

## **Text reading to mind-reading**

Sensory story programs, digital voice recorders and interactive gadgets help children and adults overcome learning difficulties, reports Sally McKeown

Sally McKeown

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Just how do Sencos (special needs co-ordinators) and others with responsibility for additional needs ensure that the children in their charge "enjoy and achieve" (the central outcome of the Every Child Matters agenda)? In 2008, we will see many new products aimed at ensuring that all pupils, regardless of their ability or knowledge, are at the very centre of the learning process.

For teachers who are faced with a child who speaks no English, Crick has created New to English. Based on Clicker, it uses very small steps to teach essential vocabulary and develops skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Pupils can record their own voice, listen and edit as often as they like. It can also be used to promote the use of community languages in the classroom and to give a voice to pupils with very little English.

Learning platforms are old news but until now there has been little thought given to their use with children who have disabilities or communication difficulties. That is all about to change thanks to Kowari, a collaboration between Inclusive Technology and Simica. Kowari can be used by children with disabilities to access content and activities on any PC connected to the internet. Emails and postings to a forum might be in the form of spoken messages, emergent writing or pictures. Kowari can be accessed via touch-screens, mice and other pointing devices, with switch accessibility in development.

### **Using whiteboards**

The range of interactive whiteboard resources for learners with multiple learning disabilities is growing. ReacTickles (£49 for a single licence, with site licences available) is an interactive play environment where children with autism can develop concentration and attention skills. It features colourful abstract shapes, lava lamps, and spinning tops, and children can explore it on an interactive whiteboard or use a microphone switch, mouse, keyboard and a laptop computer.

The Advisory Unit's Plasma Screen and Whiteboard Room is a free online resource bank for those working within the P scales. It contains lesson notes and video clips demonstrating best practice, as well as some hugely entertaining activities created in PowerPoint and Smart Notebook software. Check out the sensory stories such as Sir Pranceabout and the Dragon by award-winning teacher Pete Wells and Walking through the Storm by Nick Wonham. These stories really push the potential of PowerPoint and show just how creative the program can be. To use alongside interactive resources, Qwizdom has produced a simplified handset (price tba). It is designed to be one click only and will make voting easier for children with disabilities.

Out and About 3 - Gadgets at Home (price tba), is aimed at older pupils and adults with severe learning difficulties. It features videos of three young people preparing for an interview and shows the various household gadgets which make their life easier - from alarm clocks to microwaves and washing machines. Differentiated activities include sequencing and word searches. It is switch-accessible and has audio, text and symbol support. There are 1.5 million adults with learning difficulties in the UK and many of the products aimed at this market are worthy and serious so full marks to Semerc for producing a CD-rom with a real feel-good factor. The package is worth buying just for the out-takes.

Following the re-organisation at Granada Learning, Semerc and Sherston will focus on software for early years. Semerc has been a leading producer of award-winning materials for adults with learning disabilities and will be sadly missed. The Out and About series is now distributed by Q&D Multimedia.

Two new tools from Iansyst will help older learners with dyslexia. Audio Notetaker (£79.97 plus VAT for a single-user licence) lets users manage and edit digital voice recordings. It provides a visual representation of speech and tools to annotate and edit the recording. Users can colour-code sections, cut and paste text and audio and add notes in the margin. This will be particularly suitable for students who are studying for A-levels and beyond. Another interesting product is CapturaTalk (£995 plus VAT), a mobile phone which will photograph text and read it aloud. This is being marketed for learners with dyslexia who may have all sorts of adaptive technology in the classroom but are flummoxed by text they meet in the everyday world. They can point the camera at signs, headlines and adverts, and the software will pick out the text and read it aloud.

## **Word processing**

There are also new products for mainstream pupils who need extra help. To enhance and develop writing skills, Crick has produced Write Online, an adaptable, supported word-processing package that can be used on any Windows, Mac or Linux computer with an internet connection. It incorporates high-quality software speech so children can hear what they have written; Wordbar, a word bank and writing-frame tool, so children can point and click to find thousands of subject-specific words; and a new powerful word-prediction tool.

## **Help with inputting**

Cre8txt (£49.99), brainchild of well-known presenter Russell Prue, is an imaginative solution to text inputting. The small keypad has 24 keys which link to a text translation/predictive software package. Purists won't like it because children can type in text-speak and the software will translate it into standard English. However, since 98% of pupils now own a mobile phone and can write at phenomenal speeds using SMS text it seems foolish to overlook this method of text input. Cre8txt is likely to be popular with reluctant writers but it will also provide an economic solution to the problems of amputees and pupils who, for whatever reason, can only use one hand.

Once pupils get writing, they will need support with research and there is an amazing new "mind-reading" program called Autology (around £20 per student per year). Once you have typed 10 words, Autology figures out what you are writing about and looks for suitable resources from its bank. This might be text, pictures, video or sound, parts of carefully selected websites or extracts from textbooks produced by one of its partners such as Letts or Heinemann. All the materials are curriculum-relevant so pupils don't wander away from the topic in hand.

## **Autology will provide text in full form or with the key**

points highlighted - ideal for slow readers and those with dyslexia who find it hard to get the gist of an article. This is clever technology and what is really impressive is that the links change while the pupil is writing, following their train of thought, so no two learners will necessarily receive the same bank of reference material.

Another innovative idea that will excite many teachers and parents is that listening distortion rather than hearing loss can be one of the causes of many learning disabilities. Certain conditions leave pupils unable to focus or direct their listening which means they will have to work much harder to get meaning from what they hear. Therefore they tire easily and switch off. The Listening Centre (price variable) provides electronic retraining for the muscles of the middle ear and is reportedly effective treatment for conditions as diverse as depression, attention deficit and vertigo.