Episode Six: TEXT MESSAGING AND LITERACY  
with DR NENAGH KEMP, UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA  
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Well, as we all know, today’s teens love using their mobile phone to communicate, sending multiple text messages every day to communicate with others. Yet what impact is texting having on the literacy skills of today’s children and teenagers? Is their ability to read and write correctly being negatively impacted OR can our students actually benefit from this new way of communicating?

My guest today is Dr Nenagh Kemp who is a senior lecturer in the division of psychology in the school of medicine at the University of Tasmania. Her research focuses on the acquisition, development and use of spoken and written language, from infancy to adulthood, and she has a particular interest in the written language of digital communication. More generally, she is interested in children’s cognitive development.

Tracy: Well it is a beautiful morning here in the historical city of Hobart. And I have travelled to the University of Tasmania, the sandy bay campus to interview a highly accomplished academic Dr Nenagh Kemp. Dr Kemp, thank you for joining me.

Nenagh: Thank you

Tracy: As an English teacher myself, I’m very interested in hearing about your research into texting and language development. What prompted your research into this relationship between mobile phone messaging and literacy?

Nenagh: I have been doing research for a number of years on children’s reading and spelling development and as I saw more and more children using mobile phones and seeing the way that they wrote their text messages I started to wonder how this might be affecting their spelling and reading. A few people started asking me as well as they knew that I did research in this area and so I said that I will have a look. At that point there wasn’t actually anything published on children’s reading and writing and their mobile phone texting at all and so that’s what prompted me to start looking at that. At the same time as I started to look at that other people around the world also started looking.

Tracy: We will get to your findings shortly but with the increased use of mobile phones by our teenagers, there is a general concern that the ‘popular use of text-message abbreviations or ‘textisms’ is masking or even causing literacy problems in children and teens. Is this true?

Nenagh: It is certainly something that a lot of people have been and continued to be worried about when you see newspaper headlines especially from the past when it first began to take off. It uses words like ‘ruin’ and ‘changing our language’ and ‘ruining English’. It is a very dramatic language when in fact you start looking at it it doesn’t seem like it is true at all. I can go into more detail on that soon but overall the concerns and worries that people have especially in the popular media actually seems to be unfounded.

Tracy: Was that surprising to you?

Nenagh: Yes it was surprising to me I must admit that I saw the way that text messages were being written and now instant messaging, Facebook or anything else you are writing in this way I saw that
style of writing and I did think this has got to be making young people write in a different way in general and so when I started doing this research I did go in with an expectation but when you do something scientific and you set something up properly and you look at the results you do change your mind you do alright then this is what the data is telling me and it is not what I expected.

Tracy: I don’t think that you are alone in that one with a lot of parents and indeed English teachers probably held that concern. That’s why your results are really quite interesting. Let’s actually look at what messaging is. So you use the term ‘textism’ and ‘textese’ can you define those for us?

Nenagh: Yes there has been various words used but the ones that the research area seems to be converging on it ‘textisms’ are individual usually abbreviations sometimes elongations of words so you might use TXT for text, or MSG for message. So something where you’re changing the word into ‘textism’ and the broader term that people have used is ‘textese’ like Chinese, Japanese or Javanese. So it is like a language form that people use to describe the way that people write. And not just text messages now obviously but anything digital or anything abbreviated or kind of fun casual language style.

Tracy: Why were these ‘textisms’ created? What was the purpose?

Nenagh: They have a longer history than most of us think about but people who are using the internet in the very early days when there was a smaller community of people writing on message boards and so forth it was just for brevity to keep things shorter, for quickness and also to show that they were part of this special community where they have their own slang in all kinds of language communities. Then when people started to use mobile phones more generally they had very small screens they had character limits and people were paying per text. People would do a lot to reduce the amount of characters that they were using to save space and to save time and money. In terms of time you were pressing 1, 2, 3 or even 4 times on each key to make that letter come up. So that’s where it really started and I think that it kind of became entrenched then, this is how I write text messages so even now when we have phones with bigger screens you probably have a monthly plan so you are not paying per message and you don’t need to double or triple press on keys anymore. There is not much of a need to write in this way anymore for people because that is what you do on a phone and also it’s no longer so much as reducing the characters its having fun with languages. Its putting in emoticons, its putting it funny spellings or putting in abbreviations like lol, not for reducing characters but for being a bit fun.

