

**Title:** **Developing Bilingual Education for Deaf Children in China: Project Report, May 1999**

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### **Synopsis**

This report provides a detailed account of the background to the China Sign bilingual project supported by the Amity Foundation and Save the Children UK. It also provides useful information of a visit made to the project by UK consultants and includes a commentary on developments in Chinese schools for deaf children in Jiangsu, Yunnan and Anhui Provinces.

# Developing Bilingual Education for Deaf Children in China

## Project Report May 99

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\***chinasign**: UK-China project to develop sign bilingual education for deaf children

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## Introduction

Detailed accounts of Sign Bilingualism in the education of deaf children, and of deaf education in China, have been provided elsewhere. A summary is given below.

**The Sign Bilingual approach in deaf education** is based on the concept of deafness as difference rather than defect; Deaf people are viewed as a group with their own linguistic and cultural identity. A bilingual school uses the natural sign language of Deaf people so deaf children have an easily accessible first language for communication and learning. The spoken/written language of the country, in this case Chinese, is learnt as a separate, second language. Deaf staff are a key element of a bilingual school: they provide high standards of sign language, and also act as positive role models for the children. It has been clearly demonstrated in a number of Sign Bilingual programs in the UK and elsewhere that deaf children educated through this approach are able to match the educational achievements of hearing children, as shown in national examinations.

**Current provision for deaf children in China** is based on the nationwide system of deaf schools, whose staffing, curriculum and teaching approaches are governed by central policy directives. Deaf children are included in the current government initiative to provide all children in China with nine years basic education: 60% of deaf children are now supposed to be in education, with marked regional variations. Most urban deaf children are educated; many rural deaf children, especially girls, are missing out. Jiangsu province is relatively very advanced in special education and has 76 deaf schools, while Anhui has around 50 and Yunnan only 17 (of course there are also big differences in population density).

The national policy for educational methods in deaf schools is to use oral Chinese supported simultaneously by signs used in the same order as the spoken language. This is confusing for deaf children and clearly ineffective on an overall basis since teachers say children have considerable difficulty learning to read and write, even though specially simplified textbooks are used in deaf schools.

**The new rehab centres** (from 1998) are intended to provide oral training for pre-school age deaf children so some at least can enter mainstream primary school. Rehab centres currently provide for between 5-10% of deaf pre-school children; the prescribed target for the percentage to be integrated subsequently is 12%, the rest going to deaf school. A key problem is the lack of continuity between the rehab centres (administered by the CDPF) and the mainstream and deaf school systems (run by the Education Ministry). There is inadequate support for deaf children in the mainstream school system, which is inflexible and exam-oriented. Those few children who are to benefit from speech training in the rehab centres and to cope subsequently in mainstream schooling tend to have significant residual hearing and very involved and supportive parents.

**As an educationally effective, child-centred approach, Sign Bilingualism** should ideally be available as an option in the rehab centres, particularly for

children with severe/profound hearing losses, and as an established model for deaf schooling at primary and secondary levels. Jiangsu province has already adopted Sign Bilingualism as official policy for its deaf schools. The purpose of this project is to provide expert and practical support to further these objectives.

### **Project Personnel**

1. **Wu An'an** (Head of Social Welfare Division, Amity). Co-ordinator of project on Chinese side; interpreter at workshops; manager supporting bilingual pre-school class at Nanjing Deaf School; will also be able to provide ongoing managerial support for initiatives at schools/rehab centres in other cities e.g. Kunming.
2. **Alison Callaway** (ENT Doctor, PhD from Centre for Deaf Studies on "Deaf Children and their Families in China"). Co-ordinator of project on UK side; workshop presentations on early language acquisition and development of deaf children; will focus on work with families on future visits. Responsible for proposal and report writing, evaluation and research. Speaks Chinese.
3. **Pete Makey** (Headteacher of Blanche Nevile School for Deaf Children). Key workshop presentations to train teachers in the Sign Bilingual approach, especially practical aspects including teaching deaf children reading and writing. Fluent sign language.
4. **Linda Day** (Lecturer at Centre for Deaf Studies, Bristol Univ. MA in Sign Linguistics). Key workshop presentations on sign language linguistics and positive deaf identity. A Deaf person and a native signer.
5. **Elvire Roberts** (sign language interpreter in Nottingham, trained at Centre for Deaf Studies; degree in Chinese Studies from Cambridge University). Sign language interpreter for Nanjing workshop; workshop presentation on professional practice and ethics of interpreting. Fluent Chinese.

