

**Building an online education platform for the hearing impaired**

On March 14, 2017, the Narrow the Gap Fund brought community members to Anh Minh Private Special School located on Xo Viet Nghe Tinh Road to visit a special class from a project called "Building an online education platform for the hearing impaired" which is implemented by Hear.Us.Now.

Anh Minh Private Special School is located at the end of Alley 155 on Xo Viet Nghe Tinh Street, Binh Thanh District. Stepping into the school grounds, we felt like we were stepping back into our childhoods with the sight of playgrounds equipped with slides and colorful swings as well as the noisy sounds from classrooms which made us forget the fact that this is a special school where students and teachers use a different language in communication: sign language and lip reading technique.



*The playground has many fun activities and play areas for the children, just like other schools.*

In September 2016, the "Building an online education platform for the hearing impaired " project was granted \$150 million VND by community members through the Narrow the Gap Fund. Hear.Us. Now proposed building an online education platform that is designed to meet the learning needs of the hearing impaired community and covers the following topics: English, computer science, and science. The curriculum is converted into videos and posted onto online platforms like Kera and Youtube.

According to Hieu, the head of Hear.Us.Now, there are currently more than 3 million people in Vietnam who live with hearing impairments. Of these 3 million, most only manage to complete their primary education. Some secondary schools do open up classes for individuals with hearing impairments, but these classes do not happen on a consistent basis. Finally, every year only about 10 individuals with a hearing impairment enter college or university.

Hieu also told us an inspirational story about the positive impact he and Hear.Us.Now have had on the hearing impaired community.

"I am an individual whose family member has a hearing impairment, so I understand the impact that this situation has on an entire family. Because of my experience, I wanted to contribute and help families similar to my own. One critical experience occurred when I met a group of young people living with hearing impairments who are currently attending college but expressed their strong desire

to transfer to a university. However, many universities require students to have an English “B” certificate (issued by MoET) in order to graduate. In order to get this “B” degree, students must pass an exam that tests their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. However, the hearing impaired students cannot take the speaking and listening tests. Meanwhile, the B certificate can be replaced with IELTS issued by British Council. Hear.Us.Now therefore worked with the British Council and successfully persuaded them to remove the listening and speaking portion of the exam for individuals with a hearing impairment, and instead, simply take the average of their reading and writing scores.”



*Hieu, the Project Manager for Hear.Us.Now, shares a story of the community of hearing-impaired individuals in Vietnam.*

Additionally, Hear.Us.Now recognizes the importance and application of visual learning to enhance the ability of individuals with hearing impairments to learn new knowledge. After 2 years of implementation, which started in 2015, this educational method has proven to be both appropriate and effective. However, if only 100 children (the number of beneficiaries that directly attend the Hear.Us.Now classes) are served each year, the project is benefitting only a very small portion of the 3 million people in Vietnam who have hearing impairments. Thus, in 2016, the group has shifted gears and decided to convert the Department of Education’s English textbooks into videos and post them on Youtube and Kera, so that more people with hearing impairments can access educational resources. Hear.Us.Now has now been digitizing English textbooks, Level A computer science curriculum, and science books.

*Moreover, Hear.Us.Now is developing a 6,000-word online sign language dictionary, which includes English, Vietnamese, and sign language suitable for the hearing impaired as well as those who want to learn sign language.*



*During the discussion, a participant asked about how to narrow the gap between businesses and employees with hearing impairments.*

A site visit participant raised the question of how to narrow the gap between employees with hearing impairments and businesses. Because of this question, participants had the opportunity to hear about a specific case where a business supported an individual with a hearing impairment by giving the person the opportunity to attend design school and subsequently work for the company upon graduation. However, after working for the company for a while, the individual began to feel lost and marginalized because they were unable to fully integrate into their working environment. Both their boss and the business' clients preferred interacting and speaking with hearing employees because it required less time and effort and was more effective. Although there is not yet a solution to this issue, this anecdote reminds us about the importance of supporting and working with individuals who have a hearing impairment to create a more inclusive society. After all, the only difference we have with these individuals is related to language.

When being asked about measuring the project's impact and result, Hieu was very excited to share with us that during the 2015-2016 school year as well as the first semester of the 2016-2017 school year, 100% of their students passed the Department of Education's final exam. In addition to supporting the children, Hear. Us. Now. is also working with parents to help them understand that their children are fully capable of learning and absorbing knowledge.

