Using EEG-based brain computer interface and neurofeedback targeting sensorimotor rhythms to improve motor skills: Theoretical background, applications and prospects

Camille Jeunet, Bertrand Glize, Aileen Mcgonigal, Jean-Marie Batail, Jean-Arthur Micoulaud-Franchi

1   **²**Using EEG-based Brain Computer Interface and Neurofeedback

2   Targeting Sensorimotor Rhythms to Improve Motor Skills:

3   Theoretical background, applications and prospects

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5   Running title: Neurofeedback targeting sensorimotor rhythms

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7   Camille JEUNET [a], Bertrand GLIZE [b, c], Aileen McGONIGAL [d, e],

8   Jean-Marie BATAIL [f, g], Jean-Arthur MICOULAUD-FRANCHI [h, i] *

9

10   a - Laboratoire Cognition, Langues, Langage, Ergonomie (CLLE), CNRS / Univ. Toulouse Jean Jaurès,

11   Toulouse, France

12   b - Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine Unit, EA4136, Bordeaux University Hospital, University of

13   Bordeaux, F-33000 Bordeaux, France.

14   c - EA4136, University of Bordeaux, F-33000 Bordeaux, France; Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine

15   Unit, Bordeaux University Hospital, Bordeaux, France

16   d - Aix Marseille Univ, Inserm, INS, Institut de Neurosciences des Systèmes, Marseille, France

17   e - Service de Neurophysiologie Clinique, Centre Hospitalo Universitaire de la Timone, 264, rue

18   Saint-Pierre, 13005 Marseille, France.

19   f - Academic Psychiatry Department, Centre Hospitalier Guillaume Régnier, Rennes, France.

20   g - EA 4712 Behavior and Basal Ganglia, CHU Rennes, Rennes 1 University, France.

21   h - Service d'explorations fonctionnelles du système nerveux, Clinique du sommeil, CHU de Bordeaux,

22   Place Amélie Raba-Léon, 33076 Bordeaux, France.

23   i - USR CNRS 3413 SANPSY, CHU Pellegrin, Université de Bordeaux, France.

24

25

26   * Corresponding author

27   Jean-Arthur MICOULAUD FRANCHI

28   Service d'explorations fonctionnelles du système nerveux, Clinique du sommeil

29   CHU de Bordeaux, Place Amélie Raba-Leon, 33076 Bordeaux

30   Tel : 06 22 36 40 19

31   E-mail : jarthur.micoulaud@gmail.com

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1 **Abstract**

2 Many Brain Computer Interface (BCI) and neurofeedback studies have investigated the impact

3 of sensorimotor rhythm (SMR) self-regulation training procedures on motor skills enhancement

4 in healthy subjects and patients with motor disabilities. This critical review aims first to

5 introduce the different definitions of SMR EEG target in BCI/Neurofeedback studies and to

6 summarize the background from neurophysiological and neuroplasticity studies that led to

7 SMR being considered as reliable and valid EEG targets to improve motor skills through

8 BCI/neurofeedback procedures. The second objective of this review is to introduce the main

9 findings regarding SMR BCI/neurofeedback in healthy subjects. Third, the main findings

10 regarding BCI/neurofeedback efficiency in patients with hypokinetic activities (in particular,

11 motor deficit following stroke) as well as in patients with hyperkinetic activities (in particular,

12 Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, ADHD) will be introduced. Due to a range of

13 limitations, a clear association between SMR BCI/neurofeedback training and enhanced motor

14 skills has yet to be established. However, SMR BCI/neurofeedback appears promising, and

15 highlights many important challenges for clinical neurophysiology with regards to therapeutic

16 approaches using BCI/neurofeedback.

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18 **Key words**

19 Neurofeedback; Motor ability; Brain Computer Interface; ADHD; Stroke; Closed loop.

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1   **INTRODUCTION**

2   Neurofeedback is a neurophysiological technique that aims to teach users/patients to self-

3   regulate targeted brain activity patterns in order to specifically enhance cognitive abilities or

4   reduce clinical symptoms. The choice of target brain activity patterns is thus a key issue, in

5   order for neurofeedback procedures to be efficient. From the multitude of EEG targets [61],

6   sensorimotor rhythms (SMR) appear to be a very promising and interesting neurophysiological

7   target to try to enhance motor skills. Many Brain Computer Interface (BCI) and neurofeedback

8   studies have investigated the impact of SMR self-regulation training procedures on motor skills

9   enhancement in healthy subjects and patients with motor disabilities. This critical review aims

10   first to introduce the neurophysiological framework, in line with the motor imagery literature,

11   which led to SMR being considered as a reliable and valid EEG target to improve motor skills

12   through BCI/neurofeedback procedures. The different definitions of SMR target in

13   BCI/neurofeedback studies will be introduced and the relationship between neuroplasticity,

14   motor skills and SMR BCI/neurofeedback training discussed. The second objective of this

15   review is to introduce the main findings regarding SMR BCI/neurofeedback in healthy subjects.

16   The impact of such procedures on sport, acting and surgical skills will be analyzed. Third, the

17   main findings regarding SMR BCI/neurofeedback efficiency in patients with hypokinetic

18   activities (in particular motor deficit following stroke) as well as in patients with hyperkinetic

19   activities (in particular Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, ADHD) will be introduced.

20   This review is not meant to be a systematic, exhaustive review. Rather, it aims to propose a

21   critical synthesis of the existing literature from a clinical neurophysiological point of view.

22   Indeed, the opinions within the scientific and medical community are divided regarding the

23   efficacy of BCI/neurofeedback. Most of the randomized clinical trials show significant

24   weaknesses and do not enable us to clearly conclude on the efficacy of BCI/neurofeedback

25   procedures, since the level of evidence remains too low. However, when compared to other

26   potential EEG targets, SMR present the advantage of having a relatively well-identified

27   neurophysiological relationship with motor imagery and motor skills. On the one hand, this

28   characteristic results in the fact that SMR are considered as very interesting targets to better

29   understand motor skills acquisition in various contexts. On the other hand, SMR also represent

30   promising targets for the future development of innovative neurophysiological treatments.

