

Summary of the 5th annual *ELT well* Research Round-Up

The 2018 Research Round-up took place on June 30th this year, in *ELT well*'s seaside office in Morecambe. We had five research reports from professionals working in the field of English language teaching, or teacher training and education, and they shared the findings of the research they have done connected to neurodiversity and its impact on language learning.



Our first speaker, **Judit Kormos**, joined us from Budapest via skype, as she was unable to travel. However, thanks to modern technology, she stayed with us most of the day, and even appears in the group photo at the end!

Judit reported on research she has been conducting into the benefits for dyslexic learners of hearing a text as it is read, and specifically, whether this is a viable exam access arrangement. The findings suggest that for dyslexic students, this is indeed helpful, particularly for reading challenging texts – more so than for non-dyslexic learners. Judit suggested that this may be because hearing the text supports their working memories, allowing them to devote more attention to comprehension. Overall, it seems that simultaneously hearing and reading a text may be a useful tool for encouraging engagement with L2 reading, as well as allowing students with dyslexia to demonstrate their text comprehension abilities in assessments. However, it was noted that the 'read-aloud' strategy changes the construct of the assessment, and so in high-stakes testing contexts, an endorsement would be required on the certificate.

Our second presenter was **Esther Wilkey**, who shared with us her findings from a study which made use of the *ELT well* assessment tool, 'Cognitive Assessments for Multilingual Learners' (CAML), to investigate teachers' perceptions of learners in their classes who were experiencing difficulties.



In the ESOL context, many learners are never assessed for SpLDs, because it is felt that they do not have the level of English required to complete the tests. Often, students who are experiencing difficulties with learning will leave college before they do acquire sufficient proficiency. Esther used the literacy tasks from the CAML-young learners' suite to evaluate the performance of Entry-level ESOL learners and to try to identify which learners may have specific learning differences. She found that the four tasks (free writing in L1, scanning, copying exactly and copying reversed) gave a good indication of which learners were experiencing dyslexic-like difficulties, and that this tied in with their teachers' perceptions of the cause of their difficulties. The four tasks are now to be incorporated into the induction activities for new students at the college, to help to identify neurodiverse learners early on.



Our third talk was presented by Michael Ratajczak, and focussed on the findings of his PhD work – an investigation of the variables that influence comprehension of health-related texts.

Having analysed the linguistic features of several texts, and mapped the variables of a wide range of readers to comprehension, Michael is able to make some preliminary suggestions for how health-related material can be made more accessible to more people. Perhaps not surprisingly, the number of years spent in education, the English language proficiency and age of the readers, as well as their own perceptions of how health-literate they are, all play a major role in how easily they can access information in a health context. However, what is more surprising is the finding that texts that were written in a less-complex style according to the Flesch Reading Ease test (e.g. avoiding the use of the passive voice) were actually more challenging for advanced proficiency readers. The implications are that a range of different texts may have to be produced about each topic, in order to offer accessible information to a wide range of readers.

Diana Pili-Moss presented the fourth talk of the day, sharing her (soon-to-be-examined) doctoral research on procedural memory (i.e. how to do things) and declarative memory (i.e. memory for facts), and the roles that they each play in language learning, at different stages of life.

While it seems that we need both types of memory in order to learn another language successfully, adult learners make more use of declarative memory in the earlier stages of language learning (e.g. learning vocabulary and rules) before procedural memory takes over in order to develop the application of this knowledge. In younger learners, however, procedural memory is important from the beginning, suggesting a different way of learning a language from our adult processes. Diana also discussed memory issues in neurodiverse people, reporting that the automatization difficulties experienced by many dyslexic people is due in part to issues with procedural memory, related to motor learning. On the other hand, in ‘high functioning’ autistic people, it may be that procedural memory is over-efficient, while the declarative memory is weaker, leading to difficulties with accepting variations in the meaning of words (e.g. connotation, metaphor etc).





Finally, we heard from Karmen Pizorn (and Milena Kosak Babuder, right, who could not join us, sadly) about their planned and on-going research projects. There are three different projects in the pipeline; Karmen and Milena are both very busy people!



The first project is an investigation of whether an intervention designed for English-L1 speaking dyslexic students might have the same benefits for English L2 learning students. As Slovene is a transparent language, this may be a way of introducing the idea of a more opaque orthography to the learners.

The second project Karmen described is an investigation into the use of guided reading to support dyslexic learners of English in their development of the L2 literacy. Karmen reported that this is in response to a largely communicative approach to English teaching in Slovenia, in which literacy development is largely overlooked in favour of oral skills. Thirdly, Karmen and Milena are conducting a survey to explore how competent special educational needs teachers (SpENTs) feel in terms of providing extra support to EFL students with dyslexia. There is a move at the University of Ljubljana to introduce a new pathway for trainee SpENTs who wish to specialise in EFL, but first they need to determine what the needs may be of trainees on this course.

To round up the day, all the speakers shared what their future research goals would be, and they were all warmly invited to return next year to give us an update. The date of the 2019 Research Round-up will be announced early next year, so keep checking the ***ELT well*** website / facebook page for details.

