

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Unit of Assessment (UoA): 33

Title of case study: Improving the social conditions of deaf people and sign language through sign linguistics research

(1) Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

For HK and Asia, the lack of research in Sign Linguistics has led to sign language being misconceived as gesture and obstructive to Deaf people's development. They are barred from information accessibility through sign language, which affects their education and upward mobility.

Sign Linguistics research at CUHK triggers changes in society. Findings that sign language reflect linguistic properties and are acquirable by deaf children gradually change society's attitudes towards sign language and Deaf people, affirm the utility of bimodal bilingual education in nurturing inclusiveness in society, and support governments and universities to develop public services and education programmes involving sign language.

(2) Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Sign Linguistics research, with the underlying assumption that sign language is a fully-fledged natural language, has a short history of development. It began in the US in 1960s, and it was not until 1990s when similar research emerged in Asia, at CUHK. Before then, Some Deaf people did not even reckon they possessed a language transmitted in the visual modality.

Tang's (2007) *Hong Kong Sign Language: A Trilingual Dictionary with Linguistics Descriptions* signals her first collaboration with the Deaf community in systematically documenting the signing varieties in Hong Kong. Years of research on HKSL phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics [3.1], and information structure [3.2] lays the foundation for building a Reference Grammar of HKSL (GRF Project #6903811, 2014-2017) to support developments in applied domains of sign language teaching, sign interpretation and deaf education in HK. Other research projects led by Sze include documenting the sign language varieties in Macau (Endangered Languages Documentation Programme #SG0252, 2013-2015), Sri Lanka and Indonesia (GRF Project #450113, 2014-2016).

Tang and Sze's child HKSL research began with a GRF Project (#AL03351, 2004-2006), focusing on deaf children's development of simultaneous constructions, perfective aspect, agreement, classifier predicates [3.3], and code blending (i.e. mixing of both signed and spoken languages) [3.4]. Recently, they brought deaf children's bimodal bilingual acquisition under their scope of research, focusing on their development of discourse referencing [3.5] and locative constructions. The findings confirm deaf children's intrinsic capacity for acquiring spoken and signed languages simultaneously, thus dispelling the misconception that acquiring signed language impedes their spoken language development. They also observe that early bimodal bilingual exposure ensures a higher level of language attainment.

Based on these findings, Tang hypothesizes that a school environment with ample early input in HKSL and spoken languages is facilitative, and that social integration between deaf and hearing students in an inclusive setting is achievable when critical masses of these populations are nurtured to become bimodal bilinguals proficient in signed and spoken languages. In 2006, Tang, Sze and

other colleagues at CSLDS launched Asia's first deaf education qua research programme - Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrolment Education (SLCO) for deaf and hearing students in mainstream education. The SLCO programme, which supports children from age 0-18, recruits Deaf teachers who serve as linguistic and social role models and who coteach with hearing teachers in the SLCO classroom. Research results show a positive correlation in the grammatical development of deaf children's written Chinese, Cantonese and HKSL [3.6], and better oral language development than those deaf children enrolled individually in mainstream education. Research on social integration shows positive peer support and appreciation for diversity among the SLCO children. The principals and hearing teachers acknowledge the educational value of the presence of Deaf teachers in the school context. A spin-off GRF project to fill the gap in assessing the written Chinese grammar of deaf children in HK and China was obtained (Project #14611315, 2016-2018). Another GRF project was granted to evaluate the cognitive and linguistic benefits of sign bilingualism to deaf and hearing children (Project# 14621718, 2019-2022)

(3) References to the research (indicative maximum of 6 references)

- 3.1 Sze, F. & Tang, G. (2019). R-impersonals in Hong Kong Sign Language. *Sign Language and Linguistics*, 21(2): 284-306, <https://doi.org/10.1075/sll.00021.sze>
- 3.2 Sze, F. (2015). Is Hong Kong Sign Language a topic-prominent language? *Linguistics* 53(4), 809-876.
- 3.3 Tang, G. & Li, J. (2018). Acquisition of classifier constructions in HKSL by bimodal bilingual deaf children of hearing parents, *Frontiers in Psychology*, July 2018. v.9, 1148. doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01148
- 3.4 Fung, H.-M Cat, Tang, G. (2016). Code-blending of functional heads in Hong Kong Sign Language and Cantonese: A case study. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*. Cambridge University Press, 19(4). doi:10.1017/S1366728915000747
- 3.5 Sze, F., Tang, G., Lau, T., Lam, E., & Yiu, C. (2015). The development of discourse referencing in Cantonese of deaf/hard-of-hearing children. *Journal of Child Language*, 42(2), 351-393.
- 3.6 Tang, G., Lam, S., Yiu, C. (2014). Language development of deaf children in a sign bilingual and co-enrollment environment. In Marschark, M., Tang, G., Knoors, H. (eds.) *Bilingualism and Bilingual Deaf Education*. Oxford University Press, pp. 313-342.

