

Constructing a Profile of Successful L2 Signer-Hearing Parents of Deaf Children

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ABSTRACT

Investigations of sign language acquisition by hearing learners (also known as M2L2 signers) have increased dramatically over the past decade, mainly in the UK and the US, but also in a growing number of other countries. Findings from this body of research help to refine existing assumptions about the processes of adult second language (L2) development, and how they may be affected by modality (Chen Pichler and Koulidobrova 2016). However, existing M2L2 signer research has focused almost exclusively on the “typical” context of high school or college students learning to sign in an academic setting, out of personal interest. In contrast, this talk focuses on hearing parents of deaf children who are learning to sign in a home environment, motivated by urgent necessity rather than interest (Napier et al. 2007). The stakes are very high for these learners, given the critical role that early sign language exposure plays in preventing very negative effects of language deprivation on deaf children’s linguistic and cognitive development (Morford and Mayberry 2000). Yet documentation of sign language development by hearing parents is rare, and in the US, no standardized “family curriculum” exists for teaching American Sign Language (ASL) suited to the unique needs of hearing families with deaf children. This talk reports initial findings from interviews with signing American hearing parents of deaf children related to (a) why they committed to learning ASL, despite pressure against it, (b) the resources they use for learning ASL, and (c) their reflections on what aspects of the language are the most difficult or the most intuitive to learn.

We recruited signing parents through early intervention programs for deaf children. Nearly all the deaf children of the interviewed families had received or were scheduled to receive cochlear implants. When asked why they had opted to learn ASL despite popular pressure against it, parents most commonly answered that they wanted a way to communicate with their child while they waited for a cochlear implant. Their motivation was not solely utilitarian, however, because they also expressed a long-term desire for their children and themselves to develop as ASL-English bilinguals. Sadly, since most families receive home visits by an ASL teacher or Deaf mentor only 1-2 hours per week, parents report difficulty in advancing their ASL development, even when they supplement their learning with evening classes and lessons online or on DVDs. Still, these hearing parents displayed surprisingly sophisticated reflections about linguistic structures of ASL and spoken English, citing word order as the most challenging aspect of ASL to learn, and vocabulary as a relatively easy aspect to learn (Snoddon 2015).

Interviews are still on-going, but the patterns emerging so far are already instructive for constructing a profile of successful ASL parent learners, the factors that motivated them to choose ASL as a family language, and the practices that support their learning. Documenting these factors is an important first step towards developing

strategies that will encourage a larger proportion of hearing parents to sign with their deaf children.

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