

The Multilingual Mind: lecture series on multilingualism across disciplines

Winter Semester 2021/2022
Tuesdays, 17.00 - 18.30 CET
Online

11.01.2022

Ana Belén García Gámez (University of Algarve)

Gestures as scaffolding to learn vocabulary in a foreign language

Abstract

In two experimental studies we explored the role of gestures on foreign language (FL) vocabulary learning. First, we evaluated the impact of gestures on nouns (Experiment 1) and verbs learning (Experiment 2). Four training methods were compared: The learning of FL words with congruent gestures, incongruent gestures, meaningless gestures, and no gestures. Better vocabulary learning was found in both experiments when participants learned FL words with congruent gestures relative to the no gesture condition. This result indicates that gestures have a positive effect on FL learning when there is a match between the word meaning and the gesture. However, the recall of words in the incongruent and meaningless gesture condition was lower than that of the no gesture condition. This suggests that gestures might have a negative impact on FL learning. I will analyze these results in terms of FL learning facilitation and interference effects.

However, a question remained, do we have to perform the gestures ourselves to observe the learning improvement? A third experiment addressed this topic directly. Participants were divided in two experimental groups. In one group, the participants learned the words by performing gestures (“do” teaching group) and the other group only had to observe the gestures performed by others (“see” teaching group). Compared to the meaningless gesture condition, the processing of congruent gestures facilitated the recall of FL words in the “see” and “do” teaching groups. However, the interference effect associated with the processing of incongruent gestures was greater in the “see” teaching group than in the “do” teaching group. Thus, the performance of gestures seems to mitigate the negative impact that the use of gestures may have on the teaching of vocabulary in a FL.

Taken together, iconic gestures might be a good tool to learn new vocabulary in a FL when the gestures and words meaning match. In addition, the gestures performance mitigates negative effects associated with meaning mismatches. Hence, if one has to choose, a FL learning strategy based on the performance of congruent iconic gestures would be desirable.