Engagement, Disengagement, False Engagement in the ESP Classroom. A Student Survey

Ioana Gabriela Nan

The article discusses the notion of procedural engagement on the part of the students against the background of what constitutes their substantial engagement in class. Problems related to engagement and lack of engagement are identified and discussed in relation to existing student surveys on the topic, and solutions are pointed out, especially concerning ESP classes. Thus, after the notion of engagement is distinguished from that of motivation and defined in its own right, the results of a recent student survey concerning engagement and fake engagement in a business English class, as well as reasons and suggestions for improving active participation, are presented extensively, then correlated with the results of another survey on the same topic taken by students at a foreign university. The degree to which they coincide or not is then commented on, taking into account the difference in the scope and cultural background of each survey.

Engagement; false engagement; disengagement; attention; motivation; ESP; language teaching; student survey.

1. From motivation to engagement

Perhaps to a higher degree than in the case of other endeavours, the success or failure of learning a language is predicated on the students' motivation. Furthermore, in the case of language learning, the combined "attitude, desires and willingness to spend effort" (Richards et al., 2010, p. 377) that constitute the driving factors behind this action are strongly influenced, in turn, by the students' existing orientation towards this goal. In Romania, the majority of higher-education students probably choose to learn English because they perceive it to have value in the present social and economic circumstances and because, given how familiar it has become in the Romanian cultural context, they expect this to be an achievable goal. In other words, their motivation rests on the balance of the value of this language knowledge and the expectations they have to succeed in learning it (the expectancy-value theory). Moreover, students learn business English, for example, bearing in mind their future integration in the professional community and their aspirations for higher-level positions in their prospective work environment. Hence the integrative type of motivation that associates a positive attitude with the business language class and makes engagement in it an investment in one's future professional

success. On the other hand, the students' language learning is also driven by more immediate practical goals such as passing the end of term test, enrolling on a degree course at the end of the year or getting a scholarship or a certificate within a certain period of time. Motivation, in this case, could be an instrument that helps one take a necessary step in the right direction.

Of course, the students' attribution to their success or failure in learning business English is also an essential motivational factor. Students that are able to identify internal factors such as the degree of personal effort as their motivational engine seem to be more likely to maintain a higher level of motivation than those who readily attribute their language learning success or failure to external factors such as the teaching method or classroom environment (the attribution theory). As previous learners of English, students also bring to their university-level ESP class their own belief system not only about the best learning strategies, but also about the most effective teaching strategies and the most appropriate classroom attitude. Identifying these beliefs early on may help establish the truth that learning is a highly personal experience, as well as help the teacher pinpoint a range of expectations that should be considered, of which some may be deflected from the start, such as the assumption that strict reliance on extrinsic motivational strategies work. On the contrary, students' exclusive dependence on extrinsic motivational strategies such as end-of-term grades usually tends to reinforce a harmful attitude of unfair comparison, followed by success-failure dichotomies. Instead, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation should form a continuum into which each learner builds their autonomy, competence and relatedness to others (Richards et al., 2010).

Speaking about internal motivators, on the other hand, enjoying language learning as an intrinsically rewarding activity, in addition to its envisioned professional benefits, is far more predictive of sustained motivation than only the extrinsic pressure for academic or professional success could ever be. This kind of internal attribution may also be a good predictor of learning autonomy and self-determination, and of the growth mindset that associates learning with a process of making *useful* mistakes (Dweck, 2017) which represents effective motivational thinking.

Having said this, the substantial body of work concerning student motivation may have diverted attention from the notion of student engagement, which, in the context of language learning, a practical skill *par excellence*, is a fundamental notion (Mercer et al., 2021). Admittedly more difficult to define than motivation, engagement seems to point to a confluence of cognitive, affective and interactive traits whose common and essential denominator is the *action* that derives from one's initial intention (motivation) (Hiver et al., 2021; Mercer et al., 2021). Simply put, active involvement in a learning activity is what defines the engaged attitude. Unlike motivation, engagement always has a concrete object, whether this is a task or a person, a situation or a topic and, due to its action orientation, it is also context-dependent and time-dependent (Hiver et al., 2021). It can

vary with the class, the institution, the culture and, especially in the academic context, is observable over a longer period of time stretching from one semester to six semesters or more. Most importantly, its relation to context and a timescale also makes it dynamic and improvable provided that teaching and/or learning conditions change.

