

Learners' perceptions of interest, difficulty and attention in a digital task bank for dyslexic learners of English and German and their inclusive classes

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Abstract

Foreign language learning poses special challenges for dyslexic learners as problems of phonological decoding present in the mother tongue are transferred to additional languages, too (Kormos & Smith, 2012). Recent Central European research also suggests that teachers tend to have difficulties in providing effective support for these learners (Kormos & Nijakowska, 2017; Martan, Skočić Mihić & Matošević, 2017; Nijakowska, 2020). The aim of the ENGaGE Erasmus+ project was to contribute to the solution of this problem by providing flexible, digital, English and German supplementary materials for dyslexic foreign language learners and their primary school classes, as well as offering a digital teacher training course to support teachers using the Task Bank. It was a key aspect of course development to elicit feedback from learners. The study explores their perceptions of interest, difficulty and carefulness invested into completing the tasks, and analyses the interplay between these factors.

Keywords: dyslexia; learners with dyslexia and other reading – writing difficulties; inclusive education; differentiation

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1. Introduction

Teaching foreign languages to learners with special educational needs (SEN), and within that, learners with dyslexia and other reading and writing difficulties (DRWD) appeared to fall beyond the range of scholars, course developers and educational policy makers until the beginning of the 2000s. However, due to the emerging research interest in the last two decades, today's teachers, parents and also learners are perhaps more clearly aware of the challenges foreign language learners with DRWD have to face, and also the good practices that could offer better solutions than exemption from studies or neglecting the problem.

According to the European Dyslexia Charter 2018, 10-20% of the global population and 5-10% of children and young adults in the European Union (EU) are affected by dyslexia, although only an estimated 1% of all dyslexics in the EU are diagnosed. This means that there is a large number of latent cases in the classrooms registered as learners with varied reading and writing difficulties. In line with EU educational policy (e.g., 2003, 2010, 2010-2020, 2020) most dyslexic learn-

ers participate in inclusive education, but their proportion varies widely across the countries of the EU (between 25-100%) due to different attitudes to and rates of identifying dyslexia, as well as the difficulties of implementing inclusive education (Access to quality education for children with special educational needs, 2018). Some of these difficulties include issues of financing the individual support of learners with SEN (e.g., Öveges & Csizér, 2018), and subject teachers' lack of training, materials and cooperation with developmental teachers (Csizér, Kormos & Sarkadi, 2010; Kormos & Kontra, 2008; Kormos & Nijakowska 2017; Martan, Skočić Mihić & Matošević 2017; Nijakowska, 2020). Research focusing specifically on the experience of dyslexic learners revealed that in lack of effective teaching methods, materials and tailor-made support, they regularly experience failure and disappointment, which decreases their efforts and motivation, and in turn, their achievements as well (Csizér, Kormos & Sarkadi, 2010).

The ENGaGE Erasmus+ ¹project, realized in the framework of international cooperation involving seven institutions from four countries and 19 primary schools from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, aimed to contribute to the solution of this problem by developing a flexible, thematically organized Task Bank in English and German to support the foreign language learning of 4th-8th class learners with DRWD and their inclusive classes up to CEFR level A2+. As a key aspect of course design, teachers and learners in the associated partner schools piloted the Task Bank and provided valuable ongoing feedback for correction and development. The present study investigates the learners' feedback on the interest value, level of difficulty and carefulness invested into the tasks of the Task Bank, as well as the interplay between these factors.

2. Dyslexia and foreign language learning

2.1 Definitions of dyslexia

Dyslexia is a widely studied learning disorder, which generally surfaces in the first years of schooling and has a lifelong impact on dyslexic people's lives. The definition of dyslexia has changed in many ways over the past decades as research has identified the cluster of symptoms characterizing this atypical neurological development. According to the definition the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) (2002),

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge (Definition of Dyslexia, IDA Online).

¹ ENGaGE homepage: <http://engage.uni-miskolc.hu/>

This definition describes dyslexia as a learning disability of atypical neurodevelopmental origins, causing difficulties in accurate and fluent decoding, rooted in phonological deficit. Shortcomings of decoding mar comprehension because the technical part of reading requires focused attention, and thus there is no sufficient attention span left for comprehension (Juhász, Juhász & Magnuczné Godó, 2020).

The British Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as

a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points. Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but these are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia (What is dyslexia? BDA Online).

The BDA definition defines dyslexia as a learning difficulty causing visual and auditory processing problems, combined with a variety of shortcomings of memory, processing speed and other cognitive abilities and motor skills, which persist despite intervention and teaching. While the symptoms might appear on a broad continuum, the varied abilities that influence dyslexic learners' learning processes might also include strengths in other areas, such as creativity, effective problem-solving skills (Szaskiewicz, 2013), long-term memory for visual elements such as faces, shapes and colors (Alsobhi, Khan & Rahanu, 2015) and global/holistic thinking (Gyarmathy, 2004).

2.2 Challenges of dyslexic foreign language learners

According to Kormos and Smith (2012), dyslexia poses more challenges in foreign language learning than any other learning difficulty as the compensatory strategies developed in the mother tongue cannot always be transferred to the new language. Dyslexic learners form a very heterogeneous group (Helland & Kaasa, 2005), with clusters of difficulties that influence language learning in very different ways.

Dyslexia tends to impair foreign language learning in four areas (Kormos, 2018):

1. reading and reading comprehension, somewhat less typically listening comprehension,
2. orthography, spelling, text construction (coherence, word usage),
3. remembering and evoking new words,
4. acquiring grammatical rules.

These difficulties might also vary across languages. In their Psycholinguistic Grain Size Theory Ziegler and Goswami (2005) distinguish languages with shallow and deep orthography (these concepts representing two end points of a scale rather than a binary distinction). Grain size is the number of letters representing a pho-

nological unit; the larger the number of letters representing a phonological unit, the deeper the orthography of the given language is. English with its 26 letters and around 40 phonemes represented by more than 500 (often multi-letter) graphemes is a language with deep orthography (Kormos & Kontra, 2008), and this lack of a consistent sound – symbol relationship makes it distinctly more difficult for dyslexic learners to learn English than a language with shallow orthography (Nijakowska, 2010). Psycholinguistic Grain Size Theory has drawn attention to the importance of dyslexic learners' foreign language choice, and the different nature of support that dyslexic learners may require in foreign language learning.

