

ENGAGED or DISENGAGED? Online Materials to Help Language Teachers Support their Pupils with Dyslexia more Fully

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Abstract: The article presents an international project, ENGaGE, the aim of which is to support teachers who are working with elementary school learners with specific learning needs. The online materials developed within the project provide teachers with the training they need in order to be able to teach dyslexic learners efficiently and also with materials which they can use in the classroom. The article introduces the motivation behind the creation of the ENGaGE project and the partner institutions. The contents of the teacher training and the task bank for pupils are also presented.

Key word: Special educational needs, dyslexia, English language, German language, elementary education, online task bank

Introduction

“Every child is unique. Although we may rejoice in this fact, it poses a dilemma for educators. When students are diverse, teachers can either ‘teach to the middle’ and hope for the best, or they can face the challenge of diversifying their instruction.”
(Willis and Mann, 2000)

Studying a foreign language is always

a challenge for learners, but for those suffering from dyslexia, the challenge is considerably higher. Dyslexic students learn best in inclusive classrooms where their special educational needs can be catered for, and in most European countries, dyslexic learners are educated in integrated classes with learners with no specific or different learning needs. Unfortunately, however, they often do not get the aid and assistance they require. Although teachers try hard to cater for

learners specific needs, many educators lack training and awareness of how to work with this particular group of pupils and they may also face a lack of teaching materials. In order to support not only dyslexic learners but also their teachers, the ENGaGE¹ project aims to provide an engaging and inclusive approach to learning through the creation of an English and German digital task bank specifically designed for learners' special needs. The ENGaGE task bank is a flexible supplementary language teaching resource with vocabulary and grammar exercises, which can be used alongside regular teaching materials. Moreover, the task bank also includes a teacher training programme to support and train teachers who work with learners with special needs.

The project was undertaken in cooperation with seven partner institutions from four countries: the University of Miskolc, who are also the coordinators, the University of Szeged, Lingua-Met Gp. and Navigates LP from Hungary, Lancaster University (UK), Masaryk University (Czech Republic), and Warsaw University (Poland). From Masaryk University, two departments from the Faculty of Education are involved: the Department of German Language and Literature and the Department of English Language and Literature. In addition, as

associated partners, several elementary schools from all the target countries also participate in the project by piloting the material.

For pupils who are learning a foreign language, dyslexia can present an additional hurdle to overcome. However, with the right environment and support, it does not have to be an insurmountable one. Some of the challenges pupils may encounter when reading are difficulties recognising a word and reading it out loud, problems working out the meaning of a word or a sentence, and difficulties working out the key information in a text. When writing, some of the problems which can occur may be difficulties with spelling, writing slowly, difficulties with organising thoughts coherently and with accuracy. Some of the techniques and tasks recommended to help dyslexic learners include multisensory teaching, more intensive recycling of previous content, graded tasks, and the gamification of content (cf. Janíková et al., 2013; Nijakowska et al., 2013; Sellin, 2004). These are all addressed in the EnGAGE materials for pupils, and the flexibility of the online materials allows students to practise the same exercise several times and thus to proceed at their own speed. The group projects at the end of each module encourage learners with different abilities to cooperate and to contri-

¹ Digital English and German task bank for 4th to 8th class dyslexic learners (2017-1-HU01-KA201-035955).

bute in their own ways to the success of the shared activity. Learner autonomy and activity is thus also built up through the materials.

The contents of the project

The goal of the project is twofold: firstly, it aims to provide training for teachers in the use of online materials and in how to work with children with special learning needs. Secondly, the task bank provides differentiated materials for pupils.

Structure and content of the teacher training modules

The teacher training, which is provided both in English and in German, consists of six modules. It aims to familiarise teachers with the format of the exercises which the pupils then work with, but more importantly to remind them of, or introduce them to, some of the issues connected to teaching children with dyslexia.

The first module provides the background to dyslexia, the causes of the condition, and what the specific difficulties of dyslexic learners are. The second module deals with techniques for developing the foreign language skills of students with specific learning difficulties and guides the teachers through various strategies which they

can implement in the classroom when teaching grammar, vocabulary, or language skills. The third area of interest deals with the use of digital technology in the classroom, provides reasons for using computer-assisted learning, and also explains the term 'gamification'. As inclusive learning and teaching should always respect diversity and enable the equal participation of all learners, the fourth teacher training module is dedicated to the principles of the inclusion of learners with specific needs and differentiation of the learning content, the teaching and learning processes, and also learners' final products. An essential part of language teaching nowadays is project work, which is a valuable tool for differentiation in a heterogeneous class. The fifth teacher training module is therefore dedicated to this approach. Last, but not least, close attention is paid to intercultural elements in project work as the ENGaGE project aims to celebrate different cultures and their traditions.

