



The English Minnits began life as a project that was funded by the Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools. The project got underway in 2011 with the brief to produce teaching material for English as an additional language that would contain no text – or at least would not focus on text.

TWO FOCUS GROUPS

There were two focus groups during the project – students with dyslexia, or neuropsychiatric functional disorders, as well as students in special needs schools. There was a special needs teacher, a special needs secondary school teacher, as well as a teacher from years 3-6 from a secondary school in our reference group for the project.

FUNDAMENTAL BUILDING BLOCKS

After having discounted several bad ideas we agreed to develop an adventure game with dialogue.

The advantages were obvious:

- the game would be an environment that students would feel at home in
- the dialogues would contain material that could be presented little by little
- the basic idea of the game would become clear: players would have to choose the correct answer in each dialogue
- we could record logical answers to the answers that the player could choose
- we could introduce quests and instructions
- we could work with social aspects of the language – *functions*.

PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE

We decided to aim the teaching material at students who had studied English in school for a least a year or had the equivalent knowledge.

DIALOGUES – SOUND

By taking the decision to produce a game in which the main character meets other characters we had solved the main objective of the project; we could produce an English language teaching material that in principle did not include any text. It is in fact possible to play The English Minnits without reading a single letter by playing in the *No Text Mode* – this mode can be selected by the player. The player can revert to the text mode at any stage while playing the game.

QUESTS – TASKS – OUR WORD LIST

In an adventure game it is usual for the main character to complete a number of quests – that is tasks. Our main character Wheeze must help other Minnits in different situations. He will often collect or find items. Instead of using a word list in order to introduce new words we use the game's methodology: search and point until you find what you are looking for. In this way the player finds *rubbish, bucket, log, plank* – words that perhaps do not figure in the player's existing word bank – without using a word list.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT ANSWER

Playing The English Minnits boils down to choosing the right answer in a dialogue in order to drive the story forward. Sometimes there are two answers to choose between – sometimes more. Sometimes there is no choice to be made and the story proceeds at a quicker pace.

No answer is wrong – it simply does not fit the situation. If the player should choose an inappropriate answer he will always be able to make another choice.

ONLY THE CORRECT LANGUAGE

The English Minnits contains only correct modern day English. The language content is produced and checked in Great Britain. All the dialogue has been recorded by professional British voice actors.



LEARNING METHOD

The methodological model of The English Minnits could be called “*trial and success*”. Players use a process of elimination in order to find the right answer in the dialogues. Guessing is a great method for solving problems – particularly in The English Minnits when actually you cannot guess wrongly. The aim is that the player will learn more English and that will happen even if sometimes the player chooses an inappropriate alternative.

Guessing means that the player develops the ability to judge – learning to judge probability. Furthermore the player learns to focus on what he actually understands and begins to realise that that can be sufficient in order to hold a conversation. It is considerably more constructive to concentrate on those elements that you do understand rather than those that you do not.

The learning method is the same one that we all used when we learned our mother tongue – by listening and repeating.

WHY DRAGONS?

Wheeze’s struggle with the dragons is central to the story of the The English Minnits. All scenes conclude with Wheeze in combat with his opponents. Dragons also appear randomly throughout each scene.

Not only do they hold the story together but they also act as a pedagogic ingredient. They offer the opportunity to stretch the legs – an interlude from the concentration of dialogue work.

GOOD FOR STUDENTS WHIT SPECIAL NEEDS = GOOD FOR ALL

In an SPSM (*Swedish Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools*) publication of 2011 the following is stated:

The ideal teaching material can be used by all students in a classroom situation – not just by those students who have special needs. Those that work quickly take in a large amount whereas those that work more slowly take in less of the lesson. Both categories can therefore achieve the objective that has been set – using the same teaching material.

We do not claim that we have produced the ideal teaching material, but our student trials have clearly shown the following:

Students feel at home in The English Minnits irrespective of previous knowledge or preconditions.

OUR TRIALS

Within the scope of the project we trialled The English Minnits with more than 400 students from year 3 up to year 8 in secondary schools and from year 7 in secondary special schools up to year 3 in special sixth form colleges. Not one of the students identified The English Minnits as being made for one or another special group.

Students with less prior knowledge of the English language appreciated advancing through the game by meticulously looking for the right answer – and at the same time developing their strategy for understanding a foreign language.

Students with more prior knowledge appreciated being able to listen to the answers. They willingly repeated them – even if they were ‘inappropriate’ in the context.

Students with very good prior knowledge chose to play the game in the *No Text Mode* and thought that it provided them with useful training in listening for specific information.

IN ALL SCHOOL FORMS

The English Minnits is currently being used as a complementary teaching material in English as an additional language from years 3 up to year 9 in secondary schools. In international schools it is being used as early as pre-school. It is used in the same way and in the same version in special needs secondary schools and special needs sixth form colleges. In special needs sixth forms colleges The English Minnits is primarily used with students with limited previous knowledge of the English language.

TODAY’S TEACHING MATERIAL

The English Minnits is a teaching material for today’s students. They immediately recognize the game as an environment in which to work. The invaluable advice we received from our reference teachers has meant that both boys and girls react in the same positive way to The English Minnits. And so do students from other cultures outside Sweden. We would like to thank all those who helped us in producing a teaching material for today.

Visit us at theminnits.com for more information.