

Growing Up Bilingual in Australia

A ViệtSpeak Podcast - Episode 5

Title: Meet the Teachers – Chau Cong

[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.

In this interview, we speak with a professional language teacher, Chau Cong. we discuss a number of myths and truths about Vietnamese language education in Australia, including the factors that are taken into consideration when selecting teaching material for an Australian classroom.

Chau has been a language teacher since 2003. She likes learning new languages and loves teaching languages with young students. Her mother-tongue is Vietnamese, and she also speaks English, French and Japanese. Chau was the coordinator of the Vietnamese bilingual program at Footscray Primary School from 2003 to 2018. She has been working at Camberwell Primary as a French bilingual teacher.

Chi: What is your favourite Vietnamese Word?

Chau Cong: Word?

Chi: Yeah.

Chau: Maybe Ăn.

Chi: Why the word Ăn?

Chau: Tôi có thể nói tiếng Việt được không?

Chi: Yes. And I will translate. That's okay.

Chau: Tại vì trong tiếng Việt chữ ăn không chỉ có nghĩa là ~~mình~~ là 'eat', chữ ăn mình có thể nói trong chữ ăn mừng là 'celebrate' và cũng dùng chữ ăn. Có thể là cái chữ ăn nó xuất hiện trong rất là nhiều tình huống khác nhau thành ra không có nghĩa chỉ là ăn không.

Chi: So the word 'ăn' is or can be thought of as the word eat or to eat. But it can also be a prefix for many other words, including to celebrate, or

Chau: Because Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language. So in, in many cases, an additional word that is not the main meaning of the Word was added. So teaching young students to use the dictionary at an early age is very tricky for some of them. Because they might pick up the wrong word. And it doesn't make any sense to them.

Chi: As a young person, trying to figure it out Vietnamese by myself, because I didn't like Saturday school. I was very confused about some of the words that you know, put together in Vietnamese, for example, trả đũa is. Yeah. Is it I mean, as two words, it actually means revenge. But as individual words it means 'return the chopsticks'.

Chau: Yes.

Chi: So there, and so that kind of aspect of Vietnamese can be very confusing, I think because you are a kind of heritage, language learner, like me, you. I feel like I know the individual words, but in reality, I don't know the meaning of the words, if that makes sense.

Chau: Yeah, it does make sense. But I've been, like you said, I've been teaching young students, non Vietnamese young students for many, many years. And like any other language, like chị Cúc was saying that all languages have differences. So if we can demonstrate that to them, they can pick up the language and the nuance of the language really early on. And so it is really interesting to see the development of the brain in the time that I've been teaching languages.

Chi: Do you feel that someone has to have a talent or a gift for language learning?

Chau: Well, like when we talk about young students they have different abilities or different nature or gifts with different things, like we would say, the student might have been a visual learner or so it is the same with language learning. For some students, they're very gifted with recognizing the language and the differences to their mother tongue and they pick up language really easily. But others like everything we learn in life, there are ways of teaching languages and most students can pick up language as well. I, myself, love learning languages. So when I was little, I was sent to a French Catholic school. I did everything in French.

Chi: Right. This was in Saigon?

Chau: Yeah. So I did everything in French. In a week, I have about two hours of Vietnamese. So I did that until about year three or four? Yeah. And then the system changed. My school became a Vietnamese school and it has to restructure their program so have more Vietnamese hours.

Chi: Was that because of the change in government?

Chau: Not a change in government, but the change in the educational system, so the school has to adapt. So they can't force students to learn everything in French anymore.

Chi: Right. So suddenly, the curriculum was all in Vietnamese? Can you explain what the relationship between teachers in Vietnam and their students, what was the assumed kind of way that they related to each other?

Chau: We were brought up in a system where we respect the teachers, very much so in our upbringing, teachers will have a higher ranking than our parents. So whatever the teachers say, would be the rule. And parents have to listen, we don't have any, you know, complaints about teachers or anything that teachers say. So if your child doesn't do any work at school, and a teacher talks to the parents, they have to listen. And so that was a system that I was brought up with. Coming to Australia becoming a teacher, a lot of that has to change over the years.

What we are doing right now would be to bring up questions and students will be researching to find the answers. Back then, it would be very textbook things, the answer would be in the textbook. And the students have to find them in a textbook. So very much one way answers, not many open ended questions.

I was lucky, because I started my teaching career at Footscray. There were a lot of Vietnamese background students there. I have to change with the system as well, but a lot of parents were still adapting from the old understanding, and they'd still listen to the need or the advice that the teachers are giving.

