



**Corinne Seals**

Senior lecturer in applied linguistics at Victoria University

**A good way to talk to children**

It is no secret that much of our success in what we do in school and at work is determined by how well we can explain our thoughts – whether it be through essays, speeches, meetings, or even talk between peers. However, recent research has changed people’s understandings of why this might be.

In 1995 Betty Hart and Todd Risley examined the parent-child interaction of 42 families in Kansas and concluded that families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tended to provide about 32 million more words for their children’s input by the child’s third birthday than did families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

As these families also tended to have higher-achieving children in school, the researchers concluded that providing a much higher level of verbal input to children could help bridge their vocabulary gap. Based on these findings, schools encouraged parents to speak and read more to their children.

However, other researchers since then have questioned the directness of the relationship between more input and higher achievement. As many have now pointed out, this study was based on a relatively small group, and it is unlikely that all participants from all backgrounds would have been as equally comfortable talking to their children with a recorder present.

Additionally, socioeconomic status brings about many other significant differences, such as the school decile that children attend, the supplementary learning opportunities that parents can fund, and familiarity with how to perform the “language of schooling” (meeting institutional expectations of how to explain oneself, when, and to whom).

In recent years, researchers have found that the last point, in particular (familiarity with the language of schooling) is especially important. In their recent research, Katelyn Kurkul, Eleanor Castine, Kathryn Leech and Kathleen Corriveau found that early exposure to “mechanistic language” seems to play a major role in children’s success in school.

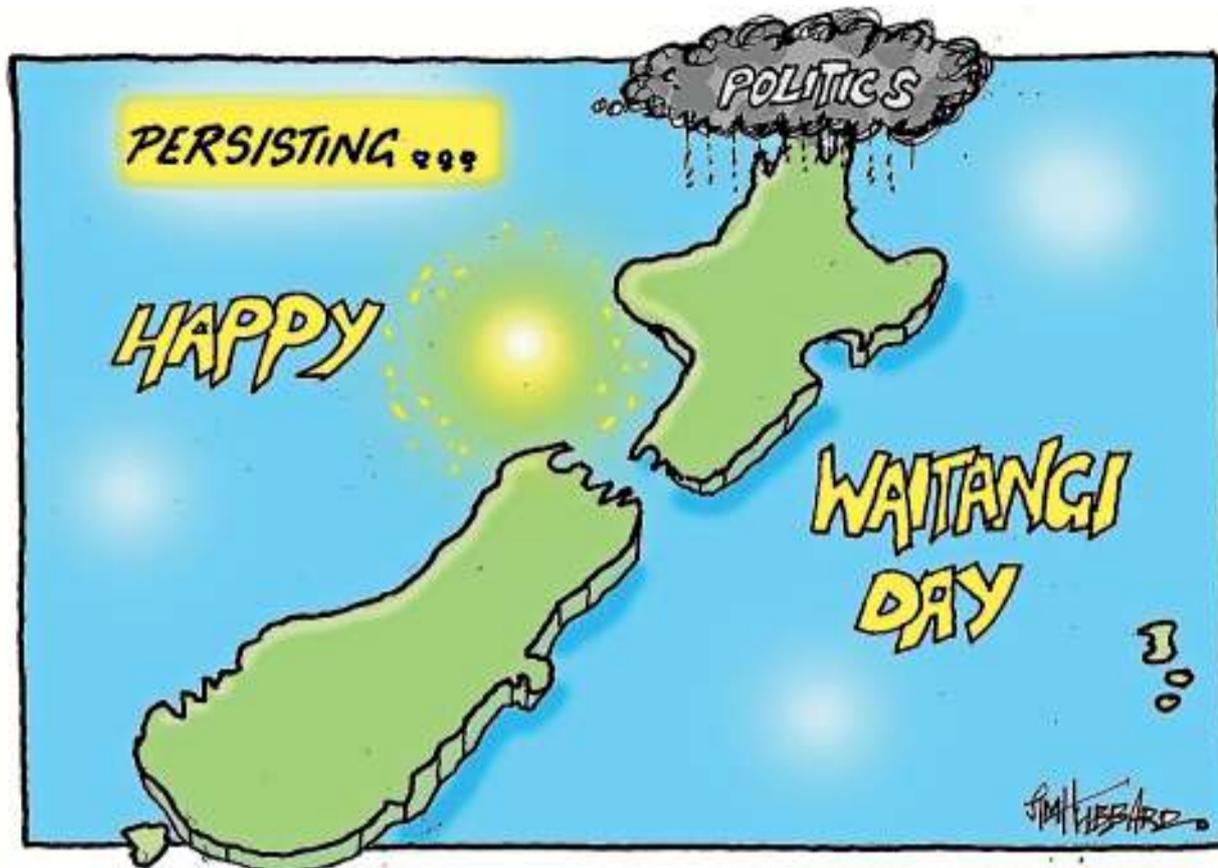
“Mechanistic language” describes the words you use to explain the reason behind something. For example, if a child asks why their toy stopped working, non-mechanistic language would be something like “because it’s broken”. Mechanistic language would be something like “because the batteries inside ran out of energy, and the toy needs energy from batteries to be able to turn on”.

