ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Non-Technical Summary

A 1000 word (maximum) summary of the main research results, in non-technical language, should be provided below. The summary might be used by ESRC to publicise the research. It should cover the aims and objectives of the project, main research results and significant academic achievements, dissemination activities and potential or actual impacts on policy and practice.

This project explores a dimension of language use not accounted for by grammatical knowledge, namely ‘nativelike selection’. In addition to an implicit knowledge of what is grammatical, native speakers also have a vast memory store of the conventional word combinations used by their speech community, and hence their mental lexicon comprises not just individual words but a complex and detailed network of the semantic and syntactic associations of those words. The native speaker who says, ‘That’s the last time I’ll ever ask x to x for me!’ has not constructed this expression word by word, but as chunk of associated words stored in memory and shared by others in the community. The paraphrased expression, ‘Asking x to x for me has happened for the last time,’ is grammatical, but unnativelike and highly unlikely to be selected.

Second language acquisition research has concentrated mostly on how learners develop knowledge of grammatical systems. But a prevasive feature of second language use is that it is often perfectly grammatical and very odd, indicating that the learner has grammatical knowledge but does not know about how, when and where words are most naturally combined. Performance testing shows how well learners recognise what is and isn’t grammatical, but it is rare to test how well learners can distinguish nativelike from un-nativelike selections.

This study aimed to explore the development of this knowledge, and whether it is related to age of first exposure (age effects); breadth and depth of exposure (acculturation and motivation effects); and phonological short term memory (language aptitude effects). Two groups of adult learners of English took part. Forty were Polish-born immigrants to London, some of whom had arrived in the UK as young children, some as older children and some as adults. Forty others were Polish-born residents of Poland who had a good command and daily use of English as a foreign language. Some had begun learning English as children, others as teenagers or adults. A group of UK-born, monolingual native speakers of English was recruited also to give native-speaker baseline data.

The Polish born participants took part in four testing instruments: a questionnaire about their English learning and use, their attitudes to English and their motivation to be proficient in the language; a grammaticality judgement test; a test of phonological short-term memory; and a test of their ability to detect un-nativelike selections in two short stories. The native speakers did only the last two tests.

Results of correlation analyses show that ability to build a nativelike memory store of word selections depends on both an early start (12 or under) and the massive exposure associated with living inside the target language community. For post-12 learners, an ability to detect non-native selections can continue to improve over years of exposure, though this is not inevitable, and does not attain full nativelike levels in either the UK or Poland. A few outliers aside, there appeared to be no general relationship between
this ability and degree of motivation to be nativelike, or to be assimilated into the English community, nor on the proportion of daily life conducted in the English. All these variables seem more related to age. Learners who came to the UK at a young age were more acculturated, more motivated to be nativelike, and had more L2 social contacts. Grammatical attainment contrasted somewhat with building a memory store of native-like selections in that the data showed that, for post-12 learners, this did not continue to improve over time.

Participants in Poland were at a disadvantage in that their exposure to the English was more limited, and their grammaticality judgement scores and nativelike selection scores were lower overall than their counterparts in the UK. For them the size of the memory store of native-like selections seems positively related to length of exposure, while an early age of first exposure, and not length of exposure, was related to higher grammatical attainment.

Unexpectedly, and contrary to existing research findings, the test of phonological short-term memory showed it to decline gradually with age, and therefore its role in the development of memory for nativelike selections (which for some participants had happened decades earlier when they were children) could not properly be explored.

The project has already generated two major linguistics conference presentations in Canada and Britain, and in 2010 will be presented at the American Association of Applied Linguistics in the USA and at the Formulaic Language research Forum in Germany.

The findings of this project fit emergentist models of language acquisition in which memory and long exposure are responsible for the implicit knowledge of both grammatical rules and nativelike selections. They also fit previous research which shows only learners who start before puberty are able to achieve nativelike proficiency in a language. Thereafter, implicit learning appears to be less effective, while explicit learning becomes more powerful. Explicit learning of nativelike selections, of which there are certainly many millions in any speaker’s memory, is too large a task for an adult to accomplish, though this project was not able to determine whether this is due to a diminished phonological short term memory.

The findings contradict models which see the processes of first and second language as essentially the same: the unavoidable, unpreventable, implicit acquisition of knowledge through exposure to linguistic input. Exposure to input can only take an adult learner so far, and not to nativelike knowledge of the idiosyncratic grammatical and semantic structures that associate with individual words. In light of these findings, lexical approaches to language teaching, which necessarily involve only brief exposure to a very small subset of nativelike selections, appear rather limited in what they can be expected to achieve.