CATHERINE DOUGHTY

Research Area Director Catherine Doughty has always been fascinated by language and science. As a graduate student in French and teaching English as a second language, Doughty was delighted when a chance elective course introduced her to the scientific study of language: linguistics. Discovering that her two passions could not only coexist, but support each other, was exciting to the former biology research lab technician, who had finally found her calling. “Right away I got interested in second language acquisition research.”

A part of CASL since its inception in 2003, Doughty was attracted by the unique language learning challenges facing government employees. “I like working on all of the problems that the government has in terms of language learning. The issues are right in my field and interesting for me to study.” CASL’s interdisciplinary atmosphere was also enticing to Doughty, who relishes the opportunity to work side by side with other types of language researchers. “It’s working really well to partner with cognitive psychologists and combine our expertise to address a problem. It’s a good synergy,” she says.

Such synergy is in full force in Doughty’s main project, the High-Level Language Aptitude Battery (Hi-LAB). Hi-LAB seeks to predict an adult’s ability to learn a foreign language to near-native fluency. “No adult language learner can become indistinguishable from a native speaker,” Doughty explains, “but you can still become very, very good. This test is designed to try to identify those people.” Unlike previous language aptitude tests, which only examined early rate of success, Doughty’s team’s study is long term and utilizes advances in cognitive psychology. “We’re investigating cognitive and perceptual abilities that we think underlie the type of learning that goes on at those very advanced levels. The long-term goal is to use the test to select people who can succeed.” The results of Doughty’s Hi-LAB will assist with the selection and hiring of top government language analysts.

In the future, Doughty would like to take Hi-LAB further, using it as a tool to determine a student’s strengths and weaknesses and assist teachers in the development of tailored pedagogic plans that optimize language learning. “I really enjoy the work I do at CASL,” Doughty says. “If it’s really intellectually challenging, then that’s the most interesting to me.”