Engagement with the activity of learning a language could be defined as the visible core of motivation and as synonymous to a long-term type of "showing-up" commitment. Although taken out of the original situational context it was intended for, I believe Dr. Gabor Mate's definition of commitment still holds true for engagement with language learning as well: "sticking with something not because it works [to perfection, or all the time], or because I enjoy it [again, not applicable to all students], but because I have an intention that overrides momentary feelings or opinions" (Mate, 2018, p. 356). If intention is understood here as one's motivational orientation, engagement would be the hands-on perseverance involved in pursuing a positive goal associated with personal or professional development.

In fact, engagement is so important as to be considered one of the "four pillars of learning" any new skill, along with attention, prompt error feedback and consolidation through rehearsal (Dehaene, 2020, pp. 4, 19, 174). It is easy to note that the first two components are especially relevant to the behaviour of students in a classroom environment. In fact, the connection between focus and engagement is so strong that in the absence of full concentration one cannot achieve active participation in the class activities. Focusing on the tasks means using one's top-down mind in a voluntary, effortful way (Goleman, 2014) reflected in an engaged behaviour. Otherwise, lack of focus and passivity do not generate the algorithm of curiosity, the driving force that propels us into action (Dehaene, 2020) and which determines our brains to constantly generate and test hypotheses against our background, a process without which learning is impossible. Besides, since learning a language involves higher-level cognitive properties, such as explicitly memorising the meanings of words and expressions (Dehaene, 2020), it can only be achieved by a conscious effort reflected in the level of engagement with the tasks.

Typically, no matter whether it's a face-to-face class or an online meeting, students often seem distracted, unprepared and unwilling to contribute. Equally typical seems to be what is presented to be the "simple truth" at the root of this behaviour: the teacher's own lack of motivation and consequent disengagement (Swedberg, 2023). However, truth is rarely this simple, and while participation of both partners engaged in the learning process is essential, the causes for students' disengagement in class can vary, ranging from causes related to the teaching process to causes completely unrelated to the classroom environment. Admitting that it is difficult to find out about what causes class disengagement unless students themselves are asked about it, a study conducted by the Education section of Harvard Business Publishing in August 2022 had the HBP editors asked four students from different universities around the world about what teachers do to cause disengagement and about what teachers can do to support increased levels of

engagement. The causes they mentioned were: monotonous delivery, "boring" or overloaded/underloaded content or content that lacks real-world applicability, class duration, lack of digital learning tools (HPB eds., 2023).

Despite the obviously small scope of the enquiry, meant more as an example than as a fully-fledged study, I have still noted the fact that the respondents were all majoring in either of two areas only: computer science/IT or economics/business administration, and that, with the exception of a minor specialisation in film studies, none of the study domains of these students were related to the humanities, or to language courses in particular. Other than that, despite the small number of responses, I have noted that the causes mentioned seem to coincide with those revealed by the students in my own survey in this article. The overall conclusion of the above-mentioned survey supports the idea of a solution in the form of a necessary shift of focus from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation and to enhanced learner self-determination.

In the case of economics students that my survey focused on, extrinsic motivation, and therefore engagement, can be directly linked to their strong sense of professional orientation, meaning that they can already envisage the utility of learning a foreign language beyond the immediate goal of getting a passing grade. However, as noted before, channelling their attention and fostering the discipline of learning a foreign language is a matter of engaging both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors which, viewed from the teacher's perspective, is "an especially complex and formidable task" (Hiver et al., 2021, p. xvi).

