Narratives in sign languages, such as British Sign Language (BSL), make use of the same referential devices as spoken languages (e.g. noun phrases and pronouns) but also use additional referential devices not found in spoken languages (although some of these devices share some properties with co-speech gesture) (Kendon, 2004; Liddell & Metzger, 1998). These devices include: a) a strategy known as constructed action (a.k.a. role shift), which involves use of the signer’s head, face and/or body to describe a referent’s actions, thoughts or feelings, and b) entity classifier constructions which describe the motion and location of referents within the signing space. Fluent signers are able to seamlessly switch between roles/perspectives of different referents, while still maintaining referential and discourse cohesion. Acquisition of these skills in native signers begins at about 3 years of age but progresses slowly; even by age 12, deaf children struggle with various discourse and pragmatic functions of these devices (Slobin et al., 2003).

The use of referential strategies in signed language narratives, particularly those produced by signers with varying levels of fluency and with varying ages of acquisition, is not well understood. Therefore, the current study examines how reference is established and maintained in BSL narratives produced by severely/profoundly deaf adults (native, early and late learners, N=18 total) and deaf children (native, early and minimal BSL signers, N=12 total), with varying degrees of BSL experience. The children were aged between 5;1 and 7;5. Brief narratives from each child and adult participant were elicited using a short clip from a Pink Panther cartoon. Signed productions were coded for use of noun phrases, use of entity classifier constructions, and use of constructed action. We also coded for sequential versus simultaneous uses of noun phrases, entity classifier constructions and constructed action.

Preliminary results indicate that noun phrases (e.g. the noun MAN alone or the noun phrase DET MAN ‘the man’) were used by all three adult groups and all three child groups, in introduction of a referent and in subsequent mentions of that referent (reference maintenance). Entity classifier constructions were used by all three groups of adults, particularly for reference maintenance. Entity classifier constructions were used largely by the native signing children; very few of the non-native signing children used anything resembling entity classifier constructions at all. Constructed action was used by all groups, both adults and children, for maintenance. Both native and non-native signing children additionally used constructed action for introduction of reference; none of the adults did this.

Results with interactions between noun phrases, entity classifier constructions and constructed action showed that a sequence of noun phrase followed by a classifier construction followed by constructed action occurred with native signers and with early signers in both adults and children (though there were very few tokens of this in the child data). This was used primarily in introduction of reference but in a few tokens for maintenance of reference. None of the late adult learners or the minimal BSL child signers used this type of sequence at all.

We conclude by showing how, despite the somewhat different referential devices available to signers, the pragmatics of reference in narratives overall appears to develop similarly in BSL and in spoken languages. Furthermore, we show how the differences between the different groups of participants (native/early/late but also child/adult) suggest that the mastery of this hierarchy could be affected by the age of acquisition and/or length of experience of sign language. These findings support other work that has shown that native input of a signed language provides an advantage for native over non-native signers (cf. MacSweeney et al., 2008; Mayberry & Eichen, 1991; Newport, 1990).