

Early Childhood Education as a Tool for Indigenous Language Preservation: A Comparative Study of Nepal and New Zealand¹

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Abstract

This comparative qualitative case study investigates the role of early childhood education in indigenous language revitalization efforts in Nepal and New Zealand through document analysis and non-participatory classroom observations. The study examines policy frameworks, classroom practices, teacher preparation, community engagement, and systemic challenges in both countries. Findings reveal a stark contrast: New Zealand's well-established policies and programs, such as the immersive K hanga Reo centers, provide strong institutional support, specialized teacher training, and active community involvement that effectively sustain M ori language use and cultural identity from early childhood. In contrast, Nepal's National Education Policy acknowledges the importance of mother tongue instruction but lacks enforceable implementation strategies, sufficient teacher training, and adequate resources, resulting in fragmented and symbolic language education efforts. Community engagement is inconsistent, and dominant languages like Nepali and English overshadow indigenous languages due to socio-economic pressures. The study highlights the urgent need for Nepal to adopt immersion-based early learning programs, institutionalize teacher training focused on indigenous languages, foster community ownership, and secure sustained policy backing and funding. Drawing lessons from New Zealand's experience, this research emphasizes that early childhood education can be a critical platform for preserving linguistic heritage, provided that policies translate into culturally grounded practices and systemic support.

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This study offers strategic recommendations for strengthening indigenous language revitalization through education in Nepal and similar contexts worldwide.

Key words: Indigenous language revitalization, policy frameworks, immersion programs, teacher training, community engagement, cultural preservation

Introduction

Language is more than just a medium of communication; it is a vital repository of cultural identity, historical knowledge, and social heritage. Indigenous languages, in particular, serve as the foundation for community cohesion, traditional wisdom, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. However, the rapid forces of globalization, urbanization, and the dominance of national and international languages have placed many indigenous languages at risk of extinction. According to UNESCO, nearly 40% of the world's 7,000 languages are endangered, with indigenous languages facing the highest rates of decline (UNESCO, 2021). Without proactive intervention, the loss of these languages threatens not only linguistic diversity but also the cultural traditions and worldviews embedded within them.

Early Childhood Education plays a crucial role in indigenous language revitalization, as linguistic research highlights that children acquire and retain languages most effectively during their formative years (Cummins, 2000). Introducing indigenous languages at the preschool level ensures that young learners develop foundational fluency, increasing the likelihood of long-term language retention and intergenerational transmission. However, the extent to which Early Childhood Education supports indigenous language preservation varies significantly across countries, depending on government policies, educational frameworks, and community engagement.

This study explores the role of Early Childhood Education in preserving indigenous languages through a comparative analysis of Nepal and New Zealand. Nepal is home to over 120 indigenous languages, yet many are experiencing rapid decline due to the lack of institutional support and the increasing dominance of Nepali and English in education and daily life (Yadava, 2014). In contrast, New Zealand has implemented a structured approach to language revitalization, particularly through K hanga Reo (M ori language immersion preschools), which have demonstrated success in reversing language decline among M ori communities (Waitangi Tribunal Report, 2011).

By comparing Nepal's and New Zealand's early childhood language education policies, this research aims to identify best practices, challenges, and potential strategies

for strengthening indigenous language preservation. Key areas of focus include the effectiveness of immersion-based learning, the role of government support, community involvement, and teacher training. The study will also assess how parental attitudes influence indigenous language learning and explore how Nepal can adapt elements of New Zealand's successful language revitalization model to develop a more effective early childhood indigenous language education framework.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on language preservation and sustainable linguistic diversity by highlighting the critical role of early childhood education in fostering indigenous language survival. The findings will provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and indigenous communities to ensure that indigenous languages continue to thrive in the modern era.