Focus on engaging the students in tasks as a means of increasing their achievement is one of the features of a direct teaching approach. Language-immersive and prioritizing language production over language accuracy, the direct method contributes to creating a positive learning environment. A combination of interactive listening and speaking tasks pertaining to this method, and reading and writing tasks that prioritise specialized vocabulary and language structure accuracy even by introducing translation tasks, can be a working formula for the teaching and learning of business English. That is because a defining feature of engagement and a measure of a student's engagement rate is the amount of time actively spent on a learning task. On-task time is academic time of the highest quality, in the sense that, besides being predictive of effective academic learning, it is also the goal of effective teaching (Richards et al., 2010).

2. Engagement and fake engagement in a business English class context: a student survey

There are four necessary components that ensure the kind of engagement with a task that all teachers are hoping to see. In the absence of any of them, we can no longer talk about authentic engagement. At the centre of genuine engagement is a four-way

involvement with the task: by attentiveness to it, by commitment to it, by persistence in solving it despite its difficulty, and by the learner's perception of the intrinsic value and meaning of the task (Mercer et al., 2021). However, at the level of behaviour alone, genuine engagement is difficult to distinguish from fake engagement. Unlike disengagement, which is relatively easy to spot, fake engagement implies "going through the motions" or enacting a series of actions that imitate genuinely engaged behaviour. While substantive engagement implies a harmony between internal – cognitive and emotional – and external action patterns, the procedural sort of engagement lacks such congruence (Mercer et al., 2021). Moreover, compliance with the teacher's instructions may be an indicator of the type of procedural engagement that is motivated by reasons other than genuine engagement, such as hopes or fears of a low end-or-term grade, or the social pressure of showing respect to their teacher (Mercer et al., 2021). My survey aimed to uncover some of the indicators of false engagement and compare them with the findings of these other studies, to see whether, in the cultural context of Romanian higher education, students of business English may display the same behaviour.

The questionnaire was inspired by a similar one designed for the same purpose, that of uncovering the level of engagement of English language learners in the educational environment of an Austrian university from their own perspective, especially considering the wish expressed by the authors themselves that the survey should be replicated in other cultural contexts (Mercer et al., 2021). With this purpose in mind, three of the five questions in my questionnaire have been adapted from this original survey, to see whether the Romanian students' answers are in any ways aligned with those of their counterparts at the Austrian university where the study was first conducted. I have also added two questions that are specific to my class objectives and teaching methods as I also wished to find out what specific actions from the part of the teacher would encourage or discourage engagement in the near future.

The survey was answered by a number of forty-one 1st year students and forty-three 2nd year Management students over a period of one week, between 4 and 10 December 2023. The timing of the survey may correlate with the answers, in the sense that 1st year student answers came only two months after they started their student life, while 2nd year students already had more than one year of student experience at this point, which means that their perception of what engagement in class means may have varied considerably. 1st year students may have brought with them most of the expectations they had in high school regarding the English class (its content, its level of proficiency, its methods of teaching/learning and of communication), while 2nd year students were already used to a wide range of classes and teaching styles, besides their familiarity with the English class itself.

The questionnaire consisted of five questions designed to find out the following: whether students ever feel disengaged in the English class, what may be the reasons for that and the subsequent actions that may replace genuine engagement; whether they

sometimes pretend to engage in the classroom activities and, once again, the reasons and actions they take under such circumstances; whether and how they become aware of the teacher's actions and attitude during procedural engagement; what kind of factors may be important in influencing their degree of engagement in class and, finally, their own suggestions for improving their degree of engagement in the class activities. In analysing the students' answers, I have taken each question in turn and compared the 1st year student answers with the 2nd year student answers to see whether there are any obvious or more subtle similarities and differences between the two sets and to speculate on the possible reasons for these, including whether the length of the students' learning experience plays a part in engagement and false engagement in class.

