Foreign Language Literacy in Deaf Learners

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Abstract

This paper explores deaf people's literacy in languages not spoken by hearing members of their communities. It describes the difficulty of all literacy among the deaf due to a lack of written domains of deaf people's L1s, i.e. sign languages, and the greater difficulty of mastery of written forms which they have very little exposure to, which represent spoken forms that they cannot process. The paper describes this target language as an L3 to show its greater distance from the deaf learner, and to emphasize that all literacy among the deaf is necessarily L2 literacy. The writer concludes by recommending the instruction of deaf learners in sign languages not used in their communities, and greater expertise in finger spelling, which has been shown to improve literacy in deaf people.

Key words: SLA, deafness, literacy, foreign language education

Introduction

Worldwide, 0.1 to 0.2 percent of people are deaf, and 6 to 15 percent are hard of hearing. (European Commission, 2005) In an increasingly globalized world－that is, a world where competition for resources is as likely to occur between parties in separate countries as it is likely to occur between parties within the same country (UNESCO, 2014)－mastery of an L2, an additional language, grows ever more useful to all people, including the deaf. Deaf people, too, need foreign languages: languages not spoken in the hearing communities where they live.

The most obvious conceptualization of deaf use of any spoken (i.e., not signed)

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language is in the written domain. The inability to perceive sound does not in itself prevent reading or writing. This might make it seem as though, in the written domain, deaf users of a spoken language operate on a level playing field with hearing users of that language. However, the circumstances of foreign language literacy among the deaf are more complicated than that. This paper explores deaf people's literacy in languages not spoken by hearing members of their communities.

The L1

A deaf person's L1 is not the language spoken in her environment by hearing members of her community, but a sign language. (Bedoin, 2011; Estee-Wale, 2004; European Commission, 2005) Sign languages are not based on spoken languages and have their own forms of syntax different from the syntax of the local spoken language. For example, English-speakers form yes/no questions through auxiliary verb movement. Yet in the English-speaking country of Australia, to pose a yes/no question in Australian Sign Language (Auslan), there is no auxiliary verb movement: a statement is signed, and the signer shows that it is a question by opening the eyes wide and tilting the head forward. (Fromkin et al., 2005) Sign languages around the world are as different, and can be as related or unrelated, as spoken languages. (Bedoin, 2011; Davis, 2000) In both the United Kingdom and the United States, the spoken language is English, yet BSL and ASL, the sign languages used in these two countries, are largely unintelligible. (Davis, 2000; Kikuchi, 2009) Sign language can differ even from city to city, as in Germany and Spain. (Davis, 2000)

Deaf children born to hearing parents who do not know sign language may suffer from impoverished input in the L1 (Estee-Wale, 2004; European Commission, 2005; Fromkin et al. 2005), and from general language processing problems related to this early linguistic deficit. (European Commission, 2005; Fromkin et al., 2005)

Literacy

When deaf children learn to read and write, they are learning grapheme strings that represent forms that do not exist in their L1. Thus, they are learning to write an L2.

The term L2 is useful to describe deaf literacy not only because it denotes forms and features not found in the users' mother "tongue" but also because "L2" is an umbrella term used for languages learned in both foreign-language and second-language contexts. Language-learning context is foreign when the language learned is not used in the learner's environment outside the classroom: for example, the study of the language of another country or region. The language-learning context is second-language when the learner encounters that language in her environment

outside the classroom. The classic example is a person who has moved to another country or region and now must learn the local language. (Fromkin, 2005) Depending on who in her family and community uses sign language, a deaf learner may learn the local spoken language as a second or foreign language.

The written form of the local spoken language is, for the deaf learner, an L2. At the same time, her own L1 has no written form. No sign language has a written form (Estee-Wale, 2004): all deaf literacy is L2 literacy. Deaf people's attainment of literacy in the local spoken language tends to be weak. (Estee-Wale, 2004; European Commission, 2005; Puente, 2006) Bedoin (2011) reported an astonishing illiteracy rate of 80 percent among the French deaf. (Gillot 1998, cited in Bedoin 2011)

The one connection between sign language and literacy is a sign language alphabet. Unlike other, lexical signs, the signs for letters *are* based on the local spoken language in that they represent standard graphemes used to spell words from that spoken language. Research has shown mastery of finger-spelling by the deaf to improve their reading ability. (Estee-Wale, 2004, Puente, 2006)

An L3

This section is about literacy in a spoken language not used in a deaf person's community. Lip-reading and speaking by the deaf in such languages are beyond the scope of this study.

