

L2 acquisition of sign language

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Abstract

This talk provides an overview of selected research related to second language (L2) acquisition of sign language. Traditionally, L2 acquisition research has focused almost exclusively on acquisition of spoken languages by hearing learners whose L1s are also spoken languages; I refer to this context as *M1-L2 learning* (learning a second language in the same modality as one's first language). Recently, however, researchers have begun investigating second language acquisition in a new modality, or *M2-L2 learning*. Researchers have chosen to approach the issue of M2-L2 learning from a variety of angles, and this discussion selects studies published since 2000 that address the broad research objectives summarized below.

1. Identification of aspects of sign language grammar and phonology that seem to be particularly challenging for M2-L2 signers (e.g. Mirus et al. 2001; Rosen 2004; Nadolske 2009; Bochner et al. 2011; Quinto-Pozos 2011), with discussion of how these findings should inform sign language pedagogy.

2. Exploration of the degree to which commonly noted L2 effects apply to M2-L2 acquisition; a relatively small number of studies explore whether hearing learners of L2 sign display well-documented L2 effects such as errors with marked forms and transfer from previous experience (in particular, gestural experience) when learning in a new modality (Ortega & Morgan 2010; Chen Pichler 2011; Brentari et al. 2012); other studies in this category explore critical period effects for L2 sign acquisition by late-deafened learners (e.g. Mayberry 2006; Cormier et al. 2012).

3. Comparisons of perception and processing of sign language across Deaf signers, hearing nonsigners and (occasio-

nally) M2-L2 signers (e.g. Hildebrandt & Corina 2002; Emmorey et al. 2008; Best et al. 2010; Mann et al. 2010).

4. Investigation of the potential effects of gesture and iconicity on sign language learning by hearing adults (e.g. Taub et al. 2008; Thompson, Vinson & Vigliocco 2010; Baus et al. 2012).

Taken together, the findings of these studies allow us to sketch a preliminary, composite portrait of hearing learners of L2 sign languages, the ways in which they perceive and process signed input, and the factors that might facilitate or impede their sign development. Such information is not only theoretically important for our understanding of how modality interacts with acquisition, it is also urgently needed for improving sign language pedagogy for hearing parents of deaf children and the dramatically increased numbers of hearing students enrolling in sign language courses in the US and other countries (Welles 2004).

References

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