LOOKING AHEAD

ATA in '92 Proceedings of the
31 st Annual Conference of the
American Translators Association

October 17-21, 1990
New Orleans, Louisiana

Edited by A. Leslie Willson

U

TECHNIQUES FOR IMPROVING ACCENT IN SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

Elizabeth A. Winston
Gallaudet University

Abstract: Although accent is not often specifically addressed in many second and foreign language classes, it is extremely important in courses for interpreters. The interpreter's accent can adversely affect the reactions of listeners, *especially* when it renders the message difficult to understand. Nida, in a 1952 article entitled "Selective Listening," (Language Learning, Vol. IV, Numbers 2 & 3) describes a method for first identifying, then improving the accent of second language learners. This technique has been applied, with some variation, to improving the accent of sign language interpreting students. The technique focuses on specific *features of* accent - such features as rhythm, articulation, and stress, with two goals: 1) to enable students to *perceive* variables related to accent in native signers, and 2) to enable them to produce signed interpretations which *reflect* native-like accent. This method of identification followed by specific suggestions for improvement allows students to make noticeable progress in their sign production in fairly short periods of time. Using this method, improvement has been noted both in students whose accents make their interpretations unintelligible and in students whose accents need improvement in one or two features only, such as the articulation of a specific handshape or the mastery of the stress pattern of a specific word.

1. INTRODUCTION

Accent has received little attention in the research and the teaching of American Sign Language (ASL). There exists no definition of accent in ASL and ASL courses do not often directly address the issue of teaching and/or improving accent. In this paper, a method of improving accent in ASL is investigated,. a method which combines detailed analysis and feedback with a process of "selective watching" and *"selective* shadowing". Accent in ASL is defined as the combination of features which involve the physical articulation of signs, as well as those which organize the utterance in terms of pacing, stress, rhythm, and intonation. These features in spoken languages include speed of speech and pausing between constituents, tone, pitch, emphasis, and

2

articulation. When discussing a signed language such as ASL, these features include the manual articulation of the sign parameters, the speed of articulation, the space used for articulation, the rhythm of *the* segments within signs, *eye* gaze, head rotation, body rotation, head tilt, and facial expressions. The complex interaction of these features which produce the phenomenon called "accent" in ASL has yet to be described in detail and this description was not the intent of this *project.* Rather, the intention was to work with second language learners of ASL in order to help them improve their accents.

The original motivation for this study stemmed from a practical need to provide interpreting students with feedback and advice about improvements needed in their signing, and more specifically, in their accents._ Student problems in this area appear to fall into two major categories, articulation problems and gestalt problems (Ref. 11). While the researcher was able to provide specific information about articulation prob*lems, gestalt problems were* much more difficult to identify and to remedy. Problems which fall into this category are problems related *to the appropriate use of space,* head nods, head and body rotation, eye brow movement, and eye gaze, and mouth move*ments, as well as the rhythm* and pacing of the manual and visual signals, all of which combine to produce appropriate accent and phrasing within ASL discourse. The coordinated use of these features produces a native-like gestalt; the uncoordinated production or the lack of one or more of these features can cause dissonance for the receiver, ranging from slightly noticeable to greatly irritating *to complete* incomprehensibility.

The major goal of this project was to experiment in depth with a method of feedback and *practice which the* researcher had used occasionally in previous courses. This is labelled "selective watching" and "selective shadowing," based on Nida's discus*sion of "selective* listening" (Ref. 9). For the purpose of this study, accent is divided into two categories, articulation and gestalt (Ref. 11). It was predicted that problems falling into the articulation category would be more susceptible to improvement through these methods than would problems falling into the category of gestalt. This prediction was not supported by the preliminary findings, however. Instead, it appears that both aspects are susceptible to this method.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research *that exists about* accent in ASL has generally centered on specific linguistic features of phrasing, such as grammatical markers produced on the face. Little has been done in the area of intersentential and intrasentential phrasing. There exists, to the researcher's knowledge, no literature concerning the teaching of these aspects of ASL to second language learners. Thus, the research for this project began in the area of spoken language teaching and acquisition. *This material will be* discussed first and will be followed by a review of research specifically related to ASL.

