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Methods of Teaching Deaf Children in Singapore and Malaysia*

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The population of Singapore in February 1990 is 2.7 million while that of Malaysia is 17.6 million, with per capita GNP at US\$10,521 and US\$2,050 respectively (Almanac, 1990). Both countries are multi-ethnic and multi-religious. In the case of Singapore, the Chinese comprise 76%, Malays 15.1%, Indians 6.5% and others 2.4% (Singapore, 1989) while the corresponding percentages for Malaysia are 32.1, 59.0 (including other Bumiputera or Sons of the Soil), 8.2 and 0.7 respectively (Information, 1989). Both nations have contrasting youthful populations which have educational implications, with Singapore having 23.1% of its population under 15 years of age and Malaysia 26%.

Education in Singapore and Malaysia is not compulsory, with children beginning primary education at the age of six years. Formal education up to pre-university level for the Singapore student lasts for an average of 10 years while that for the Malaysian counterpart is 11 years.

Education of Deaf Children in Singapore

Formal special education for hearing-impaired children in Singapore began with the establishment of the Singapore Oral School for the Deaf in 1951¹. Three years later in 1954, the Singapore Sign School for the Deaf was separately set up. Soon after in 1957, the Canossian Oral School for the Deaf (the Hearing-Impaired

* A paper read at the International Congress on Education of the Deaf, Rochester, New York, July 29 – August 3, 1990. Prof. Michael Rodda, University of Alberta, read it on behalf of the author.

subsequently) made its appearance². Educators in Singapore felt the need to reconcile the two apparently opposing camps of Oralism and Manualism and the Singapore Sign School and the Singapore Oral School finally merged in 1963 (Signal, 1989) and adopted Total Communication as an official policy of the Singapore Association for the Deaf from 1976 (Signal, 1990). Although graduated from the Oral School of Manchester University in 1974, the Principal of the Singapore School for the Deaf could appreciate the benefits of Total Communication³. What is significant is that according to the Executive Director of the Singapore Association for the Deaf, it was Total Communication together with Signing Exact English that made it possible for the Association's deaf students to follow the regular school curriculum and sit for and compete with hearing peers the same Primary School Leaving Examination (Gwee, 1990). Since 1987, resource teachers have been permitted to do direct sign language interpretation for hearing-impaired students mainstreamed at the Mount Vernon Secondary School (Gwee, 1990).

The Canossian School for the Hearing Impaired did not adopt an Oral philosophy throughout its growth since 1957. Some time later, it used the Total Communication system but in 1989, according to the current School Principal, the Auditory-Oral Approach for the Nursery, Pre-primary and Primary One classes was implemented to 'maximise the use of the children's residual hearing and to enable them to learn language in a natural way ...' (Tan, 1990).

Education of Deaf Children in Malaysia

Formal special education for deaf children in Malaysia began in 1954 (Chua, 1976). On 18.9.1989, there were 2958 hearing impaired students enrolled in two special residential schools, 22 special day schools and 64 special classes in regular schools from primary through secondary level⁴. These special schools and classes are found in all the 13 states and the Federal Territory. With 372 special education teachers deployed by the Ministry of Education, the teacher-pupil ratio is 1:8, a good ratio even by international standards. The medium of instruction is Malay, the National Language.

Methods of **Teaching** the Deaf In Malaysia

In Malaysia, formal education of deaf pupils utilized essentially the oral approach (Chua, 1977). The choice of methodology was more the result of historical accident rather than academic consideration. The first organiser of deaf education in the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, and the early special education teachers were trained to use oralism, also referred as the Oral method or the Oral/Aural method, i.e. a method of teaching hearing-impaired children that makes use of auditory training, oral training, speech or lip-reading and writing (Davis, 1986). However, since the early 1970's, there has been a trend towards using Total Communication, which "seeks to draw the best from all existing and known methods: the best of speech, lip-reading and language teaching; the use of all available residual hearing; the acceptance of the natural gestures of all young deaf children and the use and development of correct sign language and finger-spelling" (Moore, 1976). A formal switch by the Ministry of Education may be said to have been made in March 1978, with the establishment of the Ministry's Working Committee on Total Communication (Ministry, 1988).

Partly to survey the current status of methodology used by special educators of Malaysia and its effectiveness, questionnaire forms were sent out in 1989 through the various State Education Departments to 372 teachers teaching deaf children in all the States of Malaysia, including Sarawak, Sabah and the Federal Territory⁵. 325 teachers (87.4%) responded, representing all the 13 states and Federal Territory.

Characteristics of **Special** Education Teachers of the Deaf in Malaysia

Of the 325 special teachers of the deaf who responded, 231 (71.1%) had special training to teach the deaf. 205 (63.1%) received training emphasizing Total Communication, 5 (1.5%) on manualism (sign language and finger spelling), 27 (8.3%) on oralism and 88 (27.1%) had had no special training in any one of these areas. The majority of teachers, 254 (78.2%) were trained at the Specialist Teachers Training Institute, Kuala Lumpur. 67 (20.6%) had had ten or

more years of teaching deaf students, whose ages ranged from 4 to 19 years old with the majority of teachers (227 or 69.8%) teaching primary school deaf children.

