

# Composing With

## Composing with Signed and Written Languages: Our Process

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Our compositions begin and end with signed languages: discussing a research question, a social issue, a presentation, or a manuscript we are preparing, we sign. When we met in Việt Nam in 2007, these conversations were halting. Over the past decade, we have each labored to acquire proficiency in each other's signed and written languages: American Sign Language (ASL), Hồ Chí Minh Sign Language (HCMSL), Vietnamese, and English. In 2013—when Tiên began graduate studies at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC (where Audrey works)—we agreed to communicate primarily in ASL and English. In addition to Gallaudet's official bilingual mandate promoting the academic use of both languages, Tiên was eager to accelerate her acquisition of ASL and English—just as Audrey was interested in accelerating her acquisition of HCMSL and Vietnamese when living in Việt Nam and interacting with Vietnamese Deaf colleagues.

It is in the context of our interactions at Gallaudet—as well as our work as trainers for an international development project for which we prepared materials in HCMSL, Vietnamese, and English—that we began to produce our own research-based presentations and manuscripts. Accordingly, our work has thus far relied heavily on the symbolic meaning and discourse structures of ASL. When presenting to audiences in ASL, our compositions were nevertheless inflected with HCMSL, Vietnamese, and English. Similarly, when we produce manuscripts in written English, HCMSL, Vietnamese, and ASL significantly contribute to the ways we discuss and mutually determine an analytic focus, carry out and craft a manuscript. We recognize these exchanges as instances of “translanguaging”—whereby interactants engage in the “use of original and complex interrelated discursive practices that cannot be easily assigned to one or another traditional definition of language, but that make up the speakers' complete language repertoire” (García and Wei 401; see also Canagarajah; Kusters, et al.). This essay describes some of the ways that translanguaging is vital to our composition process.

Readers who compose collaboratively, working from signed to print languages, are now likely seeing a series of images in mind: two people signing together, occasionally pausing to clarify points of discussion by signing in one or two languages and by writing or typing. Providing further illustration, while discussing our recent research—which examines how Deaf social organizers

in southern Việt Nam deal with cleavages in and between organizations—Audrey sought clarification by signing a concept symbolized in HCMSL, and by using the HCMSL fingerspelling system to symbolize a concept from print Vietnamese. Tiên then responded by confirming and elaborating Audrey’s understanding by using the ASL fingerspelling system and writing in English. Such interactions often lead to longer exchanges in which we code-switch, or explicitly agree to use HCMSL in order to examine the meanings we are exploring about the language community *in the language of that community* (Harris, et al.; Singleton et al.).

Since neither of us is fully fluent in each other’s two primary languages, our composing process is aided, first and foremost, by our deep respect for the other’s ideas and experiences and by “old school” methods of clarification. We keep paper handy. Or we dart up to grab paper, writing down concepts in Vietnamese and English. We map these concepts out, including the written concept’s relationships to the topic we began discussing in ASL or HCMSL. Below is an example of a concept we discussed in ASL, then discussed in HCMSL (see fig. 1), followed by Audrey’s writing of the concept in Vietnamese and Tiên’s correction (see fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Không có điều kiện (translation: “lacking the [typically, economic] conditions for X”)

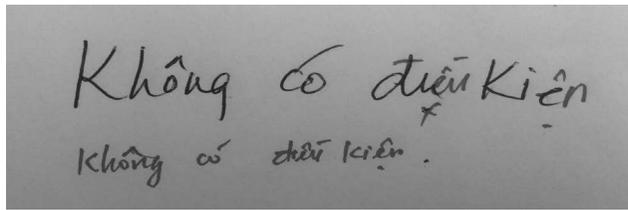


Fig. 2. Audrey's written Vietnamese (above) and Tiên's correction (insertion above and text)

This process substantially improved an earlier version of a paper that Audrey had begun composing independently. Once we began to examine the data set together, and to compose our manuscript through discussion in ASL and HCMSL, new analytic issues crystallized. The basis of these issues in southern Vietnamese Deaf people's experiences also came through more clearly, as did their struggles to share in the rights and obligations of Vietnamese citizenship via education, and the longstanding work of Deaf social organizers (see Cooper and Nguyễn).

Far from being simply a way to create a written record, the example above indicates the ways our composing process actually facilitated data analysis, development of our main arguments, and presentation of the evidence to best reach intended audiences. The practices we engaged in were also intentionally, methodologically and compositionally geared toward reporting our research in a manner that would support the ongoing work of Deaf constituencies in Việt Nam. That is, while composing between four languages, we aimed to hold HCMSL and southern Vietnamese Deaf people's values and experiences at the center of our attention. This intention also took shape as an ethical practice. Of course, the extent to which these composing practices actually succeed in representing southern Deaf people's viewpoints is difficult to ascertain—particularly given the heterogeneity among any group of people. Nevertheless, our ethical concerns prompted us to apply available guidance on conducting research with signed language communities (Harris, et al.; Singleton, et al.), and to maintain active engagement with all of the languages and language ecologies informing our composing process.

