

## **Modality-(in)Dependent Second Language Learning**

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Most reports of second language (L2) learning by Deaf individuals involve learning the written version of the ambient spoken language. A consistent finding of these studies is that late exposed Deaf signers fare relatively poorly in L2 development (Mayberry 2007). However, the vast majority of this research overlooks an important issue: learning how to read and write in an L2 involves learning not only the language itself, but also the secondary (i.e. written) form used for encoding that language. It is quite possible that the well-documented difficulties of North American Deaf students on L2 English tests, for example, reflect difficulties with English phonological coding and awareness that are distinct from the basic ability to learn an L2. We submit that testing Deaf learners' performance in L2 sign language learning provides a more direct and accurate measure of the effects of late L1 exposure on L2 learning. In this talk, we survey findings from the literature the Deaf M1L2 (first modality-second language) learners, who learn their L2 in the same modality as their L1, and argue that a more successful picture emerges than the typical picture from L2 English studies. We know from decades of research on spoken language L2 learners that transfer can have powerful facilitative effects for acquisition. For instance, cognates between the L1 and L2 facilitate lexical development, especially for beginning learners (Hall 2002). These facilitative effects in vocabulary may "free up" cognitive resources for other aspects of L2 learning, resulting in advantages in other domains such as syntax, compared to students whose L1 share fewer cognates with their L2 (Ard & Homburg 1983). Similarly, students whose L1 and L2 employ similar morphological processes facilitate morphological transfer (Jarvis and Odlin 2000). While transfer is possible between the Deaf learner's signed L1 and their written L2, particularly at the syntactic level, the potential for transfer between two natural sign languages is arguably much greater at all linguistic levels, due to the striking typological similarities across sign languages (Sandler 2006). When reproducing isolated signs, M1L2 signers reportedly make small phonological errors in handshape (Chen Pichler 2010) and proximalization (Mirus et al. 2001), but successfully produce signs that are overall well-integrated and natural looking. Similarly, M1L2 signers' familiarity with non-concatenative morphology, classifier forms and the exploitation of space to mark linguistic functions in their L1 provides high potential for transfer into a signed L2. In addition to allowing for more accurate assessment of late-exposed Deaf L2 acquisition, research on M1L2 also serves as an important testing ground for the "typical" patterns of L2 acquisition that have been established almost exclusively on the basis of spoken L2 acquisition by hearing

learners. In short, research on the development of M1L2 learners provides an opportunity to tease apart developmental patterns that may be confounded by learning a new language in a different modality. Careful examination of Deaf M1L2 signers is key to understanding the contribution of the visuo-gestural modality in terms of both biological and socio-cultural influences, including the roles of iconicity and gestural experience, in L2 learning. This paper offers predictions that can help guide this important emerging field.