Understanding the role of attention in second language acquisition: Empirical contributions from eye-tracking

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The recording of eye movements, or eye tracking, has become an important tool for language researchers to probe real-time cognitive processes in first and second language speakers (see Conklin et al., 2018; Godfroid, 2020; Godfroid et al., 2020, for reviews). When participants engage in a language task, their eye gaze may provide a measure of their attentional allocation and linguistic processing (Godfroid et al., 2013; Just & Carpenter, 1980; Reichle et al., 2006). Eye tracking is thus a valuable addition to empirical research because of the central role that attention occupies in SLA theory and pedagogy.

Following a gentle introduction to eye-tracking methodology, recent advances in eye-movement research will be discussed through work from our lab. In the area of explicit and implicit knowledge, Maie and Godfroid (2021) re-visited the claim that grammaticality judgment tests performed under time pressure tend to elicit automatic processes associated with implicit knowledge (Ellis, 2005). Son et al. (2021) addressed the long-standing question of whether second language learners can attend to form and meaning simultaneously (VanPatten, 1990). With the newly added eye-tracking data, these research teams were able to shed new light onto old questions, often finding that previous results were incomplete because they failed to take individual differences in learner behavior into account.

The talk will conclude with a discussion of methodological aspects to consider in eye-tracking research with a view to promoting sound and reproducible, open research in the scientific study of language.

Aline Godfroid is an Associate Professor in Second Language Studies and TESOL at Michigan State University. Her primary research interests are in psycholinguistics, vocabulary, quantitative research methods, and eye-tracking methodology. Her research is situated at the intersection of cognitive psychology and second language acquisition and has appeared in numerous international, peer-reviewed journals. Aline Godfroid is Co-Director of the Second Language Studies Eye-Tracking Lab and the recipient of the 2019 TESOL Award for Distinguished Research and the co-recipient of the Best of the Modern Language Journal 2019. Her book Eye Tracking in Second Language Acquisition and Bilingualism: A Research Synthesis and Methodological Guide was published by Routledge in 2020. A new volume The Routledge Handbook of SLA and Psycholinguistics (with Holger Hopp) is expected with Routledge in 2022.