

Emily: Hi everybody! Welcome to Untold Hong Kong stories, multimedia narratives from the margins. This is the podcast series where we hear the stories of people in our community from Hong Kong's non-chinese locals to marginalized members of our community. We hope that by sharing their stories, we can think about the way we live ours and create a more inclusive and diverse society. I am Emily, from the Department of English Language and Literature. And our guest today is Frederic, who is a hearing-impaired and deaf person currently working in the field of deaf education.

Frederic: Hi, everybody! I am Frederic. I am a deaf person. I can speak and sign. I have had severe hearing impairment since I was born but I studied at mainstream schools. Studying and growing up, I had never learned how to sign and I had been communicating with speech. I did not learn sign language until I became an adult. I am currently working at a mainstream school as a bilingual deaf teacher in sign language and speech supporting deaf students under the programme of Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrolment Education.

Emily: You have just mentioned that you have been using spoken language and sign language in different stages of life of yours. I would like to ask what is the most used language in daily life?

Frederic: For work, I sign most of the time as it is part of my job. When I get home, as my parents don't know how to sign, I use spoken language with them. Also, most of my friends don't know how to sign. So, whenever I am home or having day-offs from work, I use spoken language. Different languages for different times. When I go out with my friends or colleagues who are deaf as well, we use sign language to communicate.

Emily: You have just said that both of your parents don't know how to sign, which means that your first language is not sign language.

Frederic: No, not really. Actually my first language is a dialect called Hoklo as both of my parents are Hoklo. They were both born in the mainland and then migrated to Hong Kong. Even though my first language is Hoklo but I don't know much about it. I don't know how to speak. Maybe because they know that my hearing is not good, so they only teach me Cantonese, which is the mainstream language in Hong Kong. Since I started to remember things, I have been speaking Cantonese to my parents. I sometimes still hear Hoklo at home, but I can't fully comprehend, so I would say I don't know much about it.

Emily: You are kind of switching among a few languages.

Frederic: Yeah, switching among a few language groups.

Emily: Can you tell us about the process of you learning sign language?

Frederic: When I first approached sign language, it was after graduating from secondary school. I started to volunteer at a NGO that serves the deaf community when I was eighteen. The organisation wished that the volunteers would start picking up some basic sign language as it would be helpful for volunteering work. There I was I started to learn how to sign. There is

another reason that I started to learn sign language which was that my hearing deteriorated suddenly from time to time. Sometimes, my left ear would be very quiet and sometimes it could be the right ear. The sort of suddenness is like turning on and off of a switch. Once it was on, my hearing was fully gone. At that point I put on hearing aid, and I still could not hear, so I went to the ENT doctor. Even the doctor could not put his fingers on what happened. He said that could be because of sudden sensorineural hearing loss which might happen to anyone and did not understand why it happened so often. When I first had sudden sensorineural hearing loss, it was when I was preparing for HKDSE. I remember at that time sitting for HKDSE, my right ear could not hear anything at all. I was anxious throughout the exam and exam preparation. But luckily, after DSE, it just recovered. I am not sure whether it is related to the stress of studying, which might be possible. Even if it were for the stress of studying, if I caught a cold, or had a bad mood, I found that I would have that hearing loss again. As everything happened so suddenly, I could not expect or estimate when this would happen again. I had also expected that I might not get lucky next time to have my hearing back so I thought to myself long time ago that I would pick up sign language. Just in case in the future, hearing of both of my ears are gone, I can still sign to communicate. I can use either verbal language and sign language to communicate in different groups of the community. I use whatever I feel comfortable in.

Emily: It could be related to your health or mental state, but not directional.

Frederic: Yes, it is non-directional. Maybe because I am insecure, I can say that. Falling into those bottoms 6 or 7 times, I took 2-3 months to recover each time, which affected my mental state quite a bit and left me frustrated sometimes.

Emily: What is the difference before and after you started learning sign language?