The first question aims to uncover whether and why students sometimes feel less engaged in class and the actions that replace engagement in the class activities. Out of forty-one 1st year student respondents, thirty-four reported that they sometimes feel unable or unwilling to engage, which is a significantly high percentage. As for the reasons, most of them had to do with tiredness and fatigue caused by an unstructured sleep schedule, lack of rest, inability to get up early, poor time management, other more exacting and exhausting classes before the English class or even the inability to concentrate for ninety minutes without a break. This was followed by mood-related issues, such as not having a good day, not feeling in the right mood or not feeling motivated enough to face the challenges of the tasks. Thirdly, students reported feeling easily bored, with their minds drifting involuntarily to other activities, the consequence being loss of interest in the lesson (either in the tasks, the subject or in the way in which the information is presented), one person reporting their ADHD as a likely cause for their perceived lack of engagement. For a small number of students, a low level of English seemed to prevent engagement with the class activities: the fact that the language of communication is exclusively English was felt as an impediment to participating, as they could not understand some of the content, complete some of the tasks or answer the questions in class. While there were students who blamed their lack of engagement on some aspect of the topic, reporting being bored by it, others did the reverse, feeling that their lack of engagement stems from the degree of unfamiliarity of the topic. Finally, personal issues were reportedly the reason why one person felt disengaged. Other reasons included the large number of students in the class, the uncomfortable heat in the room and disturbing colleagues.

As for the actions taken by the respondents when they felt disengaged, most of them reported trying to refocus on the tasks, despite the difficulty of doing so. The teacher was reported to aid the refocussing process, either in a positive way, by making the challenge pleasant or the re-engagement process effective, or in a way that was perceived as negative, such as by calling someone to attention. Other actions meant to help students deal with loss or lack of engagement seemed to be: taking a sip of water; trying to rest;

listening intermittently; waiting for the next task; only speaking when the answer is felt to be the right one; checking one's phone or playing something on it; focusing on the interesting information and trying to see its applicability. Of the seven students who reported not losing their focus and staying engaged throughout the lesson, two reported that a condition of coming to class is being able to stay focused. Others took measures to ensure engagement by turning off their phone notifications before class or by reporting that they do not feel they need to make any special efforts to stay engaged because the classes are interesting enough.

Thirty-three of the forty-three 2nd year students who participated in the survey answered the question positively, with one answering both positively and negatively, a slightly smaller but still significant percentage than their younger colleagues. Just like in the case of the 1st year students, the reason for disengagement or lack of engagement in the English class reported by most 2nd year students was stress or tiredness caused by lack of sleep or too many classes, followed by mood-related issues, health issues or personal issues, such as bad mood, other thoughts, problems at home, not feeling well, impatience, anxiety, boredom. Two mentioned their involvement in extracurricular activities that require attention away from class. Of the class-related reasons for lack of engagement, just like in the case of 1st year students, lack of familiarity with the topic or the volume of unfamiliar information was invoked as leading to students trying to focus more on understanding it than on engaging with the tasks (even though the tasks were meant to gradually render this information more familiar) while, by contrast, one student found some of the topics not interesting enough. Similarly, the insufficient level of English was invoked again to explain the fact that the students felt shy or nervous about speaking openly. Finally, there were three students who, like their 1st year colleagues who reported the same thing, found that their level of engagement was impacted negatively by perceived disrespect from other colleagues who may speak louder or take over, so that they feel unheard or unnoticed.

While most of the 2nd year students do not mention any action they might take when feeling disengaged, those who do take more markedly positive actions than their younger colleagues. For example, most of those who do report on their actions mention keeping quiet so as not disturb the class and making a conscious effort to refocus and re-engage, particularly during pair/group tasks. These are followed by the students who, even though they stop engaging, report focusing on the tasks and on understanding the topic instead. Another positive action meant to compensate for lack of engagement is taking up the materials again at home, or making up for lack of engagement in the next class. By contrast, one student reported that the action they take when they feel disengaged is pre-emptive – they simply stay out of class that day. Again, just like in the case of the 1st year students, using the phone was reported as a response to disengagement by one 2nd year student too. Finally, of the forty-three 2nd year students who answered this question, eleven reported not losing focus during class, either because they find the

seminar "chill and enjoyable" or because the topics are interesting and they like developing their communication skills in English, with one student reporting the same pre-emptive choice of either engaging in class or staying out of it that day.

