



## REFLECTION TASK 1

What is your understanding of persistence? When is it healthy and when not? Can you think of a time when you had to persist when faced with a challenge which required effort and time? What helped you to keep going?

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## REFLECTION TASK 2

Have you ever played a video game or app and found the time just zooming past with you unable to put the game down? If so, that experience resonates with millions of people worldwide. There are various reasons for why people get so absorbed in gaming. Think of your own experience and what explanation you would give.

# Principles for Maintaining Engagement

When we talk about task engagement, learner action is key, and all tasks need to maximise the action space for learning. This is not to say that teacher-led input has no place in an engaging classroom – quite the contrary, some teachers can engage with captivating stories, cleverly posed questions and skilfully scaffolded frameworks for learners to follow. The point, however, is that when we design a task, it is important to think of what is asked of our learners at every stage of our lesson. How much opportunity are we generating for them to be active, both mentally and in terms of behaviours? After all, ‘task’ is but a name for a specific language learning opportunity, and a good task follows a design that maximises learning potential, with learner action being the defining criterion.

## Principle 1: Provide Cognitive Challenge

Experiencing challenge in learning has got a bad reputation; in efforts to make learning feel manageable, challenge has mistakenly been viewed as something to be avoided. Yet, challenge – also known as ‘desirable difficulty’ (Bjork & Bjork 2011; Leslie 2014) – can contribute positively to learner engagement and also to the depth of learning. Teachers know from experience that tasks which are too easy or too difficult, leave learners bored, frustrated and often tempted into poor behaviour. Instead, when learners feel competent but have to invest effort in working on a desirably difficult task, they are likely to remain engaged. A further benefit for learning is that people are more likely to remember what they have had to expend effort on learning, according to memory studies (Bjork and Bjork 2011; Tyler, Hertel, McCallum and Ellis 1979).

*Making things easier (each, 1992) is a common temptation. However, it is not always the best solution. Sometimes, making things more challenging can lead to better learning outcomes.*



So, what constitutes a cognitively challenging task? Figure 1 presents Bloom’s classic taxonomy of various facets of thinking (Bloom 1956), proposing six categories of increasing complexity. The bottom three levels of the model are said to represent lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) and the top three levels represent higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). Ideally, we want more of the HOTS and less of the LOTS, moving away from mere rote learning and memorisation. Moreover, teachers need begin at the bottom of the list and work up, but could begin a session with the top category of ‘creation’ and then end the lesson with an exit ticket checking on what the learners ‘remember’. We find this taxonomy useful in reminding us of the kinds of activities and tasks that promote higher-order thinking (e.g. creating something original, forming and defending an opinion, or comparing and contrasting perspectives) and which in turn are likely to be more engaging.

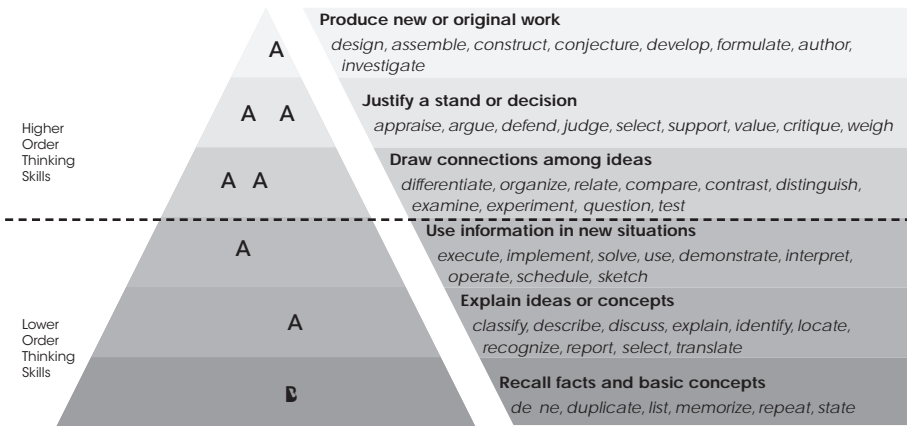


Figure 1. Bloom’s taxonomy of facets of thinking (Bloom 1956) © Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching