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1   **BCI/NEUROFEEDBACK TARGETING SENSORIMOTOR RHYTHMS FOR**

2   **ENHANCING NEUROPLASTICITY**

3   *Neuroplasticity and the acquisition of motor skills*

4   Neuroplasticity is a normal ongoing state of the human brain. It refers to the ability of the latter

5   to evolve its structure and function. This reorganization is observed from the molecular level

6   to the behavioral level [41, 45, 46, 75]. One impressive example of neuroplasticity is the

7   possibility of acquiring motor skills. This learning process involves and modifies the activity

8   of specific brain areas such as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), the primary motor

9   cortex (M1), the premotor cortex (PM), the pre-supplementary motor area (preSMA), the

10   supplementary motor area (SMA), the primary somatosensory cortex (S1) and the posterior

11   parietal cortex (PPC), striatum and cerebellum (for a review, see [25]). The progression from

12   early to late stages of motor skill learning seems to be associated with an activation from

13   anterior to more posterior regions of the brain [30], which reflects a progressive decrease in

14   reliance on attentional resources and executive functions towards more automatic processes

15   [45]. Proof of the plasticity induced by motor skill training and learning is visible both in

16   structural (anatomic) and functional changes.

17   Anatomical changes are visible using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or diffusion tensor

18   imaging (DTI). For instance, voxel-based morphometry (VBM) analyses suggest that musicians

19   show higher grey matter density in the sensorimotor cortex and cerebellum than control subjects

20   [39]. In addition, DTI analyses reveal higher fractional anisotropy in the internal capsule as

21   well as plastic changes in the 3D morphology of the central sulcus in response to long-term

22   motor skill training [39, 49]. Other studies investigating structural plasticity reported an

23   increased volume of grey matter density in brain areas involved in the task. These changes seem

24   to disappear when participants stop practicing, suggesting that structural plasticity is possible

25   in all directions (for a review, see [16].

26   Functional changes are visible using transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS), functional MRI

27   or electroencephalography (EEG). For instance, the cortical representation of the hand,

28   explored using TMS, is larger in professional racquetball players than in control participants

29   [76]. Other findings suggest that this functional reorganisation is led by an enlargement or

30   focused activation of the motor area involved in the control of the studied skill. Neuroplasticity

31   also occurs in cognitive and perceptual domains associated with improved performances. For

32   example, strong coupling of sensorimotor and auditory processing has been revealed in

33   professional musicians (for a review, see [16]).

1   However, even though neuroplasticity is probably related to cellular and molecular

2   mechanisms, one of the main challenges is to link human brain imaging findings to the

3   underlying molecular events that have been well documented in animal models. These models

4   report modulations of synaptic connections through long-term potentiation (LTP) and long-

5   term depression (LTD) in rodents [83, 84]. In humans, learning to perform a motor task also

6   seems to modulate LTP-like plasticity [87, 113], particularly in M1 via the monoaminergic

7   modulation of motor systems (for a review, see [105]. Both in humans and animal models,

8   brain derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a neurotrophin, also participates in this synaptic

9   plasticity [1, 51]. These mechanisms are followed by other molecular and synaptic changes in

10   order to induce automatic behaviours. For example, the involvement of neurons in the

11   sensorimotor striatum during late stages of learning has been shown in animal models, probably

12   via long lasting changes in glutamatergic neurotransmission. It might be partially part of a

13   substrate that enables the acquisition of automatic behaviours [66, 111].

14   ***The acquisition of motor skills and motor imagery***

15   A very interesting method that favors neuroplasticity processes for enabling the acquisition of

16   motor skills is motor imagery. Indeed, "real" motor training, i.e., motor execution in an

17   ecological context, is not always possible. On the other hand, motor imagery triggers brain

18   structures sharing similar neural networks with motor execution, including motor-related

19   regions and the inferior and superior parietal lobules [29]. Interestingly enough, visual and

20   kinesthetic imagery seem to involve specific networks of sensory modalities, i.e.,

21   predominantly occipital regions and the superior parietal lobules for visual imagery, as well as

22   motor-associated structures and the inferior parietal lobule for kinesthetic imagery [37], see

23   **Figure 1.** The activation of these networks seems to induce changes similar to those obtained

24   by motor execution, and might be led by the same molecular mechanisms. Indeed, motor

25   imagery seems to induce LTP-like plasticity in M1, in the same way as motor execution does

26   [7].

27   Post-stroke recovery provides a well-documented model of neuroplasticity and brain

28   reorganisation following a focal lesion. Following the complex injury pathways that disrupt

29   cerebral organisation, many mechanistic pathways enable the improvement of functional

30   outcomes. Notably, both neuroplasticity and reinforcement of cortical representation areas have

31   been described in animals [72] and in humans [50]. These results suggest a very plastic

32   functional cortical representation [107] and have been hypothesized to involve various

33   mechanisms, notably including vicariance. Vicariance is the theory that the cortical functions

1 of damaged areas can be managed by other, separate brain regions. Imaging studies have

2 provided examples suggesting the occurrence of this mechanism in stroke recovery [40, 107].

3 Perilesional areas are also recruited and involved in recovery [69, 90, 106]. Underlying

4 mechanisms include the functional use of pre-existing synaptic networks as well as structural

5 changes, with the creation of new networks. All these phenomena might be enhanced by

6 specific rehabilitation training procedures. Rehabilitation training and learning of skills consist

7 of inducing recovery of impairments and disabilities in order to regain activities though specific

8 and complex interventions, while adaptive strategies compensate for impaired body functions

9 (for a review, see [48]). Thus, mental imagery –and motor imagery (MI) in particular– can be

10 considered as a rehabilitation training procedure. MI practice has been shown to enable the

11 improvement of motor skills. Nonetheless, it should be noted that MI abilities can be harmed

12 in the case of motor impairment [44]. Motor imagery produces corticospinal facilitation of the

13 specific muscles used to execute the imagined action [68] as well as in increases of hand

14 representation in the motor map area over M1, as evoked by TMS, thus reducing inter-

15 hemispheric imbalance [18]. In a similar way to healthy subjects, MI training has been shown

16 to result in structural and functional modifications of the motor cortex in patients with stroke

17 [50]. Similar modifications, including synaptic and cortical map plasticity, have been shown

18 following action observation. Indeed, studies combining another rehabilitation approach to

19 motor imagery have shown re-organization of cortical activation maps for the affected hand,

20 using fMRI (for a review, see [33]. This improvement of motor function induced by MI seems

21 to be partially related to prior MI skills. In other words, recovery of motor function after

22 subcortical stroke seems to involve pre-existing cortical networks [92].