As revealed by the results above, most students mention stress and fatigue as the main cause for failing to engage, or insufficient engagement, in class. Students' not knowing how to manage their time is one of the student-related obstacles to high motivation and a reason why it may be more difficult to motivate today's students than students in the past (Yancy McGuire, 2015). It may be a good idea to teach students some time management skills (such as drafting a semester and a weekly calendar, including all the test dates, exams and project deadlines) right from the start of their first university year. Just like American students, Romanian students, especially 1st year undergraduates, are used to a high school schedule that requires around ten hours of individual study per week to do well in most classes. University classes, on the other hand are faster-paced and demand that students should be intellectually independent, ready to devote a least twenty to twenty-five hours to study time each week (Yancy McGuire, 2015). Unless the new students adapt quickly, they may become daunted by the amount of requirements and deadlines and lose both track of these and the motivation to go on (Yancy McGuire, 2015). Besides, if the students' answers are to be taken into account, they show that lack of time management skills can have a direct effect on their ability to focus and engage in the class activities.

The second question of the survey focuses on instances of false engagement, that is moments or periods of time during class when students just pretend to focus on the class activities, without really committing to them. Once again, the question was also meant to find out what the reasons are for this kind of behaviour and what kind of actions may replace true engagement. As far as the 1st year students are concerned, seventeen out of forty-one admitted to such moments. Interestingly, most of these explained trying to hide their loss of focus by a wish not to upset or disrespect the teacher or attract negative attention upon themselves. Also, they seem to be aware of a correlation between being engaged and being seen to be engaged, in the sense that they are willing to make an effort to seem engaged even when they are not, meaning they understand the value of engagement, both internal and external, in its visible manifestations. Tiredness was also mentioned as a reason next, just like in the case of non-engagement, followed by boredom, lack of interest in the lesson and impatience at the end of the class. Personal issues and not being in the right mood for class were also given as causes for false engagement behaviour. An important category of answers, even though not consistent in terms of number, seems to be the one mentioning false engagement for a definite purpose, that of getting points for participating actively in the class tasks. This proves that there are students whose engagement behaviour is purely motivated by external gains, meaning that they have not internalised the need for genuine engagement and its role in their own

learning process. The least mentioned reasons for pretence engagement, in terms of numbers, are related to lagging behind in the lesson. Once the student drifts off and the lesson has moved on, it seems that some students do not try to catch up and are content to just be seen to follow. The last reason had to do, as before, with the classroom environment – an overheated room apparently leading to loss of focus and inability or unwillingness to refocus.

As for the actions taken by those students who find themselves in this situation, very few gave an answer and of these, most reported that they do make an effort to catch up with the class activities, despite just pretending to engage in them for a while, something I believe can be construed as a positive action proving, once again, that they can make the difference between the effects of genuine versus those of false engagement. This impression is strengthened by the answers of the majority of the respondents – twenty-four out of forty-one – who reported not having experienced false engagement. Their comments range from not feeling that false engagement is necessary when they are genuinely engaged or interested in the class activities, to a statement of principle about honesty being a priority for them, meaning that the respondent may have seen false engagement as morally reprehensible, rather than a behaviour they could fall back on sometimes for good reasons. The fear of providing wrong answers is cited as being the most important factor that might detain one respondent from engaging genuinely, as is the effort it takes to stay focused and involved throughout the class.