The importance of ensuring sociolinguistic representation in the composing process and in final products comes into clearer focus when we consider (1) the widespread lack of understanding and social stigma associated with signed languages worldwide, and (2) the widespread exclusion of Deaf people from social, political, and economic participation. Of course, how we frame our ideas, and the languages we use and toward what ends, is a matter fraught with real-world ramifications—especially when crafting compositions with partners

who are composing manuscripts in their second, third, or fourth languages. Such processes implicitly give more power over the composing process to the collaborating partner privileged to compose in their first language—as is the case for this essay with Audrey writing in her first language (L1), while Tiên is writing in her fourth language (L4). The order of our language fluencies is as follows:

	Tiên	Audrey
L1	HCMSL	English
L2	Vietnamese	ASL
L3	ASL	HCMSL
L4	English	Vietnamese

Whereas both ASL and HCMSL are prominent in our composing processes, English is the privileged language for this essay, and for our publication discussed above. Below we distill our most common compositional practices into four processes. This is followed by an example of Process Four, with written drafts in Vietnamese and English.

#### *Process One*

Audrey composes initial draft in her L1 (Tiên's L4).  
 Tiên reads in her L4 and asks clarifying questions in her L3.  
 Audrey and Tiên discuss in Tiên's L3 and edit in her L4.

#### *Process Two*

Audrey and Tiên discuss in Audrey's L2 and Tiên's L3.  
 Audrey composes in her L1 and Tiên's L4.  
 Tiên gives feedback in her L1 and/or L3, and edits in her L4.  
 Audrey and Tiên review in Audrey's L1 and Tiên's L4.

#### *Process Three*

Audrey composes initial draft in her L4.  
 Tiên reads and edits in her L2.  
 Audrey asks follow-up questions in her L3 or L4.  
 Audrey edits in her L1 and Tiên edits in her L4.

#### *Process Four*

Tiên composes in her L2.  
 Audrey reads in her L4 and asks questions in L2 or L3.  
 Tiên translates into her L1, L3, and/or L4.  
 Audrey and Tiên work together on translations into Audrey's L1 (Tiên's L4).

Example of Tiên composing in her L2 (draft of the conclusion section of this essay):

Quá trình cách viết của chúng tôi rất đặc biệt vì chúng tôi có mỗi 4 ngôn ngữ khác nhau NNKH và NN đọc viết. Theo thường lệ, khi đó các học giả muốn hợp tác và trao đổi với tác giả nước ngoài, bài báo của tác giả thường viết bằng tiếng anh nên theo quan điểm của tôi, tôi [Tiên] đã nghĩ sự hợp tác với đồng nghiệp nước ngoài gặp khó khăn trong quá trình soạn bài báo và không cần đặt tên mình vào nó vì tiếng anh là NN ngoại quốc của tôi. Nhưng không phải như thế, chúng tôi [Audrey và tôi] có nhiều trường hợp khác nhau trong quá trình soạn bài báo. Bí quyết của chúng tôi giúp các tác giả biết làm theo cách này và tôn trọng ngôn ngữ bản riêng của mình nếu tác giả hợp tác với các đồng nghiệp nước ngoài.

Example of Audrey and Tiên working together on translation into Audrey's L1 and Tiên's L4 (draft of the conclusion section of this essay):

Our writing process is very special because we each use four different languages including sign languages and written languages. When Vietnamese scholars want to share their work with people outside of the country they often publish in English, so I [Tiên] believed that collaboration with foreign colleagues would meet with serious difficulties—for example, in writing journal articles together. In addition, I believed that I could not author an article in English because that is not my native language. But this is not the case. We [Audrey and I] used many different strategies while writing together, which was a wonderful process. We hope that sharing this information will benefit other authors, providing insight into multilingual composing and—if collaborating with colleagues from other countries—that authors will show mutual respect for each other's languages.

## Conclusion

While exploring our compositional process here, we gained an appreciation for the language experiences we bring to our collaborative work. Composing within four languages is an extraordinarily rich experience, especially given the nature of translanguaging and the differing affordances of signed and written languages. Making decisions together about how to represent the ideas we each care about, as individual and collaborating researchers, has also expanded our appreciation for each other's values and viewpoints. We hope that these ideas contribute to your own writing processes. Chúng tôi hy vọng rằng các ý kiến này sẽ góp phần cho cách thức viết riêng của các bạn.

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