23 Another way to enhance neuroplasticity in post-stroke rehabilitation of upper-limb impairment

24 is to provide motor-impaired patients with positive sensory feedback, using mirror therapy or

25 muscle vibrations for example. The latter enables provision of haptic feedback and has been

26 suggested to improve motor function, to reduce spasticity and to induce plastic effects on M1

27 in chronic stroke patients (e.g. increasing motor map areas and reducing resting motor threshold

28 as measured using TMS) [53]. Regarding mirror therapy, patients are asked to attempt

29 synchronous bilateral upper limb movements while observing, in a mirror, the reflection of the

30 unaffected limb located in the same position as their affected limb. Mirror therapy has been

31 suggested to significantly improve motor function in stroke patients [101]. TMS studies in

32 healthy subjects revealed that a mirror visual feedback increased neuronal excitability in M1

33 [71] while fMRI studies suggested that this induced functional changes in the somatosensory

34 areas, premotor cortex or higher-order visual regions like the superior temporal gyrus and the

1 superior occipital gyrus [32, 38, 54]. In chronic stroke patients, mirror therapy seems to induce

2 cortical reorganization with a shift in activation balance within the primary motor cortex

3 towards the affected hemisphere, as observed in fMRI [55]. In a study using MEG, Rossiter et

4 al. found that mirror therapy normalized an asymmetrical pattern of movement-related beta

5 desynchronisation in M1 during bilateral movements [88].

6 The latter study leaves open the opportunity to optimize the delivery of this feedback in order

7 to enhance modifications of these cortical rhythms. The delivered visual or haptic feedback

8 might not be temporally synchronized with the efferent cortical motor activity in both mirror

9 of muscle and vibration therapies. Brain-computer interfaces (BCI) and neurofeedback, which

10 are technologies that allow for the voluntary control of an external device (BCI) or of visual

11 feedback, enable the detection of this efferent activity in order to produce the best time-matched

12 feedback, and enhance the plastic effect induced by motor imagery in patients lacking motor

13 control after a stroke or in healthy people. Hence, this tool might enable us to close the

14 sensorimotor loop, from efferent motor activity to adapted and synchronized afferent sensorial

15 feedback(s), see **Figure 2**. Indeed, recent findings suggest that training procedures combining

16 motor imagery with a somatosensory input improves motor performance through M1 plasticity

17 similarly to motor execution [11]. Hence, closing the loop with a sensory feedback might

18 enhance the effects of motor imagery and provide robust changes in the brain.

19 *Motor imagery and sensorimotor rhythms*

20 As previously described, the effect of motor imagery (MI) on motor skill learning and

21 neuroplasticity has been largely demonstrated in healthy subjects and patients with stroke. MI

22 has been shown to activate the primary motor cortex (M1) as well as brain structures involved

23 in the planning and control of voluntary movements. MI has been shown to be underlain by

24 amplitude modulations of *Sensorimotor Rhythm* (SMR) [19, 26]. While SMR have been known

25 for many decades, their functional role is still not completely understood. Nevertheless, SMR

26 exhibit a good signal-to-noise ratio that can be measured using EEG, making them a relevant

27 and reliable neurophysiological target for BCI and neurofeedback studies which aim at

28 improving MI or motor abilities. Notably, many BCI and neurofeedback studies investigate the

29 impact of SMR self-regulation training procedures on motor skills enhancement in healthy

30 subjects and patients with motor disabilities (see below).

31 It should be noted however that the characteristics of the so-called "SMR", especially temporal

32 domain characteristics (i.e., frequency bands), vary quite extensively between studies. Broadly

33 speaking, SMR have been defined as EEG rhythms in the central region, in particular two kinds

1   of EEG band activities: mu (7-11 Hz) and beta (12-30 Hz) [43]. Mu rhythms were described by

2   Gastaut [34]. The clinical definition of mu rhythms [43] states that they are rhythms at 7–11

3   Hz, composed of arch-shaped waves occurring over the central or centro-parietal regions of the

4   scalp during wakefulness. Their amplitude varies but is mostly below 50 mV. They are blocked

5   or attenuated when a contralateral movement or a thought about movement is performed, as

6   well as during readiness to move or tactile stimulation. From a frequency band standpoint, mu

7   rhythms are part of the *Rhythmic Activity within the Alpha Band* (RAAB) [77].

8   It has been shown that it was possible to condition SMR in humans, in particular mu rhythms

9   by Gastaut in 1952 [34] and low beta SMR by Jasper and Penfield in 1949 [42]. More

10 specifically, they stated that it is possible for an individual to learn to self-regulate the amplitude

11 of their SMR during/after MI tasks. Since these pioneering works, SMR have been broadly

12 used for BCI and neurofeedback in order to improve motor skills. While SMR BCI studies

13 generally consider a broad SMR EEG band including both mu (7-11 Hz), low beta (12-15 Hz

14 or even 12-20 Hz) and high beta (20-30 Hz) frequency ranges, in most "SMR neurofeedback"

15 studies, the so-called "SMR" do not include mu rhythms and are generally focused on "low

16 beta" frequency range [56, 65].

17 SMR BCI experiments target two kinds of event-related patterns: event-related

18 desynchronization and event-related synchronization patterns. During resting conditions, SMR

19 activity in the mu frequency band is high. During motor imagery (as for voluntary movement),

20 the amplitude of the mu rhythms decreases. The decrease of the EEG signal power is referred

21 to as an event-related desynchronization. After the motor imagery stops, there is an increase in

22 the high-beta rhythm (as is also the case for movement). This increase is referred to as an event-

23 related synchronization. On the other hand, SMR neurofeedback studies dedicated to "SMR

24 self-regulation" training procedures usually consider a narrower band, usually focussing on

25 upregulation within the low-beta frequency range (12-15 Hz, although this range can vary

26 depending on the study, and may sometimes not be specified). This can also be associated with

27 training of simultaneous down-regulation of the theta band (around 4-8 Hz).