Another valuable way of promoting cognitive challenge is to consider the distinction between **convergent thinking** and **divergent thinking** (Guilford 1967). Convergent thinking refers to

*Creativity is intelligence having fun.*

(often attributed to Albert Einstein)

## Principle 2: Maximise Enjoyment, Minimise Boredom

*Students' brains are not simply waiting to be filled with information. Instead, students' emotions must be activated, attention captured, and memory supported, so that learning becomes something that is intrinsically motivated and can be transferred to real-world experiences.*

(Posey 2019: 4)

Throughout this book, we have stressed the importance of emotions for learning at every stage of the process – ‘We feel, therefore we learn’ (Immordino-Yang and Damasio 2007). Now, we turn to the kind of emotions that keep learners engaged on a task. Haidt (2006) used an expressive metaphor for explaining the role between emotions and rational cognition in the human mind. He likened our emotions to an elephant and cognition/logic to the rider sitting on top of the elephant, and the point he made was that no rider can drag a six-ton elephant in a direction it does not want to go. However, there are occasions when the elephant allows itself to be directed by the little rider on top, and the most effective way is when both work in harmony and reinforce each other’s drives positively. This is the essence of the current principle for sustaining task engagement: tasks need to have ‘emotional pull’ for the learner to get their elephant interested and moving along that path.

Traditionally, emotions have been seen as being either positive or negative but that dichotomy has increasingly been challenged. We all know that a degree of healthy anxiety can bring out the best in our performance, although we certainly would not want to be deliberately creating learner anxiety. Rather, most teachers and students would agree that, ideally, all learning should be enjoyable; as most teachers would expect, enjoyment is positively correlated with learner achievement (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz and Perry 2002). Enjoyment refers to positive feelings of being satisfied or happy to be taking part in an activity. It is about ongoing feelings of pleasure while working on a task (Ainley and Hidi 2014). This, however, does not necessarily imply that every single aspect of the learning process needs to be equally fun. Learning can be fun, but fun must be used in education to focus attention and learning, and not as a distraction (Schlechty 2011). Sometimes teachers use fun activities to diffuse tension or to offer a break, which are clear pedagogical purposes. However, teachers are not there to entertain learners and keep things fun all the time, but to engage them in meaningful learning tasks. When well designed, such learning processes should be enjoyable, but the key is that they should contribute to task-specific cognitive engagement.

Indeed, similar to mastering any skill, the acquisition of language skills also requires controlled practice that is likely to be less ‘fun’ than other creative aspects of using the skill. Yet, many musicians, for example, do not mind doing the scales on the piano or practising difficult movements again and again. How do they keep up their positive attitude during such ‘drilling’? Often, they see such practice as a necessary part of a broader process of learning, working towards larger, long-term goals and visions of themselves as becoming better piano players. They endorse ‘pre-living’ the positive affective experiences of future related tasks where their skills can be meaningfully employed (see Chapter 6 in Dörnyei et al. 2016). In this way, the same is true for language learners: even the less glamorous skill-building activities will not seem pointless but are connected to the bigger picture of language learning.



### REFLECTION TASK 3

Can you think of an activity related to your work as a language teacher that you enjoy? What makes it enjoyable? What aspects of it give you pleasure? What role does interest play? How important is your sense of competence and autonomy in enjoying the task? What lessons can you draw from your own experiences for learner enjoyment?

Let us now turn to **boredom**, the ultimate deactivating emotion we are seeking to avoid. Pekrun et al. (2010: 532) define boredom as ‘an affective state composed of unpleasant feelings, lack of stimulation, and low physiological arousal’. Mann (2016: 16) explains that boredom is about how we spend our attention and describes it as ‘the opposite of engagement’. Her book is quick to point out that there can be benefits to boredom in





and adapt their coursebooks in ways that are engaging and suited to the specific group of learners. Indeed, learners themselves can be challenged to personalise and localise the coursebook to suit themselves as individuals and as a group (McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara 2013) by creating quizzes, projects, forms of creative expression or alternative content and tasks.