Tracy: Do you find that different age groups use it more heavily than others?

Nenagh: Yes there seems to be a big spike around early teenagers when you are more able to manipulate language so your reading and spelling languages are fluent enough that you can play with language and it’s fun, it’s trendy. It’s kind of the age when you do a lot of new things but some parents might consider some of these bad things, but some of them might be wearing particular jewellery or saying particular words or using new particular things that you go through in that early teenage period. Then when people get older they start to think well that was unsophisticated or that was when I was young and then as you get into adulthood you kind of leave those things behind you.

Tracy: One of the issued that you identified is not so much the ‘composing’ of the message using textisms, rather the deciphering of the message by the recipient. Can you talk through that for us?

Nenagh: Yes I think that it’s something that’s reduced in recent years but when it first became popular to write text messages and to use these abbreviations people went a bit crazy on them so people were making up all kinds of abbreviations in a very un-standardised way. There wasn’t a
dictionary of ways to reduce ‘tomorrow’ or whatever. So a lot of people actually couldn’t understand what their friends were writing to them and then they would have to write back and say ‘what did you mean by that’ and then their friends would have to explain. So it ended up being a little bit meaningless to reduce the time you spent if it required more.

Tracy: Do you find that that still exists with the older generation receiving messages from the younger generation perhaps?

Nenagh: Yes but actually it’s the other way around. So the University students that I teach tell me ‘oh no I don’t do that anymore that is so two years ago but my mum does it’. So it seems that twenty year old students mothers are the most common users of these abbreviations and the University aged children say ‘oh gosh I can’t believe you wrote that’ and ‘no-one does that anymore’ but it seems like the older people adopting a younger persons passion that the younger person have now gone beyond.

Tracy: That’s interesting isn’t it? So if we focus a little closer on literacy and this link between using this new digital language and literacy. Is the language of digital communication affecting a students ability to spell?

Nenagh: So that has been the big research question and that’s something that has been looked at for about eight years now and I can speak on the research that has already been published but I just want to say at the start this does not mean what is happening now. This is what that has been happening in the past but it may be continuing to change. But researchers, teachers, parents and educators have all been worried that if you see too many examples of something being misspelt whether deliberately or not that is going to affect your understanding of your knowledge of how you should spell it. That is what researchers have been looking at. But in fact at least until recently and we don’t know about right now because it always takes a while to do the research, the children especially less so the older teens and adults, the children who use the most textisms or text abbreviations or elongations or emoticons, the children who uses the most of those were the ones who were actually better at reading and spelling. And that is not so surprising if you think about it as just another use of language. People who were good at using language in one way are probably going to be the quick ones to adapt it in another. So they’re the ones who can think of new ways of writing abbreviations and who were good at working out maybe what their friends have written to them. That is one surprising thing that the kids who are good at reading and spelling were good at these abbreviations. Older teenagers and adults there doesn’t seem to be any relationship and that’s probably because their reading and spelling skills were already established before they started texting a lot and then you are not going to forget how you are going to spell message if you write it as MSG or you are not going to forget if you use lol instead so if you have been reading or writing a long enough those skills are so entrenched that you are not going to start forgetting how to spell once you see words written in the shortened way. And one other thing is that the words that you are abbreviating in text messages are usually the very common and simple words. You don’t go abbreviating words like ‘unnecessarily’ or ‘acknowledgment’ or words which are long and typically difficult to spell. They’re not the ones that you do end up abbreviating so I think that is why we don’t see this negative affect on spelling.

Tracy: Is there a negative effect on the ability of children who do struggle with literacy though?

Nenagh: That is something that hasn’t had a lot of research and that’s something that I have started to look at. A few people have looked at that and what they find is children who struggle with literacy anyway just find it harder to write these messages and read them just because it is in another form of reading and writing. So it takes them a bit longer and it’s a bit harder for them to think of new
ways of spelling words. If you already can’t remember how to spell something you don’t want to be then thinking up of a fun new way of spelling it. And also if your friends write to you in a certain way that’s new maybe you can’t decipher it. But the flip side of that is kids who don’t like reading and writing who typically would have avoided it. They actually end up having more practise with it because they are having to. If your friends are writing on Facebook or posting things to invite you to things or there is a group conversation on line, it actually means that these children have been exposed to more than what they would have been in the past and it actually seems to be increasing some children’s ability to read and write.

