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EDITORIAL

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Sign language and inclusive deaf education: An Asian perspective

KEYWORDS Sign language; Asia; bimodal bilingual; inclusive education

Recent decades have seen a growing trend of inclusive education for deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) students, emphasising access to a full curriculum, oral language development with assistive hearing devices such as digital hearing aids and cochlear implantation, and social interactions with hearing peers. Amidst these developments, there is research showing consistently that (a) language and learning outcomes of implanted children are diverse and a potential gap in ultimate attainment may exist between implanted and hearing children's language development (Wie et al., 2020); (b) DHH students' inclusive experiences in mainstream classrooms are highly complex (Todorov et al., 2022); (c) late exposure to language potentially results in DHH children's linguistic deprivation with prolonged effects on their language, literacy, and cognitive skills development (Cheng & Mayberry, 2019; Humphries et al., 2016). On the other hand, contributions of sign language are observed in research in which DHH students with early exposure to the language (a) score comparatively to their hearing peers on standardised spoken language and literacy tests (Davidson et al., 2014; Goodwin & Lillo-Martin, 2019), and (b) demonstrate a positive correlation between sign language and spoken language development (Hoffmeister et al., 2022 between ASL, English literacy skills and reading comprehension; Tang et al., 2014 between HKSL, Oral Cantonese and written Chinese). In deaf education, discussions about sign bilingual education in deaf school settings are generally underscored by the concept of "sign bilingualism" (Plaza-Pust & Morales-LÓpez, 2008) and the interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 2006). The advent of sign linguistics research, particularly bimodal bilingual acquisition, has given sign bilingualism a more transparently linguistic orientation and sign bilingual education an injection of theoretical and empirical support. From a linguistic perspective, sign language is no longer seen as a last resort when all else fails but as an effective hinge for success in DHH children's language, cognitive, academic, and socio-psychological development. Crosslinguistic interactions in bimodal bilingual acquisition are seen as natural acquisition processes to support bilingual development in a signed language and a spoken language such that sign language should not be seen as "an intruder" of DHH's children oral language development with negative impacts, but a constructive partner in shaping their bilingual development. Despite these new discoveries, efforts to promote inclusive education for DHH students have led to a global decline in the number of schools for the deaf and DHH students with sign language competence, as deaf schools with signing deaf students are the citadel for intergenerational sign language transmission.

In general education, the school environment and the medium of instruction are always matters of concern among educators and parents. In many non-English speaking countries, especially in Asia, it is not uncommon to find general classrooms from

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kindergarten to high school adopting English as the medium of instruction while the students are L1 speakers of another language. In other words, the school environment and the medium of instruction can be appropriately gauged for students to achieve bilingual competence and academic performance. When placed in the context of deaf education, this approach to bilingual education can be applied to both schools for the deaf and mainstream school settings. While schools for the deaf are practising sign bilingual education to various degrees, it is necessary to explore how sign bilingualism can be incorporated into mainstream education to support DHH students in achieving academic performance and bimodal bilingual competence. A common practice is recruiting educational sign interpreters to support DHH students' lesson comprehension and classroom interactions, assuming the students have the corresponding sign language competence to sustain learning. Another approach is to explore importing sign language into mainstream classrooms through a Deaf or hearing teacher proficient in signing to co-teach with a regular teacher. Kirchner's (1994) co-enrolment approach can be seen as an attempt to advocate sign bilingualism in mainstream education. In this approach, sign language becomes a medium of instruction in addition to spoken language in supporting a critical mass of DHH students to study with hearing peers, ensuring their full participation and accessibility to lesson contents and interactions. Marschark et al. (2019) offer an excellent discussion about the countries practising co-enrolment education.

In this special issue, "Sign Language in Mainstream Education in Asia", we focus on these two means of recruiting sign language to support DHH students in mainstream education. A number of Asian countries are exploring incorporating sign language into mainstream education through various means, such as China and its special administrative regions – Hong Kong & Macau, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand and Singapore. Some of them have documented the process systematically and will appear in this special issue. The article by Liu et al. examines the situation of educational sign interpreting in mainstream education for the deaf in Taiwan. Results of a questionnaire survey and interviews with stakeholders, including DHH students at various educational levels, parents, a resource teacher and an educational sign interpreter, revealed a cogent need to refine the existing services in response to the Special Education Act that went into force in 1997. There are challenging tasks ahead: (a) to devise strategies to secure the trust and moderate the high expectations of parents who enrol their children in mainstream education with sign interpretation support; (b) to recognise the social status and define the role of educational sign interpreters in the classroom at different educational levels as well as to ensure sufficient financial resources to attract more interpreters to join the education arena; and (c) to align interpreters and parents' expectations about the sign language proficiency of DHH students for them to optimally benefit from the service, and their education. The other three papers focus on situations in Hong Kong and China. While it is common to set up a specialist classroom with sign language support alongside a regular mainstream system, allowing DHH students to receive education in both an inclusive and a specialist setting, the three articles by Thierfelder et al., Yiu, and Li et al. report on a different system that adopts Kirchner's co-enrolment approach by grouping DHH and hearing students in a regular classroom. This recent approach generates many research questions. Thierfelder et al. investigated the development of Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL) by 31 DHH students with ages of exposure to the language ranging from 1;92 to 9;33. Since they underwent co-enrolment education, a concern emerged about whether they had sufficient HKSL knowledge to engage in learning. Results suggested age of acquisition effects, but the DHH students with hearing parents closed the gap in most HKSL structures

