

plains that his pupils are not yet sufficiently competent in Maori to be able to cope with it all the time.

But he expects that will start to change from next year when the first children from nearby Waahi Marae's kohanga reo will have Maori as their mother tongue as much as English.

"Kaua e korero pakeha."

Things are a little different over in Chris Lowman's form one and two classroom, where he reminds his pupils that he expects them to speak Maori in class, not English.

Chris may be a pakeha — English born at that — but his commitment to the Maori language is impressive.

"If we do anything less than use the language 100 per cent of the time, the language will die in a generation," he says. "What we are doing here is a salvage operation — we're dragging Maori out of the grave."

But he would disagree with anyone who accused him of neglecting the children's English language development — that is still a vital part of the curriculum.

He points out that the French, Germans and Spanish don't deem it necessary to teach their children science, maths and social studies in English. If their languages are adequate vehicles for imparting knowledge, then so is Maori, he reasons.

And he says it has been shown that children who grow up bi-lingual prove to be better communicators than mono-lingual children. It's just not true, he says, that children's ability in

English will suffer if they are brought up to speak both English and Maori.

When we arrived in Chris's classroom, one of his pupils was on her feet fielding questions in Maori from her classmates about a "motoka miharo".

"He aha nga kupu pakeha mo te motoka miharo?" Chris asks the class.

"He flash car," several voices respond, amid laughter. The oral practice ranges through topics like a trip to the shop and a journey to Ahitereiria (Australia). The pupils show considerable ability with the language, and seem to enjoy the class. They are eager to participate, and the lesson is frequently punctuated with laughter.

Later Chris gathers the class around him at a desk and he gives them a lesson in Maori vocabulary and grammar using the "rakau" method, in which coloured plastic sticks are used to illustrate what is being taught, and not a word of English is used.

Chris says he does not teach his pupils anything in Maori which they do not already know in English.

But when the kohanga reo children start moving into the school from next year, that situation will reverse, he says. Then, their teachers will not be teaching them anything in English which they do not already know in Maori.

To bring the language alive for his pupils, Chris gets them to write and act out little plays which reflect real-life situations in which they can speak

Maori. For example, they may write a play representing a trip to the shop, which they will practise.

Then Mr Lowman may invite a Maori-speaking shopkeeper to visit the class, and they can practise with him or her what they have learnt. Hopefully, they will then go out and use it when they go to the shop.

For Chris, Maori is more than just a job. He has become so competent that he uses it quite comfortably in casual conversation. At the school, he and Barna are just as likely to speak to each other in Maori as in English. He has learnt it through university and other courses, and he spends a lot of time learning it with the help of the kaumatua of Waahi Marae. Also, his wife is a Maori.

For Barna, it's his first language. He grew up in Ruatoki, speaking Maori from childhood, but it hasn't all been plain sailing for him — being Tuhoe, he has to watch that he doesn't teach his pupils the Tuhoe dialect. They are predominantly Waikato children, and their parents have made it clear that the Waikato dialect is important to them.

Ki nga tau e heke mai

Huntly's Rakaumanga School expects to be given official bi-lingual status by the end of this year.

That will mean all its staff will have to be fluently bi-lingual, and will be expected to conduct their classes in Maori as well as English.

At the moment Chris Lowman and Barna Heremia, are the only fluent Maori speakers on the staff, although other teachers can use Maori to some extent.

But the school is already advertising for a fluently bi-lingual junior school teacher for next year, in anticipation of official bi-lingual status and the first five-year-olds from nearby Waahi Marae's kohanga reo.

When that happens, the bi-lingual programme will get under way in earnest. Chris said it was likely that from next year, the junior school pupils will be taught mostly in Maori for a couple of years to give the language a firm base in their thinking.

From then until they go to high school, English-language teaching will be gradually introduced to them as well, so that eventually they are comfortable and competent in both languages.

Chris said few, if any of the present pupils will use Maori spontaneously in their conversation, although a few of the older ones "can be persuaded". But he has occasionally heard the odd Maori phrase in the playground, so the effort may be rubbing off.

Chris Lowman leads his class in a lesson using the rakau method of Maori language teaching.