The learning difficulties dyslexic learners face do not merely influence the learning process at the level of cognitive functioning. Without sufficient pedagogical support, dyslexic learners struggling with varied difficulties of linguistic and cognitive processing tend to have lower foreign language learning motivation than their neurotypical peers (Kormos & Csizér, 2010). Because of their failures, their group status is also typically low, and their foreign language use anxiety is higher (Piechurska–Kuciel, 2008). All these contribute to dwindling effort invested into learning, which further destroys motivation and self-confidence, leading to increasing anxiety. In addition, dyslexic learners often refuse the help provided at school (more time, PC use, etc.) as they are afraid of the negative judgement of their peers (Kormos, Sarkadi & Csizér, 2009; Szaszkievicz, 2013).

2.3 Good practices in the foreign language classroom

Investigations mapping out good practices in teaching foreign languages to dyslexic learners unanimously confirm that the difficulties can be reduced and even eliminated with the joint application of two strategies. On the one hand, dyslexic learners should receive individualized development and support in an extracurricular form, and differentiated treatment in the classroom, for instance extra time, fewer tasks, learning buddies, text editing devices (Kormos & Smith, 2012; Nijakowska, 2010). At the same time, Kormos, Sarkadi and Csizér (2009) also emphasize that there are numerous pedagogical techniques, including clear and concise instructions, meaning-focused practice, regular revision and verbal feedback that are vital for dyslexic learners, but also useful for other learners. Dyslexic learners might have poorer working memory and shorter attention span: slower learners in general can benefit from a step-by-step introduction of vocabulary, multisensory techniques and breaking longer, more complex tasks into several subtasks (Nijakowska, 2008; Sarkadi, 2008).

On the other hand, differentiation cannot be implemented without creating supportive and inclusive classroom atmosphere, where learner differences are considered to be the norm, and learners with varied skills and abilities are entitled to have effective, individual support, and are encouraged to collaborate. To establish this learning environment, Universal Design (Timpe-Laughlin & Laughlin, 2018) offers a framework of classroom support which focuses on learners' strengths, but, at the same time, offers helping options for all learners to facilitate their development.

This is important as neurotypical learners often resent not having the same choices or support as their peers with SEN, which creates tension in the classroom. The helping options might include the multichannel presentation of materials, different forms of activity and reporting, as well as strategies to increase learner engagement and motivation.

The status treatment of learners who are often marginalized in mixed-ability classrooms because of their SEN or social disadvantage has been addressed by the Complex Instruction Program (CIP, adapted for Hungarian educational contexts by K. Nagy, 2015). The main objective of the CIP is to create a supportive classroom culture through facilitating differentiated instruction and cooperative learning relying on team work. Team members have well-defined roles, which rotate within the groups, so every student can try themselves in different roles and their roles and group statuses are not fossilized. Open-ended tasks enable learners with diverse abilities to contribute in different ways. Group projects call for cooperation, assuming responsibility and decision-making skills from learners, which, in turn, facilitate social competences, and result in increasing learner autonomy and feelings of self-efficacy.

3. The engage project

The Erasmus+ project entitled *ENGaGE Digital English and German Task Bank for 4th-8th Class Dyslexic Learners²* (2017-2020) aimed to contribute to shared thinking about effective ways of teaching foreign languages to learners with SEN, in particular learners with DRWD, and provide resources which facilitate the inclusive instruction of this learner group. The project design and material development was informed by the outcomes of previous studies mapping out the challenges of dyslexic learners and good practices of their tailor-made skills development (Csizér, Kormos & Sarkadi, 2010; Kormos & Csizér, 2010; Kormos & Nijakowska, 2017; Kormos & Smith, 2012; Nijakowska, 2008, 2010; Sarkadi, 2008; Szaszkievicz, 2013), the supportive functions of digital technology (Alsobhi, Khan & Rahanu, 2015; Terrell, 2011), as well as the significance and possible frameworks of inclusive instruction and differentiation (K. Nagy, 2015; Pirogova, 2018; Timpe-Laughlin-Laughlin, 2018).

The Task Bank offers innovative solutions in four areas:

1. Resources for differentiation
2. Tailor-made support for learners with DRWD
3. Tasks to facilitate inclusion through cooperative tasks and multicultural content
4. Motivating digital format and content

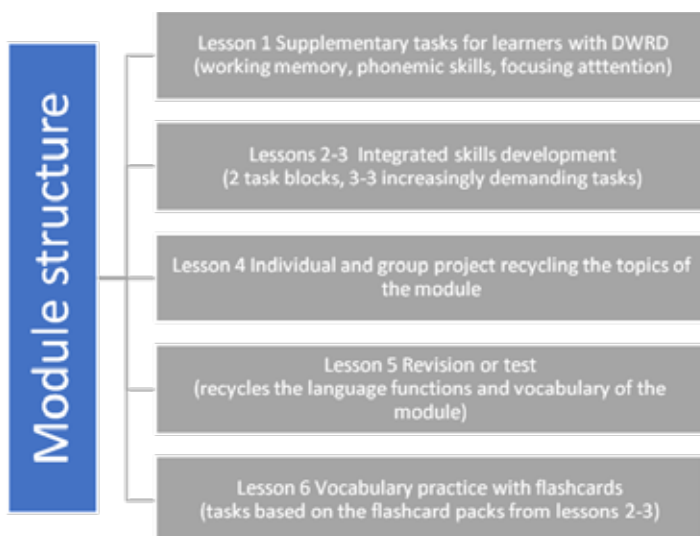
Options for differentiation are present in different forms in the Task Bank, offering materials at four levels from zero to A2+ according to CEFR. Each level contains

² ENGaGE Task Bank: ENGaGE Task Bank | ENGaGE (uni-miskolc.hu)

8 thematic modules, which in turn comprise 6 lessons with an identical internal structure (Figure 1). Lessons 1, 5 and 6, as well as the first project task of lesson 4 are designed for individual work, while lessons 2, 3 and the second project task in lesson 4 are best completed in groups. Lesson 1 offers tailor-made support for learners with DRWD focusing on the development of phonemic and orthographic skills, working memory and concentration. These tasks might also be useful for all learners for practice and revision, just as the revision tasks of lesson 5 and the flashcard tasks of lesson 6. The internal structure of lessons 2 and 3 is also identical: they contain two task blocks, each of which comprises

- the introduction of the topic and warm-up questions,
- flashcards introducing 7-10 key words,
- a central language input (reading, listening, video),
- three graded tasks with increasing complexity in terms of comprehension and required response.

