An Analysis of Constructed Action in American Sign Language Narratives: Comparing Native Signers and Second Language Learners

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INTRODUCTION

- In sign language linguistics the term "Constructed Action" (CA) refers to multi-functional constructions which encode viewpoint and perspective.
- Previous studies have suggested that deaf and native signers have the ability to use constructed actions effectively by switching from the narrator's role to a surrogate role and vice versa as they tell stories in sign language.
- Little is known about hearing L2 learners' abilities to use CA in their ASL production.
- We investigate the differences in CA production between native Deaf signers and hearing ASL students after viewing a cartoon and retelling the story in ASL.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS
3 Deaf native signers
3 M2-L2 ASL students
- First language English speakers
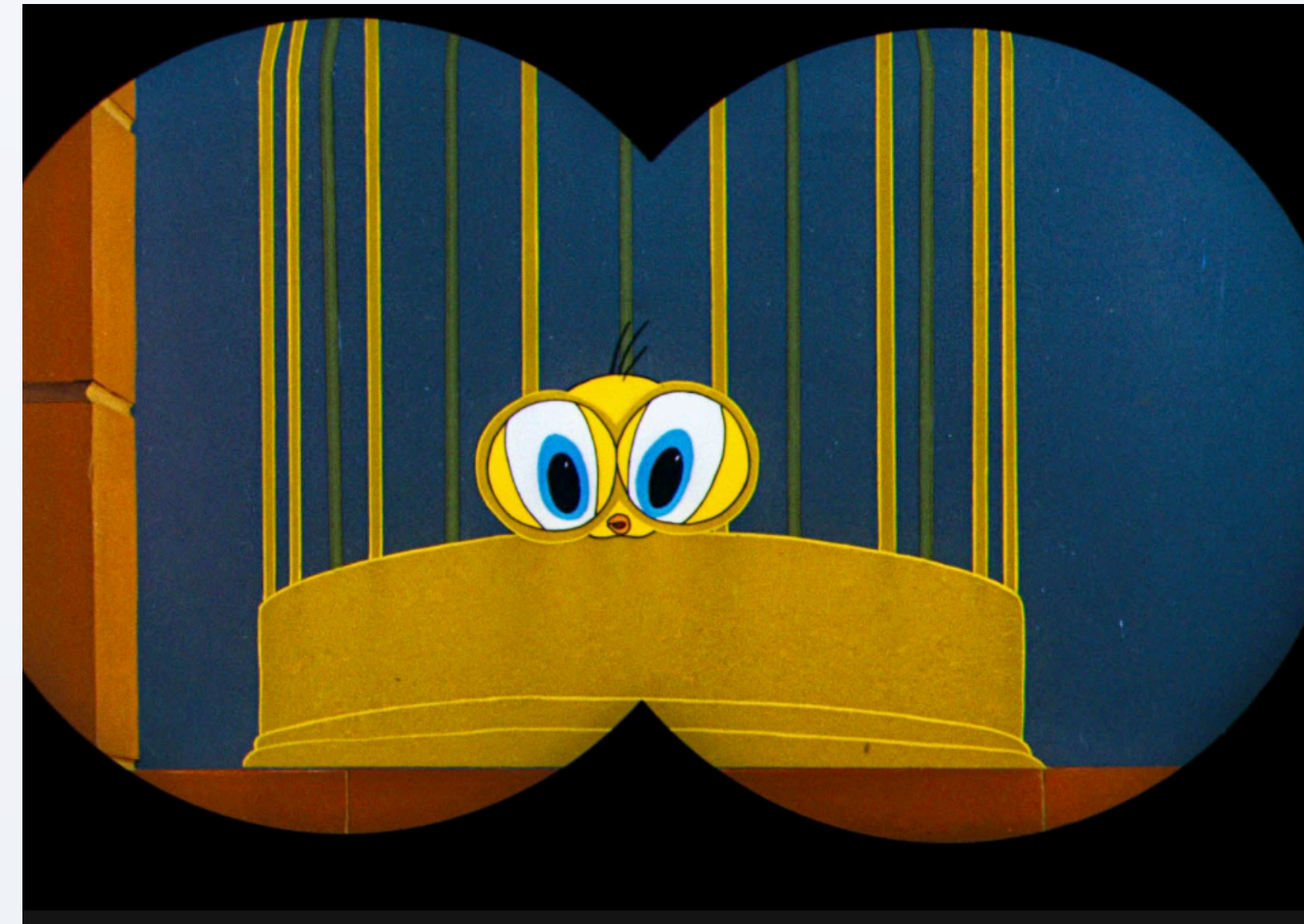- No other L2 experience

PROCEDURE
- Participants viewed three cartoon clips.
- Participants were asked to, "Retell the story as if you were telling it to a deaf friend."
- Participants gestured and signed their retelling of each cartoon clip to the camera.
- Responses were recorded with QuickTime.

CODING
- Videos were coded and analyzed using ELAN video annotation software.
- Coders calculated the time spent in each Viewpoint Construction, specifically of Character and Observer viewpoints.

