Underlining multiword units in second language (L2) reading texts

What this research was about and why it is important

Multiword units (MWUs) (e.g., *conduct an experiment, cause for concern*) make up a large part of language. This study showed that MWUs were better remembered if they were underlined for second language (L2) learners, but the fact that some MWUs in the texts were underlined did not help learners recognise other MWUs in the texts that were not underlined.

What the researchers did

Experiment 1

- **Participants**: 38 Flemish (first language Dutch) speakers of L2 English, undergraduate English majors aged 18-21.
- **Materials**: Text 1 was adapted from a BBC article about the link between food and cognition. Text 2 was from an article in the *Scientific American* about the link between music and cognition. For both texts, 16 MWUs occurring once in the text were selected to be of interest. Three versions of each text were created: Version A (all 16 MWUs underlined), Version B (8 MWUs underlined), Version C (no MWUs underlined).
- **Design**: Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups, equivalent in terms of language and text comprehension ability: group A (13 learners) saw version A texts, group B (13 learners) saw version B texts, group C (12 learners) saw version C texts (i.e., the control against which to measure groups A and B).
- **Procedure**: Groups (A, B and C) were given their first text, told to read it and that some questions would follow. The text was collected back, and a 5-minute test handed out. The first section contained four true/false statements about text content. The second section contained the text again with the 16 MWUs replaced with gaps. For each gap, learners were required to recognise the correct MWU from the original text from three options: the correct MWU, a synonymous phrase, and 'neither a nor b' (note: 'neither a nor b' was the correct answer for two questions, meaning learners needed to consider all three options when answering each question). The same procedure was used for Text 2.

Experiment II

- **Participants**: 43 comparable learners, aged 20-23 and with a slightly higher proficiency than those in Experiment I
- **Materials, design, and procedure**: Same as Experiment I, except the order of texts and tests was reversed.

What the researchers found

- In both experiments, learners were more likely in the tests to recognize items that were underlined in the version of the texts they had read (i.e., group A recognised more MWUs than groups B and C, and group B more than C, but only for the 8 underlined MWUs).
- Underlining certain MWUs did not seem to lead to other, non-underlined MWUs also being remembered
- Group B actually recognised fewer non-underlined MWUs than group, which suggests that paying attention to underlined MWUs may come at the cost of attention given to non-underlined MWUs, although the results were not clear enough to really confirm this.

Things to consider

- In these experiments, learners benefitted from texts with up to 12% of words underlined (16 MWUs per roughly 400 words). The researchers cautioned that there is likely to be a point where too many words are underlined for this technique to be beneficial to learners.
- **In your context:** To what extent can/might your learners remember words and phrases (i.e., MWUs) in reading texts more easily if they are underlined? What other ways do/would you use to help your learners remember words while reading?