Frederic: Before learning sign language, I think I am a hearing-impaired person as that's what the EDB has labelled us for - hearing-impaired students. So back then I thought "deafness" is not that relevant to me. The reason why I don't feel comfortable with the word deaf or deafness is that the word deaf used in Chinese context has a derogatory meaning, people might shout at you saying 'are you deaf?'. I had a bad experience when I was in primary 3. Having religious studies class, I was noticed by the teacher that I was not responding accordingly. That was at the beginning of a new school year. She told me to work on something in the class but what I produced did not fulfil her expectations. She had also taught us how to pray and I was not able to follow her because of my hearing, so I got it wrong again. Then she shouted at me loudly asking 'are you deaf?' with a ferocious voice. I heard that and got very upset. I got home and cried. I told my mom as well. My family was very upset, and they confronted the teacher later. The teacher apologised to me and said she did not mean it purposely and asked for our forgiveness. Later on, I got to know that the teacher has a hearing-impaired son. However, this incident had made me put a very negative label towards the word 'deaf'. Once I started to learn sign language when I got older, I started to realise that there is a community of deaf that I have never been in touch with before. I had always been studying and growing up at a mainstream school and in the hearing environment. Picking up sign language, I had more contacts with the deaf community and realised that not being able

to hear without hearing aid or not having the same ability of the hearing community, I am actually the same as the deaf community in terms of mental state. But, the deaf community has more, which are their own language and culture. The community communicates with lots of facial expressions, and they like to chat in a circle when gathering. I also found that I have been affected by some of these deaf cultures which had been picked up by me growing up. For example, when I talk to people, I read lips and a lot of the people from the community do the same. They habitually read lips when talking to people. Later on I realised my lip reading ability is brilliant as my mom was surprised that I could read her lips even when she was not speaking out loud. In a noisy environment, such as a tea restaurant or on the street, it is not easy to hear what others are speaking, so I kind of developed this ability to read lips and guess what others say. I don't wish the people talking to me having to repeat over and over again so I picked up lip reading.

Emily: In a noisy environment, you hear better than the hearing community as you can read lips accurately.

Frederic: It's not always accurate. Haha. I can't say it has 100% accuracy. As lip-reading is not the most effective way to receive information and there are limitations to lip-reading. It can create quite a hilarious situation when lip-reading has gone wrong. Let me give you an example, mei5 gwok3 (the USA) and ping4 gwo2 (apple) have the same lip movements. Baa4 baa1 (father) and maa4 maa1 (mother) are also the same. The most ridiculous one I got was mou5 jak1 tin1 (a Queen in Tang Dynasty) for mou5 chan1 jit3 (mother's day). They all share the same lip movements. Sometimes, I have to ask them to repeat or ask them to use a different expression, for instance, using English to say mother's day. It is easier for me to read lips in English as Cantonese has a lot of words that share the same lip movements when they are pronounced. If they can differentiate the terms and use other ways to express them, it would be easier for me to understand. For instance, tissue and spoon in cantonese pronunciation share the same lip movements, which are ji2 gan1 (tissue) and ci4 gang1 (spoon). It is very easy to get them mixed up by reading lips, especially in restaurants. Someone asks for tissue, and I may give them a spoon. Incidents like that happen. If that can be expressed by signing, then misunderstandings would be reduced.

Emily: Interesting. Not many of us would imagine using multiple languages to supplement in order to achieve smoother, clearer communications. I wonder which language would be the easiest for you to express yourself?

Frederic: Cantonese is my mother tongue, so it is easier and more natural for me to express but when I have to receive information, it is harder for me to listen. It is easier to receive with sign language.

Emily: Have you ever felt like there is not one language that can express yourself thoroughly? Sometimes we use mixture of languages for expressions. Something is easier to be said in English, some in Cantonese. Have you experienced that you have to use multiple languages at the same time or found that using one language only restricts your expression?

Frederic: Certainly. It is more about emotions. They could be my struggles at hearts, the feelings I have. It is so hard to use languages to express that. Not sure that is because I am a man; men aren't that good at words. I personally am a logical person and enjoy rational

analysis, so I am not much of a talker. Mostly people initiate the talk instead of me. I am usually the passive one, waiting for people to ask me or talk to me. Responding to your question, sometimes it is difficult to express my feelings deep down with languages.

Emily: You just mentioned that you studied at a mainstream local school. And now they have this programme called inclusive education which you learn with hearing students. You have also mentioned that you have unpleasant experiences. Can you share more with us about your school life growing up?