Fewer 2nd year students report false engagement compared to 1st year students – eleven out of forty-three. Most of them report tiredness or not feeling well as leading to this behaviour, but there are also class-related issues, such as either excessive familiarity or unfamiliarity with the topic or lack of interest in it. Just like one of the first year students, there is a second year student who also reports false engagement as a way of dealing with the pressure of obtaining a good grade, a means to an end. As for what the 2nd year students do when they pretend to engage, all eight respondents mentioned their effort to regain focus for purposes that range from not disrupting the class to getting the interactive communication points promised as a reward. Once again, just like their younger colleagues, a majority of students reported not having felt the need to display false engagement behaviour, among the reasons given being their inability to display the pretend behaviour or the ineffectiveness of pretending, but also the fear of being noticed by the teacher as pretending. There were also students who reported their refusal to pretend to engage as a moral principle they stick to, accepting that engagement is an arduous endeavour.

As noticed from some of the answers to the previous question, the teacher himself/herself may play a significant role in the students' decision to engage in class, as well as in their decision not to pretend to engage. The third question of the survey was meant to evaluate just how important this role is in preventing students from false engagement, and degree to which they feel that the teacher can do this effectively.

According to the vast majority of 1st year respondents who answered the question affirmatively, the usual patterns of interaction between teacher and students may make it easy for the teacher to notice any change in the students' behaviour and focus. Next, changes in the students' body language were also considered a good indicator of loss of engagement, easily noticeable by the teacher. The teacher's class experience was also noted as relevant, an experienced teacher being thought to be more skilled in sensing loss of genuine engagement on the part of their students. This is probably how, according to two respondents, teachers can feel the energy students convey when they stop participating or pretend to participate. Last in the order of response numbers, the far more obvious signs of non- or false engagement are mentioned, such as using phones or talking to colleagues about other things, making teachers aware of the students' wandering mind. Out of the forty-one students questioned, only two stated that the teacher cannot notice their false engagement behaviour, either not all the time, or because the students are careful to maintain a consistently deceptive appearance (a "thoughtful" one).

Surprisingly, all the 2nd year students questioned agreed that the teacher is able to identify false engagement. Given the longer period of time spent with the same teacher, most of them pointed to the teacher's experience as the most likely reason for this ability, detailing this by mentioning the teacher's monitoring and supervising actions (circulating, direct feedback). Following closely in the number of answers were the physical, visible signs of false attendance, such as the students' attitude, mimic, posture and the actions accompanying them also mentioned by the 1st year respondents (using the phone, conversing with colleagues about unrelated topics). Disruptions in the group or pair work also seemed to be good indicators to the teacher that engagement has diminished or is not genuine. Two of the respondents both agreed and disagreed with the fact that the teacher can identify false engagement by mentioning the large number of students in the room that may render the task difficult or, again, their own carefully staged attitude meant to deceive the teacher into believing they are truly engaged, by watching the board intently.

As already mentioned by some students in response to the previous questions, they may also engage, or falsely engage in class, for the immediate rewards represented by points contributing to their semester grade. That is why the fourth question was meant to present four factors that might influence their engagement behaviour, asking that they should be arranged in the order of their importance to the respondents. The four factors to be taken into account were: the students' personal interest in learning the specialised language (in this case, business English); the students' personal interest in learning English in general; their interest in getting interactive communication points towards their grades; their interest in communicating with their classmates and/or with the teacher. Contrary to my expectations, and assuming, once more, that the answers were sincere, the majority of 1st year students appreciated as the most important their study of the specialised language of the profession. Learning English in general was considered to be

very important next, followed by the importance given to getting the points ensuring a good semester grade. The least important reason for engagement in class proved to be socialising and communicating with colleagues and/or the teacher. As for the 2nd year students, they expressed much the same opinions, with learning English and specialised English equally important, according to the majority of students. Engagement for points was also considered very important, but by fewer than half of the respondents. Like their 1st year colleagues, the fewest thought that communicating with their peers or the teacher was very important, which may point to the conclusion that pursuing one's individual goals may have become, in an age dominated by highly personalised devices and virtual means of communication, much less important than socialising in real life.