### **Background of project**

**1994** AC carried out fieldwork research interviewing parents of deaf children in Nanjing; this was facilitated by Amity. Preliminary lectures and discussions with Amity about the Sign Bilingual approach in deaf education.

**1995** Study visit to Bristol by WAA and two colleagues to learn about Sign Bilingual practice.

**1996** Amity organised the "Sign Bilingual experimental class" in its pre-school for deaf children attached to Nanjing Deaf School: a Deaf member of staff was recruited to give the children storytelling in sign language. AC visited class soon after.

**1998** Three day training workshop in Nanjing on the Sign Bilingual approach for teachers from deaf schools all over Jiangsu; organised by Amity. AC and PM presented.

**1999** Three two-day training workshops on the Sign Bilingual approach for teachers from deaf schools and rehab centres, in Hefei, Nanjing and Kunming. LD and ER joined AC and PM for the Nanjing meeting; WAA interpreted/presented in Nanjing and Kunming.

## **Funding**

**1998** Amity funded and organised the 1998 workshop in Nanjing.

**1999** SCF (UK) funded the visit of the four UK participants: local SCF officers in Hefei and Kunming also organised and funded the workshops there and provided invaluable support.

## **Diary of workshops**

**15 May** Flight London to Beijing

**16 May** Arrived Beijing. AC and PM travelled to Hefei; LD and ER to Nanjing. AC and PM met by Dai Chunsheng (SCF Hefei), and later met Jeanette.

**17 May** Visited Hefei Deaf School (Headteacher Mr Wang), and Anhui Provincial Rehab Centre for Deaf Children (Director Ms Chen)

**18 May Hefei workshop** (AC and PM). 24 trainees attended from various Anhui deaf schools and rehab centres. Also present was the Head of the Anhui Provincial Education Commission (APEC).

**19 May Hefei workshop.**

**20 May** Travel to Nanjing with David and Ms Gao from the Anhui rehab centre. Met by Mr Hu and Ms Zhu Juling, heads of Nanjing Deaf School. Supper with Mr Chen Yiji, Head of the Jiangsu Basic Education Commission, Ms Wu An'an of Amity, Linda, Elvire and others.

**21 May** Observation of bilingual experimental class in Amity's pre-school at Nanjing Deaf School. Preparation for workshop.

**22 May Nanjing workshop** (AC, PM, LD and ER). Trainees from Nanjing Deaf School plus 16 other Jiangsu deaf schools; Amity pre-school rehab centre; most significantly, about a dozen deaf people including several widely respected and experienced former teachers in deaf school. Also attending was Prof. Zhang Ningsheng, Director of Special Education at Liaoning Normal University, who is interested in bilingualism and influential in the field of special education.

**23 May Nanjing workshop.**

**24 May** Demonstration of storytelling by Linda Day with the bilingual class. Meeting on Sign Language Research (LD) with the Nanjing SL research team.