28 *Sensorimotor rhythm self-modulation and BCI/NF*

29 To the best of our knowledge, there is no consensus with respect to the distinction between

30 brain-computer interfaces (BCI) and neurofeedback (NF). Indeed, on the one hand, the

31 functioning of both methods is in many ways comparable, and both are closed-loop systems. In

32 other words, users/patients are asked to self-regulate some specific brain activity patterns,

33 recorded using techniques such as EEG, functional near-infra red spectroscopy (fNIRS) or

1   fMRI. This brain-activity is then processed in order to provide users/patients with feedback on

2   their ability to modulate the patterns of interest. For instance, users/patients can be provided

3   with visual or haptic feedback that is temporally synchronized with the efferent cortical motor

4   activity. Haptic feedback may have the advantage to improve the neuroplasticity effect related

5   to the MI task. Users/patients should use the feedback in order to improve, i.e., to better self-

6   regulate the patterns of interest. With that said, on the other hand, BCI and neurofeedback have

7   been developed with fundamentally different objectives. Mainly, learning to self-regulate

8   specific brain patterns is an *end* in neurofeedback while it is only a *means* in BCI.

9   - The goal of neurofeedback is to teach users/patients to self-regulate target brain activity

10   patterns in order to specifically enhance cognitive abilities or reduce clinical symptoms. For

11   instance, SMR neurofeedback training procedures, in which patients had to learn to increase

12   their SMR, have proved effective in reducing ADHD symptoms [6].

13   - The goal of BCI, and more specifically of mental imagery-based BCI (MI BCI), which is the

14   most commonly used BCI paradigm based generally on SMR-EEG recording, is to control an

15   application without moving, using brain activity alone, through the completion of MI tasks such

16   as motor imagery of the left vs. right hand. Performing each of these tasks will induce specific

17   modulations of brain rhythms. For instance, a decrease in SMR amplitude over the contralateral

18   sensorimotor cortex should occur when users perform unilateral hand motor imagery [78].

19   Since each task is associated with a specific control command, such as "turn the wheelchair

20   towards the left" for left hand motor imagery, the system is able to determine which command

21   the user intended to send from the modulation of their EEG activity. Consequently, BCI users

22   should learn to self-regulate specific brain patterns in order to reliably control the application.

23   Beyond their divergent objectives, neurofeedback and BCI are also traditionally associated with

24   different methods. In order to self-regulate their SMR for instance, users are usually asked to

25   perform specific motor imagery tasks in BCI, while this is not the case in NF, in which they

26   should usually find their own strategy. Moreover, in NF, the target pattern (location, frequency)

27   is usually defined in advance. Then, users should find by themselves how to self-regulate this

28   pattern, using the feedback they are provided with. This feedback usually simply reflects the

29   amplitude of the target pattern. In BCI however, a machine learning approach is usually

30   employed. Such an approach consists of using signal processing algorithms to determine the

31   location and frequency of the target pattern that enable the best discrimination between the

32   different tasks. The EEG feedback that users are provided with reflects their ability to produce

33   EEG patterns specific to each task. In case of a BCI involving left vs. right-hand motor imagery

34   tasks, these EEG patterns would theoretically correspond to modulations of SMR. However,

1   when a machine learning approach without any a priori on the location/frequency of the pattern

2   is used, other EEG patterns could be selected.

3   **NEUROFEEDBACK TARGETING SENSORIMOTOR RHYTHMS FOR**

4   **ENHANCING MOTOR SKILLS IN HEALTHY SUBJECTS**

5   The efficacy of neurofeedback to improve healthy subjects' performances has mainly been

6   studied in three domains [104]: cognitive, sports and artistic activities. In this section, we focus

7   on neurofeedback procedures dedicated to the improvement of motor performance, for which

8   most of the studies have been carried out in the field of sport science. For more information

9   regarding neurofeedback procedures dedicated to the improvement of cognitive and affective

10 aspects of performance, please refer to [36].

11 *Sport motor skills improvement*

12 The first study evaluating neurofeedback efficiency for improving athletes' motor performance

13 was led in 1991 by Landers et al. [47]. Three groups of archers were included in the study,

14 including one passive-control group (no neurofeedback), one active-control group

15 (neurofeedback with "incorrect feedback") and one experimental group (following a

16 neurofeedback procedure based on the self-regulation of "low frequency EEG oscillations",

17 although the exact EEG band was not further described in the paper). Participants in the

18 experimental group significantly increased their performance from pre- to post-test (27 bow

19 shots) while the active-control group showed a decrement in performance and the passive-

20 control group showed no difference in performance between pre- and post-test. Nonetheless,

21 the neurofeedback procedure was not associated with any clear EEG pattern changes.

22 Following this study, several other neurofeedback experiments were conducted in the aim of

23 enhancing athletes' performance in different sports, e.g., in golf [17, 82], swimming [28], dance

24 [36, 81] or athleticism [63]. Mirifar et al. [65] proposed a systematic review of these

25 neurofeedback studies. The authors included 14 studies, of which 6 investigated self-regulation

26 of low beta SMR (12-15Hz on C3-C4 or Cz – up-regulation) and 2 investigated self-regulation

27 of alpha power over the sensorimotor cortex (mu rhythm up-regulation). They concluded that,

28 so far, a majority of published studies support the effectiveness of neurofeedback in improving

29 athletes' performance. Nonetheless, the specificity of the neurofeedback effect remains to be

30 demonstrated. Indeed, it happened that the same protocol had different effects within the same

31 or similar task, and also that different protocols resulted in similar effects within a sport. Mirifar

32 et al. stress the fact that the studies' quality was non-optimal. A similar conclusion was drawn

1   by Xiang et al. [110] following their meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials aimed at

2   assessing the efficiency of neurofeedback procedures to improve sport performance. This meta-

3   analysis, which included 10 studies of which 6 focuses on low beta SMR (12-15Hz), revealed

4   a significant effect of neurofeedback on both athletes' sport performance and EEG self-

5   regulation abilities. Nonetheless, it appeared that this effect was moderated by the control group

6   design. In other words, neurofeedback effect on sport performance was not significantly

7   different in experimental groups compared to active/placebo control groups in well-controlled

8   experiments. The authors suggest that further studies, with better designed and organized trials,

9   should be performed. Notably, as outlined by Park et al. [74] the mismatch between lab study

10   conditions (both in terms of tasks, feedback and training environment) and real sporting

11   conditions may, at least in part, explain the relatively small impact that these studies had on

12   professional athletes. It may be hypothesized that ecological training procedures would favor

13   both the acquisition and transfer of motor skills.