Figure 1. Module structure of the ENGaGE Task Bank



Teachers and learners can choose from these tasks according to interest and the level of language competence. This enables all learners to work on the same linguistic input but approach it and respond to the task in various ways. The different lesson types also allow options for learners to acquire new vocabulary and language functions with more or less practice. As choice can be offered to all students based on the principles of Universal Design (Timpe-Laughlin & Laughlin, 2018), anxiety about special treatment on the side of learners with DRWD and resentment over not receiving alternatives on the side of neurotypical learners can also be prevented (Kormos, Sarkadi & Csizér, 2009).

Besides the tailor-made supplementary tasks of lesson 1, several other digital and methodological solutions support learners with DRWD. The uniform module and lesson structure helps orientation within the Task Bank, while optional pop-up translations of the instructions and graphic function icons clarify the tasks. New vocabulary and language functions are presented in a multisensory manner (image – written form – audio or video) and this principle is at work when introducing new linguistic input (reading – listening – images, videos). This approach is supported by the results of Kosak-Babuder, Kormos, Ratajczak and Pizorn's (2019) study, which proved that young dyslexic learners' reading comprehension was fostered by read-aloud support, especially in the case of more difficult texts. Reading passages are also segmented, that is broken into several smaller units with separate tasks for easier processing. Learners are offered various response options, for instance learners having difficulties in writing can choose to respond by selecting pictures or items from a drop-down list of words, or complete open-ended tasks in writing, recording an oral response or producing a short video or a drawing.

As learners with DRWD are dominantly educated in regular classrooms, the EN-GaGE Task Bank aims to provide opportunities for cooperation, which can facilitate inclusion. The graded tasks in lessons 2 and 3 enable all learners to work on the same language input by completing different tasks: the first two tasks of the task block are closed task requiring only phrase-level or sentence-level reading/listening comprehension and linguistic manipulation, while the third task is always an open-ended task, which can be completed in the form of group work or role play during class. The group projects of lesson 4 invite learners to develop a creative output related to the topic of the module in small, mixed ability teams. The project tasks are designed to rely on varied input from the learners including conducting small research, producing linguistic and audiovisual content, designing online or hand-made visuals or objects, presenting outcomes or managing activities. The topics of the Task Bank also reinforce the idea of inclusion by touching upon issues of disabilities, different forms of functioning and cultural differences. Learners can become familiar with the varieties of English/German, explore English- and German-speaking cultures as well as other cultures of the world, and are encouraged to reflect on their own mother tongues and cultures to be able to compare and contrast them with the target languages and cultures

Finally, in line with one of the key principles of Universal Design (Timpe-Laughlin & Laughlin, 2018) to offer options to engage learners and increase their motivation, the ENGaGE Task Bank aims to provide interesting and enjoyable digital content. This is a key issue as the foreign language learning motivation of learners with DRWDs is generally below average (Kormos & Csizér, 2010). The Screenager digital platform caters for this ambition very effectively by offering more than 20 built-in task types and language games, as well as the potential to embed a variety of real-life contents through multiple channels (e.g., texts and images, mp3 audio and mp4 video content, pdf and Excel files, links to external platforms and game templates to be filled with any content). The Screenager platform also provides supportive, multi-level feedback. After completing the closed tasks and games, immediate visual and audio feedback is generated, and at the end of the lessons overall feedback is provided.

In the last phase of the project, piloting teachers' and learners' feedback provided invaluable information for course designers to judge to what extent the Task Bank has the potential to realize these objectives. The next chapter will discuss learners' perceptions of interest, difficulty and required attention in relation to the lessons of the ENGaGE Task Bank.

4. Learner feedback on the engage task bank

4.1 Aims and research questions

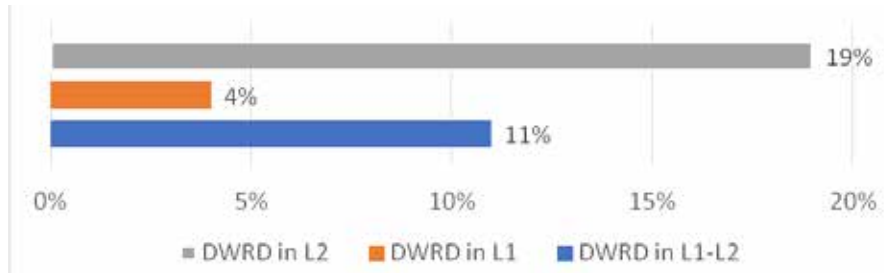
The ENGaGE Task Bank offers supplementary materials rather than a full course, and the piloting learners providing feedback as registered users could use the materials in any way they preferred. Because of the resulting, uncontrollable user- and context-related variables (e.g. number or type of lessons piloted, in class or at home, other materials used, etc.), assessing the development of linguistic competences was not a realistic objective. Instead, the aim of the present investigation is to focus on the potential of the Task Bank to motivate and engage learners with and without DRWD as previous research confirmed that the achievement of dyslexic learners is significantly influenced by motivation and the resulting invested effort (Csizér, Kormos & Sarkadi, 2010). The investigation is guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent did learners find the lessons of the Task Bank interesting?
- To what extent did learners find the lessons of the Task Bank difficult?
- How carefully did the learners claim to have done the lessons of the Task Bank?
- What kind of differences emerge in terms of perceived levels of interest, difficulty and required attention between learners with and without DRWD?

