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Could gesture play a role in ASL to English interpreting?

Research Chats Video Script

Imagine if you could improve your spoken language interpreting skills without studying. How you ask? Well, research shows that the key may not be in your mind but in your hands. We're talking about gesture.

In my experience as a teacher here at Gallaudet I noticed that when I sat down to do feedback with students there were times where they would indicate they did not sound natural. Now this was not related to their knowledge, it was not related to the content of the conversation, and it was not related to the Deaf person's signing. Often it was related to their hands. What I notice is that when they indicated they did not sound natural they were typically taking steps to restrict their use of gesture. What we're talking about here is called co-speech gesture, which I am signing as CSG.

Right now there is a lot of research focused on co-speech gesture in people who know both a signed language and a spoken language. Co-speech gesture is exactly that. It's the gestures that you produce while speaking. Those gestures have several functions but essentially they help you get thoughts from your brain and out your mouth. For example, gesture helps to support prosody. Prosody is the rhythm, the pace, and the intonation associated with the production of language. Gesture also helps to support lexical search. So, you know that tip of the tongue phenomenon where you're trying to think of what that word is? Gesture helps aid you in that search. Gesture also helps you to organize you plan for what you're going to say. So when you have a thought, gesture helps you make that thought into spoken language. Gesture is not intended to benefit the listener, it actually benefits the speaker and we have proof of this. You may notice that when people use the

telephone they still gesture. They do this even though the listener cannot see them.

For my research I went back to this observation that when interpreting from a signed language to a spoken language interpreters are often taking steps to restrict their use of gesture. So first I have to determine whether or not this is actually happening. Are interpreters actually gesturing less while interpreting? Second I wanted to see if this reduced gesture correlated to an increase in disfluencies for example saying “um” or “uh”. In order to answer this question I set up an experiment filming interpreters under two conditions.

The first condition involved a normal English conversation. The second condition involved the interpreter interpreting a conversation about the same topics that they had done under the previous condition. Once the data collection was completed I analyzed the data and found that indeed during conversation interpreters gesture normally, however while interpreting and interpreting the same content their use of gesture is reduced, often with their hands clasped. The result of this is that first, during conversation. the interpreters employ normal vocal tone; however while interpreting, that tone flattens out. Also while in conversation the interpreter’s language production is more fluid whereas while interpreting they have more instances of “um”, “uh”, and repairs.

So how can this research help interpreters? Well, if we want to sound natural, we have to behave naturally. If we don’t behave naturally we may not sound natural, so if you’re taking steps to reduce your use of gesture it could possibly lead to greater disfluencies. Now understand that I cannot say definitively that reduction of gesture leads to an increase in disfluencies. In order to determine that for sure I’m going to have to do more analysis.

So the bottom line for today's video is this: if you want to sound natural, you have to behave naturally, and my advice is free your hands.