When asked the mobilization of resources in the community, a Hear.Us.Now representative shared that the funding from the Narrow the Gap Fund was a significant part of the overall project's cost. The team also tried to mobilize and utilize a variety of resources, from raising cash funds to mobilizing volunteer staff for teaching, and making use of free locations to study and film videos.

During the project implementation process, the project team shared that it was difficult to anticipate the complexity of the video recording process, which led to delays. Hieu shared that the group was very strict about video quality and paid attention to many factors including lighting, the speed of the teacher's sign language, and ways to deliver content. The team practiced recording and tested the content with the students. When they realized that the material was not effective for the students, they went back and rerecorded. Only when the majority of the children responded well did they finalize the content.

Before taking us to see a real classroom, Hieu educated us on a few things to keep in mind when communicating with the children, which was critical because our interactions with the children were a way for us to contribute to their integration into society. For example, Hieu told us to avoid using the word "disability" with the students. Instead, he advised us to either say people who hear or people who do not hear. Secondly, he told us to simply speak with the students in the similar way to when we speak with hearing people. The students can read lips and guess our words. If there is anything we say that the students could not catch, we would write the words on the board or on a sheet of paper.

All in all, we were very excited to have the opportunity to visit this special class.



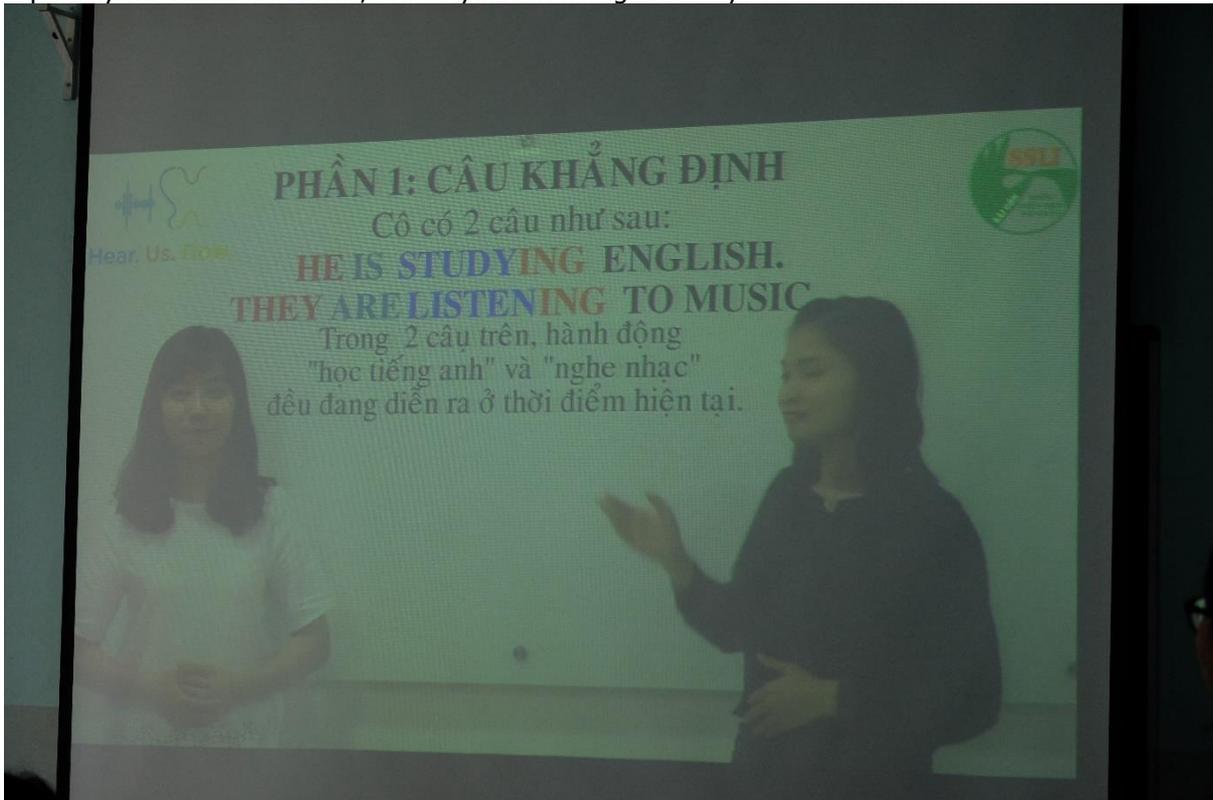
*The students listened carefully to the teacher's instructions on the projector.*

Most of us spent our school-life with different types of bustling sound from chit-chat, joking, yelling, etc...However, attending Hear.Us.Now's classroom was a completely different experience. Upon entering the classroom, we noticed that it was completely silent. The students paid careful attention as the teacher guided the students via spoken language and projecting images with the projector. The students would then participate and express their thoughts either through sign language or writing their answer/opinion on small boards.

