

700m

More than 5 percent of the world's population, or 430 million people, requires rehabilitation to address their disabling hearing loss, including 34 million children, according to the World Health Organization. It is estimated that by 2050, over 700 million people, or one in every 10 people, will have disabling hearing loss.

Yet all these were not the toughest part of her career. The hardest time came in 2005, when her newborn baby was diagnosed with innate hearing loss. Her husband, refusing to face the reality, divorced her, leaving Liu to juggle alone between working with her deaf students and raising a deaf boy.

"It was a big blow to me, and I felt as if heaven had fallen," Liu recalled in tears in an interview with China Central Television. "Doctors told me there was no hope of making my son speak, but I did not give up."

A 'tongue exercise'

She knew that early intervention may help a child hard of hearing regain his or her speaking power, but at first she didn't know how. Day and night, she browsed medical literature, while trying her best to explore and experiment with a unique "tongue exercise" to treat her son, who was about seven months old when doctors declared he had an "irreparable" hearing impairment.

Such a "tongue exercise" involves intensive movements of one's tongue and other oral muscles so that one can "feel and find" the correct mouth shape for the pronunciation of a certain word. The mouth could feel extremely sore after such intensive exercises.

Liu's relentless efforts paid off. Her son began to speak when he was 1 year old. Now, he has been enrolled in a renowned college, like any other normal student.

"Mom was strong-minded.

I love her," the son said tearfully in the interview.

In 2008, Liu's school began providing preschool education for little kids with hearing loss. Because of her experience in treating her son in the previous three years, she was appointed head teacher of such classes.

Don't mistake Liu's unique "tongue exercise" for a panacea. A child suffering from hearing loss may be able to move his or her tongue and other oral muscles freely, but they often have a hard time telling "h" (an aspirated consonant) from "e" (a vowel).

In that case, Liu would put a student's hand before her mouth to let him or her feel the difference of breath in uttering the two letters. To help a boy student feel the position of the tongue in pronouncing *gege*, Chinese for "elder brother," she even put his finger into her mouth to feel how the tongue touched the palate.

Of all the students Liu has taught since 1991, especially since 2005 when preschool education for kids hard of hearing began, quite a few have regained their speaking power, although their pronunciation may not always be standard.

Generally speaking, a baby should undergo checks of his or her hearing ability as early as possible, because the sooner one is diagnosed with hearing loss, the better. Certainly there are exceptions.

Liu Hanxiang, now a professional dancer, came to Liu Lingli's class when she was already 8 years old, her vocal chord having become too rigid. Still, Liu succeeded in helping



Liu is not just a teacher but also like a mother to take care of students.

the girl speak, by teaching her one word per day.

A couple of years ago, Liu Hanxiang sent video greetings to her teacher, who was attending a CCTV ceremony for those selected as model Party members. As the girl expressed her gratitude in not very standard pronunciation, aided by sign language, many members in the audience were in tears.

A 'touching' story

In China, more than 20 million people suffer from hearing loss. In some cases, deaf students also find it hard to speak as they can't hear the sound of a word. Many of them can only learn to communicate with sign language — talking with their hands in a world of silence.

Theoretically, a deaf child can learn to talk if he or she is diagnosed at an early stage and then gets timely treatment. But like many other things, it's easier said than done. Without a devoted and capable teacher, a deaf child may lose a golden chance to walk out of a world of dead silence.

During this year's National People's Congress, which concluded on Monday, Liu, a NPC

deputy, called for enhanced government support for special education for those hard of hearing. She also suggested hearing aids and cochlear implants be covered by the country's medical insurance.

Liu's story, popularized by a recent series of news reports, shows how a passionate teacher has persisted in achieving "an impossible mission" — helping children with hearing loss regain their speaking power.

The World Health Organization published a report last month, saying that more than 5 percent of the world's population, or 430 million people, requires rehabilitation to address their disabling hearing loss, including 34 million children.

"It is estimated that by 2050, over 700 million people, or one in every 10 people, will have disabling hearing loss," said the report.

When it comes to interventional measures, WHO's suggestions include speech reading and the use of hearing technologies such as hearing aids, cochlear implants and middle ear implants.

In a way, Liu's "tongue exercise" has enriched the concept of speech reading, thereby

enabling more hard-of-hearing children across the world to get effective treatment at an early age.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the United States, "speech reading (or lip reading) is a building block that helps a child with hearing loss understand speech. The child watches the movements of a speaker's mouth and face, and understands what the speaker is saying."

The CDC further explains that about 40 percent of the sounds in the English language can be seen on the lips of a speaker but some words can't be read. For example, "bop," "mop" and "pop" look alike when spoken.

Similar confusion occurs in Chinese contexts as well. For example, "mama" (mom) and "baba" (dad) sound different to a normal listener, but in uttering the two words, one's mouth looks the same to someone hard of hearing.

That's where Liu's "tongue exercise" comes in. When "reading" fails, "finger touching" helps one with hearing loss to figure out how to pronounce a word.

It's a "touching" story.