How Do Gestures Reveal L2 Linguistic Proficiency?

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For several decades, L2 researchers have paid little attention to gesture and nonverbal aspects because they have focused primarily on verbal aspects and linguistic competence. Recently, only a few scholars found that there is a close relationship between gestures and L2 proficiency, and hence, it is not clear yet how gestures reveal L2 speakers' mental processes in different proficiency levels. Therefore, in this study, we examined how gestures serve as a window on developmental stages of intermediate and advanced L2 speakers. Thirty-two native speakers of Korean studying in the United States participated in this study, constituting two separate groups: Intermediate speakers of English, who arrived here in their early 20s, and advanced speakers, who arrived as teenagers. The oral English proficiency of individuals was tested and the difference of mean test scores between the two groups was statistically significant. Participants watched the same cartoon movie and later told the story in English to a Korean interlocutor. Participants were videotaped and gestures were coded. We found that intermediate speakers rely more on non-linguistic channels (i.e., gestures) due to lack of L2 linguistic knowledge. Their higher rates of speech-gesture grammatical, temporal, and semantic asynchronicity are similar to early L1 developmental stages of children at which asynchronicity appears.

Key words: second language, L2 linguistic proficiency, gesture, growth points, communicative dynamism, semantic and temporal speech-gesture asynchronicity

I. Introduction

Until recently, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have paid little attention to gestures and other nonverbal aspects of second language (L2) communication. Most of them (e.g., Corder, 1973; Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; Gregg, 1993) have focused primarily on verbal aspects and linguistic competence. Recently, some SLA scholars (Gullberg, 2006; McCafferty, 1998, 2004, 2006; Negueruela & Lantolf, 2008; Stam, 2006) have expressed interest in gestures and agreed that it is hard to determine how L2 speakers perform in their L2 without considering gestures. As Lantolf (2006) pointed out, learning an L2 means much more than achieving native competence in the grammar and the phonology; rather, L2 learning involves acquiring both speech and gesture. Neu (1990) asserted that there is a close relationship between gestures and L2 proficiency, and communicative competence consists of verbal and non-verbal communication. However, due to lack of studies, it is not much known how gestures are related to L2 proficiency. Therefore, in this study, we explore how gestures reveal L2 speakers' mental processes at different L2 proficiency levels.
II. Literature Review

1. What are gestures?

How to define gestures is one of the biggest issues among scholars. Although there are various clarifications, McNeill’s (1992) definition has been most widely accepted: “When people talk they can be seen making spontaneous movements called gestures. These are usually movements of the arms and hands and are closely synchronized with the flow of speech” (p. 11). Gesture scholars have proposed multiple classifications of gestures. Although gestures cannot be established “as a single universal gesture system equally useful for all investigations” (Kendon, 2004, p. 107), the most influential current classification is McNeill’s (1992), i.e., Representational gestures are used to convey semantic content and are subcategorized into three gestures: iconics, metaphorics, and deictics. Iconics have a semantic and concrete relationship with speech. However, metaphorics represent abstract ideas. The other representational gesture is deictics (i.e., pointing gestures), which consist of concrete and abstract deictics. The former is used to indicate objects in the real world, but the latter refers to “a part where there is nothing objectively present to point at” (McNeill, 1992, p. 18).

2. L2 proficiency and gestures

Most of the previous studies on L2 gestures tended to shed light on the interaction between gestures and language (First language, L1 vs. L2) proficiency. Since bilinguals are often more proficient in their L1 than L2, the majority of the research that compared L1 and L2 concluded that participants used more gestures in L2 than in L1 speaking. For instance, Marcos (1979b) found that bilingual speakers produced more beats and lexical search gestures (termed by Marcos; e.g., groping hand gestures) in their non-dominant language although they used similar rates of iconic/metaphoric gestures and deictic gestures in both languages. In a similar vein, Nobe (1993) compared gesture rates in L1 and L2 narrations. Nobe concluded that “difficulties of linguistic representation” (p. 38) affect gesture representation in a foreign language more than in an L1. Recently, Nicoladis, Pika, Yin, and Marentette (2007) found that gesture type is related to language dominance; that is, participants produced iconic gestures and emblems (i.e., conventional gestures understood without speech and deictics) gestures more in L2 English than L1 Chinese.

Only a few studies have researched how gestures are related to L2 linguistic proficiency. Marcos (1979a) reported that as L2 proficiency decreased, speakers use more gestures mostly to facilitate lexical access. Similarly, Gullberg (1998) found that lower proficiency L2 speakers employed more gestures than did advanced speakers. Gullberg’s (2003) later finding showed there is a close relationship between types of gestures and L2 proficiency, such as more abstract deictic gestures with lower proficiency L2 speakers. In contrast, Kita (1993) found that L2 speakers produce more gestures when their oral proficiency increases. However, Chen (1990)