The last question asked the respondents to suggest methods to help them achieve a better degree of commitment and focus in class. Out of the thirty-six 1st year students who answered this question, fifteen felt that no adjustment was necessary. Half that number thought that there should be even more interaction in the form of role plays, debates or class discussions than there already is. Despite the fact that the class is meant to teach business English language, six of the respondents suggested that other topics should also be incorporated in class, such as sports, teenage-specific topics or practical things for finding the right job. The rest of the answers, although fewer in number, are still relevant for revealing the kind of activities, moods or environmental adjustments felt to be needed for improved engagement. These are, in order of their frequency: some personal changes on the students' part (in attitude, in their sleep schedule, in their individual effort to learn), short breaks during the lesson or a slower pace of teaching/learning, classes that should be made more attractive, interesting, creative, relaxed or funny, the use of Romanian or a lower level of language, including that of the business vocabulary, watching more videos and, finally, more time to speak and even opening a window, despite the fact that at least one window is always kept open in each classroom, which the respondent probably never noticed.

Forty 2nd year student answered the same question, out of which the highest number thought that the class is well-structured and interactive enough as it is so that no changes would be necessary. Unlike what the number of 1st year students indicated, more of the older students seem to feel that it is up to them to put in more personal focus, effort or show more self-confidence, which indicates a shift of perspective on responsibility for one's own learning. The third most frequent category of responses addressed class-related changes. These are quite varied because each is mentioned by a very small number of students, and range from examples from the real lives of people in other countries or real business situations, to more student-teacher interaction or even power point presentations, despite the counterintuitive nature of this suggestion in the case of a practice-focused seminar. Some of the aspects mentioned mirror those of the 1st year students. Thus, more short videos are considered helpful for engagement. So are more speaking tasks, discussions and debates on topics other than those related strictly to business, and

activities using online apps that would add an entertainment factor to the class. The pragmatic aspect of the class was also mentioned, with one student finding that an explanation of the real-life circumstances in which they could use the information presented in class would be useful for their level of motivation and engagement. The smallest number of answers were related to timing. Like their 1st year colleagues, older students also felt that a short break every twenty or thirty minutes would help them focus, some mentioning their busy schedules with the consequence of not being able to focus for the whole duration of the class, which is, at present, ninety minutes. Something that came up in the answers to the previous questions but was mentioned again as important in assisting engagement was the relationship with colleagues, from whom more respect and openness would be needed.

3. Comparisons and conclusions

The results of my survey seem to mirror those of the Austrian study of false engagement and the Harvard study on disengagement mentioned in this article. As noted above, the course content, the teaching style and physical conditions in the classroom (Mercer et al., 2021) were reported by my students as well, even though proportions of the answers referring to each category may have differed. When students feel that the content of the lesson is not personally relevant to them, either professionally or for examination purposes, they will tend to feign engagement or disengage completely (HPB eds., 2023). Likewise if they feel they already know what is being presented in class, when boredom often sets in. The solution to engagement, in this case, seems to lie in new, meaningful and practical content (HPB eds., 2023; Mercer et al., 2021). It is perhaps worth noting here that, perhaps contrary to what students feel, the difficulty level of the tasks themselves may actually help engagement, as the degree of cognitive effort seems to have a direct influence on the degree of information retention (Dehaene, 2020), but it is equally true that it can significantly reduce engagement if the students feel that, despite their sustained efforts, their progress is not fast enough (Dehaene, 2020).

As for the teaching style, traditional lecturing in a monotone is clearly one of the main causes for fake engagement (HPB eds., 2023; Dehaene, 2020), with focus time likely to peter off after about half an hour (Mercer et al., 2021). Even in classes that are not lectures, the teacher's delivery style can be perceived as too fast-paced (Mercer et al, 2021), requiring a break, or at least a temporary change of subject (HPB eds., 2023), lest fake engagement should set in. Respondents in all three surveys reported the important role physical conditions play in fake engagement behaviours (HPB eds., 2023; Mercer et al., 2021). The students' mood on the day, tiredness or lack of sufficient sleep were mentioned by a significant number of students in both years participating in my study. Closely connected to these were personal circumstances that seem to require the students'

attention to the detriment of engagement. For example, both my survey and the other two revealed that balancing student life and professional or family life can be challenging. On the other hand, other colleagues were also mentioned as possible engagement disruptors (Mercer et al., 2021).