14   *Acting skills improvement*

15   Such an ecological neurofeedback procedure has been previously used in order to enhance

16   acting performance in one study [35]. Participants had to up-regulate their low-beta SMR

17   activity while down-regulating their theta and high-beta activities. One group performed

18   neurofeedback while being immersed in a virtual reality environment, one group was provided

19   with standard feedback on a computer screen and the last group was a passive-control group.

20   Participants of both the neurofeedback groups exhibited improved acting skills compared to the

21   passive-control group. Moreover, the virtual reality group reached the *neurofeedback*

22   *performance asymptote* earlier than the standard computer screen group, reinforcing the

23   hypothesis that ecological settings favor learning. In the same vein of artistic performance

24   enhancement, Egner and Gruzelier [27] carried out two experiments that aimed to investigate

25   neurofeedback effects on musical skills. The first experiment revealed that participants who

26   followed neurofeedback training exhibited an improvement in musical performance. More

27   specifically, participants who carried out not an SMR neurofeedback protocol, but an

28   alpha/theta training procedure (which consisted of "increasing theta (5–8 Hz) over alpha (8–

29   11 Hz) activity levels during a wakeful eyes-closed condition for the purpose of relaxation

30   training" [27]) combined with weekly physical exercises and mental skills training exhibited a

31   positive correlation between neurofeedback performance (ability to self-regulate alpha/beta

32   ratio) and musical performance. These results suggest that slow wave neurofeedback training

33   could be used to enhance artistic performance. Nonetheless, as stressed by Vernon [104] a

1　number of limitations related to the experimental protocol prevent firm conclusions with

2　regards to the specificity of this improvement, i.e., the extent to which this improvement was

3　due to the neurofeedback procedure itself or to confounding factors.

4　*Surgical skills improvement*

5　Furthermore, Ros et al. [85] proposed an SMR neurofeedback procedure in which participants

6　had to *"elevate the low-beta SMR (12-15 Hz) while concurrently suppressing theta activity (4-*

7　*7 Hz)"*. This training procedure enabled a significant improvement both in surgical technique

8　and task completion time in microsurgeons in comparison to a passive-control group. In a more

9　general/abstract context, Ros et al. [86] investigated the effects of a neurofeedback procedure

10　of mu suppression over the right motor cortex on motor performance in a within-subject

11　experimental design. Participants had to perform two serial reaction time tasks (SRTT), one

12　immediately after the neurofeedback procedure, the other one either 7 days before or after the

13　neurofeedback procedure. Performances at the SRTT improved significantly quicker during the

14　task when the latter was performed just after a neurofeedback procedure than when it was

15　performed 7 days before or after. This result suggests that a single neurofeedback session may

16　be directly used to facilitate the early acquisition of a procedural motor task and that

17　neurofeedback effects could be exploited immediately after this neurofeedback session.

18　**BCI/NEUROFEEDBACK TARGETING SENSORIMOTOR RHYTHMS FOR**

19　**ENHANCING MOTOR SKILLS IN PATIENTS WITH BRAIN AND MENTAL**

20　**DISORDERS**

21　Motor abilities can be affected in case of brain or mental disorders. In this section, we focus on

22　SMR BCI/neurofeedback procedures dedicated to the improvement of motor skills in brain and

23　mental disorders for which most of the studies have been conducted. Concerning brain

24　disorders, we focus on stroke. In this disorder, SMR BCI/neurofeedback training procedures

25　aim to reduce hypokinetic activity by training to down-regulate mu rhythm or low beta SMR

26　activity (enhance SMR event-related desynchronization) or to up-regulate high beta SMR

27　activity (enhance SMR event-related synchronization) by performing MI. Such an application

28　of BCIs based on MI results from the literature on the benefits of MI for post-stroke

29　rehabilitation. Concerning mental disorders, we focus on ADHD. In this disorder,

30　neurofeedback aims to reduce hyperkinetic activity by training to up-regulate low beta SMR

31　activity during an attentional resting condition (no MI / motor inhibition). For a general review

32　of neurofeedback and mental and brain disorder, please refer to [61].

1   *Reducing hypokinetic activity: the case of stroke*

2   BCI methods have been used according to two strategies for post-stroke neurorehabilitation

3   [24, 94, 102]. The first strategy consists of using BCI approaches as "assistive technologies",

4   i.e., as substitution for a lost motor ability [20]. The second strategy consists of using BCI as

5   "rehabilitative/restorative technologies", by using neurofeedback procedures, in order to

6   facilitate brain plasticity and motor recovery [26]. Both these techniques have been largely

7   developed by Birbaumer's and Pfurtscheller's teams.

8   Assistive BCI were initially used for patients with tetraplegia in order to translate some specific

9   EEG brain patterns into a selection of letters or words on a computer screen [9, 10] or to control

10   a prosthetic limb [20]. However, the reliability and performance of such non-invasive EEG BCI

11   are not high enough for these technologies to be used in daily life as assistive technology.

12   Further researches are currently being conducted with invasive BCI or hybrid BCI (EEG with

13   other physiological signals such as electrooculograms (EOG) or electromyograms (EMG) [64].