Each module consists of short informational texts, videos, and presentations followed by interactive exercises, all of which are based on the same platform as the materials for pupils.

Structure and content of the modules for pupils

Each module consists of five lessons. The first lesson is an introductory lesson specifically designed for learners

Table 1. An overview of the topics in the English and German modules

Number of the module	Topics covered in the English modules	Topics covered in the German modules
1	All about me	Alles über mich
2	Family	Familie
3	Friends	Freunde, Freundschaft
4	School/World of work	Schule, Ausbildung, Beruf und Arbeit
5	Places/home	Orte, Wohnen, Umwelt und Umweltschutz
6	Clothes/weather/services	Kleidung, Wetter und Jahreszeiten, Einkaufen, Dienstleistungen

with dyslexia. The aim of this lesson is not only to familiarise learners with new words but primarily to develop their skills in relation to correct pronunciation and spelling. The ensuing lessons focus on the development of reading, listening, and writing and can be used by both dyslexic and non-dyslexic learners. The second and third lessons are the core units, each of which is further divided into two parts consisting of three tasks which always practise the same area of language. New vocabulary is always introduced at the beginning of each lesson. The fourth lesson is a project lesson and it always contains an individual project which learners complete on their own and a group project which can be done in class. The last lesson is a revision unit which recycles vocabulary and grammar from the whole module.

The modules are designed flexibly so that they can be used both in the classroom and at home, and translati-

ons of the instructions into the pupils' mother tongue are provided in order to facilitate this. Furthermore, the pupils do not need to work through the modules systematically. Thus, they can be used as extra support when dealing with any particular topic at any time during the school year.

The topics covered are almost the same for the English and German materials, and were chosen on the basis of the curricula covered in schools in all the partner countries and also on learners' interests and needs, while respecting the criterion of authenticity (pupils, for example, react to messages sent on Facebook or to Instagram posts). An overview of the topics is presented in Table 1 below.

How are the materials adapted to dyslexic learners?

All the tasks have been designed to suit

the needs of dyslexic learners, which is also reflected in the form of the activities. Throughout the modules, a soft colourful background and sans-serif script are used. Moreover, the task bank offers exceptionally rich audio-visual support, since the meaning of words and texts is always illustrated with a picture and, in addition to that, all the texts are accompanied by recordings in order to facilitate reading or to provide an alternative for those learners who find reading too difficult. Moreover, when completing their answers, pupils frequently have several options to choose from. In the case of tasks where pupils have to complete a word or a phrase, they can either write the word or choose the right one from the words which are offered. In the case of open-ended answers, pupils are given the option to either respond in writing or record their answers on their phones. These features allow the difficulty of the task to be adjusted and therefore make the tasks suitable for various individual learners' needs, including differentiation between dyslexic and non-dyslexic learners needs. The progress within the lessons respects the natural order of acquisition, moving from reception to production, from easier tasks towards more demanding ones.

Furthermore, an emphasis is put on the communicative aspect of the modules. Grammar is taught implicitly and is part of the communication-based tasks. Every lesson is introduced by a short text

or a video which provides a context for the whole lesson. Learners also have the opportunity to learn or practise words which are included in that particular lesson, including correct pronunciation and spelling. Another important feature of the task bank is the focus on an intercultural approach, celebrating, describing and comparing customs and traditions in countries from around the world. As mentioned above, the modules were designed for both individual use at home or use in class.

Piloting

The time frame of the piloting phase was September 2019 – March, 2020. Each country involved in the project piloted the materials in at least two or three schools. The teachers were asked to pilot two or three modules, but were given freedom in terms of choosing the topics which suited their syllabus. As a reward, the teachers were given free access to the Classroom platform for three years.

Firstly, the teachers participated in the teacher training in order to become familiar with or refamiliarise themselves with the issues surrounding dyslexia. They also learned how to work with Screener and the functions it offers. During the training, they were able to choose the activities they wanted to work on, which many of them appreciated as they were able to adapt the teacher training to their individual needs. They generally

evaluated the course positively, although with the normal demands of their jobs, they mentioned that they would have appreciated more time to work on it.

Once they had been trained, they were asked to pilot the materials and to follow their students' progress statistics and task performance. For research purposes, the teachers and students filled in an entry and exit questionnaire and some statistical data was also recorded, such as pupils' classroom code and any known

special educational needs, with special attention to dyslexia. This data was then passed on to the project partners in an anonymised form. During the piloting phase the teachers reported any parts of the task bank which worked well or needed to be adjusted in some way, which was very useful feedback for the material developers. The piloting phase is still in progress, and thus no firm conclusions can be drawn at the time of writing.

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