**25 May** Travel to Kunming - AC and PM with WAA. Met Kate Wedgwood, Head of SCF to discuss project and future funding.

**26 May** Visited Kunming rehab school (Director, Mr Yang). Saw around Expo 99. Met Kate again with proposal.

**27 May** Kunming workshop (AC, PM and WAA).

**28 May** Kunming workshop.

**29 May** Travel to Beijing.

**30 May** Flight from Beijing to London.

### **Workshop outcomes**

1. **Hefei.** The original aim was simply to introduce the concepts and practical aspects of Sign Bilingual education, without expecting that at this stage teachers would necessarily want or be able to make any changes in their schools/rehabs. Effectively, this appeared to be the result of the workshop: teachers were attentive and argumentative over the key issues, especially in the breaks when discussing with each other. But we were not approached by any individuals who wanted to start making changes in their school toward a Sign Bilingual provision as we had been in Jiangsu last year, for example. Key figures, such as the APEC official and the Director of the rehab centre, did not express strong interest or declare their backing for the project. However, we felt that the group as a whole had grasped the basic concepts of Sign Bilingual education and it is possible that further exposure and discussion would produce more tangible results in terms of concrete action.

David (Dai Chunsheng of SCF) was an excellent interpreter and very efficient. We very much enjoyed working with him in Hefei. At the same time it would be unrealistic to expect him to provide local management for any project there, unless he came to know much more about deaf education.

2. **Nanjing.** The 1998 workshop resulted in several schools wanting to implement changes in their schools. Suzhou Deaf School in particular were very enthusiastic, and in the intervening year they have started sign language storytelling and discussion sessions for the 11-13 year olds in their school: this is run by a Deaf member of staff and is very popular with the children. They are keen to do more and get further guidance. Other schools are interested but have not been able to get anything definite established.

The main feature of this workshop was the active participation of about twelve deaf people, mostly teachers though a few parents were also present. A Chinese sign language interpreter interpreted all the presentations and discussions, including the contributions of the deaf participants. There is no doubt that their support for Sign Bilingualism is very strong, and based on their empathy for and understanding of deaf children.

The **sign language research team** met with Linda, Prof. Zhang and others to discuss practical issues. Mr Shen and a group of five would like to travel to the UK for a study visit at their own expense, probably in September this year. Linda will co-ordinate this.

3. **Kunming.** Our expectations were similar to those we had for Hefei: that we would provide an introductory workshop but not expect more than to

convey and discuss the basic issues. In the event, the trainees were very enthusiastic and responsive. The Deputy Head of Kunming Deaf School, Ms Cao, was strongly expressive of her interest. There was a lot of informative feedback and lively discussion. We were struck by the difference between this group and the group in Hefei: maybe the Yunnan participants' experience of teaching deaf children from minorities, or less influence by central directives, made them more flexible and open-minded. We felt that it would be definitely be possible to work with Ms Cao, and with Mr Yang of the rehab centre, in implementing more practical steps.

Yang Hai Yu (SCF) made very good arrangements for the Kunming workshop, as well as efficiently organising the details of our accommodation and travel. He provided very good interpretation for a section of the workshop, and was also helpful in talking to some of the teachers and providing feedback on their views. We got the impression that he quickly gained a good understanding of the aims of Sign Bilingual education.

## Evaluation

Participants at all three workshops were given evaluation sheets (1) to check their understanding of the key issues; (2) to elicit their suggestions as to possible improvements in the workshop. The first aim seemed by and large to have been achieved. As for improvements, trainees did not provide any direct criticism of the content or delivery of the workshop presentations, but did suggest the following (only the main recommendations have been extracted from the evaluation sheets):

- 1 A manual on Sign Bilingualism would be very helpful as a guide to practice.
- 2 Workshops should be longer than only two days - three to five days were suggested.
- 3 A number of participants wanted to be able to see good practice with their own eyes. Use of video material is clearly one answer to this. Some participants specified that they would like to visit bilingual rehab centres or schools (or provision in the UK) so they could get a better idea of how educational techniques were used in practice.
- 4 Participants also wanted direct support within their schools to set up Sign Bilingual classes.

## Summary

The three workshops were all worthwhile and generative although perhaps different things were achieved in Hefei, Nanjing and Kunming. The following points indicate where the three of us (AC, PM and WAA) feel further progress can be made and initiatives established.

