What is the relationship between the knowledge of chunks and creative language use?

What this research was about and why it is important
This study looked at the role of chunks in the development of creative language knowledge. Chunks are word sequences learnt and memorized as a whole, because they are too complex for beginner learners to understand how they are constructed (for example questions such as comment t’appelles-tu? literally ‘how yourself call you’ – what’s your name?). These chunks are easy to spot, because they are longer and more complex than other utterances learners produce, fluent without hesitations and overgeneralised to inappropriate contexts (e.g. to ask ‘what’s HIS name?’). Learners are initially not able to change any elements in these chunks. It is debated if chunks are merely a stepping-stone on learners’ journeys to creative language use, or if they continue to play a role once learners start to apply language rules more creatively. The study found that chunks and creative language use went hand in hand as chunks were shown to form the basis for analysis and creativity.

What the researchers did
• The researchers analysed a large corpus of classroom learner French recorded as part of a project tracking 60 pupils in 2 secondary schools in their first two years of learning French.
• Learners’ progress was documented through a range of oral tasks administered each term
• This study tracked 16 of these beginner learners (8 boys, 8 girls) throughout the two years of the project
• Learners completed 2-4 audio-recorded activities that required creative language use (i.e. beyond basic dialogues rehearsed in the classroom):
  o Individually with a researcher: talking about photos, story retelling, information gap activities
  o In pairs: e.g.: planning an outing, drawing a person based on information from partner
• The researchers analysed all utterances containing questions. They documented how the way in which learners asked questions changed over time. The researchers also analysed the role that the chunks they had learnt in the classroom played in this process.

What the researchers found
• Chunks were extensively used by all learners at the beginning of the study.
• Learners first extended chunks to inappropriate contexts, for example saying ‘what’s your name’ instead of ‘what’s his name’ when referring to a 3rd person. They were not able to modify the chunks at the beginning of the study.
• When learners asked questions without chunks, they produced single words or simple phrases without verbs, using intonation and pointing.
• Some learners started breaking the chunks down by the end of the study, using some of their constituent parts productively in other sentences.
• Learners who memorised chunks successfully and still used them by the end of the study, were also the ones breaking them down and making most progress with their creative productions.
• Learners who stopped using chunks had not made as much progress in their learning, did not use verbs and were only able to produce very simple utterances.
• Chunks and creative language stood in a dynamic relationship, with some learners using parts of chunks elsewhere in their productions.

Things to consider
• This study showed that chunks could form the basis for creative language use.
• Tasks had been specifically designed to challenge learners to use language more creatively. If tasks are too easy or rely too heavily on memorised language, learners are not challenged to break up chunks into their parts, hindering them to use language more creatively.
• What type of task would challenge learners to use language more creatively?

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