Tracy: So it can actually be beneficial in that way?

Nenagh: Yes for younger children. Not by the time you get to high school age then it doesn’t seem to make any difference but kids who are still learning to read and write who in the past probably would have avoided it but gone and done other things which you may think are actually better like playing outside or running around and doing some exercise. It depends what you are focusing on but it does mean that more of those children are doing more reading and writing.

Tracy: Incorrect grammar, punctuation, capitalisation and spelling it seems acceptable in this context. Is this a good thing?

Nenagh: If everyone agrees that’s its acceptable in that context and keeps the context separate from formal writing then I think that’s ok. Its just like that we have different registers of speaking that’s its ok to speak informally with your friends but formally giving an interview or a lecture or speaking with grandparents if that’s how you speak to them. So there is nothing wrong with speaking at different levels in that way. There is nothing wrong in writing different ways to suit the medium or the way that you are interacting as long as you can see that it is separate. As long as you don’t then go into your school exam or a school test or an assignment and think that its ok to write like that. That is when it becomes less of a good thing.

Tracy: And that’s often the concern as educators especially English teachers don’t want to see this new digital language coming into the classroom where students pick up a pen and they are required to write a piece of writing using traditional English do you find that they are able to understand the differences in context?

Nenagh: That’s a really good question. When we have asked primary school and high school students in the past they really understand it. At least when you asked them they laugh, if you give them an internet or digital message written in this textese language and say ‘would it be ok to hand in to your teacher?’ and they would laugh and say ‘no that’s not how you would write for your teacher’. Older students would say ‘no that would not be appropriate’. So they do seem to know it just as if you said to them ‘see what you are wearing now, hoody and track pants, would you wear that to a wedding?’ they know that it is not right so they kind of laugh. There are a lot of antidote reports about students writing this way in exams but there is not very much research. There is one bit of research that I have been involved in is with a PhD student who worked with me Abbey Grace, and she had worked on looking at half a million words of exam answers here at the university of Tasmania. It was less than one percent of the words. It was.04 percent of the words were kind of textese words. So these are University students and not high school students but they knew not to write like that in exams.

Tracy: Do high school students know this?
Nenagh: I don’t know. There is a couple of research projects suggest that they do but it is only asking teachers what they think and the teachers say ‘oh yes there is quite a few of them do that’ but when you actually go and look at the numbers of words it is unusual to see that many. I think that people remember particular examples and say ‘gosh look at that’ but then if you think for that one student perhaps there are hundreds who didn’t do it at all. So that’s something that does need to be looked at.

Tracy: The thing that I find that comes in speaking of anecdotal evidence is the lower case ‘i’. That seems to be a common error.

Nenagh: Yes it is

Tracy: I don’t know if it is related to text messaging or not?

Nenagh: No it is, most definitely is because there is no advantage when you are hand writing when you are doing a small ‘i’ its only a time saver an effort saver digitally because when you are writing there is no reason at all, I’ve been thinking about his one. I think that’s something that might start to change and in fact the use of capitalisation in general. So as I say so far we haven’t seen this but I wonder as more kids come through having seen almost as much digital writing as formal writing on paper or whatever I wonder if that would change? I wonder if our capital ‘I’ will disappear within our lifetimes?

Tracy: I hope not. I must admit though capitalisation and punctuation tend to be two of the areas that need work in our high school students. Is this relevant to your research?

Nenagh: Yes it is relevant but I can’t give a clear answer yet because the research hasn’t been done on whether texting is definitely affecting that although I have done some research with a colleague at the University of Coventry in England, Claire Wood, and we have found absolutely no relationship between primary school, high school and university students capitalisation and in their texts and spelling ability so it wasn’t that people who use no capitals are poor spellers. What you can’t distinguish is people who don’t know about capitals, they don’t use them and people who think that they know it should have a capital but they are in a rush and ‘they will know what I am talking about I am not just going to put it in’ they’re often the smartest people, the best spellers I ought to say and so they’re the ones who are making decisions based on efficiency who are also good spellers.

Tracy: Dr Kemp does gender pay a role in your research?