- 1 **Training manual and video.** This was requested by teachers in all the workshops, both as a way of reinforcing what they had learnt and also for reference and practical guidance. Now that we are very familiar with teachers' concerns and the areas where problems arise, we can address these in writing the manual (PM and AC). A video, made with Chinese deaf people signing, will also be particularly valuable, for example in showing examples of good practice.

- 2 Supporting change towards Sign Bilingual practice in schools.** Some schools are now very motivated to undertake steps towards becoming sign bilingual, which includes bringing in Deaf staff or increasing the role of existing deaf staff, and supporting them appropriately. They are also introducing activities such as storytelling, which develop children's language and learning skills. All of this is linked to establishing a language policy in the school that promotes the use of natural sign language. Workshops and training visits to the specific schools by UK team members and WAA should be very constructive and supportive; in addition, WAA from Amity will be able to provide follow-up advice and support.
- 3 Supporting research by Chinese colleagues into Chinese sign language.** There is already a dictionary of Chinese signs and an attempt to standardise the range of sign vocabularies all over China, but there has been no research at all into the unique grammar of sign language, which differs greatly from the grammar of spoken Chinese. Research is essential to provide an understanding and recognition of Deaf people's natural sign language. This is essential for staff and children to develop their sign language skills which in turn will raise the achievement of deaf children and lead to greater recognition of the rights of Deaf people to their language and culture. Equally importantly, it will give deaf children and adults a positive sense of self-identity. The Nanjing SL research team, led by Mr Shen Yulin and Prof. Guo Xi (from the Linguistics Dept. of Nanjing Normal University) have already started collecting data from Deaf people and are already committed to the project.
- 4 Work with families with deaf children.** Chinese teachers note the difficulty of involving parents in their deaf children's education: a major difficulty is that many parents do not learn sign language, resulting in communication problems at home. The next phase of this project needs specifically to address parents' concerns and to find ways of supporting them more effectively. Sign language classes for parents taught by a deaf teacher is one solution. Generally speaking, parents need to be involved very much more in their child's education.

In conclusion, we felt that the three workshops were very useful in increasing understanding of the issues involved in bilingual education. Clearly many teachers in deaf schools feel frustrated by the inadequacies of the methods in use, and are keen to try a method which will enable deaf children to learn better. There is also readiness in many cases to work with Deaf staff and to recognise the value of their role in deaf education. There are obstacles in the structural characteristics of the Chinese educational system: the inflexibility of the curriculum, the emphasis on the written language rather than on effective communication, and the sometimes rigid staffing structures in schools. However, the development of the bilingual pre-school class in Nanjing and the work by the teachers in Suzhou suggests progress can be made. It is clearly of pivotal importance that the Head of Basic Education for Jiangsu province, Mr Chen Yiji, strongly supports Sign Bilingualism and wants to see concrete changes towards this in the deaf school system. Very much more could be done if substantial support for these initiatives could be provided as outlined in our proposal to SCF (May 1999).

Alison Callaway/Pete Makey  
22 June 1999  
(updated October 1999)

## Appendix 1: **Nanjing Deaf School - Bilingual Project**

Elvire Roberts

Linda Day and I were fortunate to have several days observing activities in Nanjing Deaf School and the Sign Bilingual Nursery before the workshop participants arrived and the school was put more formally on show. So we had a chance to perceive the everyday activities and normal interaction between staff and pupils.

There were several points that Linda made both informally and in a later formal feedback session that related to general teaching methods and more specific teaching methods with deaf children. It seemed that neither of the two deaf teachers employed had had formal training as to teaching methods when working with pre-school children and this was a gap in their knowledge that they were eager to fill. However, it became obvious from subsequent observations that they would need regular support and reinforcement of appropriate teaching methods. To some extent, the lack of focus on teaching methods may well reflect the situation in teacher training in general in China, and some of the teaching styles follow traditional patterns that are no longer deemed educationally sound in Britain.

