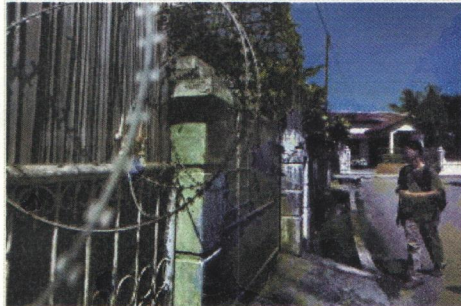


Singapore

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Gesture of goodwill in Timor Leste

NUS graduate with hearing loss wants to develop a sign language for deaf Timorese
By Lim Wui Liang

Mr Alvan Yap, a volunteer teaching at the Agape Deaf International School in Dili, Timor Leste, approaches his home which has a front gate ringed with barbed wire. 'This is actually the District 9 of Dili, he says. -- ST PHOTOS: LIM WUI LIANG

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INSIDE a classroom in Timor Leste, all is quiet except for the whirring of electric fans.

Then a student flails her arms and squeals. She exchanges hand signals with her teacher from Singapore, Mr Alvan Yap. They smile, and Mr Yap flashes another drawing on a flat screen television set.

Mr Yap, 33, has been teaching at the Agape Deaf International School in Dili, Timor Leste, since January. He is there on a one-year stint as a Singapore International Foundation volunteer.

The political science graduate from the National University of Singapore taught for four years at the Singapore School for the Deaf, then quit his job as a publications editor with another organisation to work in Dili.

'I applied for this programme because it was something I could do and it was meaningful,' said Mr Yap, who has severe hearing loss.

He wants to develop a sign language for the deaf in Timor Leste, who use their own set of gestures to communicate.

But unlike his previous students, about half of his 23 Timorese students, whose ages range from nine to 39 years old, are illiterate.

'Some are already quite old to be in school,' he said. 'So the challenge for me is how to teach effectively.'

Through the use of video recordings and PowerPoint illustrations, Mr Yap is building a unique vocabulary by combining international sign language with the gestures used by his students.

'It's a resource they can count on in the future,' he said.

He teaches his students 20 new words every week, and hopes they will master 1,000 words by the year's end so they can achieve basic communication with other Timorese.

He is also training 10 students to be teachers to ensure the project continues when he leaves in January next year.

When classes end at lunchtime, Mr Yap takes a five-minute walk along patches of dirt road to his home, which is ringed with barbed wire at the gate.

'It may not look like it,' he said. 'But this is actually the District 9 of Dili.'

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