Accent in spoken languages is achieved through the use of features such as rhythm, speed, intonation, and stress, the overall affect of this is labelled phrasing by Scollon (Ref. 12). The teaching of these features in second language classrooms when the language being presented is spoken is called pronunciation practice. This type of practice has fallen out of favor in most spoken language classrooms in the U.S. This is attributed by Wong to *three factors* (Ref. 16). First, pronunciation has proven to be difficult to improve in second language learners. Studies cited by Wong have supported the belief that pronunciation is not only difficult to improve, but nearly

impossible. Second, the shift toward more communicative philosophies of language teaching view pronunciation as having little place in the classroom. Third, Krashen's theory (Ref. 4) that true competence is acquired and not consciously learned has led *many teachers* to assume that students will unconsciously absorb appropriate pronunciation given comprehensible input. Wong disagrees with those who ignore pronunciation, claiming that "...if we look closely at the components of the communicative process, we will see that pronunciation is one of the more important means by which we achieve our communicative objectives."(Ref. 16,pg.227). She then presents examples of attitude studies which demonstrate native speakers reactions to non-native speaker accents, using accent to identify and separate in-group members from out-group members. Wong then describes three major aspects of pronunciation:

rhythm- "...an organizing principle for the timing of articulations and as a grid against which we match our perceptions "(pg.229, citing Ladd,1978:25, citing Lenneberg - no reference cited),

stress - a characteristic which "plays ... an active part in word identification, in organizing the flow of information, and in directing the listener's attention to what is important in that flow..."(pp.230-31).

intonation - which "helps convey how speakers feel about what they are saying and--of equal importance--how they feel about the people they are talking to."(pg.231).

If each of these features is important for defining *communicative competence in* the second language learner, then they are even more important for the second language learner aspiring to use their skills for cross-cultural communication activities *such as interpreting*. Thus identifying those ASL features which function for rhythm, stress, and intonation is important for these learners,

Rhythm is identified as being especially important for communicative competence by Scollon, who identifies tempo as an underlying factor not only in discourse, but in the regulating of turn-taking as well (Ref. 12). He labels the appropriate production of tempo in coordination with stress and intonation as the "ensemble" of language production, an understanding of which is necessary in order for a speaker to be considered competent in any given language.

In the realm of teaching and/or improving accent, Nida (Ref. 9) discusses the method of "selective listening," which introduces second language learners to the sounds of the new language through listening to one or two specific sounds at a time. This helps the student become more aware of the sounds in the new language and therefore helps them both understand and produce them more easily.

Bosco (Ref. 2) discusses another method, that of employing a "monumental text." This method involves providing students with a text in the second language which is produced by a native signer about a major topic. Examples of this are Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Kennedy's Inaugural Address. Students are instructed to study this spoken text until they are able to reproduce it with all the subtleties of the native speaker. Both of these methods were adapted to sign language in the forms of "selective watching" and "selective shadowing," and proved to be extremely useful during the progress of this project.

ASL research has not directly addressed the aspect of "pronunciation" in either the language itself or in the teaching of ASL as a second language. The research which exists has focused on grammatical features of ASL which function at the syntactic level. Liddell (Ref. 6&7) describes a number of markers which function linguistically in ASL, including topic, wh- questions, rhetorical questions, yes/no questions, conditionals, and

relative clauses, all of which function at the clause level. He also describes some nonmanual aspects of ASL, such as adverbial markers produced on the mouth and head nods. Baker-Shenk (Ref. 1) addresses grammatical markers in ASL as well, focusing on two specific types of markers, the negative marker and the yes/no question marker. She examines data made up exclusively of these types of sentences, describing all non-manual aspects which occurred with these sentences. However, as she points out, it still does not attempt to account for these features in connected discourse.

Other research which has focused on non-manual aspects of ASL phrasing includes Nowell's study of head nods (Ref. 10) and Snyder's study of head nods functioning as and/or with modals (Ref. 13). Snyder provides insight into the use of head nods in specific functions within a sentence and as such is useful for studying phrasing. Nowell describes a variety of functions of head nods in connected discourse, including the use of head nods as discourse markers used to structure a text in ASL. This is especially useful in the study of accent in ASL

Another feature related to accent in ASL is eye gaze. The importance of eye gaze is mentioned by Liddell (Ref. 6 and personal communication), Baker-Shenk (Ref. 1), and Valli (Ref. 15). However, little actual research has been conducted in this area, which seems due primarily to the difficulty of videotaping signers and capturing all information relevant to eye gaze - direction, height, eye contact - in a way that allows for accurate measurement of these features. One study relevant to this research is that of Mather (Ref. 8) which discusses eye gaze activity in relation to turn taking behavior in a classroom of deaf students with a deaf teacher. She identifies two types of eye gaze, group gaze and individual gaze, which are used to regulate turn-taking by the students. Similar uses of eye gaze appear in settings other than the classroom.

Although various aspects of accent in ASL have been studied, no studies address the overall gestalt, or the "ensemble" described by Scollon (Ref. 12). Moreover, none *address* the issue of improving a second language learner's accent. This project is a preliminary study of two methods, "selective watching" and "selective shadowing," which were used to improve the signing accent of such learners.

