Assessing the Vitality of New Zealand Sign Language

Abstract

New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) became an official language (NZSL Act 2006) when its vitality was already under pressure. Even though its institutional status has improved recently, the traditional community domains of NZSL use and transmission are apparently shrinking inasmuch as most of the deaf children who have cochlear implants are acquiring a primary spoken language, with or without exposure to NZSL. Census figures show a decline in the number of NZSL users. Whereas the health of ‘Te Reo Māori, the other official language of New Zealand, is regularly surveyed to inform revitalization priorities, no sociolinguistic assessment has informed an accelerating level of language planning around NZSL. In light of this, I undertook a mixed-methods assessment of the vitality of NZSL, which was informed by UNESCO’s (2003) Language Vitality and Endangerment (LVE) framework and the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) (Bickford, Lewis, and Simons 2015), both of which have been adapted for signed languages. Findings of the study reveal objective evidence of a “threatened” status (level 6b of EGIDS), juxtaposed with a mix of optimistic and pessimistic subjective perceptions of vitality within the NZSL community.

Like many minority languages, New Zealand Sign Language gained official recognition (NZSL Act 2006) at a time when its vitality was already under pressure. Even though its status in society has improved in the last two decades, the traditional community domains of NZSL use and transmission are apparently shrinking, inasmuch as

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