

# Exploring learner engagement in the language classroom

Marina Bendtsen, Sandra Bäck, Liselott Forsman  
Åbo Akademi University in Vaasa, Finland  
IATEFL 2025



kalejdo  
**SPRAK**

# The project Kalejdospråk 2022-2025



kalejdo  
**SPRÅK**

- A research- and development project where we as researchers collaborate with teachers to develop models for an inclusive and holistic language education for all.
- Background:
  - the study of (optional) languages in schools in Finland has decreased, and the range of languages studied has narrowed (Pyykkö, 2017; Vaarala et al., 2021)
  - Central challenges identified among teachers of language (N=130): increasing heterogeneity among pupils; pupils' lack of motivation and negative attitudes; lack of adequate resources (Bendtsen et al., 2023)



Svenska  
kulturfonden

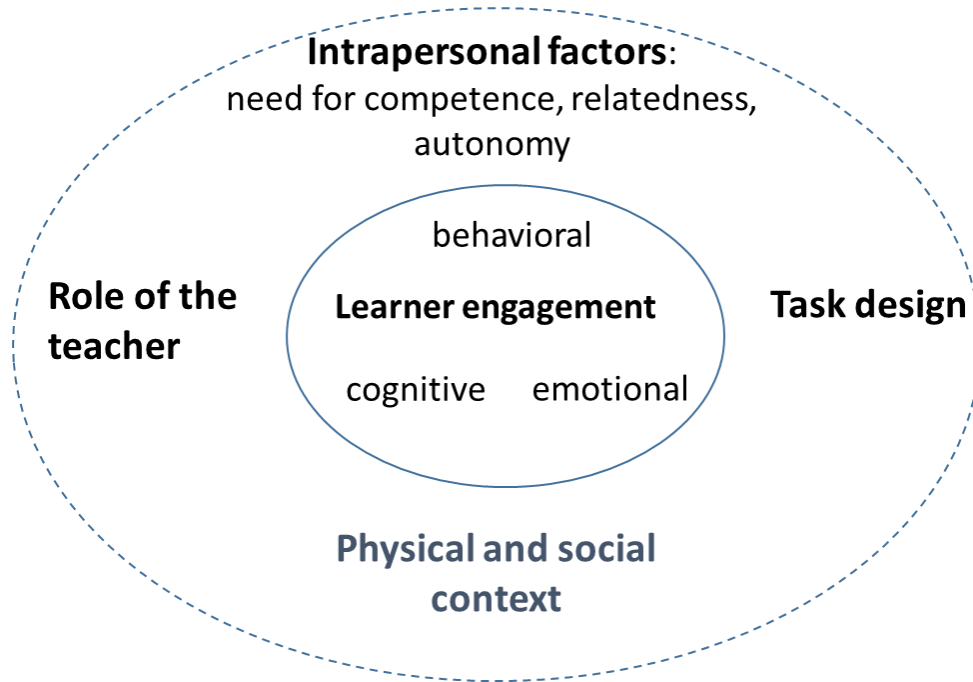
**Aktia**

# Learner engagement

- By engagement we mean language learners' meaningful involvement in learning opportunities (cf. Hiver et al., 2021)
- Action is central (Hiver et al., 2024; Mercer, 2019)
- Three core dimensions/components of engagement: *behavioral, cognitive* and *emotional engagement*
- Engagement is dynamic (Hiver et al., 2024), and functions as an ecological system where contextual, inter- and intrapersonal factors interact (Reschly, & Christenson, 2022)

Dimension	Definition	Measurement
Behavioral	The extent to which the learner is actively involved in the learning process, including attending, participating, and completing tasks.	Observation of learner behavior, self-reports, and teacher reports.
Cognitive	The extent to which the learner is mentally involved in the learning process, including understanding, problem-solving, and critical thinking.	Assessment of learner performance, self-reports, and teacher reports.
Emotional	The extent to which the learner is emotionally involved in the learning process, including interest, enjoyment, and motivation.	Assessment of learner affect, self-reports, and teacher reports.