4.2 Participants

The participating learners were invited into their learning groups by their teachers to pilot the lessons of the ENGaGE Task Bank between September, 2019 – March, 2020. 68% of the piloting students were Czech, 28% Hungarian and 4% Polish. The 10–11-year-old age group was represented with 15%, 15-year-olds with 13%, and the 12-14-year-olds had the largest representation with 68%. The proportion of learners claiming that they experienced reading-writing difficulties is demonstrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Proportion of learners with DRWD



15% of the learners had difficulties only in the mother tongue or both in the mother tongue and the foreign language (henceforth DRWD in L1/L1-L2). They together form the highlighted target group of the study as in these cases it can be reasonably assumed that the reading-writing difficulty might not be rooted in the difficulties of foreign language learning or the as yet lower foreign language competence of the learners, but rather in more general deviations of the cognitive processing system. 19% of the learners indicated reading-writing difficulties only in the foreign language (henceforth DRWD in L2). They were considered to be the secondary target group of the study comprising slower learners and ones with other, milder learning difficulties to whom the differentiated content of the ENGaGE Task Bank might also provide support and motivation.

The high proportion of learners who claimed to have experienced DRWDs either in the mother tongue, or in the foreign language or both (34%) indicates that this sample is probably not representative of general school populations. This is due to the fact that we invited schools with a higher proportion of learners with SEN and DRWD to act as associate partners in the project as the ENGaGE Task Bank has been specifically designed for inclusive mixed-ability classes where learners with DRWDs are also learning foreign languages.

4.3 Data and data collection

Learners' feedback was collected in the form of anonymous online questionnaires through the Virtual Classroom of the Screenager platform, where registered users could also access the ENGaGE Task Bank. Learners could fill in feedback forms at the end of each lesson in English, German or in their mother tongues if it was Czech, Hungarian or Polish. The feedback forms in lessons 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (see Appendix) contain questions about interest, difficulty and carefulness, to which learners could respond on a 4-point Likert-scale, where 1= not at all, 2=somewhat, 3=quite and 4= extremely.

Learners were also asked to fill in an anonymous entry survey on registration to give biodata about their country of origin, the foreign language they learnt, gender,

age and whether they had ever experienced reading and writing difficulties in their mother tongues, foreign languages or in both. Lesson feedback could be connected to these entry surveys, which allowed for a comparison of the responses of learners with or without DRWD. 253 learners filled in entry surveys, and the study will focus on the 1291 lesson feedback forms that they have submitted. The distribution of feedback forms across learner groups and lesson types is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of learner feedback on the lessons of the ENGaGE Task Bank

Lesson	Number of feedback forms	
	Number	%
1	438	34
2	342	27
3	224	17
4	104	8
5	183	14
Total	1291	

Data from the learners' feedback were collated in Excel form with the help of the survey system of Screenager. The results of the investigation will be presented in percentages rounded to up to whole numbers.

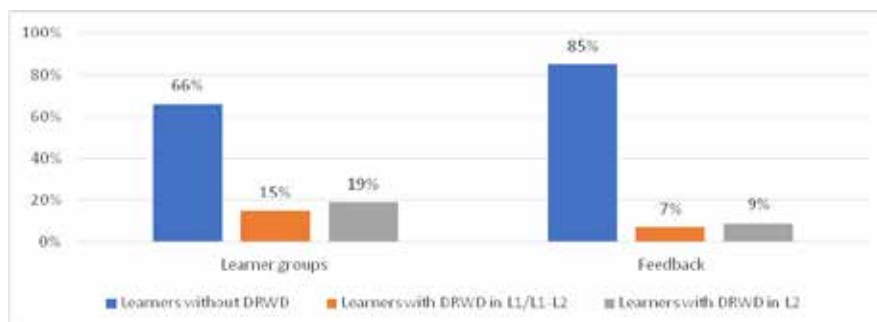
Learners could also provide open-ended comments on their favourite task types, of which only some examples will be provided here to illustrate perceptions of interest, difficulty and required carefulness. The open-ended feedback on favourite task types was also available in Excel. Learners were invited to answer the question "Why did you like this [your favourite] task?". The comments were provided in English, German, Hungarian, Czech and Polish. For the purposes of research, all comments have been translated into English.

4.4 Results and discussion

4.4.1 Overview of the distribution of responses across learner groups and lesson types

Figure 3 demonstrates the distribution of learners with and without DRWD providing feedback on lessons 1-5, and table 2 shows the average number of lessons completed by learners in the three groups.

Figure 3. Distribution of learners with and without DRWD and their feedback on lessons 1-5



While learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2 represent 15% and learners with DRWDs in L2 19% of the full cohort, they gave only 7% and 8% of all lesson feedback respectively, and learners without DRWDs (66%) submitted 85% of the feedback. Table 2 demonstrates that learners without DRWDs piloted 6.5 lessons on average, while learners with DRWD completed 2.2-2.4 lessons. These numbers suggest that learners with DRWD progressed significantly slower than learners without DRWD and completed about 63-66% fewer lessons in the piloting period.

Table 2. Lessons completed by learners with and without DRWDs

	Learners without DRWD	Learners with DRW in L1/L1-L2	Learners with DRWD in L2
No. of learners	168	38	47
No. of lessons completed	1094	85	112
Average no. of lessons/learners	6.5	2.2	2.4

Learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2 completed by far the largest proportion of lesson 1 (52%), which suggests that they (and their teachers) were interested in the developmental tasks for learners with DRWD, and/or recognized their potential to develop their foreign language skills. Learners with DRWD in L2 did not follow this tendency as only 29% of their feedback was related to lesson 1, while 33% of the learner feedback from the non-DRWD group (representing the largest proportion of feedback/lesson type in this group) also concerned this lesson. This confirms that lesson 1 was probably helpful for learners with and without DRWD in practice and revision.