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Three "Canary Row" cartoon clips featuring Sylvester the Cat, Tweety Bird, and Grandma



VIEWPOINT CONSTRUCTIONS

| Character Perspective	Observer Perspective
1st-person *looking-through* |BINOCULARS| "(Tweety bird) looking through the binoculars"	|BUILDING| *vertical-structure* "The vertical buildings (like-so)"
• Event-internal vantage point • Encompasses signer • Life-sized	• Event-external vantage point • In front of signer • Compressed size

RESULTS

CHARACTER & OBSERVER VIEWPOINT

- Native signers spent 61% and M2-L2 signers spent 4% in the **Character Viewpoint.**
- Native signers spent 39% and M2-L2 signers spent 96% of time in the **Observer Viewpoint.**
- Both Native signers and M2-L2 signers used **Observer Viewpoint** 10 times during the retell.
- Native signers used **Character Viewpoint** 18 times while M2-L2 used Character Viewpoint 1 time during retell.
- The majority of M2-L2 signers did not produce examples of **Character Viewpoint**.

Percentage of Time in Each Viewpoint
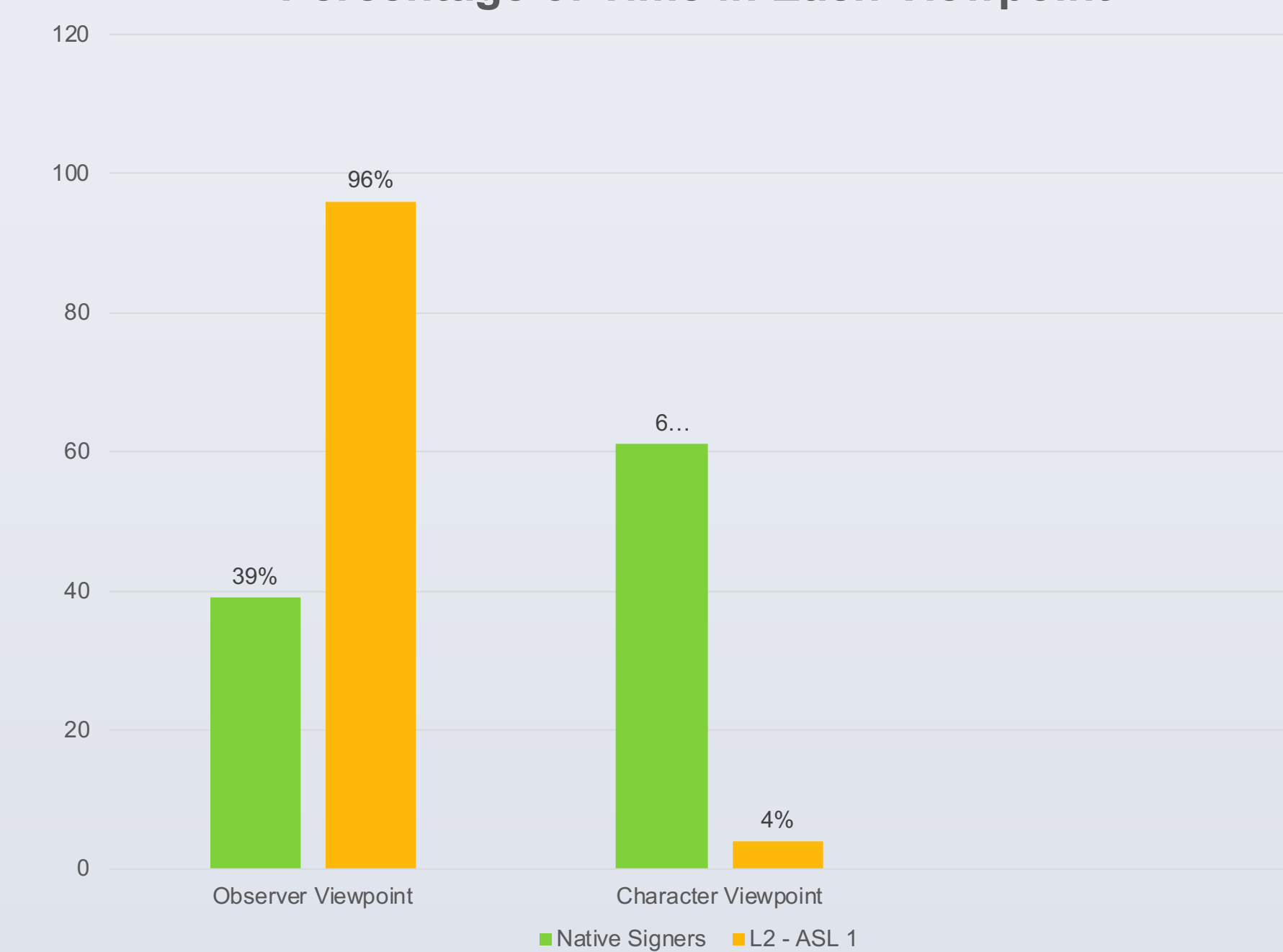
Frequency of Each Viewpoint
