Could left-right discrimination difficulty represent a constraint on comprehension of spatial descriptions for L2 sign language learners?

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For adult learners whose first language is a spoken language, learning a visual language such as ASL (American Sign Language) or BSL (British Sign Language) represents new challenges. Signers describe spatial scenes and events from their own perspective – the narrator’s perspective - which requires the viewer to perform 180 degrees mental rotation of the signer’s hands in order to infer the meaning of signs and spatial relations correctly. Native and experienced signers might be therefore habitually subjected to performing mental reversal of signs (Emmorey, 1998). This paper presents some evidence suggesting that signers do not perform true mental rotation during their sign comprehension. Under this assumption, this paper considers the possibility that late adult L2 sign language learners who experience left-right discrimination difficulty can employ cognitive strategies, such as mental rotation, nevertheless, when comprehending signed spatial descriptions. This enables them to transform themselves into a more convenient perspective and aids their interpretation of signed spatial descriptions. It is also hypothesised that left-right discrimination difficulty in late adult L2 sign language learners can represent a constraint on their comprehension of signed spatial constructions. The subjects were 23 adult British Sign Language learners as L2, all of whom had a spoken language as their first language. A questionnaire was used to elicit the subjects’ own perception of their left-right discrimination ability, their ease of sign comprehension in the classroom, hand switching and handedness. The subjects were also given a basic mental rotation test. The preliminary data based on the subjects’ self-report in a questionnaire indicate that there is a percentage of BSL learners who experience both left-right discrimination and mental rotation difficulties. These learners are predicted to have increased difficulty comprehending and learning visually presented signs, particularly spatial constructions. The predictions are also partially supported by the qualitative data collected in a questionnaire which provide an invaluable insight into the individual learning experiences of BSL as L2 in adulthood. “Late-learners of sign language have been argued to have a “phonological bottleneck” that causes them to expend additional cognitive effort deciphering phonological patterns” (Emmorey, 2006).

References