The classroom we visited had a main teacher and an assistant that would tutor and support the students in whatever way they needed. Hear.Us.Now also offers basic sign language classes for teachers so they can communicate with the students, but as you can imagine, there are moments when communication can be challenging.

The teacher said: "Everything is transmitted on the screen via the projector, and there are days when there is no electricity. On these days, both teachers and students are frustrated because teachers are forced to write everything out on the board, since I have not been able to set aside enough time to learn sign language. However, we still manage to communicate with each other. The students,

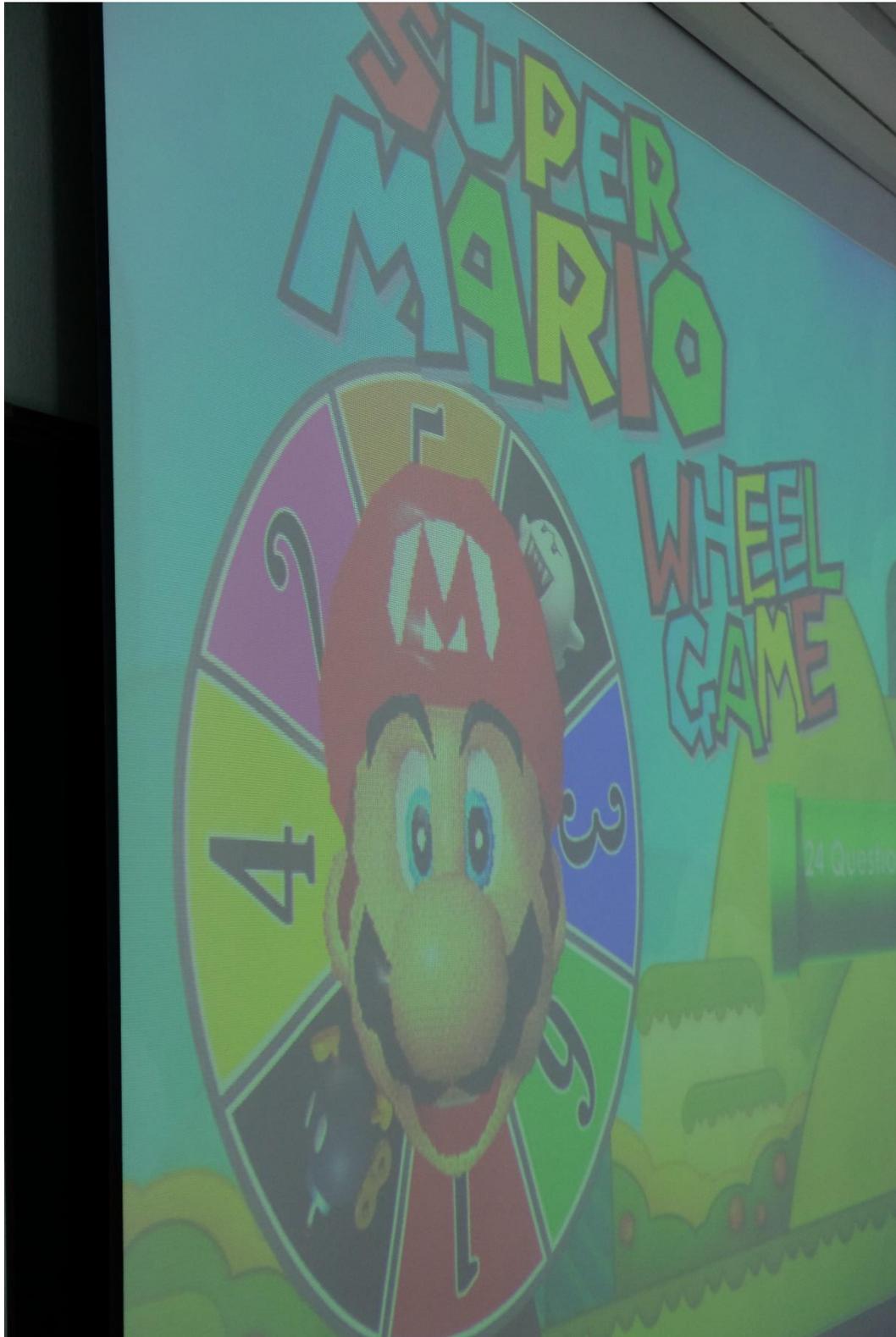
especially the female students, are very hardworking and they are fast learners."



