Applied Linguistics Circle

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Native-like selection in second language acquisition: investigating the effects of age, aptitude, and socialisation

Second language acquisition research has tended to concentrate on how learners develop knowledge of grammatical systems (Skehan, 1998). However, an obvious feature of second language use is that it can be both perfectly grammatical and very odd, indicating that the learner has grammatical knowledge but does not know enough about how words are most naturally used (Pawley & Syder, 1983). Performance testing, or judgement exercises, (DeKeyser, 2000) show how well learners recognise what is and isn’t grammatical, but it is rare to test how well learners can distinguish the native-like from the un-native-like.

This paper is based on a study exploring the development of this knowledge, and its relationship with: age of first exposure (age effects); breadth and depth of exposure (acculturation and motivation effects); and size of working memory (language aptitude effects). The participants are native speakers of Polish who have advanced English L2 proficiency: forty resident in Poland, forty resident in the UK for at least 12 years. The data are gathered through various instruments. A questionnaire (based on Freed et al., 2004) explores participants’ English learning and use. A grammaticality judgement test (based on DeKeyser 2000) gauges their knowledge of English grammar. A specially designed test of working memory measures this aspect of language aptitude (Ellis 1996). Finally, another specially designed instrument (Foster 2007) measures how far participants can distinguish native-like from un-native-like selections in English. A variety of data analyses cast light on which profile features are associated with the development of this ability.