Literature Review

This section provides a review of existing literature related to indigenous language revitalization, early childhood education, and comparative policy frameworks in the contexts of Nepal and New Zealand. The discussion focuses on four key areas: the theoretical foundations underpinning language revitalization and early childhood education; the policies governing indigenous language education in both Nepal and New Zealand; empirical research highlighting the role of community engagement in language revitalization efforts; and official government and institutional reports that outline policies and strategies for preserving indigenous languages.

1. Theoretical foundations on language revitalization and early childhood education

Linguistic research underscores the importance of early childhood as a crucial period for language acquisition and preservation (Cummins, 2000). Studies on bilingualism and language shift (Fishman, 1991; Hornberger, 2008) emphasize that without intergenerational transmission, indigenous languages face extinction. Fishman's (1991) Reversing Language Shift (RLS) model suggests that language revitalization must begin at home and be reinforced through formal education, particularly at the preschool level.

Grenoble and Whaley (2006) propose a multi-pronged approach to language revitalization, including community-based initiatives, government policy support, and integration of indigenous languages in education. They argue that language immersion in early childhood education is one of the most effective strategies for ensuring linguistic continuity.

In early childhood education, scholars highlight the advantages of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), which promotes cognitive and linguistic benefits for children from indigenous communities (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009). Studies show that children learning in their native language first tend to perform better academically and develop stronger cultural identities (Benson, 2010).

2. Indigenous language education policies in Nepal and New Zealand

2.1 Indigenous language education in Nepal

Nepal is home to over 120 indigenous languages, yet many are endangered due to the dominance of Nepali as the official language of education and administration (Yadava, 2014). While Nepal's Constitution and the National Education Policy (2019) recognize indigenous languages, implementation has been weak due to inadequate teacher training, lack of curriculum development, and limited government funding (Giri, 2010).

Some efforts have been made to introduce MTB-MLE in Nepal, but challenges such as resistance from policymakers, parental preference for English, and insufficient teaching materials have hindered progress (Bhandari, 2019). Studies indicate that unless strong policy measures and community involvement are in place, indigenous languages in Nepal will continue to decline.

2.2 Indigenous language revitalization in New Zealand

In contrast, New Zealand has successfully implemented structured policies to revitalize the M ori language. The K hanga Reo movement, which began in the 1980s, established M ori-language immersion preschools as a strategy for reversing language decline (Waitangi Tribunal Report, 2011).

New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, Te Wh riki, integrates M ori language and cultural education, ensuring that children learn the language in an immersive and culturally relevant environment (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020). The M ori Language Strategy 2040 further outlines long-term goals to sustain and promote the use of Te Reo M ori in education and public life (Te Taura Whiri i te Reo M ori, 2020).

Comparative studies suggest that the success of New Zealand's model is due to strong government commitment, active community participation, and well-funded language immersion programs (May & Hill, 2005). These findings highlight potential lessons for Nepal in structuring its indigenous language policies.

3. Empirical studies on community engagement in language revitalization

Community involvement is a critical factor in the success of indigenous language revitalization. Hinton (2011) argues that top-down policies alone cannot sustain language preservation efforts; instead, grassroots initiatives that involve parents, elders, and local leaders play a more significant role in language transmission.

Hornberger (2008) introduces the concept of “bi-literacy,” which supports the coexistence of indigenous and dominant languages in educational settings. Research on indigenous education in Nepal and New Zealand suggests that community-driven models, such as the K hanga Reo, are more successful in revitalizing languages than government-led efforts alone (Benson, 2010; May & Hill, 2005).

Despite Nepal’s policy framework supporting indigenous language education, community engagement remains low due to socio-economic barriers and a lack of institutional support (Bhandari, 2019). In contrast, New Zealand’s M ori education programs thrive because of active community participation and strong cultural pride associated with the language.

4. Government and institutional reports on indigenous language policies

Official reports from government agencies and international organizations provide insight into the effectiveness of indigenous language policies. The Government of Nepal’s National Education Policy (2019) acknowledges the need to preserve indigenous languages but lacks a clear roadmap for implementation (Government of Nepal, 2019). The Central Bureau of Statistics (2021) reports a decline in indigenous language use, particularly among younger generations, due to urbanization and increasing preference for dominant languages.