*The video describes a lesson in the project where one person uses spoken language, while the other person must translate the words into sign language.*



*Sign Language - an interesting language that all of us can learn to communicate with non-hearing people*



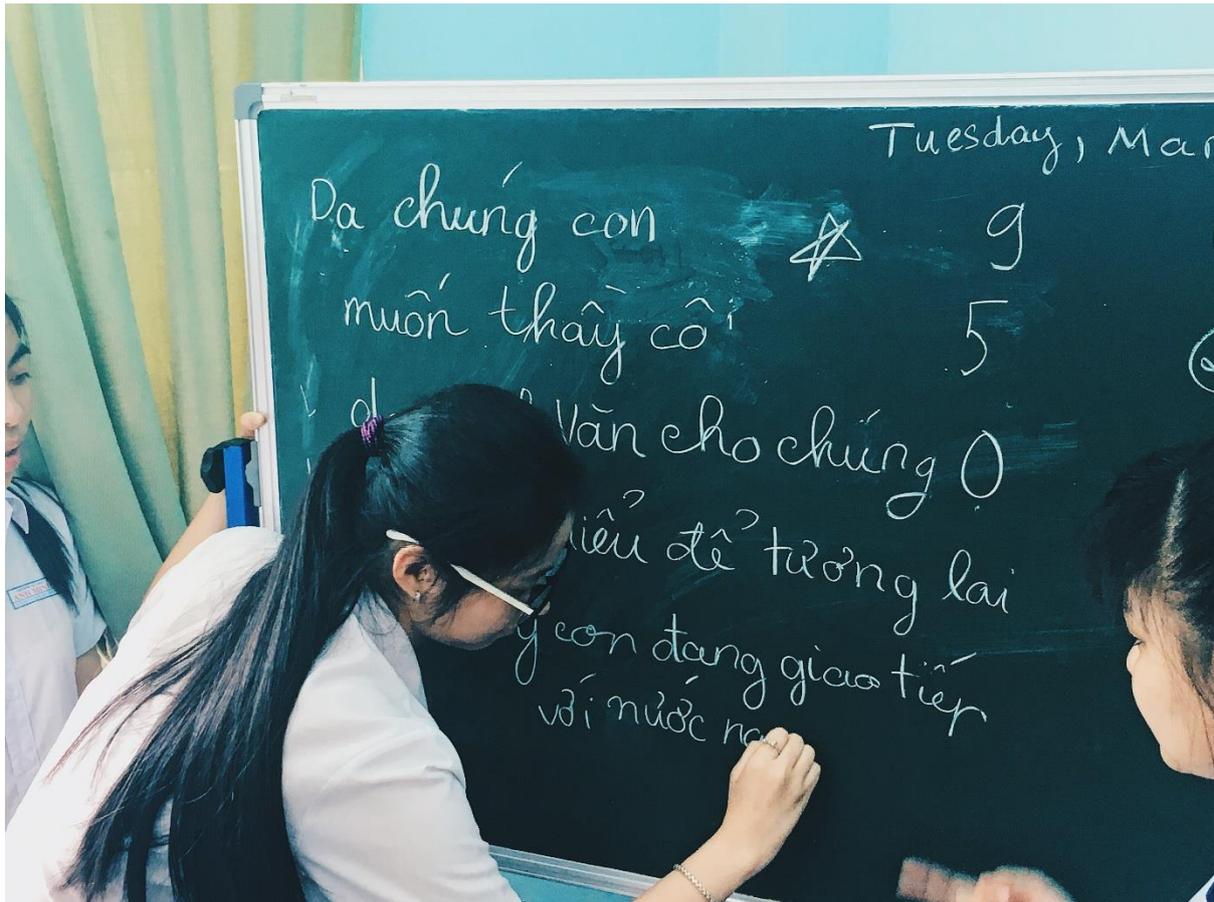
*Simple games like the one pictured above are used to encourage students to complete the practice exercises after they learn theories.*



*Students use the small board pictured above to communicate with their teachers as well as groups like ours that come to visit the classroom.*



*Chess - One of the students' favorite games to play during their break*



"We want you to teach English to us so that we can understand and communicate with foreigners in the future" – Shared by a young student when speaking with our group.

We hope that the project does not only cover English, IT and sciences but also include a variety of other subject so that the deaf students can be equipped with knowledge and confidence to better integrate into the society.