3. METHODOLOGY OF PROJECT

3.1 Setting and Subjects

The setting chosen for this project was the Gallaudet University Interpreter Training Program, which offers a Master of Arts degree in ASL/English interpreting. The curriculum of this program includes two semesters of intensive ASL instruction at an advanced level; it is expected that students entering the program will be fluent in ASL but will need additional skill improvement in order to function as interpreters. One skill requiring improvement was accent. This advanced ASL class of interpreting students was originally chosen for my project because the instructor and the department were both willing to permit me access to the course and to the video equipment required for the project.

The class consisted of eight students, all in the second semester of the four semester MA program. In addition to these 8 students, a professional interpreter, wanting to improve her accent, also participated in the study. The 9 participants' experience with various forms of sign language, either ASL, signed facsimiles of English, or Pidgin Sign English (PSE) ranged from one year, three months to over eighteen years.

There were 8 women and one man in this study. The teacher of the class was a deaf, native ASL signer. The methodology he used for teaching the class was primarily the modified direct method; he used ASL for all communication other than written forms, writing was conducted in English since ASL is not a written language. After the purpose of this study was explained to *the class,* volunteers were recruited to participate. All the students volunteered. It was hoped that only half would volunteer so that a control group could have been established, but since they *were all eager to* participate, it was decided to *accept them all. This provided more opportunity* for working with the method, which for this study was more important than producing any quantitative results which a control group *might* have provided.

3.2 Method

Feedback Sessions

The design of this project consisted of a series of three evaluation and feedback sessions with each participant (with the exception of two who missed appointments). The entire project covered a seven week time period during the second half of the spring semester. The goal of these sessions was to meet with each participant to discuss individual problems related to accent and to suggest methods for practice which the students could employ independently between the sessions, as well as after the project was completed. *The first* feedback session occurred at the beginning of the project. For this session a 5 minute story that each student had prepared for the ASL class and which had been videotaped during their presentations was evaluated. Evaluation of each story required approximately 20 minutes and consisted of watching the signed production and making extensive written notes about the production under the two following categories: sign production and "other". This category of "other" was eventually changed to "gestalt." Sign production evaluation consisted of detailed analysis of the four major sign parameters: handshape, movement, location, and palm orientation; gestalt consisted of *features* such as eye gaze, use of space, head nodding, and phrasing. Notes were recorded on a form which was later shared with *the* participant. Based on the number and types of accent errors found, participants were placed *in groups* according to those having mostly articulation errors and those having mostly gestalt errors.

After the evaluation was completed, a 30 minute interview was scheduled *with* each participant. During this interview the researcher first explained the notes, discussing the findings with each participant. Then the participant's story was *replayed* on the videotape, with the researcher pointing out the problems just discussed. This was an introduction to the method labelled "selective watching". *After this, the* researcher made suggestions about ways that participants could work on the problem areas between that interview and the next. These suggestions centered on the use of "selective watching" and "selective copying". "Selective watching" *refers to* the watching of an utterance, either the signer's own or that of a native signer, and focusing attention on one or two *features of* that utterance, in this case a feature such as finger extension or eye gaze. Watching for specific features builds an awareness of these features in the watcher, an awareness which then can be used to improve the watcher's own production. To paraphrase Nida, "We will do much to improve our speaking [signing] if we will learn to hear [see] correctly. One of the secrets to correct speaking [signing]

is correct hearing (seeing)" (Ref. 9,pg.95). "Selective copying" is an activity which requires the watcher to copy, as exactly as possible, the production of a single feature such as eye *gaze from a native* signer. This is done by watching a videotape of the native signer and copying, *as exactly as possible, every movement of* the *eyes or every* nod and shake *of* the head. This activity was especially useful for features of gestalt.

The second evaluation interview was scheduled three weeks after the first. These were scheduled to last for 45 minutes, because the first 30 minute interviews had proven to be too short. For this one, participants were asked to bring to the interview *a recent example of* their signing, an example which had been taped a few days before the second interview. For this interview the signing was not evaluated prior to the meeting. Instead, the previous analysis was reviewed and the participant was asked to comment about any improvement in accent that he/she had noted and any practice methods which had been useful. Students reported that they had "practiced" little but had begun noticing the accent features much more frequently, both in their own signing and in others._ This "noticing" was, in itself, considered to be a successful form of practice. After this, the participant played the tape which had been made for this session, pointing out each error, explaining why it was an error, and describing the appropriate correction. Any participant who missed a significant number of errors was stopped and the researcher reviewed the same segment, pointing out the errors that had been missed. This exercise lasted for approximately 20 minutes._ This analysis was primarily directed at sign parameter errors, although other errors such as eye gaze were also pointed out when appropriate. At this point, the participant was shown a taped story signed by a deaf, native signer. The goal of this was similar to that of the "monumental text" described above. The student and the researcher watched this for specific production features related to rhythm, stress, and phrasing, noting such features as eye gaze, head nod, and facial expression. The researcher then suggested activities for the participant to practice. These activities were also "selective watching" and *"selective* copying" activities.