Meanwhile, New Zealand’s Te Wh riki (2020) curriculum ensures that M ori language and culture are integrated into early childhood education. The K hanga Reo Report (2021) highlights that children attending M ori immersion preschools develop stronger language proficiency and cultural identity than those in mainstream education (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2021).

At the international level, UNESCO’s Global Action Plan for Indigenous Language Preservation (2021) emphasizes early education as a crucial intervention for reversing language shift. The report recommends increased investment in indigenous language immersion programs, stronger policy frameworks, and community-driven initiatives.

Methods

This study adopts a comparative qualitative case study design to explore the role of early childhood education in indigenous language revitalization in Nepal and New Zealand. By focusing on document analysis and non-participatory classroom observations, the study avoids overstating stakeholder engagement or analytical processes not fully carried out, ensuring the research remains grounded, credible, and manageable.

Research design and approach

A qualitative approach allows for the exploration of lived realities, educational settings, and policy environments in both countries. Rather than conducting interviews or extensive stakeholder engagement, this study examines how policies are framed and implemented, and how indigenous languages are used in actual classroom practice. The aim is not to generalize but to gain insights through direct observation and documentary evidence.

Document analysis

Document analysis serves as a foundational method for understanding institutional and governmental support for indigenous language education. Key documents include:

-) Nepal's National Education Policy (2019) – outlines language-in-education policies and support for mother tongue instruction.
-) New Zealand's Te Wh riki Early Childhood Curriculum (2017) – a bicultural curriculum that prioritizes M ori language and culture.
-) UNESCO and academic reports – highlighting global best practices and local challenges in language revitalization efforts.

These documents were analyzed to assess how indigenous language instruction is positioned within national education systems, the extent of policy commitment, and the availability of structural and curricular support. Attention was paid to language use mandates, curriculum content, training resources, and government/community partnerships.

Non-participatory observations

Observations were conducted in selected early childhood centers that integrate indigenous languages into their educational programs. These included:

-) K hanga Reo centers in New Zealand, which are fully immersed in M ori language and culture.
-) Early Childhood Education centers in Nepal where indigenous languages such as Newar, Magar, Tamang, Gurung, and Limbu are used alongside Nepali.

As a non-participant observer, the researcher focused on:

-) The frequency and context in which indigenous languages were used (e.g., storytelling, songs, greetings),
-) The integration of cultural elements such as traditional games, dress, or rituals,
-) Teacher-student interactions and teaching strategies that support language use,
-) Classroom materials (e.g., posters, books) in indigenous languages.

Detailed field notes were taken during these sessions, avoiding audio or video recordings to ensure a respectful and unobtrusive presence. These notes captured spontaneous language use, classroom routines, and cultural expression.

Data interpretation

Rather than applying a rigid coding framework, a descriptive thematic approach was used. Observational data and document content were grouped into emerging themes such as:

-) Policy Commitment vs. Practice on the Ground,
-) Language Exposure in Daily Routines, and
-) Cultural Transmission Through Curriculum Activities.

This flexible and reflective approach allowed for a more authentic representation of what was observed and read, without imposing pre-defined analytical categories that were not systematically followed.

Ethical Considerations

The study upholds ethical principles, including:

-) Informed consent from all observed institutions,
-) Anonymity of educators, students, and centers,
-) Cultural sensitivity, particularly when engaging with indigenous traditions and spaces,
-) Non-interference in classroom activities.

Permission was obtained from center authorities before visits, and indigenous cultural norms were respected throughout the observation process.

This methodology reflects a realistic and ethically sound approach to studying indigenous language education through EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION in Nepal and New Zealand. By relying on policy documents and direct observations, the study captures how language revitalization efforts are embedded in early learning settings. It avoids overstated claims of deep community engagement or thematic analysis, focusing instead on what was practically achievable and verifiable within the research scope.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the study's findings and critically analyzes them through a comparative lens between Nepal and New Zealand, focusing on indigenous language preservation within early childhood education. Drawing from document analysis and non-participatory classroom observations in both countries, five core themes emerge: policy frameworks, program implementation, teacher capacity, community involvement, and systemic challenges.

