Language skills are critical for State Department employees, but some languages are more difficult to learn than others. In particular, tonal languages such as Vietnamese can be a major challenge for speakers of English.

Effective communication in a tonal language depends largely on the speaker’s ability to accurately produce the tones that distinguish words. For example, in Vietnamese, the word *ba* can mean “grandmother” or “three”, depending on the tone. Because English does not use tone in this manner, it can be difficult for learners to accurately distinguish these tones and produce them correctly.

**Historic Conference**

To help Department employees gain proficiency in Vietnamese, the University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language, a U.S. government–funded research center, and the Foreign Service Institute organized an international gathering of Vietnamese-language specialists from Australian, Vietnamese and American universities and two U.S. government language schools April 1–3, 2007.

The conference, titled “Tôi Không Hiu: Improving Students’ Speaking Success” in Vietnamese, featured academics and teachers presenting papers and demonstrations on the complex tone and vowel systems of spoken Vietnamese to enhance strategies for teaching pronunciation to U.S. foreign affairs professionals serving abroad. Ambassador Greta Morris, dean of FSI’s School of Language Studies, welcomed conference participants, and FSI Director Dr. Ruth Whiteside made the opening remarks. Dr. Anita Bowles, CASL’s principal organizer for the gathering; Dr. Charlie Miracle, chair of East Asian and Pacific Languages; and Duy Ho of FSI’s Vietnamese Language Section facilitated the conference and the lively discussions that occurred after each of the 15 presentations.

This conference was the first of its kind on teaching Vietnamese.
pronunciation to English speakers. The presence of language professionals from around the world and from different work settings ensured that different perspectives on the tough issues were heard. Dr. Thanh-Huong Le, assistant professor at the Defense Language Institute, said the diversity of participants from abroad and domestically ensured an enriching environment, which made the conference successful.

“We all share similar goals and professions, so each paper contributed to the total knowledge of each participant,” he added.

Similarly, Dr. Kimloan Hill, from the University of California-San Diego, said the conference was the first time she had met with so many Vietnamese teachers simultaneously.

Other participants noted that a key conference theme was that teaching strategies work better when selected based on the students’ learning styles. The conference papers and demonstrations highlighted strategies that might be effective in varied contexts. For example, tones might be taught by relating them to musical notes, creating visual aids such as vowel and tone charts, or illustrating proper tones in poetic rhythms.

**Effective communication in a tonal language depends largely on the speaker’s ability to accurately produce the tones that distinguish words.**

**Lasting Impact**

The conference produced several initiatives. CASL and FSI will jointly consolidate the conference materials to identify best practices for teaching Vietnamese to English speakers. In addition, FSI’s Vietnamese Language Section teaching staff has begun discussing innovations they would like to bring to the teaching of that language’s phonology—improvements resulting from the conference’s information and their fruitful interchange with colleagues from around the world. The conference built a durable international network of Vietnamese-language professionals who are staying in contact by e-mail and will undoubtedly continue to share their professional experiences and teaching strategies.

**Further Efforts**

Meanwhile, FSI’s School of Language Studies is implementing an ambitious program of staff and program development to address cultural and linguistic changes in Vietnam, and to provide diplomats new tools to carry out Transformational Diplomacy in Vietnam. Working with the bureaus of East Asian Pacific Affairs and Human Resources and U.S. missions in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the School of Language Studies has developed a “Vietnamese Action Plan” to explore ways to enhance training at FSI and in Vietnam. A School of Language Studies working group is looking at such approaches as bringing instructors from Vietnam to supplement the instructional staff at FSI, providing end-of-training immersions in Vietnam and even extending the length of training for this difficult language. Finally, the School of Language Studies has also collected and written new material that focuses on topical issues and job-specific language for Department employees doing public diplomacy, consular, security and other work.

Jane Kamide is the Department’s representative on CASL’s U.S. government board of directors and Cheryl Hendrickson is a knowledge transfer consultant for the board.