Researcher SPOTLIGHT

ERICA B. MICHAEL

Before learning about CASL through a colleague, researcher Dr. Erica Michael was considering an academic teaching job at a small liberal arts college. With a PhD in cognitive psychology from Penn State and substantial postdoctoral research experience at Carnegie Mellon, including two years at the Center for Cognitive Brain Imaging and three years as a National Research Service Award fellow, Dr. Michael believed her next step would be a traditional academic position. But she found CASL “different in every respect” from her other job options—from the amount and type of research being conducted to the applied focus of the work. Intrigued by CASL’s multidisciplinary approach and being surrounded by “so many people with similar interests,” Dr. Michael joined CASL’s research staff in 2005.

“The chances were high I’d be interested in almost every CASL project,” Dr. Michael says, noting her own multifaceted research background in developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, and cognitive neuroscience. Having started out her graduate work studying cross-linguistic differences in children’s use of gender-specific language, Dr. Michael became increasingly interested in language and cognition in adults. Her doctoral and postdoctoral work examined the cognitive aspects of bilingual language processing and second language acquisition.

At CASL Dr. Michael continues to pursue her interests in the cognitive factors involved in language tasks. One of her current CASL projects focuses on gisting—that is, summarizing in English key information from a foreign language text. The goal of the research is to help language professionals maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of their translation work. Dr. Michael’s team is also working with clients to create and evaluate a tool for assessing gists, which they hope will ultimately lead to more standardized quality control practices.

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“A common thread throughout my career has been the integration of multiple perspectives, methods, and disciplines in the study of second language processing. This integrative approach has been a real asset in the multidisciplinary research environment at CASL.”

—Erica B. Michael, CASL research scientist

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