Nenagh: I do always look at the differences between the male and female participants just out of interest and what I have been finding in my research which echoes that which other people have done around the world is that females in general whether they’re girls or women tend to use more of these abbreviations than males do but they also write more words, send more messages. But even as a proportion of the number of words they use they use more textisms and unusually more emoticons and that kind of reflects general differences. It sounds as though it’s kind of a stereotype but it’s based on real differences, women tend to talk more than men, use more words than men and express more emotions than men in their spoken language so I think that this is a reflection in their written language.

Tracy: The relationship between girls using abbreviations more often than boys is this reflected in the literacy skills of boys and girls?
Nenagh: In general girls are slightly better at literacy skills than boys and of course this isn’t the case for any individual girl or boy but overall females are slightly better at language based tasks whether it be speaking or verbal fluency like how fluently you can speak or spelling or reading. Overall they are a bit better than boys so it’s not surprising that we see these small differences in the use of textisms as well.

Tracy: Generally what can teenagers do to ensure their traditional English language skills don’t suffer as a result of using this new digital language of communication?

Nenagh: I think that the most important thing is just make sure you are exposed to formal written language at least as much as you expose yourself to this more informal written language. So obviously more teenagers are spending a lot of time online or on their phone or both looking at informal casual written language of their friends or people whose work that they might be reading written with small letters and not uppercase letters and emoticons than abbreviations and so forth. Just make sure you also read novels or even magazines or newspapers or more formal online material that is written in Standard English just to keep up that exposure to it and so that you are not only seeing things written in casual English.

Tracy: And equally what can parents do to help their sons and daughters?

Nenagh: I think just encouraging that reading of formal English and again it doesn’t need to be reading ‘War and Peace’ or anything even magazines are written in formal English. Still you don’t see small ‘i’ or missing full stops or emoticons in magazines or anything. And also just talking about it. Reminding their sons and daughter; most of who won’t need reminding but still it’s that discussion that ‘you know how you write to your friends so just remember you don’t write like that at school’. Just that discussion of the different levels of formality of writing.

Tracy: If we were looking at the English language broadly do you think that the Formal English language would change as a result of digital technology?

Nenagh: That’s a difficult one and I think that it is something that we can still only speculate on. But written English does change. It changes very slowly compared to spoken English more at the levels of centuries than years or decades. But I think that over a couple of more centuries perhaps what we see today is standard or formal English might converge more with informal or casual English. And I think that we might perhaps the reduction in the use of capital letters because they are not actually essential for understanding apart from a couple of times like ‘polish’ or ‘Polish’ but most of the time you don’t need them. So I think over time it will change but whether it is a problem or not is in the eye of the reader because it is now right that we don’t write in the same way as Shakespeare in terms of spelling. It is not good or bad it’s just language change. It happens.

Tracy: What’s your opinion though? Do you think that it is good or bad?

Nenagh: I suppose my natural instinct as someone who researches language and who is someone who is pedantic to see change in the short term as bad but then having to take a step back and having to remind myself that language change is never bad unless it is loss of vocabulary perhaps inability to express yourself properly but otherwise it’s just what language does and otherwise you can say it’s a terrible thing that we are not speaking the same as people 200 or 400 or 600 years ago but that’s what happens.

Tracy: So we need to keep up with the times. Change with the times if you like.
Nenagh: Yes that doesn’t mean that we should abandon all our structures of written formal English because it is a big, beautiful language with more words than any other language in the world. Probably simpler grammatical rules, there aren’t that many of them and the way that we write at the moment does capture what we need to say so I wouldn’t advocate abandoning capital letters and expressions of emotion for emoticons quite yet.

Tracy: You say that the English language is extensive. Is it one of the most difficult languages to learn?

Nenagh: I don’t think that it is very difficult to learn spoken English compared to many other languages because it doesn’t have different verb endings like if you are trying to learn many European languages you have to learn different verb endings and you have to learn different cases. So if you are given something to someone or saying something directly you have to change. It doesn’t have gender to learn so it is easier for spoken language but in terms of reading or writing it is the most difficult of the alphabetical writing systems to learn. So it takes children learning English much longer to learn to read and write than children learning any other alphabet in the world.

Tracy: Why is that?

