

The 2014 Symposium on Sign Bilingualism and Deaf Education

SigAm Bilingual Deaf Education Projects in China (2004-2014)

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Background: Influenced by the international development of deaf education, the Amity Foundation (an NGO in China: www.amity.org.cn) initiated its first experimental sign bilingual project in Nanjing School for the Deaf in 1996. With the successful experiences of the Nanjing project and the support of Jiangsu Education Department, the Amity Foundation started the SigAm Bilingual Deaf Education Project in cooperation with Signo Foundation, Norway, (www.sign.no) in 2004, aiming to continue the development of the sign bilingual deaf education in the five selected special education schools (Nanjing, Yangzhou, Zhenjiang, Changzhou and Suzhou). Since then, SigAm project has expanded to the ten special education schools in Sichuan, Guizhou and Chongqing and impacted many others in the country in the last ten years.

The aim of the SigAm Bilingual Deaf Education Project was to develop the sign bilingual concepts and approaches in deaf education based on the Chinese context, by teaching deaf children Chinese Sign Language (CSL) as their first language and Chinese as a second language, to bring awareness to the Chinese people that CSL is the natural language of deaf people in China in a linguistic sense; to ensure the rights of deaf children to use their own language, CSL, to receive equal education with their hearing peers from pre-school to nine-year compulsory education; to promote reform in deaf education in China in order to improve the quality of deaf education for the benefit and empowerment of deaf children and deaf community in the country.

Approaches: Each project school set up experimental classes on a bilingual approach in both pre-school and primary school levels; Deaf teachers/teaching assistants were employed to work in partnership with the hearing teachers in classroom teaching. Both the CSL Story-telling class for preschool children and the CSL assist reading class for students at primary school levels were taught by deaf teachers who were trained in CSL linguistics and pedagogy in the seminars/workshops organized by the project regularly; In addition, they also learned how to teach from their hearing partners in the everyday teaching jobs. Parents training programs were set up in schools for learning CSL and other knowledge in regard to deaf education. Various parent-child CSL story-telling activities were organized in schools to improve communication between parents and child.

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Results (findings from evaluations): By using CSL as communication tool in classroom, it has greatly improved the communication ability of deaf children. They are more active in thinking and more willing to express themselves. The interactions between students and teachers and among students themselves have greatly improved, that made classroom teaching effectively. The sign bilingual approach has enabled deaf children to reach the similar level of developments in language, cognition, psychology and social skills as hearing peers and brought them with positive deaf identity. The examinations of students have showed that their Chinese learning (in both oral and literacy) also reached better results.

Before learning CSL, parents and child had hardly any communication at home. Now the parents are able to communicate with their child at home. They have seen their child having changed into a happier, active and “normal” child and have now higher expectations for the children in education and better hope for the future.

The teachers’ CSL ability has improved and their attitude towards sign language and deaf children has changed. Having enjoyed the better teaching results brought by the sign bilingual approach, the teachers in the project said that bilingual approach has opened “another door of hope” in deaf education. Before the sign bilingual projects, there was hardly any deaf employee in the project schools. But now there are 45 deaf teachers/teaching assistants having been employed in the 14 project schools teaching in partnership with hearing teachers. They have become role models for deaf students and the CSL resource persons in schools. For the first time in history, the deaf teachers are playing such an important role in deaf education in China. Evidence shows that deaf teachers’ participation in education for deaf children has greatly improved classroom teaching effectiveness. The SigAm project has facilitated school development by adopting a “child-centered” sign bilingual pedagogical policy and promoting “**Acceptance, Respect, Equality and Empowerment**” of deaf children in education.

Sustainability: In the final evaluation of the SigAm bilingual deaf project in Sept. 2013, all the principals and teachers interviewed in the project affirmed that sign bilingual deaf education will be continued in their schools. With the evident-based results, the representatives in charge of special education in the local government also affirmed that they would continue to support and promote sign bilingual deaf education after SigAm project finishes so as to improve the quality of education for all deaf children in the region.