



# FINDING OUR OWN VOICE Suong Le

**The way young Vietnamese women living in Australia communicate is a negotiation between the different contexts we have evolved in, such as East vs. West and Home life vs. School life. The current radio project In My Own Words challenges young Vietnamese women to explore these underlying patterns of communication and their relevance and impact on their own lives.**

The program was an initiative of The Voice Box - a weekly half hour radio show on 3CR, produced by five young Vietnamese women. The Voice Box started broadcasting in February with funding from the Young Vietnamese Women and Drugs Project of Victoria.

In My Own Words engaged and trained 84 young Vietnamese women from high schools across Melbourne to create their own radio show. Eight distinct shows were created by each group of 3-6 young Vietnamese women after undergoing a workshop where they were trained as radio presenters, producers and panellists. One school coordinator stated, "This has just been a wonderful experience for our students. Our Principal took home a recording of their show and listened to it and quoted them in the school newspaper on advice on how to communicate to parents".

On the show topic 'The structure of languages' we asked Truc, a 15-year-old recent migrant to Australia, not yet fluent in English, to co-host the show. Alternating between Vietnamese and English, she expressed how incredibly frustrating it is for people like her to continually try and force themselves through the language barrier, often lacking the confidence to even initiate or

maintain a conversation with a non-Vietnamese speaker.

We realised that even the young Vietnamese women who were fluent in English had their own struggles with communicating. Some have chosen to forget the Vietnamese language as part of a desire to 'fit in' and this is often reflected in them adopting new English names which are easier and less embarrassing to pronounce.

Others such as Dao had rediscovered a late desire to learn their language, "I just wanted to be able to speak to my mother and learn more about my own cultural heritage and identity." This concept of a dying Vietnamese language in Australia is entwined with the realisation that the younger generation are the future custodians of keeping our heritage alive. We were losing our own culture and traditions either by choice or neglect.

The "cultural motifs" which underlie our communication may only become apparent once they are found to be maladaptive in a Western society. For example, teachers often comment that the young Vietnamese women in their school seem, "shy" or passive because they evade direct eye contact and rarely pose questions or offer opposition to comments made in class. However, young Vietnamese people are taught to always respect their elders and to never question their wisdom as this is seen as disrespectful. They avoid direct eye contact with people they respect for fear of causing offence or being seen as ill mannered.

Traditionally, a young Vietnamese woman must always be reserved and self-censor her



communication so as to not ruin the reputation of her family. Given these cultural expectations young Vietnamese women are not trained to believe that they have a right to speak openly and freely. Even throughout our program, the participants often had to make a conscious choice between telling their parents that they were making a radio show and inviting them to listen, or deliberately withholding that information. If they had chosen to speak freely and openly on their radio show, they might be the source of displeasure in their family. Often this choice, about what was appropriate, was made unconsciously.

By making and being conscious of our own choices about how and what we communicate, whether that is in English or Vietnamese, we are in the process of realising our own identities. "In My Own Words" is not just about training people in radio program technicalities, it is also about the possibility of finding our right to speak, finding our confidence and sources of inspiration and finding our own voice and expressing it as softly or as loudly as we want.

**"In My Own Words" airs on The Voice Box every Tuesdays 6.30 - 7 PM**

