Promoting bilingual education for the Deaf in Vietnam

Let us begin by showing you a [Video[[1]](#footnote-1)] which takes you on a tour of our project site, a bilingual school for the Deaf in Dong Nai province, Vietnam.

At the Dong Nai school, the classrooms are quiet but still buzzing with activity. The students are so engaged in their lessons that they sit forward in their seats, waiting for their turn to ask questions. They sign bigger and faster as the discussion with other classmates heats up. Not a single student can be found looking out the window or doing something else during the classes. This is not only because they cannot rely on their ears to follow the class, but also because they are full of joy at obtaining new knowledge and being able to express their opinions.

You might ask why the students are so overjoyed.

The reason why is because their lives had been completely different, including their school environment, before coming to the Dong Nai school.

“Before, when I finished elementary school, I wanted to continue studying, but my parents could not find any junior high schools in Hanoi. So I had to find work to do. When I found out about the project, I was eager to stop working and apply… I was happy because the project would teach me many different subjects that I had never studied before, such as history, biology, chemistry, English, and others. In Hanoi, the teachers only taught me math and some Vietnamese.” (Nguyen Thanh Son, 2004).

“I went to school in Ho Chi Minh City from 1988 to 1995. The school was oral, so it took me almost 8 years to finish 5th grade. That was the highest grade at the school at that time.” (Hai, 2004).

Although the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities clearly specifies that sign languages are languages in their own right, just like other countries in the world, sign language is often regarded in Vietnam as mere gesture or pantomime, moving only the hands. They have no idea that sign languages differ in each country or even in the regions thereof, that grammar does exist in sign language and that not only the hands but also facial and other body movements are used in order to communicate. Since the mid-1980s, under the initiative of the Vietnamese government’s new “open-door” policy, the country has been supporting and emphasizing oral education, which forces the Deaf to train to be able to speak and read lips. While many people believe that if proper training is provided, Deaf people can understand what is being said as long as they read lips. Dr. James Woodward, a former professor at Gallaudet University in the United States and a leading authority in the field of sign linguistics, points out the limitations of using oral communication with the Deaf, as words are vocalized not just by movement of the lips but also at the back of the mouth to produce certain sounds. In addition, spoken Vietnamese utilizes tones which cannot be distinguished on the lips.

Deaf students who attended mainstream schools, in which there was no consideration made for an accessible classroom environment, would sit in the classroom all day not knowing what was going on in the classes, and it was not uncommon for those students to be treated as though they had a learning disability or to be assumed to be less capable than hearing students. This did not discourage them from studying entirely, but would clearly have had a negative impact on the development of their self-esteem.

The lack of a quality educational background made it difficult for them to find employment and with limited choices available to them, they often found placement in manual work with low wages. Also, parents tended to conceal the fact that their children had a hearing impairment and Deaf children were strictly prohibited from using sign language at home and within the community.

Let’s take a moment to use our imagination in order to understand just how stressful it was for those Deaf children. Imagine if you were treated as though you didn’t exist, in a foreign country where people spoke a completely different language from you and belong to a different culture, or instead, being the only hearing person in a group of Deaf people, where they have no problem at all communicating with one another and it is you, the hearing person, who would have trouble expressing your needs and feelings or understanding what was going on.

In order to provide Deaf students with an opportunity to pursue higher education in their own language, the Nippon Foundation began providing funding to launch the first ever bilingual school for the Deaf in Vietnam in 2000 through our Dong Nai project, under the direction of Ms. NGUYEN Thi Hoa, the Director of the Center for Studying and Promoting Deaf Culture at Dong Nai University and Dr. Woodward.