Table 3. Proportion of lesson types completed by learners with and without DRWD

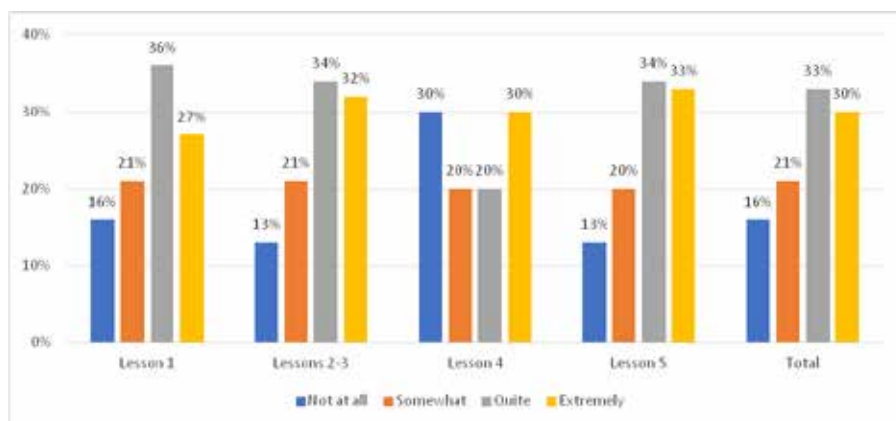
Lesson	Proportion of feedback by lesson type		
	Learners without DRWDs	Learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2	Learners with DRWD in L2
1	33%	52%	29%
2	25%	27%	39%
3	18%	15%	17%
4	9%	0	0
5	15%	6%	15%

While there tends to be a diminishing tendency in lesson completion across lessons 1-5, learners with DRWD in L2 peaked with 39% in completing lesson 2, which might mean that they found the differentiated tasks here appropriately challenging. 43% of the feedback from learners without DRWD and 42% of feedback from learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2 was also related to lessons 2 and 3. The most remarkable difference between learners with and without DRWD surfaced in relation to project lesson 4, as only learners without DRWD submitted feedback about lesson 4. Finally, lesson 5 received the second fewest feedback in all three groups. We can observe a particularly low feedback rate in the learner group with DRWD in L1/L1-L2 indicating that they could not reach lesson 5 after completing the other lessons within the time period allocated for covering the module.

4.4.2 Interest

The collated learner responses for lessons 1–5 are shown in figure 4. The respondents found 63% of the piloted lessons quite or extremely interesting, and lesson 1 proved to be the most appealing with 73% of the responses claiming that it was quite or extremely interesting.

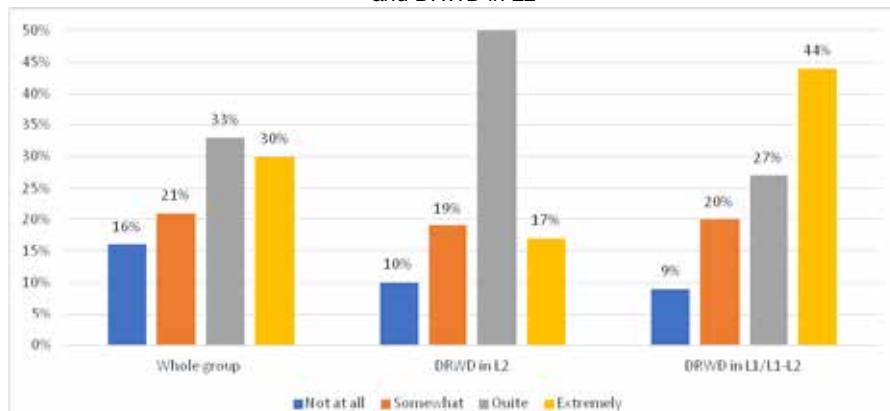
Figure 4. To what extent did you find the lesson interesting?
(Collated learner responses for lessons 1-5)



At the same time, project lesson 4 proved to be controversial from two viewpoints. On the one hand, learners with DRWD submitted no feedback on this lesson type, which indicates that they had probably not tried them. On the other hand, the responding learners without DRWD considered lesson 4 to be the most uninteresting with 30%, while according to another 30%, it was extremely interesting. Besides the divisive engaging potential of the project topics and tasks, this result might also suggest that learners found project work itself, or the cooperation and autonomy expected in project work unappealing, or having had only limited experience and routine in project work, they might not have discovered its benefits yet. Alternatively, unlike the dominantly closed tasks of the other lessons, the project tasks might have lacked the attraction of immediate feedback. The above-mentioned considerations could actually have deterred learners with DRWD from trying the project tasks; at the same time, it is not clear from the data if they felt the tasks were uninteresting, or maybe their teachers considered them unsuitable for learners with DRWDs.

Comparing the overall interest values of lessons 1-5 in the full learner cohort and learners with DRWD (figure 5) suggests that the piloted lessons provided the greatest appeal to learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2: both the “extremely interesting” value (44%), and the composite of “quite interesting” and “extremely interesting” values (71%) are the highest in this group. Learners with DRWDs in L2 showed a similar tendency, evaluating 71% of the piloted lessons as “quite interesting” and “extremely interesting”, although the proportion of lessons they found extremely interesting was remarkably lower (17%). It can be stated that the Task Bank proved successful in completing one of its central aims: to provide interesting and motivating content to learners with and without DRWD.

Figure 5. Interest: Comparison of the full learner cohort, learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2 and DRWD in L2



The open-ended comments on favourite tasks provide insight into the reasons why learners found different task types appealing. Commonly used positive adjectives to describe the tasks included *interesting*, *exciting*, *creative*, *playful*, and *unusual*, indicating that learners appreciated the tasks which were somewhat different in content and form from their regular course book assignments:

“It was interesting. I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“Because it was unusual, and it brought some colour into the lesson.”

“It was quite creative. It is really rare.”

The original audio and video material also proved to be appealing: *“Because real kids talked about the experiences.”* Finally, some learners highlighted the interest factor related to specific task types, the automatic feedback provided after closed tasks, or the digital platform itself:

“Because I like crossword puzzles.”