### SOME WAYS OF ADAPTING COURSEBOOKS

No matter how committed to the task, everyone can be distracted by something more appealing in that moment, whether that be an internal train of thought or an external distraction. That means the first thing to do to sustain attention is to reduce external distractions so that it is easier for the learner to concentrate on the task; indeed, Davenport and Beck (2001: 58) claim that, ‘the most important function of attention isn’t taking information in, but screening it out’. Many of you will be familiar with the ‘Gorilla Experiment’ (Simons and Chabris 1999); this now famous study asked participants to watch people in white or black t-shirts throwing a ball to each other and concentrate on counting the number of passes of the ball. In the midst of the game, a person dressed in a gorilla suit came into the middle of the players, faces the camera, bangs on its chest and leaves.<sup>1</sup> Amazingly, over 50% of the participants never even noticed the gorilla. The test was an excellent example of selective attention in action and refers to a phenomenon known as *inattention blindness*. It showed how humans, when focusing on one thing, struggle to also focus on an additional thing at the same time. As we have established in Chapter 5, we only have a limited amount of conscious attention, which is why we struggle to multitask and pay attention to several things at the same time. For us as teachers, the clear implication is that if we want students to focus on the learning task at hand, we need to direct their attention to other things, which is why we need to be aware of the gorilla that the learners are missing!





A particularly engaging approach which also generates higher-order thinking (see Principle 1 above) is the problem-based approach to learning (PBL) (see also Action 5 below). Problem-based learning centres round the idea of getting students to work on a complex, real-life problem, typically of their choice, although sometimes the problem is presented by teachers (Amador, Miles and Peters 2006). The main aim is to have

cars, which differ from traditional cars in that they not only use up fuel while moving but also generate some at times, resulting in significantly larger driving range; similarly, incremental goals can offer the extra boost that will help to sustain task engagement much longer than would be if students worked towards one final goal.

Although not all lessons or tasks lend themselves equally to such an elaborate goal structure, the idea of incremental goals or milestones is broadly useful. For teachers, it can prompt reflection on what exactly learners are being asked to do, what check points there could be and what milestones might be passed. For learners, reaching such task check points can offer a motivating sense of progress – after all, as the saying goes, ‘success breeds success’. Having clear goals, which set suitable levels of challenge, is known to be linked to learners’ performance, as well as to their sense of confidence (Hattie 2009).

The progress principle: *of all the positive events that influence inner work life, the single most powerful is progress in meaningful work.*

(Amabile and Kramer 2011: 76–77)

There are many ways to set incremental goals and make the progress visible. In gaming, progress bars show how far along someone is, for example, in completing a quest, or when we play in a game online, it often tells us what percentage is complete. This breaking down a process or progress towards an end goal into chunks can keep us on track to reach 100%. A creative way to mark progress is to provide learners with a piece of a puzzle with each stage completed, but the whole picture or word or clue only becomes apparent once all the parts and stages have been completed. Learners can also have a ‘progress card’ booklet and collect stamps to complete the booklet. So, in accordance with the point we already made in Chapter 2 (Action 2), the key is to help make the progress learners are making – along with the successes and accomplishments – visible for the learners to draw energy from, as well as for the teacher to keep track of where learners are up to on task.

## A GOAL-SETTING TOOL

and recreation by the popularity of pedometers tracking one's steps, or in weight-loss systems by plotting calories consumed on one's smartphone, etc. The availability of various metrics and clear progress criteria for students can help to make their development more tangible, and the feedback from teachers also plays a vital role in keeping learners moving forwards with clear direction, sense of progress and accomplishment. Feedback can have some of the most powerful effects on learning, so it needs to be used in a thoughtful and informed way (for a useful guide in language teaching, see Nassaji and Kartchava 2017). It is important for educators to provide encouraging, but at the same time realistic and honest, feedback. Feedback is most constructive when it provides specific information that helps learners to know how to bridge any discrepancy in performance or competence between their current state and their desired targets, while also offering advice on what steps are needed to get there.



### EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

Hattie and Timperley (2007: 86) suggest that effective feedback must answer three major questions:

1. *Where I am going?* (What are the goals?)
2. *How am I going?* (What progress is being made toward the goal?)
3. *Where to next?* (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?)