14   Rehabilitative BCI training procedures are very close to neurofeedback procedures.

15   Nonetheless, in the field of stroke rehabilitation, the term BCI is more often used than the term

16   neurofeedback. Both these procedures rely on the fact that SMR modulations in the hemisphere

17   ispilateral to the stroke lesion can benefit the motor recovery [94]. In order to maximize the

18   brain plasticity effect, the feedback is integrated into an orthotic device that assists the desired

19   motor movement of the paralyzed hand [9, 14]. The hypothesis behind such a closed loop neural

20   interface is that re-establishing the contingency loop between the ipsilateral cortical activity

21   related to motor imagery (motor planning or attempted execution in relation with the measured

22   SMR activity) and proprioceptive feedback (induced by the haptic effect of the orthotic device)

23   would provide a somatosensory feedback to the primary motor cortex (M1), via the

24   somatosensory cortex S1 and direct thalamic input. This would therefore induce simultaneous

25   activation of presynaptic inputs to M1 with postsynaptic M1 activation that could result in

26   Hebbian potentiation, improve motor learning and brain plasticity [26], and thus maximize the

27   effect of the physical therapy applied after the stimulation with SMR training [19], see **Figure**

28   **2.**

29   The first case study investigating the use of SMR neurofeedback (reward production of low

30   beta activity (15-21 Hz) and down-regulation of production of theta activity (4-8 Hz) in a patient

31   with a stroke was published in 1995, and suggested a possible beneficial effect of

32   neurofeedback on motor recovery [89]. However, the protocol was not specifically designed in

33   line with the literature on MI in post-stroke. In 2007, Birbaumer et al. [9] developed a specific

34   SMR BCI/neurofeedback training procedure that enabled a stroke patient suffering from a hand

1   motor deficit to control a hand orthotic device (open and close commands, based on MI). In

2   2008, it was shown that a majority of patients with stroke could use such a technology by

3   learning to down-regulate their mu rhythm (i.e., 9-12 Hz oscillations in central areas), thus

4   enhancing SMR event-related desynchronization, in the hemisphere ipsilateral to the stroke

5   lesion [14]. This study thus suggests that patients with a lesion (due to stroke) in the motor

6   cortex may still be able to perform motor imagery and motor attempts of the paretic hand.

7   Nevertheless, this study did not reveal any functional improvement related to the

8   BCI/neurofeedback training procedure. This may be due to the fact that the training was not

9   associated with a goal-directed physical therapy that could enable transfer and generalization

10 of the skills into daily life activities. In 2009-2010, two case studies (down-regulation of mu

11 rhythm, here defined as 8-15 Hz frequency band, occurring during MI [13], and high beta SMR

12 (21-24 Hz) up-regulation occurring after MI [23]) suggested a possible beneficial effect on

13 motor recovery of the association of ipsilateral SMR BCI/neurofeedback training procedure

14 and goal-directed physical therapy [13, 23]. Moreover, fMRI analysis showed that clinical

15 improvement was associated with increased activation of the hemisphere ipsilateral to the

16 stroke lesion [15], which suggests a specific effect of the SMR training procedure on brain

17 plasticity and recovery after stroke.

18 A 2013 randomized double blind controlled study included 32 patients with stroke without

19 residual finger movements [80]. The 16 patients of the active group performed 20 sessions of

20 SMR BCI/neurofeedback training (the exact beta EEG band in central areas was not described

21 in the paper) associated with a goal-directed physical therapy. The other 16 patients of the sham

22 group performed 20 sessions of random SMR BCI/neurofeedback training, also associated with

23 a goal-directed physical therapy. The active group exhibited a higher clinical hand motor

24 recovery. This clinical improvement correlated with fMRI results showing increased activation

25 of the hemisphere ipsilateral to the stroke lesion [80], which was confirmed in other

26 neuroimaging and electrophysiological studies [79, 103, 112]. Interestingly, the efficacy of the

27 SMR EEG BCI/neurofeedback training was related to the integrity of descending and ascending

28 cortico-spinal pathways [12]. This result strengthens the importance of the motor-

29 somatosensory loop to induce Hebbian potentiation and thus brain plasticity [94]. Lastly, it has

30 been shown that stroke recovery was higher with haptic than with visual feedback [73].

31 The efficacy of SMR BCI/neurofeedback training has been consistently suggested in less well-

32 controlled studies. For a recent systematic review, see [67]. Interestingly, Thibault et al. [100]

33 highlighted the fact that only one neurofeedback randomized double blind controlled study

34 demonstrated a clinical superiority of neurofeedback over sham neurofeedback [80] . This study

1   is therefore important in the current debate regarding the efficacy of neurofeedback [57].

2   Nonetheless, the characteristics of the population were not detailed in this study, which may

3   reduce its legitimacy to generalize the results to the entire stroke population. Further studies are

4   thus needed to establish well-defined stroke criteria (severity, localization: cortical vs

5   subcortical, type: ischemic vs hemorrhagic, temporal evolution, etc.) that could be associated

6   with predictive factors of response to such neurofeedback therapies.

7   *Reducing hyperkinetic activity: the case of ADHD*

8   In order to reduce pathological excessive motor activity, it has been proposed that patients could

9   be trained to voluntary self-modulate their SMR brain oscillations through neurofeedback

10   procedures. The neurophysiological rational for such protocol did not come from MI literature,

11   but largely from the literature by Sterman's team. In the 1960s, Sterman showed that operant

12   conditioning of SMR through neurofeedback procedures could be applied on cats, which were

13   trained to modulate their SMR brain oscillation [109]. Their results suggested that the cats

14   trained to enhance their SMR activity were more resistant to a drug that induced epileptic

15   seizures [96]. In 1972, the same team published the first case study showing a possible

16   beneficial effect of low-beta SMR up-regulation neurofeedback (i.e., 11-13 Hz oscillations in

17   central areas) on the frequency of generalized motor epileptic seizure [98]. Many open-label

18   studies and a few more controlled trials on the topic have been published since; for a review

19   see [60]. Their hypothesis according to which it would be useful to use SMR training

20   procedures to control seizure activity was based on intracerebral recordings in animals [97,

21   108]. During neurofeedback training, the subject is trained to increase their SMR rhythm and

22   to decrease motor activities in the sensorimotor cortex (S1) in a vigilant state of alertness and

23   motor relaxation [61]. It would decrease the activity of motor efferences in the posterior

24   ventrolateral nucleus (VLP) of the ventrobasal (VB) thalamic complex as well as in the red

25   nucleus (NR) of the brainstem, leading to a reduction in muscle tension and myotatic reflex

26   [97]. The reduction of muscular activity would in turn decrease the activity of somatic afferent

27   paths, which would favour a transition from rapid non-rhythmic activity to rhythmic oscillatory

28   activity between the VLP and the reticular nucleus (NRT) of the thalamus [97]. These

29   oscillatory activities would spread through the thalamo-cortical loops at S1 and give rise to the