Findings of the Study on Teaching Methodology in Malaysia

The teachers were asked to give their professional opinions regarding the most effective method of teaching the hearing-impaired according to the degree of hearing loss (mild, moderate or severe). Expectedly there was an overwhelming choice for Total Communication. Two-thirds or more of the 325 teachers cited Total

Table 1

Professional Opinion of Teachers of the Deaf in Malaysia regarding the Most Effective Teaching Methodology

	Mild (%)	Moderately (%)	Severely (%)
1. Total Communication	220 (67.7)	273 (84.0)	254 (78.2)
2. Oralism Only	44 (13.5)	6 (1.8)	2 (0.6)
3. Oralism with Cued Speech	18 (5.5)	11 (3.4)	5 (1.5)
4. Malay Manual Code (Sign Language & Finger Spelling)	12 (3.7)	19 (5.8)	48 (14.8)
5. Finger Spelling/Manual Alphabet	1 (0.3)	1 (0.3)	2 (0.6)
6. Maternal Reflective Method	4 (1.2)	2 (0.6)	1 (0.3)
7. Others	26 (8.0)	13 (4.0)	13 (4.0)
Total :	325 (99.9%)	325 (99.9%)	325 (100%)

NB: Numbers in brackets are in percentages.

Item 1 in Table 2 could be interpreted loosely as measuring teachers' proficiency in using Total Communication. Based on the teacher's responses apparently just over two-thirds (68%) of them were proficient in using Total Communication. Regarding hearing-handicapped adults, surprisingly only 150 teachers (46.1%) opined that Total Communication was effective for the adult deaf population which might be explained by one or more of the following:

- (1) Many adult deaf in Malaysia have not gone through the formal special education system including mastering the Malay Manual Code, and therefore do not use Total Communication.
- (2) Many adult deaf in Malaysia only sign and finger-spell without voicing or mouthing language.

Recommendations

Based on the situation in Singapore and Malaysia, the following recommendations may be made:

- (1) With Total Communication being officially accepted, there is a need to standardize the use of sign language especially in Singapore, based on local cultural elements. The *Sign for Singapore*, published by Times Books International in 1990, is very timely but it lacks an index for ease of reference. Malaysia has made an attempt in this direction through publication of its first volume of *Komunikasi Seluruh: Bahasa Malaysia Kod Tangan Jilid 1 (Total Communication: Malay Manual Code Volume I)*, which has a vocabulary of 1612 words including prefixes and abbreviations unique to the Malay language, cited earlier.
- (2) More hearing people in Singapore and Malaysia need to learn Sign Language and the Manual Alphabet to provide more communication and social interaction between deaf and hearing people. We should aim towards the situation in the U.S.A. where it is "estimated that more hearing people

now know the language of signs than do deaf people" (Stuckless, 1976).

- (3) Some special education teachers especially in Malaysia need to attend further inservice courses to increase their proficiency in Sign Language and Finger Spelling as part of the Total Communication philosophy.
- (4) In view of the finding that 223 (68.6%) teachers of the deaf in Malaysia have expressed the wish to attend an in-service course on Cued Speech, plans should be made to mount such a course. The advantages of Cued Speech pioneered by Dr Corin Cornett and advocated by people like Heffernan (1972) and Tan (1988), include the following:
 - (a) it provides a clear visual means of communication between hearing-impaired children and their parents in the pre-school period and in the years to come and, thus, facilitates accuracy in speech reading,
 - (b) language is learned through the visual equivalent of spoken Bahasa Malaysia or English and not through a translation into finger-spelling or signs,
 - (c) a child taught through this method thinks and communicates in a verbal language,
 - (d) it is relatively easy to learn.

Conclusion

It is clear in Singapore and Malaysia that it is no longer an oralism-versus-manualism dichotomy in the education of deaf and hearing-impaired children. Both nations have adopted Total Communication as a matter of philosophy and policy, being cognizant of the best of both worlds. What has been recognized is the need to give every deaf child as early as possible in his life as much language as possible through whatever correct communication input. Rodda and Grove (1987) have summed it up beautifully, "It is not the need for some oral

communication that is in dispute: it is the espousal of this method of communication to the exclusion of all others".

1. Neo Sin Chow, in a completed Questionnaire dated 1/7/82, in Chua Tee Tee, *Some Aspects of Special Education in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand & the Philippines: A Comparative Study*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Malaya, 1976. 356.
2. Sister Helen Fernandez, in a completed Questionnaire dated 13.4.72 in Chua, Ibid.
3. In an interview with Miss Cheah Sou Mooi, Principal, Singapore School for the Deaf on 25.4.90.
4. Special Education Unit, Ministry of Education, Malaysia.
5. Permission to use part of the still unpublished data was given by Associate Professor Dr Khadijah Rohani Md. Yunus, Head, R & D Deaf Education Project, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya. Dr Chua Tee Tee was the former Project Head and is now its Advisor.

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