compared to DHH students with Deaf parents at the end of the two-year assessment period. More importantly, a positive correlation was observed between their oral Cantonese and HKSL performance, implying no negative impact of HKSL acquisition on the children's oral language development. Yiu tracked the academic attainment of Chinese, English and Mathematics of 24 DHH students over six years, from Primary 1 to Primary 6, to address the concern of parents and educators about the impact of incorporating sign language in DHH's students' education. Since the scores were obtained based on a territory-wide academic achievement test for primary students with norms established for each subject at each grade level, the author could profile the academic performance of these DHH students closely year by year. By Primary 6, they reached the territory norm for English and Mathematics but one level lower (i.e., Primary 5 standard) for Chinese, as only 50% of the P6 DHH students reached the territory norm. In other words, co-enrolment education supports their academic attainment in these subjects to some extent, given time. The last paper by Li et al. described a co-enrolment programme established in an integrated kindergarten in Zhejiang Province of China, which houses a rehabilitation unit for DHH children. The DHH children's vocabulary development was not directly assessed but through reports provided by hearing teachers on their Mandarin Chinese and Deaf teachers on Chinese Sign Language (CSL). The authors found more positive growth in Mandarin Chinese than CSL vocabulary and suspected it was caused by inadequate input from Deaf teachers, as there were just four to support 12 classes from all levels. Views from parents and teachers, hearing and Deaf alike, revealed positive attitudes towards the co-enrolment approach in learning and social interactions, albeit to different degrees, and they also suggested promoting the approach to other kindergartens in China.

The four papers in the special issue by no means provide a complete picture of the role of sign language in supporting DHH students in mainstream education in Asia. More research is necessary to unveil the interactions between programming strategies involving sign language and learning outcomes. There are many ways to involve sign language in mainstream classrooms, including the provision of sign interpretation, the extent of sign language use, the adoption of signing varieties, the involvement of Deaf teachers, and the number of DHH student placements per class. A diverse range of classroom arrangements is also common in classes with DHH students, such as pull-out teaching or whole-class versus individual learning activities. Combinations of any of these pedagogical variables inevitably interact with the characteristics of DHH students with highly diverse backgrounds, thus yielding different learning outcomes.

Programming strategies aside, the stigmatisation of sign language in Asian society, education in particular, is an invisible hurdle for bringing sign language into a mainstream classroom, where the conventional wisdom is to use this venue to nurture DHH students' oral language and social integration skills. This might explain the low service usage of educational interpreting in Taiwan. On the other hand, the stigmatisation seems to disappear when the hearing peers in the China programme learn CSL to interact with their deaf peers, and parents perceive it to be a meaningful educational practice. Where sign language is a minority language in education, having minimal exposure by DHH children until they enter a system that provides it, it is reasonable to question when would be most appropriate or cost-effective to phase in sign language interpretation for it to become an effective support to "mediated education" (Russell, 2021). Another thorny issue is whether and to what extent elementary DHH students benefit from classroom teaching and interactions that favour information transmission in both signed and spoken languages still being acquired by these children.

While the theories of bimodal bilingual acquisition, sign bilingualism, and interdependence hypothesis each have their own independent assumptions, they share the possibility of interaction between two language knowledge domains. This commonality is further espoused by the proposal of "translanguaging in deaf education" put forward by Swanwick (2017), who cautions against misinterpreting translanguaging as learning a sign language, a minority language, to support the development of a spoken language, the language of the larger majority, in a bilingual classroom. Instead, one may interpret the concept as how DHH individuals employ their additive linguistic repertoire, defined as "a set of integrated skills across languages" (p. 5) in making meaning through language expression. Nevertheless, a mainstream classroom with the presence of deaf and hearing participants plus signed and spoken languages occurring simultaneously makes the multisensory educational process highly complex, and hence, deserving of our attention. While the need for sign interpretation support is ascertained in the Taiwan study, and the learning outcomes may look encouraging in studies from Hong Kong and China, empirical research on the impact of this multisensory classroom on DHH students' learning outcomes is highly sought after. Swanwick et al. (2022) suggested a form of classroom process research, which requires a careful analysis of the interactional processes involved when deaf and hearing participants are engaged in the educational process, to evaluate how and to what extent they synchronise the discharge and reception of information signals, linguistic and contextual, in different modalities to achieve communication effectiveness. Indeed, they observed breakdowns of inclusivity when the use of communication modes was not sufficiently synchronised due to different sensory demands between the deaf and hearing participants. According to them, "Translanguaging … does not guarantee an inclusive experience for learners, and indeed can give rise to confusion and a fragmented language experience." (p. 13). Applying this analytical framework to examining the multisensorial interaction processes occurring in mainstream classrooms that promote bimodal bilingualism and collaborative teaching and learning between deaf and hearing participants would inform researchers and educators of the linguistic, pedagogical and socio-psychological conditions that contribute to the degree of inclusivity of the school environment and learning experiences of DHH students.

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