

Teaching English To Viet Children

Fort Smith, Ark.

Tens of thousands of Vietnamese youngsters, clutching dictionaries they are barely able to read and nodding assent to questions they do not understand, have entered public schools across the United States.

They are receiving a largely hospitable but often confusing welcome in the schools, which were at the disadvantage of not knowing how many to expect until the children walked through the doors.

Bilingual teaching materials are scarce and few adults with Vietnamese language skills have been hired to help. Many of the youngsters, particularly at the secondary level, are lagging behind even this early in the semester.

Yet, they have already distinguished themselves for their ability to equal and surpass American students in mathematics and for the respect they show their teachers, who, according to Vietnamese tradition, are outranked in esteem only by royalty.

There has been both humor and pathos as the young Vietnamese have been introduced to a quite different educational system and a society with customs that still baffle them.

At Fort Chaffee, Ark., where

13,325 Vietnamese refugees are waiting to join those who have already been resettled, their American orientation starts with a program in "Survival English."

The children are not permitted to leave the base to go to public schools in nearby Fort Smith, but they, along with their parents, may voluntarily attend classes conducted in wooden barracks on the vast, 71,979-acre Army base.

Classes are augmented by ten media centers, equipped with tape-recorded English lessons, as well as closed circuit television sets that play and replay old programs of "The Electric Company," produced by the Children's Television Workshop.

At night, the Vietnamese are encouraged to watch commercial television programs on the same sets.

Other learning and acculturation comes through playing Scrabble, teaching the Vietnamese football and giving them driver education by use of simulators.

"You should have seen how many of the red lights indicating accidents lit up the first time the machine gave them snow conditions to drive on," one American remarked.

Harold Cameron has been

assigned to head the project at Ft. Chaffee by Western Community College, a local two-year institution, where he is dean of students. The college is being paid \$1,394,272 by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare to run the educational operation at the base.

The Ford Administration has promised — but no money has yet been paid — at least \$300 a student to each school system for the first 100 Indochinese refugees who enter the system, and \$600 a student thereafter. It is estimated that the one-year proposal would cost \$15 million.

In California, which has received more than 20 per cent of the 137,000 refugees already resettled, the administration's offer is regarded as inadequate.

A bill introduced by California's two senators, Alan Cranston and John V. Tunney, both Democrats, would provide \$125.6 million over two years to reimburse school districts for the full cost of the education of the refugee children. The administration opposes the bill.

Bagley Elementary School, in northern Seattle, is able to offer an hour a day of instruction in English to its six Vietnamese newcomers because two neighborhood women volunteered to handle the task.



New York Times photo

Paul Tran, a Vietnamese refugee, in the classroom of a California school

Pearl Conkle and Bernice Schmidt have no knowledge of Vietnamese, but they are trying to teach the children the alphabet and words and phrases in English by showing them objects and pictures and repeating the names over and over.

"Who knows what letter this is?" Mrs. Conkle asked the youngsters one day recently, showing them for the first time a flash card with a large letter "z."

Getting no answer, she told them the name of the letter and asked for words beginning with "z."

"Jebra, Jipper," was the response from a particularly precocious child whose Vietnamese name has already been Americanized to Linda.

Painstakingly, Mrs. Conkle and Mrs. Schmidt try to get the children to pronounce the unfamiliar "z" sound.

Intonation is apparently the crux of the problem that Vietnamese of all ages are having in learning to speak and understand English, according to American educators.

The English-as-a-second-lan-

guage approach, which does not require that the instructor know the students' native tongue, is being most widely used in public schools around the country to teach English to the Vietnamese, as well as to other immigrants.

But the Vietnamese have arrived in the United States at a time when bilingual education is in vogue. The number of bilingual Vietnamese-English classes will probably increase once federal money reaches the school systems.

New York Times