Building up L2 Corpora in different signed languages – SSL, ISL and ASL

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INTRODUCTION
In contrast to years of extensive teaching in the second language (L2) programs of signed languages, there has been a lack of research on signed languages as L2s, specifically with respect to the area of second language acquisition (SLA) (Wolf, 2013). Nevertheless, earlier studies have covered different aspects of L2 SL. For instance, neurolinguistic studies have demonstrated neural differences between L1 SL and L2 SL brains (e.g. Newman et al., 2002). Linguistic studies have yielded specific L2 structures, mainly with respect to phonology, i.e. handshape and movement error (e.g. Rosen, 2004; Bochner et al., 2011). Furthermore, some studies have described L2 behaviors with respect to the bimodal aspect of L2 learning and then accounted for motoric skills (e.g. Mirus et al., 2001; Hilger et al., 2015) and nonmanual features (McIntire & Snitzer Reilly, 1988) in L2 SL learners.

While we know there are difficulties linked to cross-modality effects, i.e. phonetic and motoric skills and non-manual features, as well as body treatments and behavior (touching, expressions), fewer studies have described the acquisition of linguistic structures on a broader scale, i.e. what language patterns are harder to learn than others. There is a need for studies that account for developmental patterns of L2 SL acquisition, e.g. describing an acquisition order for L2 SL.

METHODS
The methods used for data collection were the same for each corpus and departed from the corpus linguistic methods used to build earlier corpora (cf. Mesch & Wallin, 2015). The rationale for stimuli was based on:

1) Dialogues. Here the learners are being interviewed by a deaf native speaker. The questions are based upon their appropriated L2 stage according to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for languages).

2) Picture descriptions. The learners were asked to describe a selection of pictures from a) “Frog. Where are you?” and b) Volterra picture elicitation task (Volterra et al., 1984).

3) Retellings. The learners were asked to retell a short movie clip from “The Plank”.

Data collection had a longitudinal approach, i.e data was collected over time (4 times/year) during the learners’ progress.

Corpus data
So far, data have been collected from 18 SSL, 12 ISL, and 19 ASL learners (1st- and 2nd-year students). The first investigations of the corpora are in progress. For example, for SSL, the first analysis (approx. 9 hours of data) has focused on description of the learners’ interlanguage (Selinker, 1972), i.e. the learners’ use of grammar and vocabulary, along with identifying common L2 errors, especially regarding the use of nonmanuals. The multimodal annotation tool ELAN is being used for annotation of glosses and error tags. The SSL L2 corpus also comprises data from three native signers of SSL as a control group for future investigations.

PROJECT OUTCOMES
So far, research outcomes are limited as this project is ongoing, i.e. data is still in the data collection phase. Also, different progresses have been made in the research outcomes of the three sign languages involved in this project: SSL, ISL and ASL.

Proposal of an annotation standard
A proposal for an annotation standard for analyzing L2 structures has been developed (Schönström & Mesch, 2014). In this proposal, interlanguage as well as error tiers were created in order to tag learner structures as manual as well as nonmanual features. A set of tag glosses was suggested, too, based on error form and error type. We also added a tier, L2 strategy, for specific learner strategies related to SL, i.e. fingerspelling and gestural imitation.

Research on the pipeline
The interaction between mouth actions and signs in L2 SL. The ongoing study has so far found some interesting patterns related to the synchronization of mouth actions and signs in L2 SL learners, e.g. an interference effect through a greater use of mouthings borrowed from Swedish.

Learner perspectives on learning. Aiming at European learners, the ISL team has collected data regarding learner perspectives on their L2 SL learning through i) a questionnaire survey, and ii) recorded focus group discussions with other L2 SL learners.

DISCUSSION
Building up learner corpora demands resources and is time consuming due to the treatment of the extensive amount of data and time spent establishing annotation standards. However, by the end, the outcomes may give us unique insights into L2 SL acquisition.

The use of corpora of different SLs for the purposes of research holds a great potential for allowing researchers to compare, e.g. learning milestones for L2s cross-linguistically, in order to make the results more reliable.

Moreover, learner corpora can provide educational advantages for teaching SLs as L2s (cf. Granger 2003).

REFERENCES (selected)