30   SMR rhythm synchronization recorded in EEG. The mechanisms of action of neurofeedback

31   on SMR rhythms would thus consist in reducing the activity of efferences and afferences in the

32   sensorimotor system, leading to a decrease in cortical neuronal excitability and an increase in

33   the epileptogenic threshold [97]. It should be noted that SMR share similarities with sleep

1 spindle activities and that training to increase SMR in waking states increases the number of

2 spindles during stage 2 slow sleep states [99]. Therefore, SMR neurofeedback training

3 procedures have been applied to patients with insomnia [31, 91]. Moreover, as it has been

4 clinically shown that SMR neurofeedback induces a decrease of motor activity as well as an

5 improvement of the vigilant state of alertness related to attention capacities, it has been

6 suggested to use such a training for Attentional Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

7 (previously called hyperkinetic disorder) therapies [58]. In 1976 [52], Lubar's team published

8 the first case study showing a possible beneficial effect of neurofeedback on hyperkinetic

9 activity in a child with ADHD treated with low-beta SMR neurofeedback ("*production of 12-*

10 *14-Hz activity in the absence of 4-7 Hz slow-wave activity*"). This study is very interesting

11 because: i) training (during a single session) and learning (across different sessions) effects

12 during the neurofeedback procedure were controlled, and ii) training procedure and feedback

13 presentation were reversed (trained to decrease the amplitude of SMR) in order to investigate

14 the specificity of the effect on motor inhibition [52].

15 Since then, many studies investigating the efficacy of neurofeedback as a potential therapy for

16 ADHD have been published. In most studies, neurofeedback training protocols correspond to

17 low beta SMR neurofeedback, which in the field of ADHD is conventionally called a

18 Theta/Beta Ratio (TBR) training (on EEG recorded from Cz or C3-C4). Indeed, TBR training

19 procedures consist of rewarding low beta activity (around 16-20 Hz) while down-regulating the

20 theta activity (around 4-8 Hz), in order to decrease the Theta/Beta Ratio. ADHD clinical

21 applications have received a lot of attention both from non-specialist, general public sources

22 [2] and from research groups [3]. Nevertheless, the methodological quality of these studies is

23 very variable, and the results of the different meta-analyses tend to swing back and forth [62].

24 Four meta-analyses investigated the therapeutic usefulness of EEG neurofeedback in ADHD

25 [5, 21, 56, 95]. All these meta-analyses concluded that: i) EEG neurofeedback could be more

26 effective on the inattention dimension than in the hyperactivity dimension of ADHD, and ii)

27 neurofeedback is more effective in randomized open trials than in randomized blinded trials,

28 for which the size effect remains non-significant in two meta-analyses [21, 95]. The discrepancy

29 between these meta-analyses can be explained by the selection of the studies included and the

30 difference regarding the training procedure [62]. Moreover, from a neurophysiological

31 standpoint, it can be questioned whether the chosen EEG targets are valid targets for ADHD

32 children. Indeed, the level of evidence regarding the relationship between SMR activity and the

33 hyperactivity and inattention dimensions of ADHD remains poor [4]. Therefore, an important

34 and timely field of research consists of determining better, i.e. more reliable and specific, EEG

1   targets related to hyperkinetic activity [22], but also to the inattention dimension in ADHD.

2   This will enable more relevant and efficient training to be provided to patients [59], which

3   should ensure that the EEG target is modified during the neurofeedback procedure.

4   **CONCLUSION**

5   In this critical review, we first described and discussed the relationship between neuroplasticity,

6   motor skills and SMR BCI/neurofeedback training in line with the MI literature. More

7   precisely, we argued that BCI/neurofeedback could be used to train healthy subjects and

8   patients to voluntarily self-regulate their SMR in order to trigger neuroplasticity phenomena

9   and enable the acquisition of motor skills. Based on this theoretical background, we introduce

10   the literature in which such procedures have been tested and evaluated. Mainly, we describe

11   studies in which SMR BCI/neurofeedback demonstrated efficiency in improving sport

12   performance as well as acting and surgical skills. BCI/Neurofeedback training seems to be very

13   promising for improving healthy subjects' motor skills. Nonetheless, due to a range of

14   limitations (e.g., selection and design for the control group, varied number of sessions, non-

15   ecological training procedures, non-optimal feedback, absence of recordings of changes in

16   baseline EEG activity) we agree with previous authors that "a clear association between

17   BCI/neurofeedback training and enhanced performance [both in terms of EEG self-regulation

18   and motor skills] has yet to be established" [104]. We also present the literature in which the

19   efficiency of these BCI/neurofeedback techniques to improve the clinical symptoms of patients

20   showing hyperkinetic (ADHD) or hypokinetic (stroke) activities was assessed. While these first

21   results are promising, further investigations are also required, especially in order to determine

22   the specificity of the effects observed: is the clinical improvement due to neuroplasticity

23   phenomena? To which extent? What is the influence of the placebo effect and the mechanisms

24   underlying the latter? What is the impact of the training procedure and which variables should

25   be controlled for? In the context of stroke studies, Ramos-Murguiaday et al. [80] highlight the

26   challenges to be addressed in order to ensure the efficiency of BCI/neurofeedback techniques:

27   i.   It is possible to assess the clinical efficacy of BCI/neurofeedback through a well-

28   controlled study (with adequate size of study population, randomized and blinded

29   protocol, adequate control group, and high quality of EEG BCI/neurofeedback

30   sessions),

31   ii. It is of the utmost importance to determine reliable, valid and well specified (particularly

32   in terms of spatial and temporal characteristics) EEG targets, related to the clinical

parameter of efficacy, to underlying pathophysiological mechanisms of the disorder and also mechanisms of neuroplastic modulation,

iii. It is also necessary to control for learning, training and plasticity effects by designing and implementing an appropriate BCI/neurofeedback protocol design (with optimized quality of signal recordings, signal processing, threshold, feedback reinforcements, duration and number of sessions, transfer/generalization methods) [3].