Nenagh: Because we have such an inconsistent spelling system. And that is because people spoke different dialects of English but then printing press was invented and it kind of froze a lot of spellings and pronunciation continued to change and then dictionaries were invented and that kind of froze more spellings so we still have a lot of words written how they used to be pronounced. And we no longer pronounce them that way and there is a whole lot of hodgepodge of different word origins all represented in one spelling system. Ideally an alphabet means one sound for each letter. If you learn Finnish or Italian or Croatian or Serbian you can learn to read if you are an adult in two days. You just learn twenty something correspondences between symbols on the page and sounds and you have learnt to read and write. English has so many inconsistencies that it takes years and years for kids to learn them compared to any other alphabetical language so well done to every one learning English it is really hard to read and write just easier to speak.

Tracy: Dr Kemp you said that the English language is a hodgepodge of various sounds. Why is that?

Nenagh: I think that there is so many influences in it that words came from a lot of languages then people fiddled around with the spelling of English for a very long time so academics who wanted to show that we should be aware that words came from Latin originally would insert Latin letters back in to words. So words like ‘debt’ which used to be spelt like ‘dette’ they wanted to show that Latin root of it coming from something to do with debit and so they put the ‘b’ back in and now we have to spell it with a ‘b’ in it. Words like ‘receipt’ which used to have no ‘p’ at the end and then they wanted to show that Latin root and show that it was related to words like ‘receptacle’ and so they put the ‘p’ back into ‘receipt’. Medieval monks who were writing out manuscripts if they wanted their manuscripts to nicely fit from the left hand to the right hand of the page nowadays we fully justify on our word documents and it just does it for us. What they would do for us if they had a little bit of space at the end they would put an ‘e’ at the end of the word just to make it fit properly so now we have some words with an ‘e’ on the end. Some other words, there was a fashion for a while for kind of writing in pointy writing so a ‘u’ and a ‘v’ would end up looking quite similar because it was fashionable instead of having rounded letters to do pointy ones. But that meant that if you had ‘u’ and ‘v’ and ‘n’ all in a row sometimes it would be very difficult to read the words because there was a whole lot a little spikes and so often they would change the letter ‘u’ into an ‘o’ to make that easier to read and for that reason we have a whole lot of words like ‘oven’, ‘love’ and ‘dove’ where it is a ‘u’ sound but we spell it with ‘o’ because it used to be a ‘u’ and a ‘v’ next to each other and it
was too hard to see. So we just have these really silly spellings that came from changes that people made.

Tracy: Well given that you really have to take your hat off to early childhood teachers and primary teachers of English they face a great challenge there of teaching this language of ours.

Nenagh: They really do and when you are an affluent reader and writer as teachers are it’s actually quite difficult to step back and think about the sounds of language and children learning to read are very good at hearing the sounds. And for us when we look at the word ‘love’ we don’t actually think that it’s a bit strange that it has an ‘o’ there it’s just how you spell it but when a child makes a spelling mistake and actually spells it as though as it sounds we should be praising them for that bit but not just keep letting them and writing it wrong but telling them that sometimes writing it is actually tricky. Sometimes it is not actually what we think and acknowledging to the child that they have had a good go because children often write thing as exactly as they sound and we are so good at reading and writing that we forget that actually that’s a really good attempt at that word.

Tracy: Yes because it is difficult for children to learn and how to spell the English language.

Nenagh: Yes and often we don’t appreciate how well they are doing and so things like you might say that this curly letter always makes ‘s’ sound and if there is two of them it a ‘s’ sound and then a child might use it to spell ‘z’ but then we might not remember that words like ‘dissolve’ and ‘scissors’ have an ‘z’ sound with two s’s so there are all these rules and patterns that we don’t always remember that make it even harder for children to learn to read and write that we might have first think.

Tracy: Are some children naturally better spellers than others?

Nenagh: Yes they do seem to be but what that means is that you just have to give more help to the ones that aren’t rather than saying ‘you are not a very good speller’. Well you can acknowledge that but giving them that bit of extra help to maybe learn some patterns that they might not have picked up themselves.

Tracy: How critical is the primary teachers’ role in teaching spelling and indeed the techniques that they use, the strategies they use to teach the language?