Frederic: I had been studying at mainstream school all my life without any sign language support. While I was at school, I had to read lips to ensure I did not miss things out. Some teachers and classmates are not so understanding. If teachers didn't see me wearing a hearing aid and think I was not paying attention, they could burst out something really derogatory. Not so much about the classmates. However, local students can be a bit snobby. Of course, there are different kinds of students. But if that person is fast-paced and rushed, then we might not get along well as it takes time for me to listen. They will have to speak slower or repeat. I am not able to make friends with classmates who are not patient as well. While I was at school, I felt like I had missed out a lot of chances as my hearing always bogs me down. Because of my hearing, I had to work harder to equip myself. Looking back, I feel like I had spent most of my childhood studying and revising. I did not know what was for me to do because of my hearing. I felt that there was not much for me and the only way to show my ability is to study hard and get good grades because I want to show the world that deaf or hearing-impaired community are capable. I worked for that mostly while being a student. My parents are not that educated, and they have been educating me that knowledge can change my life. Therefore, I worked hard and entered university. But when I got to university, I found that I was restricted by my hearing again when choosing my major. Not too sure what I could do at that point, I don't think I can get in jobs that require extensive communication, as I am simply restricted by that. Eventually, I chose something practical. I was a science stream student back in high school, so I chose food science as a major for my studies hoping to get into a job that doesn't require extensive communications with people. I thought about getting into Healthcare, being a nurse but then I would have to be wearing masks all the time. I would not be able to communicate smoothly without seeing lip movements. After three years of pandemic, I feel that masks have created distance for me and other people. Now that the mask mandate is over, it is better since I can finally see facial expressions and lip movements. This is basically my school life. I got admitted to Chinese University of Hong Kong for MA in Linguistics in sign language stream after my bachelor's degree. That was the first time I had deaf classmates. While doing master at CU, they provided sign language interpretations as there were deaf students in our class. I, of course, got to enjoy the perks as well. I really enjoyed my time during my master's studies as it was easier for me to have sign language interpretation. Now, I joined Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrollment Education Programme of CUHK to contribute and educate the new generations of deaf students.

Emily: So from secondary school to your bachelor degree, you did not really have any special support or arrangement, right?

Frederic: I can't say there was none as there was a programme for school to help students to apply for a frequency modulation system for a few hearing-impaired students. Teachers will have a mic to speak into and their hearing-aids have receivers to get what teachers say directly so that they can understand. But I only got to use this modulation system when I reached secondary three. There was no support for me before secondary three. I don't know why they did not ask me about that. Until I reached secondary three, I had a brilliant SEN teacher. I got to know from him that we can get learning support with the modulation system from the Education Bureau. I only got to hear clearer when I reached secondary three.

Emily: It would be very difficult as I can imagine. Any seniors shared similar conditions and experiences with you that you could talk to about choosing a major?

Frederic: With hearing-impairment? I don't think so. At the end of the day, there is not much chance for deaf or hearing-impaired community to enter university. They generally do not have a high education level, so there was not anyone I could seek advice from.

Emily: Do you think the low enrollment rate of the deaf and hearing-impaired community in university is due to the mainstream education system of Hong Kong? Do you think it could have something to do with the way classes are delivered in Hong Kong? I know the school you are working at right now, is one of those who are genuinely conducting inclusive education where hearing- and hearing-impaired students have the same class together. Teachers like you can sign, so both groups of the students can understand and participate in class. Do you think the practice of schooling has something to do with the low enrollment rate?

Frederic: Of course, there is a certain level of impact. Being restricted by language is already an obstacle. If they can't hear, how can they learn? And the Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrollment Education Programme is to eliminate the obstacles so that they do not need to hear to learn but to read sign. We educate mainstream curriculum with sign language. To be honest, mainstream curriculum is quite difficult; this is coming from me as a person who has been there. Hong Kong is one of those regions with the most difficult public examinations. I totally understand how hard it is to be a student. Deaf or hearing-impaired students usually have delayed development of speech, hence the delay in learning. I am sure this contributes to the low enrollment rate in university as well. Deaf school back then did not teach with sign language either. They taught verbally. If they can't understand speech or are born without cochlea, they would not be able to understand anything even with the FM system. How could they learn with speech? Most of the students ended up wasting time at school as they can learn much from going to school.

Emily: They teach verbally to train students to use speech, right?

Frederic: Yes.

Emily: Understood.

Frederic: There are choices offered in our programme. We provide speech and sign language so that they can choose themselves and even get supplemented with information with the languages available. Some deaf students do have hearing, but they can miss out or not get all

the information. If they don't understand or have missed out information, we will supplement with sign language.

Emily: Then they have an extra option. I see. As a teacher yourself, looking at your students, I believe their learning is a lot easier than yours from your sharing. Do you have any expectations for your students?