Similarly, children who hear “circular language”, where the answer provides the same information as the question, seem to develop less linguistic sophistication than do children who hear “linear language”.

For example, if a child asks, “Where did Mum go?”, a circular answer is “Mum went out”. A linear answer is, “Mum went to the store to get milk for your breakfast tomorrow because we ran out.” Children who hear more linear explanations are exposed to more explanatory language structures, which helps them to connect concepts more quickly and to explain these connections more easily in places like school.

The language of schooling also extends to the use of multiple languages in school. Linguists have found children get significant improvements in school achievement when encouraged to use any home languages alongside the standard language(s) their schools use.

This approach helps children build more cognitive sophistication within and across languages, which in turn helps them expand their mechanistic and linear language sooner. The amount of language input matters, but so does the type of language used.



**Ordinary Iranians need support but not a war**



**Donna Miles**

Iranian-Kiwi columnist and writer based in Christchurch

The political rebirth of Israel’s Binyamin Netanyahu and the formation of the most right-wing coalition government in Israel’s history are sure to result in an explosion of tensions with Palestinians and serious confrontation with Iran over its nuclear issue.

Iran says its nuclear programme is to secure its energy needs. But Iran cannot and should not be trusted. This is why Barack Obama signed the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015.

The agreement allowed for unprecedented levels of inspections. Iran remained compliant and the world was safer for it. The deal was a triumph of diplomacy over war.

But Donald Trump withdrew from the agreement in 2018. President Joe Biden came close to reviving it, but the deal is almost dead now, partly because of Iran’s insistence on better terms, but also because it would be politically damaging for the US and Europe to be seen to be negotiating with a regime that is continuing to kill its own people.

Iran has, so far, executed four protesters, jailed thousands and killed hundreds in response to nationwide protests, triggered by the death in custody of Kurdish-Iranian woman Jina “Mahsa” Amini, who was arrested for not wearing her hijab properly.

So how should the world respond to Iran’s nuclear issue and the Islamic Republic’s murderous actions inside and outside Iran?

Maximum sanctions on Iran have not worked. Since the breakdown of the

deal, Iran has increased its uranium enrichment programme and amassed valuable sanction-busting expertise, which it is now sharing with Russia as well as, reportedly, supplying it with drones to attack Ukraine.

Furthermore, maximum sanctions have worked against civil society’s ability to sustain a viable resistance movement against the Iranian regime.

For instance, because of the sanctions, the diaspora opposition groups have been unable to financially assist Iranian workers, whose precarious employment and already poor economic situation have prevented them from carrying out sustained mass strikes.

And when the Iranian Government

*A major attack on the Iranian nuclear system would not go without retaliation.*

shut off the internet, it was the sanctions that further complicated any hope of smuggling Starlink terminals into the country. Such terminals would have enabled the protesters to circumvent the internet ban.

And don’t forget maximum sanctions are called maximum for a reason. There’s no dialling up the notch any further. Meanwhile, ordinary Iranians are suffering from extra economic stresses as a direct result of these brutal sanctions.

So how else to respond to Iran? The European Commission recently voted to list Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), in its entirety, as a terrorist group. This makes it criminal to belong to or work for the group.

IRGC is pervasive in Iran. Many governmental and economic organisations have links to it. Military service in Iran is compulsory and there are many people who have no choice

but to work for the IRGC, or have been forced to in the past. Many members of the IRGC fought gallantly in the Iran-Iraq war to protect their country, in the same way many Ukrainians are fighting to defend theirs.

As with sanctions, we need to be careful not to hurt ordinary people in Iran. I agree with the New Zealand Government’s approach of targeted sanctions against key Iranian figures involved in human rights abuses.

There are also calls for the diplomatic isolation of Iran. Such a move would leave only two options to contain Iran’s nuclear programme.

The first option is banking on the quick fall of the regime. This is highly unlikely, given its multi-nodal security forces, its current support base (17.8 million Iranians voted for the current hard-line president) and the lack of organised opposition.

The second option is an Israeli strike on Iran, which has to be done with assistance from the US, the only country with the weapons systems needed to target Iran’s deeply buried nuclear facilities.

Israel successfully attacked nuclear facilities in Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007 without any major consequences. But it’s certain that a major attack on the Iranian nuclear system would not go without retaliation.

In November, the US and Israel held joint air drills, simulating strikes on Iran and its proxies. On January 28, Israel used a drone attack to strike an Iranian military facility in the middle of the city of Isfahan, with a population of roughly 2m.

Much of this could be theatre, of course, to force Iran to sign a more permanent deal on its nuclear programme. But with Iran’s international reputation in ruins, the diplomatic cost of an attack on Iran will be at its lowest.

The international community must support Iranians in their fight for freedom, but it must also take action to prevent the possibility of a war, which always brings with it unintended consequences, as devastatingly observed in Iraq and elsewhere.