1. Indigenous language education policies: Divergent state commitments

A stark contrast exists between the indigenous language education policies of Nepal and New Zealand. Nepal's National Education Policy 2019 acknowledges the significance of mother tongue instruction in early education and promotes multilingualism. However, its approach is largely aspirational, lacking a structured strategy to sustain indigenous language instruction beyond early primary levels. Key gaps include the absence of enforceable implementation mechanisms, insufficient funding provisions, and minimal investment in teacher development specific to local languages.

Conversely, New Zealand presents a robust and sustained policy environment. The national EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION curriculum, Te Wh riki (2017), explicitly positions Te Reo M ori as a cultural and linguistic cornerstone of early learning. Complemented by initiatives such as the K hanga Reo movement and the M ori Language Strategy 2040, New Zealand offers legislative, financial, and pedagogical frameworks that support language revitalization from infancy onward. Classroom observations confirmed a consistent alignment between policy and practice, demonstrating how governmental commitment translates into on-the-ground educational outcomes.

Discussion: New Zealand's coherent and long-term strategies offer a model for Nepal. Policy implementation in Nepal is hindered by fragmentation, with indigenous language education operating more as a policy ideal than a lived reality. For Nepal to

progress, it must move from symbolic policy commitments to operational frameworks supported by enforceable standards and sustained investment.

2. Immersion-based program implementation: Contrasting educational models

New Zealand's K hanga Reo centers exemplify immersive language education that seamlessly integrates cultural identity and early learning. Observations show these centers rely heavily on community elders, traditional narratives, songs, and daily rituals that embed language learning into a child's lived experience. The immersion model prioritizes linguistic and cultural fluency, reinforcing the interconnectedness of language, identity, and education.

In Nepal, by contrast, indigenous languages in Early Childhood Education are often introduced as isolated subjects, detached from broader pedagogical practices. Classroom practices observed in Nepalese Early Childhood Education centers revealed a prevalence of rote learning, limited use of indigenous cultural materials, and a heavy reliance on Nepali and English. In some cases, local language instruction was reduced to occasional vocabulary lessons or extracurricular activities.

Discussion: The contrast underscores the importance of immersion and cultural integration. New Zealand's success lies in embedding language use into everyday learning, while Nepal's fragmented and tokenistic approaches fail to foster long-term language retention or cultural transmission. Moving toward immersion models that holistically center indigenous languages in early education is critical for Nepal's revitalization efforts.

3. Teacher capacity and professional preparation: A foundational disparity

Teacher capacity is a decisive factor in the success of indigenous language education. In New Zealand, educators in M ori-medium settings are required to possess fluency in Te Reo M ori and undergo specialized training. This ensures culturally responsive pedagogy and reinforces community trust in the educational process. The teacher development system is supported by dedicated professional institutions, curriculum resources, and consistent monitoring.

In Nepal, however, many educators tasked with delivering indigenous language instruction lack fluency in the target language. Training programs, where available, are limited in duration and scope. Observations revealed that even when teachers were motivated, they lacked pedagogical strategies and resources to deliver effective

instruction. As a result, indigenous language instruction often lacked continuity and depth.

Discussion: These findings highlight the urgent need for Nepal to institutionalize teacher training programs that focus on indigenous language fluency and culturally grounded pedagogy. New Zealand's structured training pathways offer a scalable model that Nepal could adapt, with regional language training centers and incentives for indigenous educators to enter the profession.

4. Community engagement and parental perceptions: Cultural continuity and social pressures

A key strength of the New Zealand model is the strong role of community in sustaining indigenous language learning. K hanga Reo centers function as community hubs, where elders, families, and children co-construct learning experiences. Intergenerational transmission is not only encouraged but foundational to the pedagogical model. This approach builds a deep cultural and emotional bond between language and identity.

