

Individual Paper Session 9
Bilingualism and Processing
Wednesday, July 5
12:15-12:45pm

Breaking and entering: First contact with a new language

Marianne Gullberg

Christine Dimroth

Leah Roberts

Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

marianne.gullberg@mpi.nl

christine.dimroth@mpi.nl

leah.roberts@mpi.nl

This study examines the earliest perception and processing of input in an unknown L2 to investigate how adult learners might break into an unknown language in the wild. All SLA theories assign some role to 'input', but are generally vague regarding which features in the stream learners take as evidence for linguistic distinctions. We investigate the effect of item frequency, gestural deictic links between sound and content, and amount of exposure for phonological and lexical learning. We report on a word recognition task and a lexical decision task. Eighty Dutch listeners with no knowledge of the target language were exposed to seven (N=40) or fourteen (N=40) minutes of naturalistic but controlled input in the form of a weather report in Mandarin Chinese. The input includes a set of target words that are either frequent or infrequent. Half of the targets are also highlighted with gestures forming a link to the referential content (icons on weather charts).

The results from Experiment1 show that adults recognise word forms after only 7 minutes if the forms have been frequent and gesturally highlighted in the input. Moreover, bi-syllabic words are better recognised than mono-syllabic words. The findings from Experiment2 indicate that although adults recognise words after seven minutes, they cannot link meaning to them. However, after fourteen minutes, they reliably assign meaning to bi-syllabic items that have been frequent and gesturally highlighted in the input.

These findings show that adults extract segmental and lexical information in separate but very small the increments. Syllable structure, gestures and item frequency all play a role in the process of breaking into a new language. While emphasising the complexity of the learning task in the wild, these findings also indicate that the adult learning mechanism is more powerful than normally assumed when faced with complex, continuous speech input.