

Initial graining sessions were short with tutors returning to their own areas and concentrating on developing their skills.

Drawing in

Many have managed to draw other Maori speaking people into working with them as assistants.

Now, after a year in operation, at least 200 tutors are running regular classes and Katerina estimates that another 300 to 400 assistants are working alongside these groups. "And there's possibly another hundred working on their own" she said.

The aim is to get some of these students trained up as independent tutors this year to meet the ever-increasing demand for classes.

Katerina said the snowballing numbers of prospective students are both Maori and Pakeha and offer a variety of reasons for their choice of this method of learning.

Many Maoris were trying to recover their lost language, others growing up in the city had never spoken it. Some students had unsuccessfully tried night-school or other teaching methods.

Defining the success of the Te Ataarangi method is difficult. It is informal, its fun, and according to Katerina most students feel they are learning the language well.

Other benefits

Katerina Mataira and Ngoi Pewhairangi believe other benefits have come out of the training programme: which has:

- brought together Maori families living in urban situations
- stimulated Maori people to use talents which had been dormant
- created situations in which parents and children learn together
- aroused interest in those who in the past had rejected Maori language learning as being too difficult and given confidence to further learning in other areas
- developed a closer relationship between Maori and Pakeha
- created a greater awareness of and pride in Maori identity and turanga-waewae
- strengthened feelings of self-reliance in the community.

But they say if the programme is to continue there must be some kind of funding for established tutors putting in long hours teaching and travel, to ensure they are able to continue with the work.

They also need resource materials — manuals, dialogues, stories — for use as more classes reach advanced stages, and they want to see more frequent training sessions for tutors and establishment of language boards in tribal areas to support the programme.

TE REO/The Language

Students at home with rakau

Every Tuesday evening Pauline Higgins' Eastbourne beginners congregate in a warm suburban sitting room for an hour of coffee and conversation — in Maori.

Like the advanced class already ensconced round the dining room table, the beginners are predominantly female, pakeha and working in education.

Pauline bounces in, smiling a welcome, springy black hair restrained under a bright scarf.

"Kia ora," she greets each in turn. "Kia ora Jill, kia ora Raewyn."

"Kei te pehea koe — oops I haven't taught you that," she lapses briefly into forbidden English, as she joins the circle of beginners lounging in deep sofas in front of the piano.

Five are here tonight — John, middle-aged civil engineer and the only male in the group; schoolgirls Paula and Terekawa, one blonde and one dark; Jill and Raewyn, psychologist and teacher both in jeans and jumpers.

Pauline sits down and empties a plastic bag full of brightly coloured rods (nga rakau) onto the low table.

Colours and numbers

She turns to John, alert in his armchair, and asks a question.

Glancing at the charts of colours and numbers in Maori hung up on the fireplace he hesitantly picks up several green sticks.

"Tino pai," Pauline says encouragingly, and moves on round the circle of intent faces.

Conversation revolves round the rods — how many, what colour and what is to be done with them.

The students listen and speak, taut features reflecting the strain of concentration.

Gradually they take over from Pauline, repeating and altering her words to issue instruction to each other.

Raewyn, passing a handful of orange sticks to Terekawa, stumbles over her words; She rolls her eyes, grins sheepishly and tries again.

Unforced rhythm

Terekawa, the only Maori student, listens carefully before replying.

After only three lessons her vocabulary is no more extensive than her classmates but her speech already has a smooth unforced rhythm.

The question and answer conversation continues its jerky progress.

The students, like players in an exotic parlour game, pass the sticks back and forth.

Nodding approvingly Pauline shifts backward slightly out of the circle, letting the class continue unaided.

A fluent Maori speaker, who grew up

in Ruatoki in the Ureweras, Pauline was on the verge of going to training college when she heard about the new teaching method and decided to become a Te Ataarangi language tutor instead — despite the total lack of wages.

Own experience

It was closer to her own experience of learning. "I wasn't taught Maori. I just heard it," she says. "And you don't have to be terribly well educated to be a tutor. The whole aim is to use all the fluent speakers."

"People who come to these classes are interested in conversational Maori — not so much in the written."

In the Te Ataarangi classes no notes are taken till the end of the lesson she says.

"Lots of Maori people don't like going to school. Learning grammar doesn't mean anything to them."

She says most classes have at least half Maori students, many of whom have grown up in the cities and gradually become interested in their Maori background.

Till its closure last year Petone's Gear Meat works had a thriving 200 strong group which met after work every night in the stock pens.

Nga pakeha

Her Eastbourne class is unusual in its high percentage of pakeha students, Pauline says, switching her gaze back to the centre of the room where the little group continues its halting dialogue.

She tosses in a correcton, smothered a grin, then collapses in untutorly giggles as John grapples with the difference between "au" meaning "I" or "me" and "ia" meaning "she" or "him".

He grins back unoffended and finally gets his mouth around the tricky vowels.

Satisfied with progress Pauline edges out of the room to investigate the sounds of hilarity emerging from the advanced students in the dining room.

The room has undergone a minor transformation. Now small tables are pinned to each piece of furniture — "tepu" on the table, "turu" on the chair, "arai" on the curtains.

Punctuated by bursts of laughter the half dozen young and middleaged women are using these words to make sentences.

Pauline flicks off the light switch then, through the darkness, explains in Maori what she has done.

One by one her students step up, and switch the light on and off, repeating her words.

A new concept has been learned.