



Found in translation

Auslan is helping Chinese students to learn English

It's Saturday and a group of young students, having completed weekday classes for up to 12 hours a day, and a three-hour morning lesson, can be heard singing, *Everyone loves a barbecue*. Aged between six and nine years, the children, none of whom are hearing impaired or native English speakers, use Australian Sign Language (Auslan) to help them remember the words. Welcome to hey dee ho music's first foray into international markets.

The rising importance of Asia, and more particularly China, in our region is as evident in education as it is in economics. The Australian Curriculum includes 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' as one of its three cross-curriculum priorities, suggesting in its preamble that, "Many Asian nations are growing rapidly and are regionally and globally influential." The point was further underscored recently by Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who in an interview with *The Australian* described her fears of our nation becoming the "runt of the litter in our region". Ms Gillard also drew attention to the fact that four out of the five top performing countries in terms of education as reported by OECD figures are in our region – Korea, Singapore, Japan and the Chinese city of Shanghai – and alluded to our need to win the "education race".

Perhaps the most interesting indication of the growing concern about China's educational dominance is evidenced by the furore surrounding the release of Amy Chua's memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Chua's accounts of Chinese parenting

philosophy, which include punishing homework and music practice regimes and an expectation that anything below an A is unacceptable, attracted worldwide censure. The book does, however, reflect a growing awareness that Western lifestyles that include large amounts of time being spent watching television and playing video games may not be adequately preparing children to challenge themselves to be their best in school and in their later lives, and to accept that hard work is often necessary for success.

Jenny Wilkinson understands Chinese attitudes to education better than most Australians. More than 20 years ago, Wilkinson became involved with 'hey dee ho music', a program that uses music to stimulate child development. After initially attending classes with her own child, Wilkinson bought the business in late 1996, and when an employee shared her experiences of using signing with children with developmental delays, the idea to incorporate a modified version of Auslan into the lessons was born.

With the business well established and franchises operating around Australia, in August 2009 Wilkinson received an unexpected 'phone call. On a visit to Australia, the owner of a private school in Chongqing in China's southwest found hey dee ho on Google, and was interested in seeing how the classes were run. From there, things happened quite quickly. After organising for him to watch the program in action, Wilkinson flew from Melbourne to Sydney to meet with the caller and not long after, she and a colleague were on their way to China

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to run a demonstration lesson. The result was a joint venture which sees hey dee ho offer English classes to Chinese students at a privately run school.

It has been a sometimes frustrating, but ultimately rewarding process for Wilkinson. One of the most difficult aspects to get used to initially was the high expectation that parents have of classes. “The government has a ruling that if parents are not happy with the class they can ask for their money back, so the school is very careful to accommodate students. That fact, coupled with the one child policy, means parents are determined to give their child the very best opportunities. Every year there are millions of students trying to get into universities so they all realise that the key to their success is diligence and of course English,” she explains.

Among the many changes made to the existing hey dee ho program to adapt it to Chinese students was the lengthening of class times. “Children learn the most in the first 20 minutes of a class but parents think that classes need to be at least two hours long or else they are not getting their money worth.”

As a compromise, classes typically last for one hour, however parents often opt to sit in and watch. This presents an additional hurdle to overcome: the belief that fun and learning are mutually exclusive concepts. Parents don’t like the idea of paying for their children to have fun, asserts Wilkinson. Despite this, if parents are happy, they will try to negotiate fees for their children to participate not for just one year, but for two or three years. “As a business owner in Australia, this is a very different culture. Most Australians like to ‘pay as they go,’” Wilkinson observes.

Singing and dance are an inherent part of Chinese culture which makes music the perfect medium through which to enhance students’ English skills, largely because Chinese children are generally free from the embarrassment of performing and joining in that many Australian children experience. Contrary to many other Chinese programs, the aim is to improve conversational English, rather than relying on rote learning. The use of Auslan offers an important scaffold that builds students’ confidence, as if they forget a word, they can often remember the sign for it. The Chinese call this kind of learning “total physical response” and the method has proved instrumental in increasing vocabulary and promoting brain development. Hey dee ho programs use a modified version of Auslan that



draws on keywords and this overcomes some of the difficulties that traditional Auslan syntax might cause the students. It also helps children navigate the vast differences between Chinese and English syntax.

While Australian hey de ho music classes feature up to 12 songs in a single session, in China each session concentrates on only one song. The lessons feature a PowerPoint presentation which is used to support the students’ understanding of words and their meanings. The combination of nouns, pictures and Auslan signs is a powerful technique to reinforce learning.

With 32 million people living in the Chongqing area, competition is a strong motivator for students. Wilkinson’s Australian clients, most of whom attend programs aimed at preschoolers, may not have assessment expectations, but in China exams are expected in any course that children attend. Wilkinson sees it as an advantage that she can also use concerts to demonstrate to parents the progress that their children are making. The performances nicely complement the aspirations of the students, many of whom are aiming for careers as models or broadcasters.

Asked to describe her Chinese students, Wilkinson responds that they are “very typical children – loud, cheeky and yet respect the wishes and expectations of their parents and do what is needed to go the extra mile.” For some, hey dee ho classes are a welcome relief from their strict academic schedules and because of this, students can sometimes play up. Wilkinson has found that teachers need to be mindful of this to ensure that class control is maintained.

Wilkinson’s Chinese business partner recognised the need for classes to include cultural knowledge and the hey dee ho lessons have evolved to incorporate time talking about Australia, its culture and expectations. Students also take part in a show and tell segment, which they can find challenging. Photos are a common

favourite for sharing, but a highlight for Wilkinson was a poem that a boy had written about the word family:

F is for father.

M is for mother.

Y is for you.

Mother and Father, I love you.

The example demonstrates how hey dee ho’s approach is going beyond memorisation of words, allowing children to begin to internalise English vocabulary and its use.

The cultural experiences also build a bridge between the students’ understanding of their own language and the nuances of English. Wilkinson recalls when she first introduced the song *Everyone loves a barbecue* the class erupted in giggles, because unlike in English, the concept of ‘love’ is not interchangeable with ‘like’. The students were greatly amused by the thought of anyone having such love for a barbecue!

Although hey dee ho music in Australia is not aimed specifically at non-English speakers, Wilkinson believes that the program would work well in communities with high immigrant populations as it has the potential to engage both parents and students in learning together.

But it’s also reassuring to think that even with its formidable reputation for academic excellence, China is still learning a few lessons from Australia. **ET**

References

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