These challenges appear relevant and could be applied to other pathologies. Regarding clinical aspects, this review has mainly focused on SMR BCI/neurofeedback procedures in stroke and ADHD. Nevertheless, motor skills are also altered in various other neurological and psychiatric disorders. In particular, motor disabilities are core manifestations in depression and schizophrenia; some studies suggest a relationship with SMR alterations [70, 93]. Here as well, as highlighted by Ramos-Murguiaday et al. [80], further neurophysiological studies are required to better investigate the relationship between specific motor manifestations and SMR activities in these disorders. If such relationships were demonstrated, SMR BCI/neurofeedback could be of great interest to reduce the symptoms of motor disabilities, which are currently under-investigated and under-treated in psychiatry [8].

1   **Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest:**

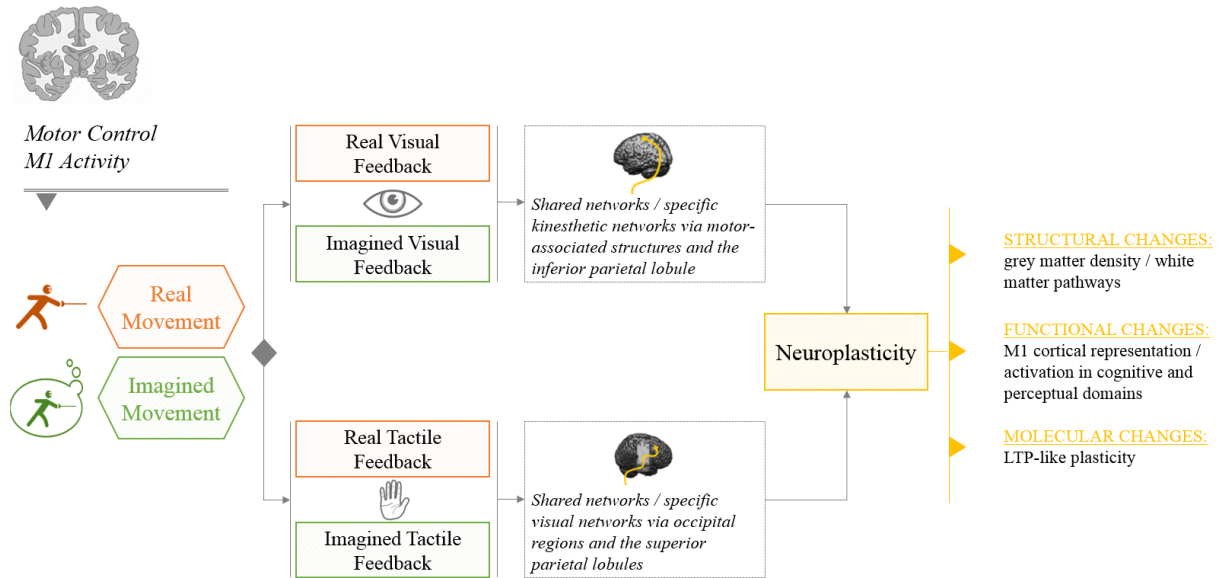2   The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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1 **Figure 1:** Neural processes shared between real and imagined movements, which impact the

2 brain through neuroplasticity. These plastic effects occur at different levels: molecular,

3 functional and structural changes induced by visual and/or haptic feedback. *LTP = Long-Term*
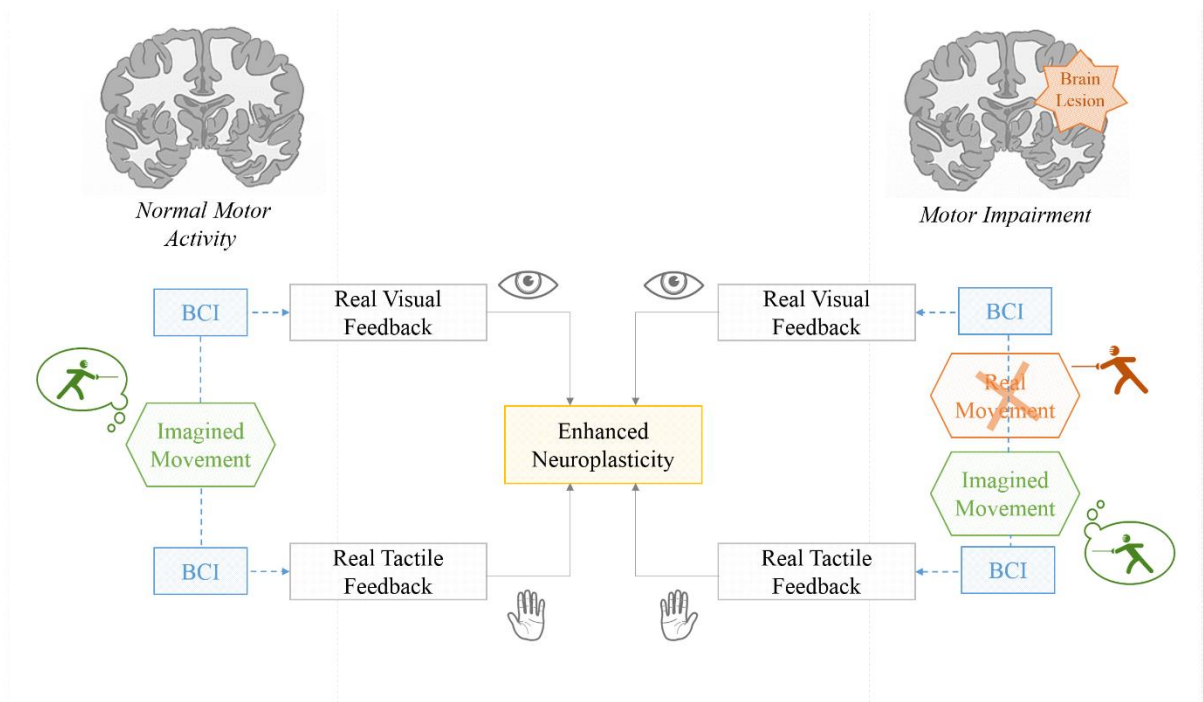
4 *Potentiation*

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1   **Figure 2:** Impact of the brain lesion. Due to the lesion and motor impairment, only imagined

2   movement might have an impact on plasticity, involving networks and mechanisms which

3   enhance neuroplasticity, particularly using brain computer interfaces (BCI) that enable their

4   users to be provided with visual and/or haptic feedback

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