“My favourite is the word search.”

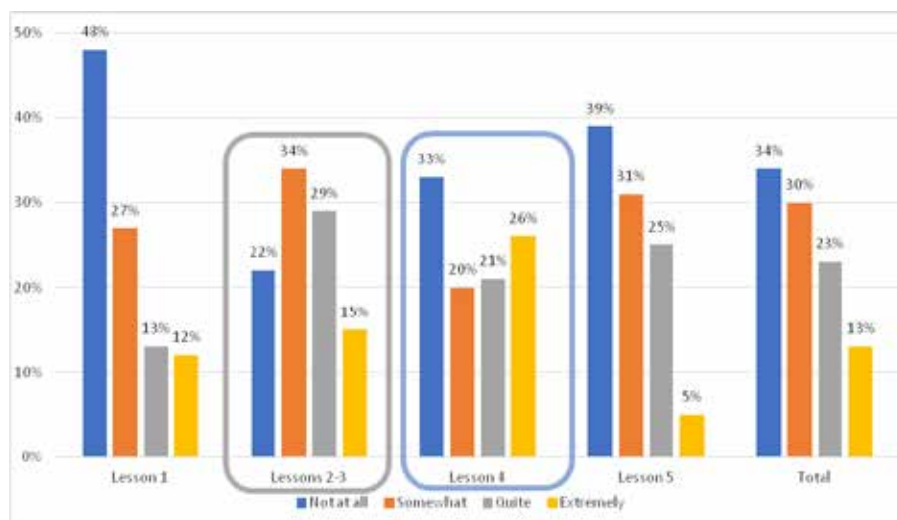
“well it was fun as frick and it was nice to me when I did it correctly :)”

“Because it is on a computer.”

4.4.3 Difficulty

As demonstrated in Figure 6, 63% of lessons 2-3, designed to provide differentiated, integrated skills development to all segments of mixed-ability classes, was considered to be somewhat or quite difficult by the full learner cohort, while 22% of the lessons were not difficult at all, and only 15% appeared to be extremely difficult.

Figure 6. To what extent did you find the lesson difficult?
(Collated learner responses for lessons 1-5)



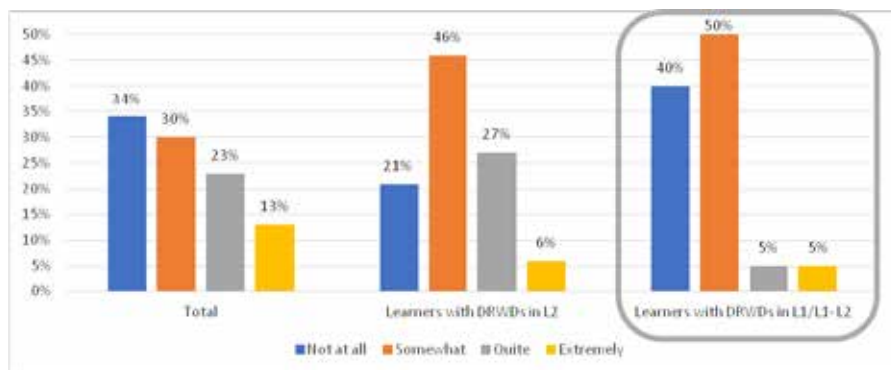
Lessons 1 and 5 proved to be the least demanding, in line with the principles of materials design. Lesson 1 contains playful tasks developing working memory, phonological and orthographic awareness, which require only word-level manipulation in the foreign language and rely on a limited number of vocabulary items. The aim of these lessons is to introduce the new key vocabulary of the module, and provide learners practice opportunities without difficult reading and writing tasks. Based on the feedback, this expectation was fulfilled: 48% of this lesson type did not prove to be difficult at all, and 27% was considered only somewhat difficult based on the feedback of all learners.

Lesson 5 serves to recycle, automatize and/or test new vocabulary and language functions presented in lessons 2-3, so they do not contain new material. Another key objective of these lessons is to provide learners a sense of achievement, which, based on the feedback, was also fulfilled: 39% of lesson 5 was considered not at all difficult by the full cohort, 56% provided optimal challenge, and only 5% seemed extremely difficult, so presumably most learners could complete these lessons successfully.

Feedback on lesson 4 demonstrates different tendencies than the other lessons in terms of perceptions of difficulty as well: 53% of the feedback indicated that the project lessons were not at all difficult (33%) or somewhat difficult (20%), while almost another 50% claimed that they were quite difficult (21%) or extremely difficult (26%). As learners with DRWD did not provide feedback on project lessons, DRWD could not have been the reason for the experienced challenges. It is to be further investigated why learners found these tasks difficult: did they reflect on the task itself, the foreign language competence needed to complete the task, collaborative work, or some combination of these variables?

Comparing the perception of difficulty of lessons 1-5 across the full learner cohort and the learner groups with DRWD generated unexpected results (figure 7).

Figure 7. Difficulty: Comparison of the full learner cohort, learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2 and DRWD in L2



The statistics of the full learner cohort tend to be balanced:

- 53% of the lessons completed was considered somewhat or quite difficult, posing appropriate challenge for most learners;
- 34% of the lessons proved not at all difficult, which is due to the intentionally less new linguistic material in lessons 1 and 5, and might also reflect the opinion of learners with higher-level foreign language competence;
- only 13% of the lessons was claimed to be extremely difficult.

Although this 13% might be expected to reflect the opinion of learners with DRWD, a completely different picture emerges from the feedback. Indeed, learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2 considered the material the easiest: 40% of the piloted lessons did not seem difficult at all, and 50% only somewhat. This unbalanced result might be rooted in the fact that 52% of the feedback from this group was submitted for lesson 1, which contains little new language material, and presents tasks requiring only word-level manipulation of the foreign language. Also, across lessons 3-5 there was a strong decline in lesson completion among learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2, only 21% of the feedback referring to lessons 3-5, which is the smallest proportion across the three groups (learners without DRWD: 42%, learners with DRWD in L2: 32%, cf. table 3 on p. 11).