In this paper, I call such a language an L3, not only because it is the third language learned in the instructional sequence, subsequent to the L1 sign language and whatever control learners can attain over forms (written or spoken) of the local spoken language (the deaf person's L2), but also to show the greater distance, explained below, between this most recent attempt at language and the L1.

For a deaf person, literacy in an L3 is control over written forms representing spoken forms that they cannot process. In this way, L3 literacy is similar to literacy in the local spoken language. Yet the L2 and L3 differ in the deaf learner's exposure and need. The social dominance of the local spoken language brings exposure to its forms in whatever mode is available to the deaf learner, including signs and labels. These forms include proper nouns and words newly coined in the spoken language, with no equivalent in the local sign language. Deaf people need to refer to the things and concepts represented by these forms. A sign language usually accomplishes this reference through finger-spelling with its particular sign language alphabet. (In another manifestation of differences among sign languages unrelated to the spoken languages of their areas of use, ASL and BSL alphabets are completely different, despite American and British spoken English using identical alphabets for their written forms.) (ABC ASL 2014; Pritchard 2004) However, there is no such need for reference to forms of a language not used in the deaf learner's community,

and almost no opportunity for L3 input outside the classroom. With impoverished input (Fromkin 2005), even the written forms of a language based in a mode (i.e., spoken, not signed) inaccessible to the deaf learner can be extremely difficult to gain control of.

Deaf learning of a foreign language: The language of instruction
  In the description of an individual language-user, the L1 refers to the mother tongue or the language the user has the greatest control over. In the context of a language classroom, however, the L1 is, if not the language of instruction (which it may very well be), the basis of meaning: the language of gloss and definition, the "standard" against which forms of the target language contrast. In an English classroom in Japan, even if some students speak, for example, Russian or Korean at home, the classroom L1 is Japanese because Japanese is the basis of meaning for the new English forms learned. For learners with Japanese skills strong enough to achieve academically in a Japanese-medium school, the difference between their own L1 and the classroom L1 is not a problem. Their previous experience at learning languages can actually be an advantage in the language classroom. (Fromkin, 2005)
  When a deaf person learns to read and write an L3, a spoken language not used in her community, what is the language of instruction? What is the classroom L1? If the student does not attend a special school for the deaf, the classroom L1 is almost certainly the local spoken language, maybe without even a sign language interpreter. (Bedoin, 2011; Quay, 2005) A classroom L1 different from the student's L1 is not a problem for a student who has mastered the classroom L1, but deaf students cannot perceive the classroom L1 in its spoken domain and, as previously stated, perform poorly in its written domain. Thus deaf learners of a written L3 in a mainstream classroom are trying to forge meaningful links between two systems they don't fully understand.
  Is this problem solved by deaf students being taught by a signing teacher, or through a sign language interpreter? The teacher's signed explanations and any glosses or translations will certainly make sense to the deaf student. However, in the case of an L3 in its written domain – the only domain accessible to the learner – positive transfer from the L1 is unlikely because the L1, a sign language, has no written domain. Research shows that excellent control over sign language itself does not transfer to control over written forms because of their different language domains. (Estee-Wale, 2004; Puente, 2006)

Conclusion: Recommendations

The ideal L2 learning experience for the deaf is the study of an additional sign language. (Bedoin, 2011; European Commission, 2005) Learning a language in the signed, rather than spoken, mode, learners can make good use of expertise they have attained in their L1 and experience positive transfer from an L1 to an L2, both in the same mode. But if deaf learners are to achieve literacy − necessary for independence in a literate society-- they still need to study a spoken language, at least in its written domain. For the deaf, the useful bridge from a sign language to the written domain of a spoken language is finger-spelling, using a sign language alphabet. Research shows that deaf expertise in using finger-spelling for proper nouns and newly-coined words in the local spoken language transfers to better performance at reading and writing the local spoken language (Puente, 2006), which is, for a deaf learner, an L2. A deaf learner who gains control over an L1 sign language and its alphabet can transfer alphabetic expertise to the written domain of the local spoken language (Estee-Wale 2004, Puente, 2006) − the most useful, most accessible spoken language − and once this is mastered, experience positive transfer to the written domain of another spoken language, an L3.

This writer hopes that educational policy-makers around the world will recognize the benefits of fully-educated, multi-literate deaf people in society, and institute language programs for the deaf that proceed from mastery of the signed L1 to a signed L2, with sufficient practice in finger-spelling to gain control over local and foreign literacy.

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