Classes are provided in Ho Chi Minh sign language and written Vietnamese for students up to grade 12. Soon after the school opened, students who were enrolled demonstrated a dramatic change in academic performance. The education system in Vietnam requires all students to take standardized exams to graduate from junior and senior high school. From 2003 to 2007, the percentage of Deaf students passing the National Exam was higher than that of hearing students for both the ninth and twelfth grades in Dong Nai province. In 2007, the program produced the first group of Deaf students to pursue postsecondary education in Vietnam. This year, Ms. Song Ha, a twelfth-grade student from Dong Nai school, competed at a national math competition which was also attended by hearing students as one of the representative members of Dong Nai province, where she placed third. Bilingual education for the Deaf proved that Deaf students are indeed just as capable as hearing students and all that they needed was an appropriate environment for them to learn in. Such an achievement captured the attention of the Vietnamese government, and since 2010, the Dong Nai school has been provided with funding from Dong Nai province.

After its success in providing bilingual education for the Deaf at a high school level, the project shifted its focus in 2010 to providing educational opportunities at the university level. The plan was to support the admission of Deaf students to Dong Nai University to obtain a B.A. degree in education in order to develop Deaf teachers. Students admitted to the B.A. course are provided with sign language interpreters and follow the same curriculum as hearing students enrolled in the same course.

Since 2012, 17 Deaf students have graduated from the university and although some of them had difficulty finding a teaching placement, as many Deaf schools in Vietnam still support oral education for the Deaf and display low motivation to hire a Deaf teacher, most of the graduates are involved in teaching Deaf children. Lam Nguyen, one of the first Vietnamese Deaf students to enter a university, now serves as a math teacher at the Dong Nai school. When he was attending a mainstream school, he was told that with his “poor” grade, he would not even proceed to junior high school, yet in reality he obtained the first rank in the province on the national standardized exam he took to graduate from the Dong Nai junior high school. The highly motivated young math teacher Nguyen said, “based especially on my experiences at a mainstream school, I wanted to become a teacher and contribute to the education of other Deaf students to let them discover that studying is fun.” The ability to secure employment as teachers, a respected and high- status occupation in Vietnam is another result of the Dong Nai project, yet the impact of the project extends beyond obtaining a good job.

Ms. Hoa, who has witnessed the changes in the project over the past 10 years, points out that the first change she saw was in the students’ attitudes. As Deaf students are able to participate in classes and score higher marks, they become more confident, they find joy in living and they also start to be aware of their rights. This has influenced the attitude of their parents, who become proud of their children after seeing them actively participating in the classes and even become motivated to learn sign language themselves.

Ms. Hoa and Dr. Woodward emphasize that the success of the project highlights the importance of having a high standard of anthropological linguistic research on Vietnamese sign language and the Deaf culture as a foundation of the project. This can be achieved through the provision of training to Deaf people to gain research skill on sign language linguistics and also basic knowledge about their own Deaf culture. In the future, Ms. Hoa and Dr. Woodward are hoping to see Deaf people take the lead in the project.

The next step for Ms. Hoa and Dr. Woodward is to find a way to expand the current certificate program on sign language interpretation in order to establish a B.A degree program to develop more skilled sign language interpreters, with the hope of establishing sign language interpreters as legitimate professionals in Vietnam. Ms. Hoa is also hoping to set up a bilingual elementary school for Deaf children with Deaf teachers in the future, emphasizing the importance of early education.

This project has proven that if there is a will and if Deaf and hearing people can work together towards achieving the same goal, the opportunity to change millions of people’s lives and mindsets can be created with limited financial and human resources. As a donor, we are extremely grateful to and must mention the crucial contribution of the hearing teachers who had years of experience working with the hearing, but none with the Deaf. They made the enormous effort to become fluent in sign language, having had no prior knowledge in it, and committed themselves to the implementation of bilingual education for the Deaf. And of course, we cannot thank Ms. Hoa and Dr. Woodward enough, who always put the Deaf students first and think about the sustainability of the project when they submit the proposal to us every year. Until today, the Dong Nai school still remain the only bilingual school for the Deaf which offers courses up to the university level. We hope that sign language is recognized as a language with the same standing as spoken languages and as the primary language of the Deaf, and that more schools will provide classes using sign language for Deaf students across Vietnam. Moreover, we hope that neighboring countries, including our country Japan, can learn from the many successes of the Dong Nai project.

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ab4ULUovHWI&feature=youtu.be [↑](#footnote-ref-1)