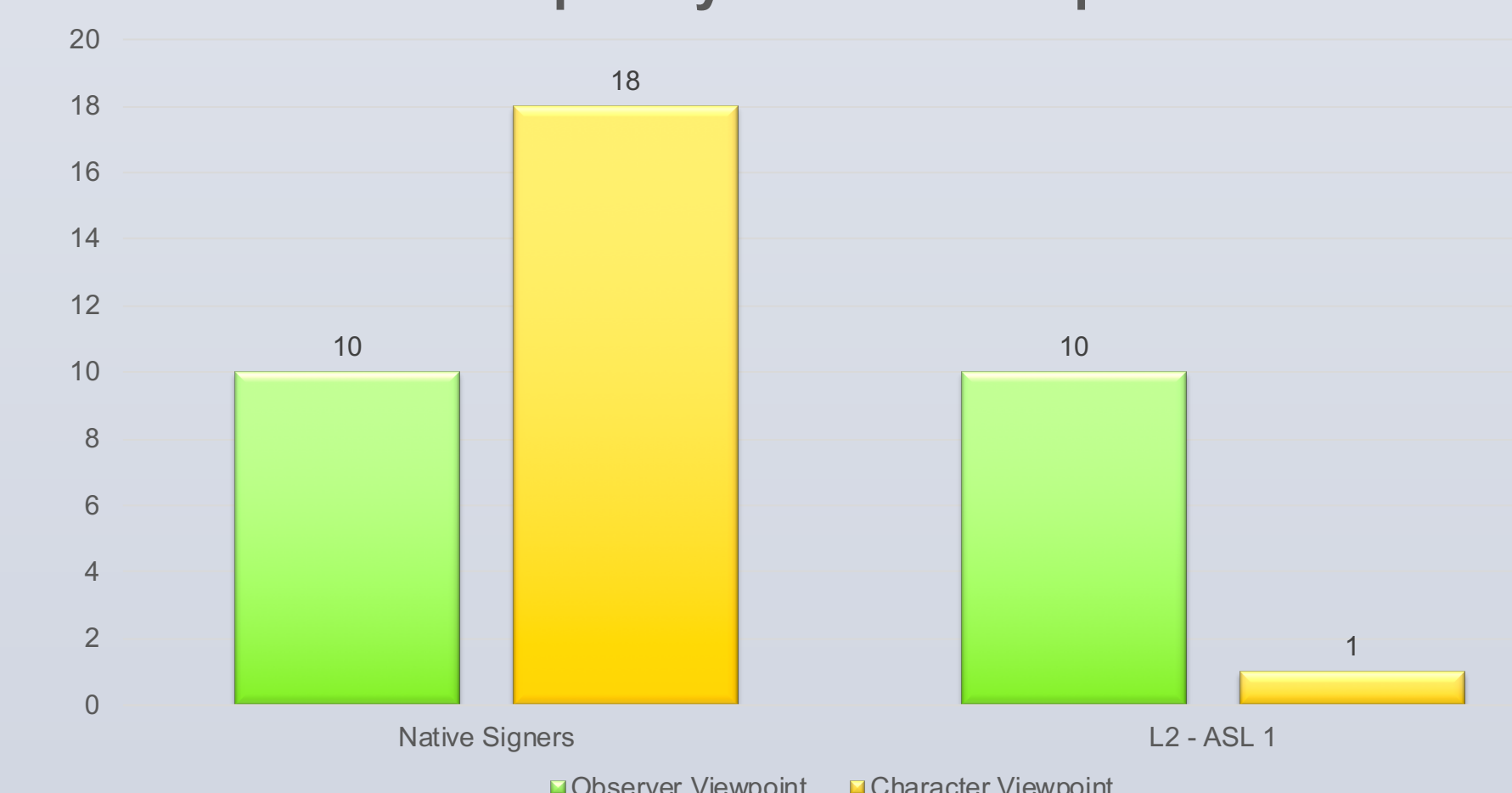
M2-L2 signer in Observer Viewpoint. This signer is using a classifier for "many buildings."

DISCUSSION

- The percentage of Character Viewpoint is much higher compared to the M2-L2 signers. M2-L2 signers uses Observer Viewpoint more frequently compared to native signers.
- The results suggest that learning constructed action is a complex linguistic skill that is not easily acquired by M2-L2 signers who are learning ASL as their second language in a second modality. More research is needed to explore the long-term trajectory of the acquisition of constructed action.
- Further longitudinal studies are needed to analyze the later stages of acquisition of constructed action, and to measure the amount of improvement at each level of ASL. These studies could reveal whether students who take ASL as part of a foreign language requirement differ from students majoring in ASL interpreting.
- Studies are also needed to examine whether different curricula and emphases during classroom contact hours accelerate or inhibit the acquisition of these complex constructions.

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