

A bimodal bilingual experience in a unique environment

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Anique went on exchange to the Chinese University of Hong Kong to study cross-language activation in deaf bimodal bilinguals.

"I gained more skills in Hong Kong Sign Language and more confidence in expressing myself in a 'new' sign language."

When I heard that we had to arrange an internship, I got excited: this is my chance to visit Hong Kong. I found out that I could apply for participating in the joint agreement program between Utrecht University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). After filling out MANY forms, I was enrolled in the program and they even arranged free housing on the CUHK campus. I am so thankful for this support and the opportunity to go abroad!

During my internship, I worked in the Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies (CSLDS). There, I set up an eye-tracking study to find out whether cross-language activation takes part in deaf bimodal bilinguals. Our aim was to create an experiment that is both applicable in Hong Kong and in the Netherlands. Therefore, I created stimuli for Dutch and for Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT), while my Chinese colleague collected Cantonese and Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL) stimuli. Meanwhile, I was taught how the eye-tracking equipment worked and I learned to build the experiment from scratch with Experiment Builder software.

Besides improving my research skills, I aimed to learn more about the participants-to-be and their unique Bimodal Bilingual (BiBi) environment. Therefore, I wanted to see and experience what a BiBi environment looks like and how it worked out on deaf BiBi people. Hence, I visited a kindergarten, a primary school and a secondary school, that all intro-

duced a so-called sign language co-enrollment program (SLCO)¹. In these mainstream schools, in every grade, there is a critical mass of deaf pupils participating in a classroom together with their hearing peers. These students are taught in spoken Cantonese and in HKSL simultaneously by one (deaf) signing teacher and one (hearing) teacher who uses spoken language. Both teachers are trained in and capable of distributing the same content to the pupils in their teaching modality. In this way, the students get language input in two modalities, which enables them to become bimodal bilingual language users. During my visit to the schools, I spoke/signed with deaf teachers, hearing teachers and with students. These chats provided me with more insight into the SLCO program and into the deaf community in Hong Kong. One of the main outcomes was that all people (deaf and hearing, teachers and students) seem to benefit from the SLCO program.

Initially, when I entered the CSLDS, I was a bit overwhelmed and the communication in HKSL was not fluent from scratch. Alternatively, we all used a blend of several sign languages and spoken English to communicate, but when I got more used to the new environment, the communication became easier. During my stay, I was taught HKSL. I could apply the learned signs during meetings and in chats. By means of communicating with other people, I gained more skills in HKSL and more confidence in expressing myself in a 'new' sign language.

I liked working at the CSLDS and doing research that contributes to the philosophy of the SLCO program. They were open to my ideas and gave me the opportunity to work things out. A few days before my internship ended, I finished a template for an eye-tracking experiment that is ready to use in both Hong Kong and in the Netherlands, by adding the correct stimuli. In the future, we plan to collaborate and share data. ■

1 In the Netherlands, there is no such thing as a sign language co-enrollment program in mainstream schooling. Deaf students either attend a special school with deaf peers and are taught in Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT), or they attend a mainstream school accompanied by a sign language interpreter who translates the spoken language of the teacher.