## Teacher Actions

The focus in the second half of the chapter is on actions which help to maintain learners' engagement, by keeping them on track as well as by sustaining their effort and will to continue on task. We would like to stress that not all the actions will be pertinent to all kinds of tasks, and, similarly, not all actions will be suited for every purpose or type of learning activity. However, we hope that every teacher may find some relevant ideas to select from and to implement in combination with actions from other chapters.

### Action 1: Utilise the Power of Stories

#### REFLECTION TASK 9

What has your day been like so far today? Where did you go? What did you do? How did you feel?





the advent of digital storytelling tools, the attractiveness of creating stories has been enhanced even further by incorporating interactive formats and attractive visuals (see, e.g. tools and apps such as Storybird, Storyboardthat, Mystoryapp). Egan even suggests that we can get learners to invent stories about language itself on a meta-level to explain and reinforce learning. By way of illustration, he suggests telling learners to imagine that a new family with three children have moved in next door. Their kids are called: Their, There and They're. The students are split into groups and each group gets one of the kid's names and builds a story about the character of that child from their name. So, Their is very selfish as he has his ego – 'I' – tucked inside his name. Learners then together build up a story around these characters which reflects the spelling as well as the meaning of their names. Learners can also create stories to explicitly highlight tense use or linking words.



### SOURCES OF STORIES AND NARRATIVE FORMATS

These examples of where we can see the story format may provide inspiration for teaching in terms of using them as input or forms of output for learners' own work.

- Novels, short stories, (auto)biographies
- News stories
- Poems
- Songs
- Oral storytelling
- Pictures and comics
- Drama, including role play
- TV, film, YouTube
- Games
- Dance
- Mime

Dörnyei et al. (2016) argue that centring a task or a project around an unfolding storyline, whereby parts of the story are shared/created gradually and incrementally to build tension and maintain interest, is a natural way of producing an engaging temporal frame that can help to sustain student involvement. A task design following this approach requires a central, engaging narrative to foster student interest to discover or invent what happens in each new sequence of events, and this core axis can even be a visual narrative such as a film, a TV miniseries or a student performance. Teachers can use a storyline pulled out of a topic or content in flexible ways, either as an introductory hook or as the main form of input, or even as the framework for the entire task pitched as a story. The final form will depend on the language levels of our learners, their interests, our teaching objectives and our resources.

## EXAMPLE OF A SUCCESSFUL STORYTELLING PROJECT

Tsou, Wang and Tzeng (2006) report on a project with an EFL teacher and her pupils in an elementary school in Taiwan. They had two groups work with storytelling – one in a more traditional manner and one using a multimedia storytelling website. This website managed the storytelling process administratively for teachers, and allowed learners to construct their stories online and also replay and share the stories again later. Tsou et al. note the concerns teachers may have about an already overloaded curriculum and a perceived lack of experience for integrating storytelling. Yet, they show that the learners in the experimental group not only improved in their language skills and confidence, but the teacher herself

self-regulate their learning. As with most democracies, this is not a free-for-all situation; there will be agreed rules and frameworks, but these can be challenged and debated, with decisions being voted upon. Learners can get involved to different degrees, depending on age and experiences, at all stages of the task design process.

*A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.*

combined with technology-based approaches, as they enable learners to create their own 'playlist' of tasks based on options presented, inspired by previous activities, assessments and learning objectives when managed digitally. Second, the learner-involvement process often works best when learners reflect on specific lessons they have learnt and strategies adopted, and share these with the whole class. In this way, students can learn







However, there are other ways a lesson can be broken into chunks to help think about learner engagement in lesson design. Chunking can be done on the whole lesson level and/or on the task level. On both levels, thinking in terms of chunks means creating intervals when you could create a break, change the pace, switch the action, or introduce a new hook for the next stage. It is a bit like inserting several new triggers to keep up pace and





*Exercise improves learning on three levels: first, it optimizes your mind-set to improve alertness, attention, and motivation; second, it prepares and encourages nerve cells to bind to one another, which is the cellular basis for logging in new information; and third, it spurs the development of new nerve cells from stem cells in the hippocampus.*

(Ratey and Hagerman 2009: 53)

## Action 5: Work with CLARA Principles

The final action point is one that really applies to the whole book and has been touched on in several chapters (see Chapters 4 and 5), but we feel this is so critical to engagement that we chose to make this the last suggested action to reinforce its value. There is a broad family of instructional approaches – project work, problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning, genius hours (working for set times on personal projects) and passion projects – which are known to be highly engaging due to certain common features in their design. Although they have different origins and have several unique elements, they also share the core characteristics that they are intended to foster exploration, discovery and inquiry, and are directed by learners who take a strong, active role. We have identified five features that are central to them under the acronym of ‘CLARA’ (see panel below).