Nenagh: I think that primary school is a really important part because children don’t come to school with the expectation that they won’t like it. Or very few do, but high school a lot of kids have decided that they don’t want to like this. If you can instil a love of reading and writing or at least the tolerance of it and the ability to believe you can do it earlier on you are going to make a big difference for children so primary school teachers are really instrumental in getting children to think that reading and writing and something that they can do. And giving them those tools to break words apart into their little bits and see what some words meaning are and then put them back together. And that can really be helpful for spelling and not just to spell words all in one but helping them see the different sections of words that they can use and rules perhaps to spell.

Tracy: Is there a point in the child’s age where changing habits of spelling becomes increasingly difficult? For example once the student has reached grade eight or grade ten and misspelling words, is that likely to change or can you retrain them at that age?
Nenagh: You can but it is going to get harder and some of that is just about the student thinking ‘well this is how good I am at spelling at this is my skill level’ or not bothering to change because by then they have got that far it would be a very self-motivated student who at that point in high school would say ‘right I am going to improve my spelling’. So the young person would have to want to change as well.

Tracy: So it can be done but it just requires again hard work.

Nenagh: Yes and I have become a better speller even in adulthood. The more that I have learnt about word origins the more that I can see that ‘oh that word come from that therefore I will spell it this way’

Tracy: I think that we are always improving our spelling aren’t we. I don’t think that we ever stop learning how to spell words. It’s one of the few skills that keep on going up in old age. Most other things just go down. Spelling and general knowledge go up. Well that actually links to my final area where we talk about today. Its and area that remains a concern for teachers and parents but many students would rather type their work using word processing on a laptop rather than hand write it and in doing so they use spell check and grammar check often the results that the student receives vary dramatically. Is this use of technology negatively affecting the language and literacy development of children and teenagers?

Nenagh: I think that that is a difficult question to answer. But what we can think about is if having that help with spelling and grammar that the computer programme provides leads the person to produce a better piece of work is that what we should be doing for them. So that is one way of looking at it. If that frees them up from having to worry about their spelling and think about the next word and it actually lets them express what they wanted to say maybe that’s a good thing if they can create a higher level piece of writing without worrying about the parts that they find difficult. I think that the one potential danger in that is a feeling that you no longer need to worry about spelling and that it’s the computers responsibility because the computer can’t always tell. Say if you used a homonym wrongly and it’s a very obvious one that no-one would mix-up would say ‘right’ and ‘write’ you can spell it correctly but get the wrong one. That is something that the computer can’t fix for you. And even I suppose the words that you do get wrong say the wrong type of compliment like with an ‘i’ instead of an ‘e’ or the wrong kind of ‘hoard’ versus ‘horde’. So it’s those types of spelling mistakes that it can’t fix.

Tracy: And I have seen those errors personally I must admit.

Nenagh: Yes they are very very common and you don’t often get picked up on. If people use spell check as the spelling teacher for themselves it would be a great tool. If you went oh that’s not how you spell it, here it is, the computer has just provided it for me, it would be really good. But the thing is that people don’t they go ‘oh well its fixed it for me I won’t bother’ and I must admit to my own laziness, not in spelling because I know how to spell but with typing ‘children’ with the ‘i’ and ‘d’ around the wrong way. Typing ‘research’ with the ‘e’ and ‘a’ around the wrong way I frequently do that but I know that the computer program will fix it for me. So it does insert a certain laziness I think.

Tracy: So student won’t have a pen and paper next to them and then write out the word out five times?

Nenagh: No, no one bother they just want to keep on going but a few people including the PhD student that I mentioned earlier said ‘oh I use it as a spelling lesson for myself’. She is a very motivated and pedantic kind of person and I think ‘good for her’. She has learnt to spell a lot more words from learning from that computer spell check little red line.
Tracy: Does that actually work writing out a word five times? How do you teach yourself how to spell a word?

Nenagh: I think that you use whatever works best for you and I think that writing it out and getting the kind of physical feeling of writing it does help and seeing it and just going over it I think just being conscious of it. I think just learning some way of doing it or making up a little rule for yourself. I remember in grade one when I must have been a pedantic little spelling girl I could never remember how to spell ‘beautiful’ because of all of these vowels in the middle but I just remember coming up with this strategy. It’s like the word ‘ear’ you must remember the ‘e’ and the ‘a’ first and then the ‘u’ must be after that. So even if you think up a silly grade one strategy like that anything that you can remind yourself of or how many n, c and s’s in unnecessarily. Just thinking of someway of remembering how many there are. Just say it to yourself.