The results of learners with DRWD in L2 are more balanced: 29% of the feedback is related to lesson 1, 56% to lessons 2-3, and 15% to lesson 5, so the opinions are not dominantly based on lessons with lower-level cognitive and linguistic challenges (cf. Table 3 on p. 27). The Task Bank catered the most effectively for the needs of this learner group, as 73% of the piloted lessons presented somewhat or quite (but not extremely) challenging tasks for them.

The open-ended responses to favourite tasks contained references to perceived task difficulty as well. Learners liked the tasks because they were “*pleasantly difficult*” or “*easy, but still interesting*”, or, on the contrary, “*difficult but interesting*”. Several learners were inspired by the open-ended tasks allowing for creative solutions at the same time presenting a higher-level cognitive challenge:

“Because I liked it that I had to use logic to find it out.”

“Because it made me think that I shouldn’t get mixed up”

“Because there might be several solutions in this task, and so there is a challenge in it.”

Learners also noticed and appreciated the helping content supplementing the tasks:

“I liked the example.”

“Because there was help for the composition.”

There were also clear indications of the success felt over the completion of a challenging task, which was one of the central aims of the Task Bank:

“I don’t really like the listening, but I could do this with only few mistakes.”

“I could practice reading comprehension, and I managed to collect the info I needed to do the task (it was perfect!!).”

4.4.4 Carefulness

The feedback on carefulness invested into completing the tasks demonstrates a uniformly positive tendency in each lesson type (figure 8). Overall, the full learner cohort completed 67% of the lessons quite or very carefully, and this value is above 64% in the case of every lesson type.

Interestingly, the highest carefulness values characterize lesson 1 and also lesson 4. Lesson 1 proved to be optimally interesting (36%: quite interesting, 27%: very interesting), but relatively easy (48%: not at all, 27%: somewhat difficult): this combination must have inspired learners to do the tasks quite (32%) or very carefully (32%), thus having high chances of success. Feedback on lesson 4 also indicated high levels of carefulness (34%: quite carefully, 34%: very carefully), although opinions were very much divided both on interest (50%: not at all or somewhat interesting, 50%: quite or extremely interesting) and difficulty (33%: not at all difficult, 47%: quite or very difficult). These values might suggest that learners invest more attention and care into tasks which are not very demanding even if they do not seem very interesting. Carefulness values are optimally high across all lessons even including lesson 5, which is supposed to be less demanding because of its recycling profile. While in lessons 2-3 the proportion of feedback claiming that learners completed the tasks very carefully is relatively low (27%), the proportion of feedback saying that learners did not do the tasks carefully at all is also the lowest (8%) of all lesson types.

Figure 8. How carefully did you do this lesson?
(Collated learner responses for lessons 1-5)

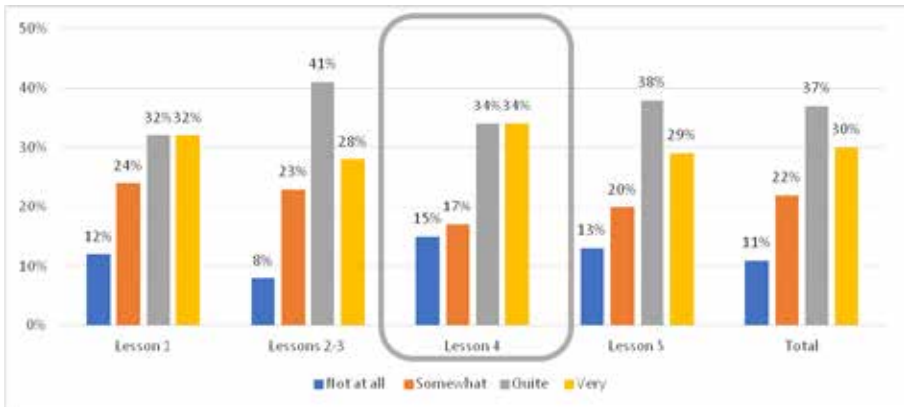
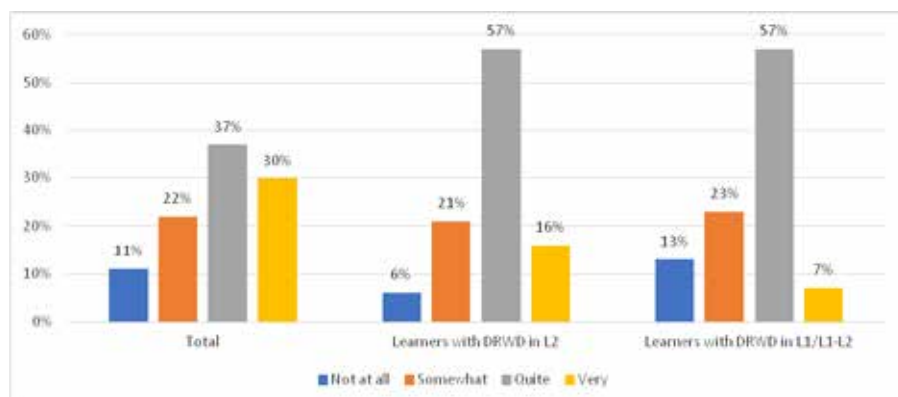


Figure 9 comparing the carefulness values of the full learner cohort and learners with DRWD demonstrates more complex patterns. As in the case of perceived difficulty, learners with DRWD in L2 showed the most optimal results indicating the highest level of carefulness: 73% completed the tasks quite or very carefully. Here, it seems that high interest levels combined with moderate levels of task difficulty provoked a more careful approach. Among learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2, the composite value indicating quite and very careful task completion (64%) is only slightly below the full learner cohort composite value (67%). However, the distribution of the values among learners with DRWD is noticeably different. While 37% of the lessons was completed quite carefully and 30% very carefully by the full learner cohort, only 16% of the lessons was processed very carefully by learners with DRWD in L2, and 7% by learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2. This is a remarkable difference, which probably reflects these learners' negative experiences with attention focusing.