CLARA APPROACHES ARE:

literacy skills, and learners often use technology to source information, communicate with others, manage their learning and create their output. Many of the characteristics of these kinds of teaching approaches have been linked to increased engagement (see e.g. Ainley 2012; Assor, Kaplan and Roth 2002; Blumenfeld et al. 1991; Buchanan, Harlan, Bruce and Edwards 2016; Christenson et al. 2012; Reeve 2012).

*Although there obviously will be individual differences in student reactions, projects can be designed to include elements that are likely to enhance most students' interest and value, including variety, challenge, choice, cooperation, and closure in the service of answering real questions. In addition, by considering students' prior knowledge and thinking skills, projects can be designed to support students so that they feel able to succeed.*

(Blumenfeld et al. 1991: 393)

Not all teachers and learners feel comfortable embracing project-based approaches and Blumenfeld et al. (1991) note the importance of suitable structural support for those wishing to work with such an approach. They suggest technology can play a valuable role in project work as a resource and tool for learners, as well as a way of organising and managing the process for teachers. They draw attention to the fact that learners may need to be taught to research for and work effectively on projects. Similarly, teachers themselves may need guidance in how to form suitably divergent puzzles or questions for projects and how to guide the learners so that the learning during the project, and not the project product, remains foregrounded. In this regard, there are many useful online resources to draw inspiration and courage from where other teachers share ideas and experiences with project work.



## DEVELOPING A PROJECT-BASED MINDSET

In discussing the conditions for effective project-based learning (PBL), Dörnyei et al. (2016: 168–172) offer the following points about developing a PBL mindset:

*Being prepared to alter one's professional role.* When setting up a project, teachers need to take on less commonly assumed pedagogical roles, such as that of coach, coordinator, mentor and – most importantly – facilitator.

*Rethinking the teacher–student relationship and embracing the ethos of co-construction.* When PBL is successful, students co-create the project-learning environment, and learners are more likely to be engaged when they sense that the final goal is something they have ownership of.

*Being prepared to embrace excitement.* PBL can create a tangible goal to work towards and about which learners can become excited. For teachers, it can also reveal an enthusiasm in our learners which is contagious!



4. Students collaborate with other students in person or online and/or receive guidance from adult mentors and experts.
5. Students use a project management process that enables them to proceed effectively from project initiation to completion.
6. Students reflect on their work and learning throughout the project.

(Source: <https://hqpbll.org/>)

## Summary

To be engaged, learners need to be active, but it also helps if they are interested, enjoying their work and feeling challenged but competent. This chapter has closely built on the material in the previous chapter which centred on triggering engagement, focusing here on ways of maintaining engagement on tasks. We proposed five core principles, concerning providing learners with the appropriate level of challenge, ensuring positive emotions on task, keeping their attention and interest, reducing levels of predictability, and ensuring an ongoing sense of accomplishment and progress. These can be best achieved by having the foundations in place from Chapters 2–4 and by having created the right starting condition of a task. We offered five specific action points that support the principle of sustained engagement:

- working with stories and narratives to keep learners emotionally hooked and interested as well as supporting their ability to process and remember;
- making the learner the hero of their own learning by involving them in task design and helping them to personalise their learning;
- utilising game design elements such as ‘levelling up’ tasks by providing a structure of levels which serve as milestones for achievement, allowing for replay moments and using judicious reward systems;
- chunking the lessons and tasks into smaller segments, such as through the use of stations or by integrating brief intervals such as energisers or brain breaks;
- working with CLARA principles drawn from approaches such as project-based learning to foster challenge, learner-centredness, active learning, real-world relevance and autonomy-richness.



### CHAPTER IN A NUTSHELL

*Maintaining task engagement depends on learners being active on a task that is set at their optimal level of challenge, and is characterised by a positive emotional tone and a supportive design structure.*