The third evaluation interview occurred at the end of the semester, just prior to the participants' final evaluations. For their final evaluation in the ASL class, they were required to prepare and present *a* 20 minute lecture._ They *were* given the option of preparing this a few days early and taping it to bring to the final interview. This was to provide them with feedback which might be useful during the actual presentation as well as to ensure that the signing sample they brought to the final interview was very recent and well prepared. Once again the researcher asked the participants for comments about any improvements or changes noticed between the second and third tapings. Their comments were detailed and specific, an indication that they had incorporated the selective watching techniques they had been shown. Finally, the researcher watched the tape for one to two minutes to see the overall production, commented on this, then reviewed it for specific problems.

Addressing the Research Questions

In order to assess the usefulness of selective watching and selective shadowing for accent improvement a variety of strategies was used. To address the question of which type of accent problem would be most susceptible to improvement, the researcher compared their performance in the first evaluation with that of the second and third evaluations. This was based entirely on the researcher's judgment. Future

research will require a more *objective test, such as* preparing a videotape with two samples of each student's signing, one being from the first evaluation and one being from the final evaluation. These would have been ordered randomly, i.e., either in the order of first and last or last followed by first. Then, a panel of deaf, native signers would be asked to rate the performances. This would provide an objective measure for this aspect of the study and would also provide the researcher with *an objective* measure against which to test her own evaluations. This will be a valuable avenue for future research.

In order to evaluate the overall method of working on accent, the participants' responses to an opinion/evaluation question given to them at the end of the project were examined. This provided a gauge of the usefulness of the method from the participant's perspectives. In addition, the researcher evaluated the usefulness of the method as a teacher, a purely subjective but useful perspective. This provided a basis and a rationale for using the method which *the researcher* did not previously have. The results of this project are discussed in the next section.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section the results are discussed in two parts: first, the actual improvement of accent as a result of the methods; and second, the responses of the participants to the methods.

4.1 Accent Improvement

It was predicted before starting this project that those students with accent problems in the category of articulation would make quick improvements while those with problems in gestalt would not improve quickly. There were two reasons for this prediction. First, articulation problems are related to the four parameters of signs, handshape, movement, location, and palm orientation, a relatively limited number of features. Gestalt problems, on the *other* hand, are related to many more features, such as head nodding, body rotation, head rotation. eye gaze, use of space, and *facial expres*sion. Not only do *these* need to be mastered individually; the student must also learn to control their complex interaction during any utterance. Second, because much more is known about the parameters than about the gestalt, more specific feedback could be provided to those with articulation problems than to those with gestalt problems. This prediction was not supported by *the* findings.

After the first evaluation in which the participants *were* divided into two groups, with each participant receiving advice about how to look for their errors and what to look for in other signers, they were expected to continue the "selective watching" process on their own and incorporate improvements in their signing. After the second evaluation, although articulation problems had improved,i.e. some students had improved a feature such as weak finger extension or loose articulation, none had shown marked overall improvement. On the other hand, those with gestalt problems showed marked improvement in both their awareness of their errors and in their overall production of the gestalt. This result was unexpected. There are two possible explanations for this. First, their ASL teacher had been working *with them on* one of these features, *eye gaze. This could have* been expected to influence their improvement in eye gaze, but not necessarily the other features. The second explanation,

which was voiced by one of the students, was that gestalt problems had never before been discussed with them as such, whereas articulation problems had been addressed, if only sporadically. Simply being made aware of the type of problem may have helped students focus attention more quickly on this area of accent

Having continued the selective watching process for the second evaluation and having added *selective copying as an activity, the* students were expected to continue incorporating *what they* learned into their *own* signing. After the third evaluation, those with gestalt problems showed continued improvement. In addition, those with articulation problems had improved significantly, that is, instead of recurring patterns *of problems, the previously* identified misarticulations occurred only occasionally or not at all. Thus, based on the *researcher's* judgment, both *types of accent problems* were improved during the course of this project.

