Which factors influence the ability to recognise unconventional word sequences?

What this research was about and why it is important

Native speakers are not infinitely creative in combining the many words that exist in their language to express themselves. They actually use a lot of conventional word combinations and set phrases. This makes it easier for our brains to process what we hear as we expect certain words to follow each other. While it is often possible to express the same meaning using a different set of words, native speakers of a language would pick up on it as something ‘you would not really say’. This study wanted to find out if a learners’ memory, the age at which they first started to learn a language or their motivation to learn foreign languages influenced in how far they were able to learn these conventional word combinations.

What the researchers did

- Participants were 79 adult Polish-born speakers of English; 39 resident in London, 40 resident in Szczecin (Poland). They were all comfortably bilingual in Polish and English (CEFR levels: B2/C1). They used English daily and had been using it for at least 12 years.
- Participants’ length of exposure to English was 12-67 years in London and 12-35 years in Poland.
- Participants in the UK were 1-35 years old when they started to learn English. Participants in Poland were 5-30 years old when they started to learn English.
- Participants were compared to one group of monolingual English speakers aged 20-50.
- The researchers used a questionnaire to collect information on learners’ daily use of English, their attitudes to British life and culture and their motivation to become very competent speakers.
- They also tested how well learners could remember a sound sequence they had heard before.
- In two stories, learners had to identify sequences of words that they would consider unusual.

What the researchers found

- The English native speakers were much better at detecting unusual word combinations than either English learner group. The group living in the UK did better at this test than the group living in Poland.
- UK-based learners, who had started to learn English before the age of 12, performed like monolingual native speakers. This was not the case for the Poland-based learners.
- Attitudes to the target language did not play a role for either group.
- For the UK-based learner group, the length of exposure to English played a positive role but could not replace an early start.
- For UK-based learners, who had started to learn English later in life, their ability to remember sound sequences had an influence on their result.

Things to consider

- This study analysed learners’ ability to recognise unusual sequences of words in their second language, rather than their production. Results might be different if production had been tested.
- Can the monolingual native speaker be considered an appropriate benchmark for language attainment in the context of foreign language lessons outside the target language environment?