# Learner engagement theory applied to the classroom



**Competence:** *feeling that you have the necessary competence for handling the task and that by applying yourself you will succeed.*

**Relatedness:** *need to belong; feeling that you can contribute with something that is of value and appreciated by others.*

**Autonomy:** *need to experience control over what you do; feeling that you may and can influence the learning situation and make you own decisions.*

(cf. Mercer, 2019; Reschly & Christenson, 2022)

# The current study: aim and material

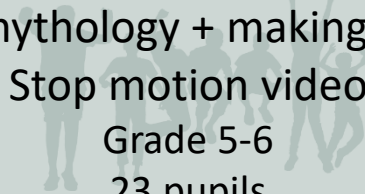
- Aim: To explore episodes where learner engagement is either present or not present in the classroom, in order to identify and better understand contextual, inter- and intrapersonal factors that shape, change and maintain pupils' engagement.
  - 1) How can engagement or disengagement show in the language classroom?
  - 2) How can learner engagement theory help identify conditions that affect learner engagement?
- Data in the form of classroom observations, field notes, focus group interviews with pupils and teacher-researcher discussions.

# Context and participants



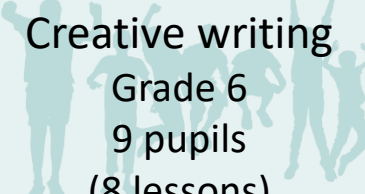
Classroom 1:  
Working with a novel

Grade 3-4  
21 pupils  
(9 lessons)



Classroom 2: Greek  
mythology + making a  
Stop motion video

Grade 5-6  
23 pupils  
(7 lessons)



Classroom 3:  
Creative writing

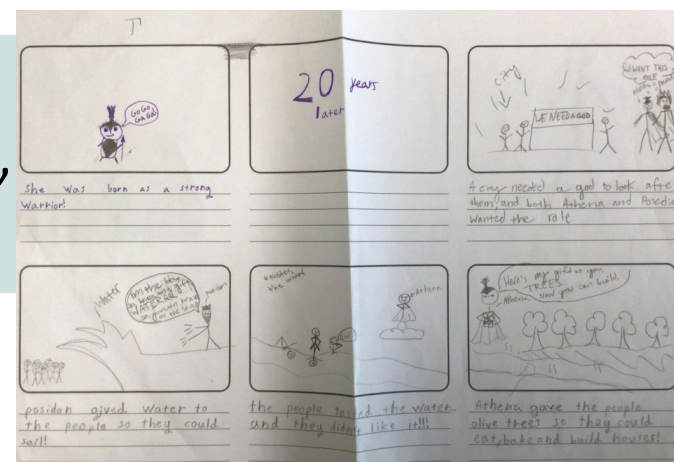
Grade 6  
9 pupils  
(8 lessons)

# Episode 1:

“ I’m waiting for them to need my help”

The four focus group students are all in the same group. After this lesson the final product has to be finished and they still have a lot to do. John is absent this lesson and Dennis comes late.

Bella and Jenny discuss what needs to be done and get to work. When Dennis arrives they are busy working and don't pay any attention to him. Dennis seems unsure of what needs to be done but takes initiatives to contribute by asking the others if he can make a stick figure, how many he should make or if he can cut out something etc. The girls do assign tasks to him but Dennis has a hard time concentrating and finishing the tasks. Dennis repeatedly tries to interact with the girls and when he doesn't get a response from them regarding the group work, he starts acting up. He jumps up and down, talks to other groups, talks about his hobby, plays with props and tries to get a reaction from Jenny. When the teacher comes in to check, Bella explains what she and Jenny are doing and Dennis then says “I’m waiting for them to need my help but they don’t need my help.”

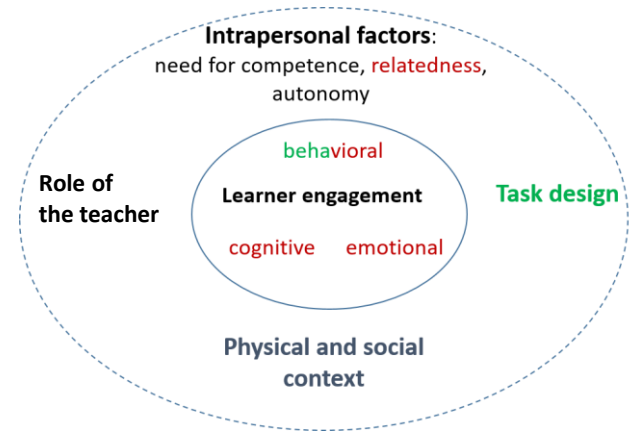


# Episode 1:

## “ I’m waiting for them to need my help”

The four focus group students are all in the same group. After this lesson the final product has to be finished and they still have a lot to do. John is absent this lesson and Dennis comes late.