Because all of the students participated in the study, there was no control group for comparison of accent improvement. There were other factors which could also have influenced their improvement, such as their other classes and their continued *exposure to* signing throughout the study. Although the findings are only preliminary, these data suggest that both types of accent problems are remediable with this type of method, and encourage continued research in this area.

4.2 Participant Responses

This part of the study, evaluating responses to this method for problems of accent, was equally as interesting as the actual effect of the method. The researcher had used this type of detailed, specific feedback for other students and for more general problems related to interpreting and signing.. However, she had never focused attention specifically on accent in such a structured fashion. That this method was beneficial to the participants is clear from their responses to the final opinion/evaluation form.

After the final interview, each participant was asked to write their opinion about the project and the methods used. *These were* given to the students *after* class by their teacher, who asked them to answer, then return them to the researcher. Five responses were received from the nine students who participated. The most common comment from the participants was that the selective watching process had made them aware of specific problems which they could tackle in structured activities; until this project they had simply seen their overall sign production as *a* problem but had no understanding of how to begin improving. One student wrote, "What really helped was the detailed level of the criticisms. I've *been told for years that my* signing is stiff, jerky, not smooth, etc., but your recommendations were the first that were specific enough to allow me to monitor and modify my production? Another student wrote, "Every videoed assignment I've had since, I have noticed the things you pointed out and worked towards correcting them." A third wrote, "Your ability to pinpoint and identify minute *details in* errors of sign production, eye behavior, etc. was extremely helpful for me. Also, it helped me to be more aware of what to work on specifically as well as what to look for when watching native ASL speakers, and when critiquing others."

These comments are representative of other written comments and of comments made by students during the interviews. Based on student reaction, this method of detailed feedback, coupled with selective watching and copying, has proven

to be very effective for these students. Learning to provide themselves with this type of feedback is, in the researcher's judgment, the most beneficial aspect of this type of teaching. With it, each instance of output can be turned into input for continued learning.

5.<u>CONCLUSION</u>

      This study was not an attempt to provide quantitative evidence proving the effectiveness of a particular method. Rather, it *was an attempt to use a* method of feedback for teaching in order to determine if there was any benefit to be derived from using it, and as such can be considered as a qualitative study. The results which were most encouraging were those of the students' responses to the method, and the researcher's own expanded understanding of both the topic, accent, and the method of detailed feedback and analysis of selective features. While the findings of the current study are in no way generalizable, they provide motivation and direction for future research.

REFERENCES

1. Baker-Shenk, Charlotte. 1983. A microanalysis of the non-manual components of questions in American Sign Language. Ph.D. dissertation at University of California, Berkeley.

2. Bosco, F. 1989. Methodology in language teaching seminar. Graduate course: Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

3. Klima, E. and U. Bellugi. 1979. The signs of language. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

4. Krashen, *Stephen.* 1983. The natural approach: language acquisition in the classroom.. New York:Pergamon Press.

5. Liddell, Scott. 1986. Head thrust in ASL conditional marking. SLS

52:243

262.

6. Liddell, Scott. 1980. American Sign Language Syntax. New York:Mouton Publishers.

7. Liddell, Scott and Robert E. Johnson. 1987_ An analysis of spatial-locative predicates in American Sign Language. Presentation at the Fourth International Symposium on Sign Language Research, Lappeenranta, Finland.

8. Mather, Susan. 1987_ Eye *gaze and* communication in a deaf classroom, SLS 54:11-30.

9. Nida, Eugene A 1953. Selective listening. Language Learning IV3-4:92 101.

10. Nowell, Elizabeth A. 1988. Head nods in ASL Unpublished manuscript: Gallaudet University.

11. *Peters,* Ann M. 1977. Language learning strategies:does the whole equal the sum of its parts? Language 533:560-573.

12. Scollon, Ron. 1982. The rhythmic integration of ordinary talk In Deborah Tannen (ed.), Analyzing Discourse: *Text* and Talk. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown university Press.

13. Snyder, Barbara. 1988. Non-manual tense markers in ASL Unpublished manuscript: Gallaudet University.

14. Supalla, Ted and Elissa Newport. 1978. How many seats in a chair? The derivation of nouns and verbs in American Sign Language. In P. Siple (ed.), Understanding language through sign language research. New York: Academic Press.

15. Valli, Clayton. 1989. Native ASL signer; instructor of ASL at Gallaudet university and instructor of the students in this project. Notes from numerous discussions held after the individual evaluation sessions for the students.

16. Wong, Rita. 1986. Does pronunciation teaching have a place in the communicative classroom? In Tannen and Alatis (eds.), GURT '85 - Languages and linguistics: the interdependence of theory, data, and application. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.