

# The development of German Sign Language (DGS) and Written German in bilingually educated deaf students

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## Abstract

This paper concerns variation in the bilingual development of German Sign Language (DGS) and written German in deaf learners. Research conducted over the last decades has shown that variation in learner grammars, either in relation to conflict resolution in the face of competing linguistic representations or as a means to fill temporary gaps, is an integral part of language development (Tracy 2002; Plaza-Pust 2000a, b, 2008). Thus far, however, little is known about variation in the bilingual development of deaf learners, who, for their greater part, acquire sign language outside the family and written language as an L2 in a formal context. While several studies have been concerned with the attainment of literacy skills, sign language competence in bilingually educated deaf students has seldom been subjected to qualitative analyses that would provide a detailed picture of the structural knowledge attained.

The study presented here, part of a longitudinal investigation of deaf students attending the Berlin bilingual education programme, represents a first attempt at assessing bilingual deaf learners' competence in DGS and written German by using theoretically founded diagnostic tools. The data collection (2004-2008) consists of signed and written narratives elicited on the basis of the "frog story".

The individual developmental profiles established for either language provide evidence of variation at the inter-individual level

(participants vary as to how far they advance), and also at the intra-individual level (the inclusion of new target-like grammatical features does not always occur to the immediate exclusion of the previously available target-deviant ones).

As for DGS, the data reveal a discrepancy concerning the participants' grammatical competence vis-à-vis their discursive skills. Crucially, variation in the DGS data concerns the use of linguistic devices necessary to create cohesion and coherence, which, by assumption, reflects the complexity of the task learners of DGS, a discourse oriented language, are confronted with as several grammatical phenomena they acquire are linked to the discourse level via the syntax-discourse interface.

As for written German, our analysis reveals that variation is primarily tied to structure-building processes, reflecting also the temporal lag in the acquisition of this language. The participants' production of target-deviant structures they do not encounter in their German input deserves special attention because such apparent errors provide further insights into underlying language learning processes. Striking similarities to the productions of other L2 learners of German become apparent.

Finally, the incidence of language mixing was found to be low and developmentally constrained.

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