The deaf and hearing staff seemed to work well together, although there was occasional tension between the two deaf staff. We were surprised that with such a widely differing age range (4-7) in the group, there was no use of one-to-one tasking, particularly since there are always a "spare" teacher whose energies were purely focused on ensuring the children behaved. Some of the children were clearly very bored and could be given much more challenging work. Linda and Pete Makey identified this in a tactful way during the formal feedback.

There is some work being done on introducing Chinese characters, explaining their meaning in CSL, and starting the children on writing characters. There is however scope for doing this much more than at present and in an exploratory, not parrot, fashion. It is unfortunate that pure repetition (*bei*) is still so much a part of their education system.

The staff were very open to receiving feedback, and I was particularly pleased to see that the Deputy Head Zhu was positive about the bilingual group and aware of the teaching issues. This is quite a difference from her cooler attitude when I first met her in 1995. Likewise her attitude towards Chinese Sign Language (CSL) as deaf people's natural first language, as opposed to Sign Supported Chinese (SSC) had undergone a shift: while she did not necessarily advocate CSL as the language of education, she did understand the difference.

I cannot emphasise enough how important Wu An'an's role has been in reinforcing the basic concepts of Sign Bilingualism and keeping the project on track.

The school as a whole uses sign language and speech as the teachers' mode of communicating. The sign language used is always SSC and fluency in it is extremely variable. Some classes have more of an emphasis on oral repetition and lip-reading; new teachers are given a crash course in SSC and it is then up to them to pick up the rest from the students. We did not see any teachers use CSL, apart from the deaf teacher, but the students used CSL among themselves. Although oral repetition and

use of SSC was part of classroom practice. It was good to see the students were not reprimanded in any way for having poor speech or using CSL instead of SSC. For the school as a whole to make the shift towards Sign Bilingualism, there would need to be a lot of re-training and probable replacing of staff, as well as alteration of teaching methods.

### **Sign Language Linguistics**

This has been a particularly fruitful part of the visit/training and it is hoped that links between Nanjing University Applied Linguistics Department (Nanjing being the Chinese equivalent of Cambridge University) and Bristol University Centre for Deaf Studies will get research in sign linguistics off the ground. Certainly there was a great deal of academic interest and valuable support from a major figure in Special Education publications. Linda's input was invaluable, giving them information on methodology, guidelines as to obtaining viable source material, and examples of linguistic items to look out for. It was extremely useful to hold a linguistics research group meeting with specialists in the field, separate from the general bilingual training. I hope this bears fruit and will result in future academic exchange. Linguistics and socio-linguistics research is an essential foundation stone for progressing China's official attitude towards sign language and Sign Bilingualism.

### **Interpreting Issues**

As a whole the Chinese-English interpreters were excellent, but it was vital during the training days that Alison and I could understand the Chinese translation sufficiently to correct many mistranslations as well rectify omissions. There were frequent instances when Linda and Pete would have been ignorant of events if I had not been able to translate from Chinese to British Sign Language. It was also useful for Pete and Alison to use the Chinese-English interpreters in one location while I could interpret for Linda in a different location. If a sign language interpreter without Chinese skills were to be used, it would be essential that a highly skilled Chinese-English interpreter be more available to the deaf member of the team.

It is also worth noting that most sign language interpreters would not work the hours I worked, nor would accept the relatively low pay, never mind in Renminbi. I accepted this because of my personal interest in the project and have no complaints, but it is important to bear in mind for future projects.

### **General Comments**

I found the whole project satisfying and was delighted with the generally positive response. One can become rather cynical in the field of deaf work and while there is still clearly a very long way to go, there is an awareness in Chinese deaf education of the need for change and an eagerness for more training and guidance.

I think our team would all agree that we worked together and supported each other admirably. Each of us provided a valuable contribution, but I would particularly like to thank Alison Callaway for having created the project and found the funding. Without her commitment and conviction, this valuable piece of work would never have happened. I would also like to thank Wu An'an for her untiring effort in Amity Foundation, Nanjing.