Bella and Jenny discuss what needs to be done and get to work. When Dennis arrives they are busy working and don't pay any attention to him. Dennis seems unsure of what needs to be done but takes initiatives to contribute by asking the others if he can make a stick figure, how many he should make or if he can cut out something etc. The girls do assign tasks to him but Dennis has a hard time concentrating and finishing the tasks. Dennis repeatedly tries to interact with the girls and when he doesn't get a response from them regarding the group work, he starts acting up. He jumps up and down, talks to other groups, talks about his hobby, plays with props and tries to get a reaction from Jenny. When the teacher comes in to check, Bella explains what she and Jenny are doing and Dennis then says “I’m waiting for them to need my help but they don’t need my help.”





# Episode 2: writing a story about a fictive pet

There is a calm, quiet atmosphere of concentration in the classroom as the pupils are writing their stories.

The teacher sits at her desk at the back of the class and walks around from time to time to check the progress, spur them on and provide support if needed.

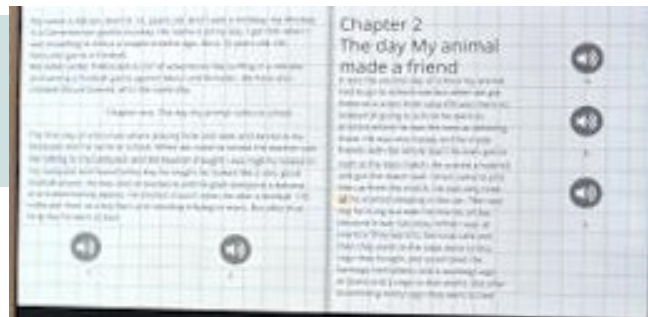
Most of the pupils sit at their own desks but Kristian has moved to sit next to Billie. Kristian and Billie continuously share ideas and discuss what will happen in their respective stories. They smile and giggle.

Just like previous lessons, the pupils freely and openly ask the teacher or each other questions about vocabulary, spelling, structure and content of the story. Kristian, who writes a story about a cow, asks what a paella is and if it has beef in it. Another pupil explains that it usually contains seafood upon which Kristian concludes that his cow can safely it.

A girl asks permission to modify the instructions to include her own as well the pet's perspective. She and the teacher discusses for a while before the teacher says that it is ok as it allows her to include different views.

Ian gets up and asks the teacher to see the examples of ideas for chapters they had looked at earlier. He takes out the folder and looks through the ideas. Afterwards the teachers approaches him. Ian explains what he wants to write about and asks if he can write it in a specific way. The teacher says it is ok.

A pupil who has just been out in the corridor walks in and announces that there is something going on outside, "they are moving tables". Billie, who often has problems sitting still for very long, turns around, asks a quick question and then turns back to his writing. The rest of the pupils continue writing.



# Episode 2: writing a story about a fictive pet

There is a calm, quiet atmosphere of concentration in the classroom as the pupils are writing their stories. The teacher sits at her desk at the back of the class and walks around from time to time to check the progress, spur them on and provide support if needed.

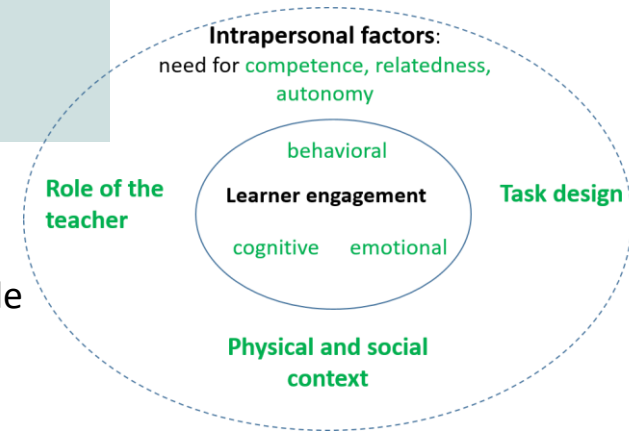
Most of the pupils sit at their own desks but Kristian has moved to sit next to Billie. Kristian and Billie continuously share ideas and discuss what will happen in their respective stories. They smile and giggle.

Just like previous lessons, the pupils freely and openly ask the teacher or each other questions about vocabulary, spelling, structure and content of the story. Kristian, who writes a story about a cow, asks what a paella is and if it has beef in it. Another pupil explains that it usually contains seafood upon which Kristian concludes that his cow can safely it.

