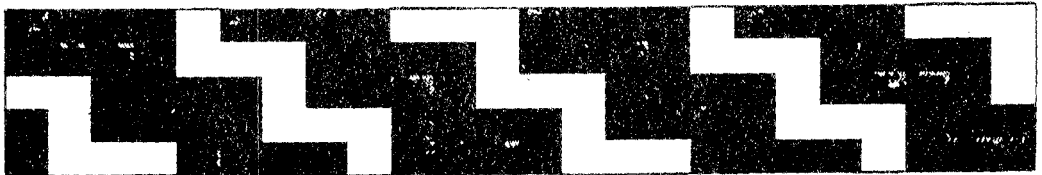
tethe reo – language

Te Kohanga Re – The language nest

tethe kohanga – nest

reo – language

kaupapa – strategies

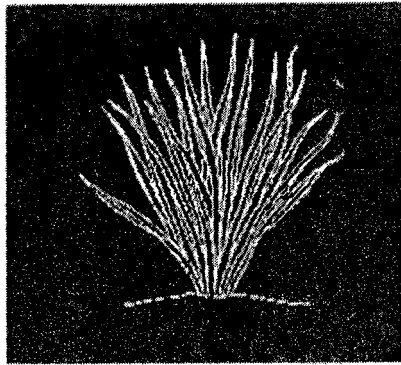


Appendix A

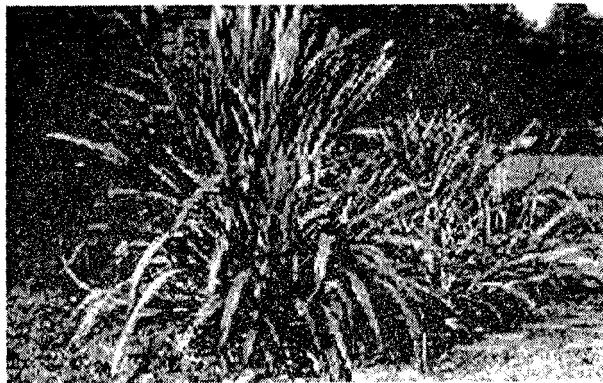
The answers which would be supplied to the students are given in italics.

Tape 6 Worksheet

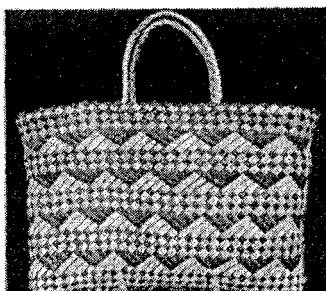
1. What do we mean when we say that New Zealand is a bicultural country?
There are two main cultures in New Zealand – that of the Maori and the Pakeha or white settlers.
2. This is a picture of the flax *harakeke* plant found in New Zealand. Next to it is a drawing of the plant. Draw the plant yourself and label the leaves showing how the Maori used it to represent the family or *whanau*.



The outer leaves of the plant are the extended family – the aunts and uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces. The next leaves are the grandparents, then the leaves that represent the parents and finally in the centre the child.

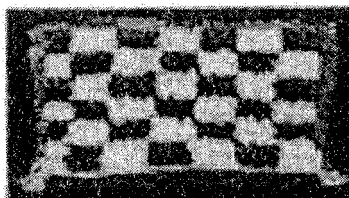


3. Why was the plant so important to them? The pictures below will give you a few clues but remember there were many uses for the plant.



The flax was used to make clothes and shelters. It was used to make baskets to put food in and also to carry babies. Because the Maori did not have nails it was used in the building of houses and canoes.

4. How did the Maori harvest the *harakeke* or flax plant? Why did they do it in this way?



The outer leaves are cut first leaving the inner leaves. This is the natural way of life as the grandparents die to make way for the parents and finally the child. If the centre of the plant is cut out the plant will die.

5. The *harakeke* is used to weave mats known as *wharihi*. The weaving *raranga* of these mats has great symbolism for the Maori people, as they see the mats as representing society. Why is it important that the flax follows the direction that the weaver wants it to take in the weaving? *If this does not happen the weaving will not be strong and beautiful and the mat will not be a good one.*
6. What is the Maori word for pathway? *Ara*.
7. What do the Maori call the step pattern that you see at the top of the page? *Te Ara Poutama*
8. Why do the Maori regard this design as being important?
Maori believe that we must all try to climb the steps to achieve our potential but we must also think about others. We must be prepared to drop back to help others who are having trouble climbing.
9. What challenge did the Maori people face in the 1980s? What did they do to meet this challenge?
The Maori language Te Reo Maori was in danger of dying out. They built language nests where young children would attend kindergarten before they went to school. Here the Maori language and culture would be developed.
10. Explain how the name Maori came about.
Maori meant "usual" or "ordinary". The Maori were ordinary and it was the white settlers who were different.
11. What does the word Pakeha mean/ Are you a Pakeha?
Originally meant white person. Now the term means all people who are non- Maori New Zealanders. There is nothing in the definition referring to colour.

12. Match the Maori word with the English definition in the table below.

1 whanau	a. strategies 8 kaupapa
2 harakeke	b. step design 9 poutama
3 te	c. the 3 te
4 reo	d. flax 2 harakeke
5 kohanga	e. nest 5 kohanga
6 Pakeha	f. non Maori 6 Pakeha
7 kohanga	g. nest 7 kohanga
8 kaupapa	h. family 1 whanau
9 poutama	i. language 4 reo
10 whariki	j. mat made from flax 10 whariki

Questionnaires

Please do **not** give your name or student number.

Date

Age

Sex

Ethnicity

Course of study e.g. Certificate in Business (CIB) 3; BA Soc Sc

Number of tape used e.g. 2B

What languages do you speak?

Please rate these statements on a scale of 1–5 where

1 = I agree completely with the statement

2 = I mostly agree with the statement

3 = I partly agree with the statement

4 = I mostly disagree with the statement

5 = I disagree completely with the statement

I think this is a good way to practise listening skills.

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I would like to listen to more lectures on tape

I think it is a good idea to listen to the tapes at home.

I would like to listen to tapes on general topics such as cooking, gardening, care of pets as well.

I found the content of the tape useful.

I found the content of the tape interesting.

The tape helps me to understand what my lecturers are saying.

It is useful to be able to listen to the tape more than once.

I did not have any problems hearing the lecturer's voice.

The lecturer spoke too fast.

I found the lecturer's accent difficult to understand.

I found the vocabulary difficult to understand.

I did not have enough background knowledge to understand the tape.

What did you like most about the tape?

Other comments or suggestions

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