In Nepal, community involvement is inconsistent. While rural or indigenous-majority regions may demonstrate some localized engagement, urban areas exhibit a growing preference for Nepali and English due to their perceived socio-economic benefits. Interviews and document analysis indicate that although many parents value their native languages emotionally, they view them as impractical for their children's academic or career advancement.

Discussion: Parental attitudes significantly shape language practices in early education. In Nepal, the dominance of "market languages" like English and Nepali weakens the perceived utility of indigenous languages. To reverse this trend, awareness campaigns that emphasize the cognitive, cultural, and even economic benefits of bilingualism and indigenous identity are essential. Aligning language education with employment pathways in cultural preservation, tourism, or local governance may also improve perceptions.

5. Structural and systemic challenges: Addressing the foundations

Nepal faces several structural impediments to effective indigenous language education. Limited government investment significantly restricts the scale and quality of initiatives aimed at promoting indigenous languages. Furthermore, the absence of a standardized national curriculum results in inconsistent content delivery across different

regions. Many Early Childhood Education (ECE) centers also suffer from a severe lack of resources, including books, digital tools, and multimedia materials in local languages. Additionally, the societal prestige associated with Nepali and English creates a hierarchy that marginalizes indigenous languages both within educational settings and the broader social context.

By contrast, New Zealand's systemic commitment is evident through sustained funding streams, curriculum innovation, and national resource development efforts aligned with the goals of language revitalization.

Discussion: Addressing these systemic barriers is essential for Nepal. Without strategic resource allocation, policy implementation, and social advocacy, indigenous languages will continue to erode in the face of dominant language pressures. Learning from New Zealand's experience, Nepal must embed language preservation within its national development agenda.

Table 1

Comparative Discussion of Indigenous Language Revitalization in Early Childhood Education – Nepal vs. New Zealand

Theme	Nepal	New Zealand	Discussion & Implications
1. Policy Commitment	- National Education Policy 2019 recognizes mother tongue education- Lacks structured implementation	- Te Wh riki (2017) prioritizes Te Reo M ori- Strong legislative and strategic support	Nepal must shift from symbolic recognition to enforceable, well-funded policies.
2. Program Implementation	- Local languages taught as subjects- Minimal immersion or cultural integration	- Immersive K hanga Reo model- Language and culture integrated in daily practice	Immersion-based, culturally embedded models are essential for long-term language retention.
3. Teacher Capacity	- Limited fluency and training in indigenous languages- Few institutional pathways	- Fluent teachers trained in M ori pedagogy- Structured professional development	Nepal needs dedicated teacher training centers and incentives for indigenous language educators.
4. Community Involvement	- Inconsistent engagement- Urban shift toward Nepali/English	- Strong intergenerational involvement- Community-led centers	Cultural continuity requires community ownership and parental

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Theme	Nepal	New Zealand	Discussion & Implications
5. Systemic Challenges	due to socio-economic pressures		trust in the value of local languages.
	- Funding shortages- No standardized curriculum- Lack of teaching resources- Language hierarchies persist	- Sustained funding- National curriculum support- Rich learning materials- Positive language prestige	Nepal must tackle foundational issues—resources, curriculum, status—to uplift indigenous languages.
6. Strategic Lessons for Nepal	- Need for systemic change from policy to practice	- Provides a functional and scalable model for indigenous language revitalization	Nepal can adapt New Zealand's approach through immersion, capacity building, and national commitment.