A girl asks permission to modify the instructions to include her own as well the pet's perspective. She and the teacher discusses for a while before the teacher says that it is ok as it allows her to include different views.

Ian gets up and asks the teacher to see the examples of ideas for chapters they had looked at earlier. He takes out the folder and looks through the ideas. Afterwards the teachers approaches him. Ian explains what he wants to write about and asks if he can write it in a specific way. The teacher says it is ok.

A pupil who has just been out in the corridor walks in an announces that there is something going on outside, "they are moving tables". Billie, who often has problems sitting still for very long, turns around, asks a quick question and then turns back to his writing. The rest of the pupils continue writing.



# Concluding remarks

- Learner engagement theory can be a useful tool for analysing and understanding classroom interaction, and for identifying factors that influence learner engagement.
- The tool reflects well the complexity and dynamic of the classroom.
- In future interventions, it would be interesting to explore if specific attention to these factors can improve student engagement, both short term and long term.

# References

- Bendtsen, M., Bäck, S. & L. Forsman (2023). Enkätundersökning inom projektet KalejdoSPRÅK HT2022 - Sammanställning av enkätsvar. <https://blogs2.abo.fi/kalejdosprak/publikationer-och-presentationer/>
- Hiver, P., Al-Hoorie, A.H., & Mercer, S. (Red.). (2021). Student engagement in the language classroom. *Multilingual Matters. Psychology of Language Learning and Teaching.* (p. 1-13)
- Hiver, P., Al-Hoorie, A. H., Vitta, J. P., & Wu, J. (2024). Engagement in language learning: A systematic review of 20 years of research methods and definitions. *Language Teaching Research.* <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688211001289>
- Mercer, S. (2019). Language Learner Engagement: Setting the Scene. In X. Gao (Ed.), *Second Handbook of English Language Teaching*. Springer International Handbooks of Education. (643- 660). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02899-2\\_40](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02899-2_40)
- Pyykkö, R. (2017). Multilingualism as strength. Procedural recommendations for developing Finland's national language reserve. [https://okm.fi/documents/1410845/5875747/Multilingualism\\_tiivistelm%c3%a4.pdf/be86bffa-d55f-4935-bff4-2fd150c82067/Multilingualism\\_tiivistelm%c3%a4.pdf](https://okm.fi/documents/1410845/5875747/Multilingualism_tiivistelm%c3%a4.pdf/be86bffa-d55f-4935-bff4-2fd150c82067/Multilingualism_tiivistelm%c3%a4.pdf)
- Reschly, A. L., & Christenson, S. (2022). *Handbook of research on student engagement* (2 uppl.). Springer. [https://abo.finna.fi/Record/abo\\_electronic\\_aa.991368135120597](https://abo.finna.fi/Record/abo_electronic_aa.991368135120597)
- Vaarala, H. , Riuttanen, S., Kyckling, E. & Karppinen, S. (2021). LANGUAGE RESERVE. NOW! Follow-up on Pyykkö's Report Multilingualism into a strength (2017) Summary in English. University of Jyväskylä. [https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/solki/tutkimus/julkaisut/pdf-julkaisut/summary\\_languagereservenow.pdf](https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/solki/tutkimus/julkaisut/pdf-julkaisut/summary_languagereservenow.pdf)



Thank you!

[marina.bendtsen@abo.fi](mailto:marina.bendtsen@abo.fi)



Svenska  
kulturfonden

Aktia



STIFTELSEN FÖR  
ÅBO AKADEMI



# Dimensions of learner engagement

dimensions	definition (cf. Hiver et al., 2024)	indicators as operationalized in current study
behavioral	Learners' actions, attention and participation in learning opportunities	Active participation (endurance, focus), ask questions, collaborate with others, follow instructions, listen to teacher ↔ disruptive behaviour (focus on other things)
cognitive	Learners' mental effort and mental activity in the process of learning	make active choices, do more than required, find own solutions, employ strategies, seek or ask for help (to solve task) ↔ have difficulties getting started, not knowing what to do
emotional (relates to attitudes)	Learners' affective reactions as they participate in learning opportunities  (enjoyment, enthusiasm ↔ anxiety, boredom, frustration)	Positive displays of emotion ↔ negative displays of emotion  (verbal and non-verbal, such as facial expressions, body language, tone of voice)