Tracy: So the ability to spell is drawing on your memory essentially.

Nenagh: Yes because we have stored words in your memory and you need to access them somehow and whether you either write or type those letters in a certain order and that it feels right or you remember how the word should look and you write from memory and you go ‘oh that’s not right’ and you change it until it looks right you are matching it with the stored word in your memory.

Tracy: So should we see more hand writing in schools and less word processing?

Nenagh: I think that in primary school that there should be a real focus on hand writing and getting it fluent, get it so entrenched that you can’t ruin it by then doing a lot of typing. If you spend the first five to six years of school mainly hand writing you are going to get that habit, you are going to get that ability to write in that way. And even just the hand writing neatness as well. That physical practise because if you don’t do much as a child you certainly not going to get better at it when you are an adult. At our University and I think that at most other Universities I think exams are still hand written simply because of the physical difficulty of getting enough computers with no availability to cheat on them. With that many students all at once we still get them to hand write. And like high school students as well they don’t hand write anymore and then twice a year or for ever how often exams are they have to write for two hours and its very difficult for them. It is no longer easy for them their hands simply cramped up. That is obviously not a good reason for saying that they should do more hand writing for two hours of exam later on. I just think that there are many times in life when you still need to hand write. It does teach you that fine motor dexterity that you don’t have from hitting a keyboard and it really helps you with spelling development to be creating the letters one after the other rather than tapping them on the keyboard when you are first learning.

Tracy: It’s often questioned whether hand writing it is on its way out but from your research and from what we have discussed today hand writing certainly has its place in schools and universities and we should be encouraging it, do you agree?

Nenagh: I would agree but I am aware that that is not a sentiment necessarily shared by everyone. Just in this passed academic year Finland has stopped teaching hand writing in schools, children just learn typing. The Fin’s are often well ahead in other countries in some academic or social areas so I don’t want to just it in a blanket statement that you must learn to hand write because clearly here is a country which has decided that that is not so important. However Finnish is a very straight forward language to read and write, not to speak but they just have 26 letters or 24 sounds for those letters and a few letter combinations but I think to read and write Finnish is a very trivial thing compared to English so that they have decided that they can go straight for the word processing or typing but I think for English at least in my opinion at least I think learning to physically to hand write is till a very important skill to learn earlier on and to practise all your life. Maybe in the future everyone will have their phone or equivalent with them all the time and maybe a shopping list or phone message or a
love note electronically but I still think that there is really a place for writing on paper or on a medium that will stay with us for a long time to come.

Tracy: Dr Kemp to just finish up today what direction is your research taking you here in the school of psychology?

Nenagh: I think that is the area of digital communication I have looked a lot at the actual spelling in the way that people write the words but what I would like to look more at is how that affects the reader. So for an example if you were to write to a friend or a job interview application or write electronically in any other way I would say to the teacher or a lecturer how does the recipient of your message judge you or feel about the way that you write? Because it is one thing to write informally to everyone but if you don’t realise that writing informally or casually or spelling with textisms can have a detrimental effect upon you then some people are going to be disadvantaged. So kids who don’t get the chance to read a lot of formal English if they think that it is ok to write to their teacher or lecturer or eventually a potential employer they don’t know that you shouldn’t use textisms in the contexts. What happens if they miss out on a job or get a poorer mark or so forth because of how they have written? So looking at how different people perceive the way that they have written too because I think that that is an important social implication that is also here to stay as more and more people write in a great variety of ways for different people.

Tracy: Well Dr Kemp it has been a fascinating interview and we could certainly talk more but I do appreciate your time today especially because you are on maternity leave so thank you very much for joining me today.

Nenagh: Thank you

Tracy: And I hope that you have enjoyed my interview with Dr Nenagh Kemp from the University of Tasmania. If you would like to learn more about Dr Kemp’s research, follow the links provided in the transcript of this podcast on the CCPS website or check the Soundcloud episode description. This podcast was produced by Tracy Burton featuring music by Paul Cusick. Thanks for listening.

WEBSITE LINKS:

http://www.utas.edu.au/profiles/staff/medicine/Nenagh-Kemp

*click the ‘research’ tab

#Interview by Senior Teacher, Tracy Burton, BA Arts (Communication – Theatre/Media), Grad Dip Ed