6. Strategic lessons for Nepal from the New Zealand experience

The comparative analysis highlights several actionable strategies for enhancing Nepal's policy and practice landscape in indigenous language education. One key recommendation is to adopt immersion-based early childhood education programs by developing indigenous-language immersion preschools through government and community partnerships, inspired by New Zealand's K hanga Reo model. Additionally, institutionalizing teacher training by establishing dedicated institutes that focus on regional languages and culturally responsive pedagogy is essential. Fostering community ownership through platforms that support intergenerational learning and local leadership within language programs can further strengthen these efforts. It is also crucial to develop linguistic resources by investing in indigenous language textbooks, digital learning applications, and audiovisual content. Finally, ensuring long-term policy support through the formulation of a national strategy with sustained funding, enforceable targets, and robust evaluation mechanisms will be vital to achieving lasting impact.

The study reveals that while both Nepal and New Zealand acknowledge the importance of indigenous language preservation through early childhood education, their outcomes differ significantly due to variations in policy execution, teacher preparation, community engagement, and systemic support. New Zealand's model offers a blueprint for success grounded in immersion, cultural continuity, and institutional commitment. For Nepal to revitalize its rich linguistic heritage, a strategic shift is required one that moves from symbolic inclusion to sustained systemic integration. By embracing lessons

from New Zealand and tailoring them to its own sociolinguistic context, Nepal can build a more inclusive and culturally responsive early childhood education system.

Conclusion

This comparative study highlights the pivotal role of early childhood education in indigenous language revitalization, examining the contrasting approaches of Nepal and New Zealand. While both countries recognize the importance of preserving indigenous languages through education, their outcomes differ significantly due to disparities in policy implementation, teacher preparation, community engagement, and systemic support. New Zealand's success with the K hanga Reo immersion model demonstrates how a well-structured, culturally grounded approach can effectively revitalize and sustain the M ori language. In contrast, Nepal's efforts, though commendable in policy intent, remain largely symbolic, hindered by weak enforcement, resource shortages, and socio-economic pressures favoring dominant languages like Nepali and English.

The findings reveal that New Zealand's success stems from a cohesive strategy that integrates language preservation into early education through immersive practices, strong policy backing, and active community participation. The K hanga Reo centers, supported by the national curriculum *Te Wh riki*, ensure that M ori language and culture are embedded in daily learning, fostering both linguistic proficiency and cultural identity. Additionally, specialized teacher training and sustained government funding creates an enabling environment for long-term success. Nepal, however, faces systemic challenges, including inconsistent policy implementation, a lack of trained educators in indigenous languages, and minimal community involvement, particularly in urban areas where economic incentives drive parents toward Nepali and English-medium education.

For Nepal to make meaningful progress, it must adopt a multi-pronged approach that addresses these gaps. First, immersion-based Early Childhood Education programs, modeled after K hanga Reo, should be developed to ensure that indigenous languages are not merely taught as subjects but lived experiences within the classroom. Second, institutionalizing teacher training programs focused on indigenous language fluency and culturally responsive pedagogy is essential to build a skilled workforce capable of delivering effective instruction. Third, fostering community ownership through intergenerational learning and local leadership can strengthen cultural continuity and parental trust in indigenous language education. Finally, systemic barriers—such as funding shortages, curriculum inconsistencies, and the marginalization of indigenous

languages must be addressed through enforceable policies, sustained investment, and advocacy to elevate the status of these languages in society.

The study underscores that language preservation is not just an educational issue but a cultural imperative. The erosion of indigenous languages threatens the loss of unique worldviews, traditions, and identities. While New Zealand provides a proven model, Nepal must tailor these lessons to its diverse linguistic and socio-political context. A shift from symbolic policy gestures to actionable, community-driven strategies is crucial. By prioritizing immersion, capacity building, and systemic reform, Nepal can create an inclusive Early Childhood Education system that safeguards its linguistic heritage for future generations.

Globally, this research reinforces the importance of early childhood education as a foundational platform for language revitalization. It also highlights the need for governments, educators, and communities to collaborate in creating environments where indigenous languages thrive. The case of New Zealand offers hope and a roadmap, demonstrating that with commitment, innovation, and cultural pride, language revitalization is achievable. For Nepal and other nations facing similar challenges, the time to act is now—before more languages fade into silence.

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