Chi: Can you tell us what it was like to teach those earlier generations of Vietnamese, you know, Vietnamese Australian students?

Chau: Well now that I have an education degree, I realise the system is not the same as the one that I went through. To teach a language is to help students to know the differences with their mother tongue, and then look at how the language works. What are the differences and then put words together to make it work. So that should be how useful the language they learn. To keep them learning languages is not just to force them to learn, because for us when we were young, it was that system, it was how I learned the language, but now we have to give them some context, something to work with, there's a usefulness for the language. That's how I had been trying to set up the program for younger students to learn. For example, instead of just purely learning the language, we learn how to use the language in a science context or learn the language in a cultural context, like Chi Cuc was saying, for example, we look at different celebrations, and then we use the language to describe that.

Chi: Yeah, so in this, in the Australian context, you have to not only provide the content of you know, this, these are the words, but also how you would apply it, and then provide an incentive, you have to kind of make it engaging enough for them to want to continue learning,

Chau: Especially since they are not Vietnamese background students, or most of them are not. During the time I was at Footscray, the number of Vietnamese students dropped. I have a lot of non-Vietnamese students in the program. And then we need to align with the mainstream program. So their mainstream teacher would teach in English and I teach in Vietnamese, and the students come across the two teachers. So there should be some alignment between the two of us. So we still need to cover literacy, we need to cover numeracy, but in two languages,

So yeah, over the years for me, I've always found myself in a unique situation when I had a PD meeting with other teachers who were mainstream teachers. I felt like an odd one out because I teach in Vietnamese. And then when I was with language teachers, like Vietnamese teachers, I found myself in an odd situation as well, because I use Vietnamese to teach other subjects, not just purely the language. So,

yeah, so that was the bilingual program. In Victoria, most bilingual programs would have been structured like that. So using language to teach something else. So the students learn other subjects in the language, and not just the language.

Chi: Parents here might think, ah, I can just buy a textbook from Vietnam, and follow along that textbook with my young children. And then they can learn Vietnamese through that method? Does that method work?

Chau: Books are always good, but I mean, the context of the book, brought from Vietnam might not fit in with the program, or the units that we have built here. So to align those two is difficult. And also, my Vietnamese for example, my Vietnamese stay where it was since 1990. My Vietnamese now is not the Vietnamese people speak in Vietnam anymore. So if you speak another language, you will realise that whenever you go back to your mother country, it's not the language people speak on the street anymore. So we have to adapt a lot of those. So when I was at Footscray, we bought a lot of books from Vietnam, well, books that didn't have anything to do with the political system or anything like that. But still, when we brought them back to school, we found it difficult to use them, because it's not the way, well for example, the units are not the same, and levels are not the same. So yeah, it's difficult to have those kinds of literature to support the program.

Chi: And would you say that the pedagogy in the Vietnamese textbooks was still of that mindset? Yes. There's one very much. Yeah, one, one answer right here. And do those books encourage students to generate language? Or is it a kind of question and answer?

Chau: No, I mean, I don't buy textbooks like, you know, like, Vietnamese textbooks because those textbooks didn't work. I don't touch any textbook because the systems are way too different to use any of them. Yeah, we tried with handwriting. We did try. It didn't work. You think handwriting is just handwriting. But no, it didn't. Because the way the handwriting script we use here is not the same as the one they use in Vietnam. The dotted line here and those used in Vietnam are different, so it didn't work.

Chi: Wow. Okay. So it sounds to me like if you were a parent or a teacher over here, hoping to pass on your heritage language to your kids. You don't have much material to draw.

Chau: Well, you can buy storybooks. Yeah. And just read that story to them. Yeah.

Chau: At least the student can listen to the pronunciation of the language and then they can replicate, use some of the vocabulary from the book and talk about the story. Yeah, you can do that.

Chi: Can you tell us? Yeah, what we could do as a society to help the very passionate parents and school teachers who want to share heritage language to younger generations.

Chau: I mean, the first first thing is to be open minded to think that everyone can learn a language. My children, even if they don't learn Vietnamese, they have to learn another language. Secondly, if you can support students, by bringing in technology which is very easy to access, you know, speaking book, talking book and get them to use those ones with the kids at home, that will be very helpful. And then there are language schools, and then there's many programs on the iPad to learn languages. And that's a good start for the young learners.

Chi: Thank you so much for your knowledge and expertise. Thank you.

[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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