Child language acquisition is an amazing process as all children undergo similar developmental stages and acquire their first language in few years of time (cf. Guasti 2002, Lust 2006, among others). Lenneberg’s (1967) Critical Period Hypothesis, however, notes that full linguistic competence can only be obtained when language acquisition takes place within the critical period. Deaf children of hearing parents, who do not receive fully accessible language input from birth, then become natural test cases of this hypothesis. Previous studies on deaf adults show that delayed ASL input have an impact on phonological processing as well as competence on the ASL morphology (Emmorey, Bellugi, Friederici, and Horn 1995, Newport 1990, 1991, Mayberry 1994, among others). Recent studies on two deaf children who receive ASL input after the age of 6 show further that delayed sign language input affects the development of verb agreement (Berk 2003, 2004).

This paper aims at exploring the impact of delayed sign language input on the acquisition of Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL) verb agreement by 11 severely to profoundly deaf children who received HKSL input in a sign bilingual school setting. All of these children have hearing parents and their ages at initial exposure of HKSL range between 3;11 and 6;8. Children’s knowledge of verb agreement was elicited longitudinally from a story retelling task of the Hong Kong Sign Language Elicitation Tool.

This paper reports the results of the data collected at two time points, with a 2-year interval. The deaf children produced a total of 56 and 74 tokens of the agreement verb GIVE in the first and second time points. The error rates are high in both time points (17.86% in the first time point and 14.86% in the second time point). Omission errors, commission errors and avoidance are the major error types. Deaf students tended to avoid the use of fully marked agreement forms by using location marking (e.g. *a-GIVE-3i*). They also produced the agreement markings sequentially by using two verb signs, each marked with one person value and one location (e.g. *3i-give+CL\_body:hand-a a-GIVE-1o*). While the omission and commission errors are commonly reported in acquisition studies on verb agreement, the avoidance strategies are not only used by late learners. Earlier studies on acquisition of HKSL verb agreement show that CC, a deaf child who received native HKSL input since age 1;9, produced agreement verbs marked for spatial locations (cf. Lam 2009). The sequential production of agreement markings also echoes the sequential production of classifier predicates in first language acquisition in ASL (Supalla 1982). Mastery of verb agreement is often measured by the production of agreement markings under obligatory contexts. The deaf children studied here do not perform better with agreement markings in obligatory contexts initially. However, their performance improved greatly in the second time point, evidenced by a drop of error rate from 33.33% to 10.00%. Taken together, the deaf children of hearing parents go through similar developmental stages as native learners acquiring sign language as the first language.

**Examples**

1. **Use of location marking**

take+CL\_sass:box ONE tear+CL\_hand:hold\_sweet THROW gesture [=eat] gesture [= look at the sweet] take+CL\_hand:hold\_sweet+CL\_sass:box ONE\_LEFT GIVE-3i LISA gesture [= that's a good idea] take+CL\_sass:box **a-GIVE-3i** GIVE-3i

(*C1-5-TKH, 12;3, 5;6 years of HKSL exposure*)

‘(I) took one sweet from the box and put it in my mouth, (I) ate the sweet. (I) saw that one sweet was left and I thought it was a good idea to give it to Lisa, (I) took a sweet from the box and gave it to Lisa.’

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| The student is directing the verb to a side to denote third person value of the object LISA (locus-3i).  Classifier for the box of sweets (locus-a) |
| a-GIVE-3i |

1. **Linearization of the target agreement verb form**

IX\_1 IX-mouth EAT\_FINISH ONE SWEETS ONE gesture [= give me]

**3i-give+CL\_body:hand-a a-GIVE-1o**

*(C2-5-WCY, 8;5, 3;8 years of HKSL exposure)*

‘I had one sweet already; (she) gave me one sweet.’

Third person subject (locus-3i)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Classifier for the hand |  |
| 3i-give+CL\_body:hand-a | a-GIVE-1o |

First person object (locus-1o)

Locus-1o, first person

Classifier for the hand (locus-a)

Classifier for the hand (locus-a)