

Growing Up Bilingual in Australia

A ViệtSpeak Podcast - Episode 4

Title: Meet the Teachers – Cuc Lam

[THEME MUSIC]

Chi Vu: Hi, welcome to *Growing Up Bilingual in Australia*, the podcast where we speak with bilingual children and their parents about language, culture and what it feels like to be multilingual in Australia. I'm Chi Vu, a writer and educator. Today, something a little different: meet the teachers.

In late 2022, language advocacy group, ViệtSpeak, held a language and community symposium at Footscray Community Arts Centre. It was a fantastic day of panel discussions, workshops and more.

You're about to hear from a woman who played a pivotal role in language education in the Vietnamese community from when it first settled in Melbourne in the late 1970s and 80s. You might know Cuc Lam for her work as a councillor at the City of Maribyrnong. But today, she's here to tell us about her experiences as a bilingual education pioneer. Cuc Lam is a former School Council President of Western English Language School and Principal of Vietnamese Language School for over 15 years. As an 11 year-old, Cuc Lam moved away from her rural village to live with her sister in Saigon.

Chi: And so what was the Tây Ninh of your youth like? Can you paint a picture for us?

Cuc Lam: Sure. My youth during the war, my youth life is not an enjoyable at all. Because every day that you worry, you've been kidnapped, every day you worry that something wrong and sometimes your own way paranoid about that in your youth life. And that is why my primary, when I finished my primary school that I request my mother to send me to Saigon to study because that was a traumatic experience when you were young. Because on always you can hear gun, you can hear bullet at night or day. That is very, very difficult.

Chi: Yeah. Let's situate Tây Ninh a little bit in our minds. So where how far away from?

Cuc: Oh, I think for my, I put in the middle of Tây Ninh and Saigon about 66 or 70 kilometer. It's called Hiệp Thành, the Tây Ninh province.

Chi: Yeah. So very kind of village, small rural area village. And obviously the fighting was there going on at the time.

Cuc: During night or day. About 11 I went to Saigon to stay with my sister, my oldest sister.

Chi: Cuc's time in Saigon led her to more encounters with languages

Chi: So at this time you were studying in Saigon, were you learning English or another language?

Cuc: Yeah, yes. Yeah. As a secondary school I pick up English my first language and French is the second. So and then follow the way through until my HSC, the university. I like to learn English. I pick up English is my first language and French is my second language. Yeah, now my French very rusty [laughs].

Chi: Can we paint a little picture about what Saigon was like?

Cuc: Well, I have to be honest. When I have had very hard life, when am I youth. Because I stay with my sister, I have to help her with domestic chores, she working, so I have no leisure I have sort of, you know, I know what to do and to be honest, but up to now I don't know how to dance. I never learning then sort of luxury activity, or enjoyment, so I only work and support her. You know to help her with everything, so she give me a little bit money to pay to learn extra English in different school where the foreigner teaching English there, called Hội Việt Mỹ. Yeah, so I learned English there as well to substitute my secondary school. It's not much and I don't think one or two hours a week, it's not enough.

Chi: What did learning English or knowing English mean to you at this time?

Cuc: I love it. Learning, I would love it to learn very multi-skill and multilingual is so amazing that you can speak another language and I would love it, any language at all. You know, English, French, Chinese or whatever, learning another language, I'm able to understand their language and culture, it's amazing.

Chi: She didn't know it yet, but Cuc's natural interest in learning languages was about to help her through some of her toughest times.

Chi: And so at what point did you know that you were going to leave Vietnam?

Cuc: My strong and determined to leave the country in, my brother in laws, the sister I stay with, she passed away 1976 after the fall of Saigon, and that gave me a lot of lesson because we have the paper. My brother in law who worked for American embassy, we have all the paper, all the document to leave the country, which my sister was loved, the sister was loved one to be around and surround them and doesn't want to leave. So that pulled up, pulled back all everybody in the family, nobody could go. And so 1976 that I tried to escape. And I lost so much money's and thing you know, and sort of belonging, wasn't successful. That's why 1978 that's the last time, I think "this is gonna last one", if I couldn't get through

then maybe, you know, some crazy idea thing in my mind, maybe committed suicide, or something like that is really strong feeling and that because you unsuccessful 1976 and 1978. They just say "Oh, this is a last resort I don't have much money left."

Chi: So after the fall of Saigon in 1975, you felt very, it was very clear to you that this no longer felt like your country. And you tried to leave three times and had considered committing suicide if you weren't going to. You didn't want to be there. And so you left by boat to go

Cuc: On the river boat, river boat from Saigon. I actually went in Saigon, and we got we put our money together with one of my girlfriend, her uncle live in Cần Thơ. South west Vietnam and we out all our money together. And we pay our share we give to her and she, we all manage on together and we purchased some small boat and a big boat that we can carry. But this is a river boat, it's not a fishing boat. So when we saw that we say "Oh my god, we're gonna survive here or this gonna the last time we see our family". So it's on the river boat.