Concerning the reasons why students revert to fake engagement, it is clear from the survey that they are aware that the teacher can notice it and that most of them consequently try to re-engage, more or less successfully. Consciously or not, by adopting a procedural form of engagement they seem to either want to please the teacher, sometimes for fear of grade-related consequences, or to respond to wider social expectations, such as those that require them not to disturb others during class (Mercer et al., 2021). On the other hand, the significant number of positive answers to the question about fake engagement may point to the same conclusion as that of the other surveys on the topic, namely that procedural engagement is, in fact, something that may be perceived as positive by the students themselves: the polite, respectful and considerate thing to do when there are so many demands, educational and personal, competing, at any one time, for the students' attention. Consequently, fake engagement can be considered "a default feature of many academic settings" (Mercer et al., 2021) and students should not be overly admonished for the occasional lapse of focus, just as teachers should not always blame the disengagement or fake engagement behaviour of their students entirely on themselves, especially in the case of language learning, where engagement is required constantly and over long periods of time (Mercer et al., 2021). It seems that even in classes that are entirely based on communicative tasks and activities, such as language classes usually are, fake engagement can still be an issue.

The solutions to fake engagement behaviours suggested by the participants in my survey also coincide with those suggested by the students in the other studies and represent the opposite of what they feel may be the problems that lead to this behaviour, mentioned previously. By adopting an active teaching format and inserting "brain breaks" into one's class (Mercer et al., 2021; HPB eds., 2023), by keeping the course content meaningful and offering additional support and learning avenues to students who might need it, teachers can ensure that they don't often lose their students' attention. Based on the students' responses in my survey, they understand the importance of learning a language as directly related to their professional success. However, they understand almost equally well the consequences of non- or fake engagement on their grades, which points to a higher degree of compliance than desirable, to the detriment of genuine communicative engagement with the teacher and their peers. The goal of education at all levels, including university education, is for students to engage in learning rather than focus on their grades (HPB eds., 2023). Nevertheless, based on the results of the survey, it seems that the pressure of having academic success quantified in the form of good grades is still too high for some students to commit whole-heartedly to learning for the sake of their own development. Another relevant aspect pointed out by both the Austrian

survey and my own is that, even though in both cases the students' answers were meant to reflect false engagement in the specific environment of a language class, it is difficult to evaluate the extent to which students also had other classes in mind when considering their answers, but the results appear to be relevant for any kind of academic subject (Mercer et al., 2021).

All the above findings imply the fact that active students are successful students and that any method that compels them to give up passivity and get involved is effective. On the other hand, fake engagement, far from irrelevant even if sometimes difficult to identify as such, is worth studying further as a complex phenomenon involving behavioural and psychological factors that may prevent genuine learning. "Compliant busy-ness" (Mercer et al., 2021, p. 160), a time when the student's effort goes not into learning, but into trying to mask non-engagement, is a type of action that cannot remain ignored by teachers, especially since distractions on devices are increasingly competing for the students' attention. Although the nature of language classes makes them almost by definition communicative, participatory classes, the phenomenon of false engagement is still present. That is why teachers need to be aware of such moments, reflect on them critically and find the most appropriate solutions for their students and the classroom dynamics.

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Assistant Lecturer Ioana-Gabriela Nan, Ph.D., is a member of the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication with the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Her main areas of interest are: literature and literary journalism, the philosophy of literature, discourse analysis, language-teaching in higher education. (ioana.nan@econ.ubbcluj.ro)