(4) Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Establishing Sign Linguistics research and subsequently The Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies (CSLDS) for the first time in HK and Asia signifies the researchers' efforts to requite the Deaf community for their collaborative support for research in Sign Linguistics. The series of impact activities have led to the changes in society:

(A) Recognizing the status of sign language and Deaf people

The research on sign language documentation has attracted donations from the Nippon Foundation in Japan (US\$8,072,700 up to 2019) for CSLDS to replicate similar activities (The APSL Program <http://www.cslds.org/apsl/>) in Asia, directly benefitting Deaf individuals, Deaf associations and universities from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, The Philippines, Vietnam, Japan, Fiji, Cambodia and Myanmar.

For the first time in Asia, training Deaf people through CSLDS's sub-degree programmes in Sign Linguistics opens up their opportunities for tertiary education and professional engagement in society. Among the 58 Deaf graduates between 2013 and 2019, two HK and one Indonesian Deaf adults, who aspire to become a Deaf sign linguist, successfully completed their BA and are now reading MA in Linguistics.

As Kenny Chu says [5.1],

“Before joining the APSL, ... I thought I was abnormal. I also wrongly believed that sign language was just some gestures ... APSL changed my perceptions, making me believe that even if I am a Deaf person, I still have my dreams and talents.”

Other Deaf graduates became either Sign Linguistics trainers for the Deaf, sign language instructors at local universities, advisors to governments, teachers for the deaf and sign interpreters. Their presence in society with transformed abilities has boosted the public’s confidence in sign language and Deaf people. As Brayon Kodithuwakku from Sri Lanka states [5.2],

“I am now on the committee for preparing the Disability Rights Bill and the Sign Language Bill under the Ministry of Social Services, and the Advisory committee of the Ministry of Education which discusses education of Disabled children and I am representing Deaf children.”

Since 2014, research centres have begun to emerge at universities in Japan, Indonesia [5.3] and Sri Lanka, aiming to establish research and training in Sign Linguistics for the country. At the grassroots level, CSLDS also offer training to Deaf organizations. As Fr. Dittmeier of DPP-Cambodia says [5.4],

“Our sign language committee is now acquiring the linguistic knowledge and tools they need to continue their work with Cambodian Sign Language.... The involvement and input from CSLDS has also helped to change Krousar Thmey’s (deaf school) attitude toward sign language.”

Locally, Gladys Tang was invited to join the Task Force for Sign Language Promotion under the Labour and Welfare Bureau (LWB) in 2010, to advise on developing sign language services in HK. Since 2013, LWB started to fund CSLDS for constructing the HKSL Browser (<http://www.cslds.org/hkslbrowser/index.jsp?lang=en>), to support local developments and services [5.5]. Sign interpretation appeared in Legislative Council meetings since 2016, and TV news broadcast since 2018.

(B) Transforming deaf education

Research on how deaf children acquire HKSL and Cantonese simultaneously has attracted donations (HK\$108,412,940 up to 2019) to innovate the SLCO approach in inclusive education in HK (<http://www.cslds.org/slco/en/index.php>) since 2006. Both the deaf and the hearing children [5.6] as well as the school principals claim the SLCO approach removes barriers of communication and facilitates an appreciation for diversity in inclusive education. According to one of the principals, a recent school review by the Bureau concluded with this statement [5.7]:

“We have observed the peers have get along well, and the school campus has a caring atmosphere. Students are obviously studying in an inclusive environment.”

In 2014 and 2017, some Legislative Council members motioned to support the rights of sign language in education [5.8]. Impact on child health is evidenced by CSLDS unprecedentedly collaborating with the Child Assessment Centre of the Department of Health since 2013, advising parents on early sign language support [5.9]. As Dr Lam states,

“I am pleased to see continuous dialogue and collaboration between your colleagues and those at Child Assessment Service ... increasing number of parents are now approaching your centre for early (sign language) support ... Over the years, I have seen numerous cases of success with these children at the SLCO schools.”

The SLCO Programme has attracted 3943 visits from 34 countries, as well as 163 media coverages, including newspapers, magazines, radio and TV programmes. Support for teacher training in inclusive education has been rendered increasingly up to three local universities since 2011. Beyond HK, consultancy for developing SLCO education is provided to two deaf schools in China [5.10], and to the governments of Singapore and Macau since 2017.

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1 Testimonial from a Deaf BA graduate in Linguistics
- 5.2 Testimonial from a former Higher Diploma Deaf graduate - Brayan Kodithuwakku from Sri Lanka
- 5.3 Testimonial from the Director of The Sign Language Research Laboratory, University of Indonesia
- 5.4 Testimonial from the Director of Deaf Development Programme, Cambodia
- 5.5 Testimonial from The Labour and Welfare Bureau, HKSAR Government
- 5.6 Testimonial from a hearing student of the SLCO Programme (in Chinese with English translations)
- 5.7 Testimonial from a secondary school principal overseeing the SLCO Programme (in Chinese with English translations)
- 5.8 Legislative Council meetings to discuss the benefits of SLCO education
- 5.9 Testimonial from Dr. Lam, former Head of Child Assessment Service, Department on Health
- 5.10 Testimonial from the principal of a deaf school in Quzhou, China (in Chinese with English translations)