Chi: This was in the year 1978. Their boat took them to international waters, where they encountered the Malaysian navy.

Chi: Oh, okay. Yeah, yeah. And then they help.

Cuc: They help to Pulau Tengah Island, in Malaysia.

Chi: And so, on the island, you were asked to be an interpreter. How old were you?

Cuc: I wouldn't say my age. I always very secretive about my age [laughter]. But I when I landed Pulau Tengah is very, is sort of the island that less refugee than other Pulau Bidong. So we got about over 2000 people or 2500 people at that time and um, you know, I am an extrovert person [laughter]. And I love to help people. So the United Nation High Commissioner they need people like a receptionist or helping like acting on behalf or interpreter. I could speak English because on my boat they some other of our, my friends speak English, but because they were too worry, they male, and so only a female could speak and plead the Navy captain to rescue us. But I am very confident and I also want to help people at the refugee camp as well. So they asked me to acting like interpreter or help them at the reception, is what I did.

Chi: See with speaking another language, it's not just your technical knowledge of the language, it's also your confidence, and I guess your extroversion? And how kind of yeah, how strongly you feel about kind of connecting with others? Where does this confidence come from with language?

Cuc: I think when maybe from life experience, that I could go back, because when my I stay with my sister, and I help her with her business, so I deal with American people, when we're buying sell things and business to them. And so that I learned

from them and practical and also I say, well, what my I feel confident because I think, you know, we all human being and the way that I like to talk to people and open mind learn from other people. I feel like nothing worry me.

Chi: So as part of this early wave of Vietnamese refugees in Australia, and then because of your background, you can see all the struggles, all the hardship people are facing. And so you make a decision to help people kind of learn English.

Cuc: Yeah. I think from my experience, and I can see that I put myself in someone else's shoes. So I found that is very important for the people, language, cultures and also come to the new country that we have nothing. So anything that I could do that I would like to help I put my hand up and help whatever I could.

Chi: And so the Vietnamese community in Australia settled and ~~people you know,~~ enough people learned English, and then over time you saw a different need. You saw actually now the need is for the children to learn Vietnamese because they were losing that.

Cuc: I start to regret the life of my children. When they were young, I forced them I asked him to go learn Vietnamese because I run the school in 1985, 86 I think in Kensington. Then I think my predecessor he told me can you please take this take over this school? Because with my health, I could do that I put my hand up. And I say yes, no worry. I keep up until 15 years later. And I will meet all the parents there. I think we run the name of the school at that time we call Kensington parent club or something that teach Vietnamese school, because you don't forget, you don't worry about that you can't speak English, but you worry about the children can't speak Vietnamese. So you know, for that, for that I would like to maintain the language and particularly the mother-tongue and encourage the parents to take the children go to learn Vietnamese, and I only took, at that time I have my son and my daughter, I only take him to the Vietnamese school as well. And then later young one was born.

Chi: Yeah. And so when we were talking earlier you were saying that learning Vietnamese is not just about the language, can you tell me about some of the activities that you brought in to help illustrate or enrich the language.

Cuc: The Vietnamese language or any other language that including the culture, the tradition, the custom. For the last few years I'm advisor for the Vietnamese ochre dancing groups, and we have one member here today. We go into different festival events to performing dancing and singing as well. And they saw other culture or mainstream community they're very very welcome about that. Next year we're going to Canberra for the multicultural. We've been to Bright for the multicultural festival and Moomba and we participating in a number of events.

Chi: Do you have any advice for you know, this kind of generation of you know, language activists or teachers or parents who want to, you know, are trying to kind

of help second and third generation Vietnamese families children learn Vietnamese?

Cuc: Yes, if are giving me go back to another whatever year that tell bring the children but learned another language or learn to Vietnamese language, I think it's very very important to bring the children good to learn another language is Vietnamese or other language is a very, very important and very crucial and that gives them more confidence. And also the children can pick up any language at all I can tell my grandson, he's a four and a half years old, his other grandparents Italian, so and when I come and talk to him teach him from 1 to 20 in Vietnamese. And he asked me what about Italian? And then he started speaking English. So three languages. So, you know, they can speak many, many languages because the children are very, very quick. So his other grandfather growing some because the Italian they like to grow some tomato, and you know, and eggplant everything like that. And then he asked me what, when he talked to me he say, "What about eggplant ahh no no, give it to me." So I think it's very, very important. With the culture with respect as well. I see some of my student, they're pharmacist, they're doctor, but they every time they see me "Hellô Cô", it's very nice, and I think whenever the way you always need some support, encouragement from the parent and also resource as well. So everything all come together.

Chi: Yeah, yeah, I can see all the pieces of the puzzle coming together. Thank you so much for sharing your linguistic life journey.

[Applause]

[THEME MUSIC]

Chi: You've been listening to *Growing up bilingual in Australia*, the podcast where we speak with bilingual children and their parents about language, culture and what it feels like to be multilingual in Australia.

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