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Speech-Sign Bilingualism: A Window into Neurodiversity

Abstract

All deaf children can acquire a sign language, which uses the visual modality, to increase their access to information in modern societies. I will present a series of studies involving both adult and young deaf readers, indicating that knowledge of a sign language can improve reading abilities in two ways.

Firstly, a foundation in sign language can greatly enhance language comprehension and metalinguistic abilities. Studies show that sign languages are processed in a left-lateralized brain network remarkably similar to the language network for speech. Good comprehension of language and metaphonological abilities, even in another language, are crucial for manipulating language structures essential for reading proficiency. Secondly, deaf readers seem to rely more on the links between letter and lexical representation for accurate word recognition. Studies suggest that fingerspelling can serve as a bridge between letter representations and word recognition in the absence of a robust phonological representation.

I aim to highlight the importance of sign language acquisition for deaf people, not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for improving literacy and educational outcomes. This research has implications for educational systems, as better academic achievement might require promoting sign language learning.