

Te Ataarangi comes from behind the shadow

Te Ataarangi Incorporated Society was the dream of the well-loved kuia, Ngoingoi Pewhairangi. She saw an alternative way of teaching the maori language to the generations of Maori and pakeha who missed out on it when they were growing up. She saw people who had poor memories of their formal schooling instead being taught in their own home, in their work-places, on the marae, in factories. She put together her maoritanga with her years of being a field officer with the National Council of Adult Education and in the late 70's her dream was born.

The now familiar brightly coloured plastic rods from which the teaching style gets its nickname, 'the rakau method', were introduced by education researcher, Katarina Mataira. Together Ngoi and Katarina, along with 3000 tutors and learner tutors, have changed forever the state of maori language learning in this country. Te Ataarangi is also the backbone of language revival today and the mainstay of the kohanga reo movement.

Teripoai Pauline Higgins is the secretary of the incorporated society and along with Kathie Edie another part-time worker, handles day-to-day administration as well as long-term planning.

Teripoai says institutions for adult learning such as night classes and polytechs and universities are seen as 'backing up' Te Ataarangi classes. People have so many levels of learning and so many varied needs that weekly rakau sessions may not be enough. A lot go on to intensive language courses such as run from the Kuratini in Wellington, or opt for extra-mural language studies from a university.

Whatever happens, says Teripoai, a seed is sown that blooms later.

She says Ngoi's dream has been so successful that the society is snowed under with requests for tutors. And the requests come by phone and letter from government departments right through to community groups. She says pakeha groups have not been slow to ask for tutors, especially when they found how non-threatening the rakau method is.

She attributes this to the non-competitive nature of the teaching, where the tutor first establishes the ground rules such as no speaking english and then picks up a rakau and says a phrase. The students are then encouraged to do likewise, with the quicker ones helping the slower ones. In this way says Teripoai, confidence is built up in the tutor and individual students. It gets to be fun.

This method of teaching doesn't encourage questions, particularly in the



early stages. Native speakers of maori couldn't always explain why a certain way of saying things was done so Te Ataarangi tutors weren't initially known for their enthusiasm in answering student queries.

Teripoai says this became obvious from the many refresher hui held up and down the country for tutors and learner tutors. At these hui kaumatua

are sprinkled among small learning groups and asked for advice. It's usually in these sessions that some of the reasons for saying a particular sentence construction come out. And says Teripoai, sometimes the kaumatua are the ones who admit they learn the most.

She remembers one such hui this year at Waitara where a 92 year old kuia was reduced to tears after taking part in a rakau session. All she could say was that she was privileged to be in the company of such 'obviously talented people! Teripoai puts these sorts of comments down to the simplicity of Te Ataarangi in getting across some of the depth of te reo.

Talking to Teripoai you latch onto a fierce pride in the independent way of getting Maori people motivated to teach their language as pioneered by Ngoi and Katarina. Grants from Maori Affairs, Maori Education Foundation and loans from Adult Education were enough to keep the shoe-string operation together in its founding days. That and belief in a kaupapa maori, a maori way of relying on ordinary people to organise themselves in a way they wanted. A way that still sees all the 3000 tutors and learner tutors giving their services for free, paying their own way to refresher hui and loving it.

Teripoai says some are tutors like Ranui in Otira who travels to take classes a hundred miles away and then never misses a refresher hui. Others like Kiti Temara and Lucy Te Amo (Lucy died the other week) and Hohepa Kereopa would travel to hold classes in the Bay of Plenty area.

Teripoai says these tutors have the say in how they want to be used and money has never been an obstacle to the work of Te Ataarangi.

However a recent grant of \$100,000 to Te Ataarangi from the Government may signal a change in the fortune of the society. (Teripoai says most of the money will go in travel for tutors.)

The alternative way of organising the teaching of maori as envisaged by Ngoingoi Pewhairangi seems to have become a main way with those inherent problems Te Ataarangi sought to bypass.

Within the society, co-founder Katarina Mataira leads a group keen to have formal certification of tutors. The subject has surfaced at hui last year and this year, but has been turned down after discussion.

Along with this recognition of maori language skills from an institutional point of view has come the whole