Figure 9. Perceptions of invested carefulness: Comparison of the full learner cohort, learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2 and DRWD in L2



Examining the negative attention values (“not at all carefully” and “somewhat carefully”), we can see that the composite value of learners with DRWD in L2 (27%) is slightly below the full learner cohort composite value (33%), while the negative attention value of learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2 (36%) is somewhat above the whole group value. Although this difference might not seem very significant, taken together with their perceptions of remarkably low difficulty levels, it might suggest that 1) learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2 form a superficial impression of the difficulty of lessons and do not invest the required carefulness; 2) or, they (or their teachers) might underestimate their foreign language skills and pick lessons below their level.

The open reflections on favourite tasks illustrate that learners appreciated tasks requiring concentrated attention especially if they were also short:

“Special. Because it’s short but I still had to pay attention.”

“It was interesting, I had to pay attention. I like such tasks.”

“Because here I had to think more! And pay attention.”

“I had to pay attention and it was exciting to find the right answer.”

The reoccurring phrase *“I had to pay attention”* is important to note here as it might equally refer to the conscious experiencing of focused attention, the effort inherent in conscious attention focusing, as well as the potential of intellectually challenging tasks to foster attention focusing.

5. Conclusion

The learner feedback reviewed in the present paper provided important information for course developers about the perceptions of interest, difficulty and required attention in relation to the piloted lessons of the ENGaGE Task Bank. The analysis of learner feedback suggests that the Task Bank fulfilled its key objectives to provide

tailor-made support for learners with DRWD, and engage them as well as their inclusive classes in foreign language learning with the help of differentiated tasks.

Overall, 63% of the piloted lessons was found quite or extremely interesting by the full learner cohort, with lesson 1 considered to be the most interesting, and lesson 4 having received the lowest interest values. The interest values of learners with DRWD were even higher with a particular emphasis on the engaging potential of lesson 1. These results suggest that the topics and tasks had good engaging potential to cater for the special interests and needs of learners with DRWD, at the same time offering appealing content to the majority of learners with mixed abilities. Also, the general interest in lesson 1 proves that tailor-made supplementary content for learners with DRWD might also be useful for other learners to revise and practice vocabulary, and develop phonemic and orthographic skills.

The perceptions of difficulty also appeared to be optimal both at the level of the full learner cohort and learners with DRWD, which was largely due to the principled planning of differing cognitive effort required by different lesson types. While 63% of lessons 2-3 provided somewhat or quite difficult content to all learners, difficulty figures are lower in the other lesson types. Across all lessons, but especially in the case of lesson 1, lower difficulty values might also have contributed to the positive perceptions of interest. However, this is not true for lesson 4, where perceptions of relatively low difficulty levels are paired with similarly low interest values. The remarkably low difficulty values of learners with DRWD in L1/L1-L2 reflect a significantly smaller number of piloted lessons than the full cohort average, more than half of which being lesson 1. This raises questions about the potential motivations behind lesson choice: a strong focus on lesson 1 might have been rooted in learners underestimating their own, or teachers underestimating their learners' foreign language competence and thus opting for easier content.

Carefulness invested into task completion proved to be quite outstanding: 67% of the piloted lessons were completed quite or very carefully by the full learner cohort, with 73% and 64% among learners with DRWD in L2 and DRWDs in L1/L1-L2 respectively. A remarkable difference emerging here between learners with and without DRWD is that in the former groups values of completing the lesson quite carefully dominate significantly over very carefully. Taking into account the open-ended responses of the learners as well, we might conclude that learners with DRWD are aware of their attention focusing problems, but interesting, moderately challenging, short or segmented tasks facilitated conscious attention focusing. In the full cohort the emerging tendency is that high interest values combined with differentiated and thus overall lower difficulty levels result in higher invested attention rates.

A controversial finding of the study is the divisive nature of project lessons. It calls for further investigation why learners with DRWDs did not send feedback for (and presumably complete) project tasks: Did they judge the projects uninteresting or too demanding in terms of the required individual effort and/or collaboration with others? Did these tasks lack the appeal of a well-defined outcome and immediate feedback, which were evidently popular features of the Task Bank in general? Or did their teachers believe that project tasks were unsuitable for them?

The feedback from learners without DRWD also reflects ambiguous perceptions of interest and difficulty in project lessons, while the invested carefulness values are remarkably high. It also raises the question which aspects of the projects were found to be not at all or only somewhat interesting by half of the respondents, and at the same time quite or extremely difficult by another nearly 50% of learners, and whether the experienced difficulty influenced perceptions of interest. Besides the fact that project tasks should be matched to the foreign language competence of learners, this feedback also highlights that project work needs learnable skills, to the development of which time and effort need to be devoted. It is crucial to explicitly demonstrate and systematically assess these skills (e.g., research skills, creativity, planning, time and resource management, collaboration, independence, etc.), which could significantly contribute to the engagement of learners.

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APPENDIX Learner feedback forms

Lesson 1



STUDENT FEEDBACK FORM
 Evaluate the lesson



1. How interesting was this lesson? not at all ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ extremely

2. How difficult was this lesson? not at all ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ extremely

3. How carefully did you do this lesson? not carefully at all ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ very carefully

4. Was there a task in this lesson that you liked very much? If yes, which one was it?

1

2


3

4


5

5. Why did you like this task?

Lessons 2-3



STUDENT FEEDBACK FORM
Evaluate the lesson



1. How interesting was this lesson? not at all ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ extremely

2. How difficult was this lesson? not at all ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ extremely

3. How carefully did you do this lesson? not carefully ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ very carefully at all

4. Was there a task in this lesson that you liked very much? If yes, which one was it?

1/A
 1/B
 1/C
 2/A
 2/B
 2/C

5. Why did you like this task?

save

Lesson 4



STUDENT FEEDBACK FORM
Evaluate the lesson



1. How interesting was this lesson? not at all ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ extremely

2. How difficult was this lesson? not at all ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ extremely

3. How carefully did you do this lesson? not carefully ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ very carefully at all

4. How did you manage to cooperate with your team mates in the group project? not at all ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ very well

save