Effects of Observer and Character viewpoint modes of representation on the learning of words in a second language

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Research has shown a positive impact of representational gestures on L2 word learning in adults (e.g., Kelly et al., 2009). Yet, little is known about the potential effects of modes of representation on L2 noun learning. Nouns may be gesturally depicted by representing the form of an object or the action associated with it. These variants correspond to observer and character viewpoint modes of representation (McNeill, 1992). Here we investigate the impact of mode of representation (i.e., character and observer viewpoint gestures) on L2 noun learning.

Thirty-six Catalan-dominant speakers were audio-visually exposed to 12 Russian disyllabic nouns. In the training video an instructor produced words under 4 experimental conditions: accompanied by observer viewpoint gestures, character viewpoint gestures, beat gestures, or no gestures. Participants were trained and tested individually. During the training session, the target words were presented in random order for each participant, according to four within-subject experimental conditions. The test consisted of a word translation task in which participants had to choose between three possible Catalan translations for each Russian word. The results revealed a main effect of condition (F(3.428) = 4.261, p = .006) confirming beneficial effects of observer viewpoint gestures on noun memorization in an L2.

The findings of this study indicate that the mode of representation matters for second language noun learning. A possible explanation of the results would be that since character viewpoint gestures contain supplementary information about the action related to the referent, they might cause an additional cognitive load and thus negatively affect novel L2 noun learning.


Keywords: modes of representation, character viewpoint, observer viewpoint, L2 noun learning, representational gestures.