Frederic: I wish they can be more dedicated to try to achieve for themselves. They are luckier nowadays. They grew up in the Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrollment Education Programme. They are well protected. This programme has been running for 15 years now; it started in 2006. Actually, some of the first year graduates got university offers as well but not that many. Most of my students are very much used to the support of sign language teachers. And our roles can be like their parents as well, so they don't like us nagging or micromanaging. But at the end of the day, it is for their own good. We ensure they can do their jobs in acquiring not just knowledge but also the right attitude towards life. I wish to be the role model for my students to help overcome their learning difficulties. Even though it is not easy for them to learn, the learning environment is also a happy and healthy one as they have peers who share similar situations with them. They are growing up with companions. Looking back, I was all alone. In a way, I quite envy them. As it is inclusive education, you get to see hearing and deaf students having fun and hanging out with each other. This is actually a beautiful picture.

Emily: You had mentioned that they are well-protected. What do you think about the real world? Or let me be clear. Do you think deaf and hearing-impaired population are marginalised?

Frederic: At certain level, for sure. The society is fierce and cruel. I was well-protected myself as well. When I first graduated and had to start working, I felt worried and confused because the world is so competitive. If you are not catching up with the speed, people might think you are not that suitable to survive in this society. Therefore, the deaf and hearing-impaired community are definitely marginalised. Sign language is not being recognised as an official language or even a teaching language in Hong Kong. If there is no sign interpreter for breaking news or major events, deaf and hearing-impaired community suffers from delay in receiving information. It is a lot better now. RTHK has a live interpretation for LegCo meetings, and TVB pearl has news in sign language. There are also different kinds of RTHK programmes such as A Wall-less World Series, podcasts with sign language, etc. Now there are more people paying attention to the rights and interests of the deaf and hearing-impaired community.

Emily: Now that you have seen improvement, looking back on your life, do you think there is a big change or improvement?

Frederic: Can you repeat the question, please?

Emily: Now that there are more discussions towards the rights of the deaf and hearing-impaired population. There are shows and TV about them, news with sign language interpretation. Compared to what you had experienced; do you think it has been improved?

Frederic: I would say more and less the same. But I see more people are interested in learning sign language. It seems that hearing people are more interested in learning sign language instead of the hearing impaired population. I have friends who are hearing impaired but do

not really have the heart to learn sign language. Especially for the new generations, they rely more on speech, so they are not that interested in learning. On the other hand, more people learn sign language, the more deaf or hearing-impaired population will be helped as they will be able to communicate with them. There are a lot of jobs that might encounter deaf or hearing-impaired community, such as flight attendant, doctor, nurse, counsellors. If they learn how to sign, it can help them to reach to deaf and hearing-impaired community to sort out not just medical but mental needs. Sign interpreters would not even be needed. The more people learn sign language, the more inclusive the society will be. Of course, government will have to be the leader to help improve. It would be a worthless effort from us if the government doesn't help.

Emily: The deaf and hearing-impaired community are perceived by the Officials as non-mainstream. Coming back, where do you feel the most comfortable as you have mentioned that sometimes it would be very difficult for us to hear.

Frederic: I would definitely say my home in my bed. I love doing nothing at home when I am free. I enjoy hanging out with friends. I also like playing Mahjong as well. I feel very comfortable in these environments. I also go hiking and have dinner parties with friends. Sometimes they may not be able to fully understand me or even forget that I am hearing-impaired. I can get a bit upset too. One time my friend called me out for not paying attention, but I had to explain to him that my condition can hinder me. I used to pretend I got it all then I realised that doesn't work. So now, if I don't feel comfortable, I always tell my friends.

Emily: This takes courage. How do you see your future?

Frederic: I have not thought much about it yet. I wish that deaf and hearing-impaired community can communicate without any obstacles, are able to take care of themselves and have a job that they are happy with. With a job that they are contend with, they don't have to suffer from discrimination. It would be great if they can take care of themselves.

Emily: Can you use three words to describe your life in Hong Kong?

Frederic: The first one, marginalised. Second one is stressed. I believe a lot of Hongkongers are experiencing the same, feeling exhausted. Seeing so many people on the streets can make me feel stressed already and want to have an escape from home. The third is helplessness. A lot of things are out of control, hence the description.

Emily: Thank you so much for sharing!

Frederic: Thank you!