

## Foreign Language Learning in the Low Countries

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[ L U D O B E H E Y D T ]

The situation regarding foreign language learning has changed considerably in the Dutch-speaking region over the last ten years. In the first place, this has to do with changing social realities. The language landscape in the Low Countries has undergone rapid change. Urban areas of Flanders and the Netherlands have in fact quickly become multilingual. For example, we only have to look at official figures for home languages in Flanders for 2011-2012 to be confronted with a number of surprises: in urban areas in Antwerp, 46% of the children do not speak Dutch as their home language. For Ghent the figure is 37% and for Mechelen 33%. Almost one child in eight in Flemish primary education speaks a language other than Dutch at home. This means that Flanders, like the Netherlands in fact, can now be characterised as linguistically super-diverse, for not only is cultural diversity increasing yearly, language diversity is as well. Likewise, more than a hundred different home languages are spoken in the Brussels Capital Region. This means that more or less half the children begin school speaking a language other than the official language of instruction. As far as foreign language instruction is concerned this implies that for many children regular education is actually foreign language instruction from the very outset.

In addition to this, as a result of increasing demographic diversity, globalisation and internationalisation both in Flanders and in the Netherlands, there is a growing need for an international lingua franca designed to serve both the present Babylonian internal diversity and the mobility of the youth and the employed. Much more frequently than before, speakers have to rely on another language or lingua franca to survive in various situations in our multilingual and multicultural society.

Moreover, a new attitude has arisen with regard to languages. In traditional foreign language teaching, languages were linked to their respective nations. French was the language of France and was considered a normative and monolithic standard language and its classically correct use deemed to be followed and respected. The same was the case for English, Oxford English being the ideal. Times have changed and in the meantime common language varieties and their usage have become much more acceptable. In multilingual environments, the varieties used by second language speakers have come to be considered as genuine varieties. The normative use that was required ten years ago,



along with its grammar book and dictionary, has since made way for tolerance for 'understandable varieties'. A multilingual speaker is no longer expected to be lexically and grammatically perfect and this is also clearly visible in foreign language education. The formerly strict, code-oriented foreign language education with its exclusive emphasis on grammar and vocabulary has given way to communicative language instruction along with an explicit shift in focus towards language use and mutual comprehensibility. The mastery of form is no longer the first requirement, communicative efficiency being more important.

### European language policy and the Low Countries

These social changes have also had an influence on European language policy and will surely change European foreign language instruction in a profound way. Following the conference on *Multilingualism in Europe* in 2006, the European Union formulated the recommendation known as 'the one plus two principle', i.e. that besides providing mother-tongue instruction schools should also place instruction in two other European Union languages on their curriculum in order to promote European diversity and intercultural understanding and combat the dominance of any single language. To quote their 2006 recommendation literally, 'Multilingualism is an important part of our European identity which should be cherished and nurtured. If one lingua franca is allowed to predominate there is a risk that other national languages will suffer a loss of function (for example fewer written texts). To avoid this it is essential to increase our efforts to promote multilingualism.' In the meantime, the fear expressed here has increasingly become reality. The dominance of English has become considerable in the Low Countries. In his now notorious book, *Words of the World. The Global Language System* (2001), Abraham de Swaan remarked that the third language is no longer necessary. His advice was the following: 'Learn the national language as well as possible, then learn English as well as possible and only then learn a third language if it proves useful, advantageous or pleasing.' The Dutch government has obviously taken this advice to heart for, according to Article 9 of the Law on Primary Education, only English is mandatory as the







second language in Dutch primary schools. The situation for Flemings is somewhat different, because besides Flanders, which is a monolingual region, there is also the officially bilingual region of Brussels. In the Brussels Capital Region, French is the first mandatory modern language for all pupils attending Dutch-medium primary schools, which means they receive instruction three hours per week from the second year on and five hours per week in the third and fourth grade (Art. 10 of the 1963 Language Law). In Flanders, French is still mandatory as the first foreign language from the fifth year on in primary schools, but English can also be chosen as one's first foreign language in secondary school. Since 2011 introductory courses in English and German are also allowed in primary education. We also notice a gradual shift to more English instruction in Flanders. In June 2014, the Rector of Ghent University, Anne De Paepe, made a plea for more English medium programmes at Bachelor level 'to attract more international students and scientists'. Her Dutch colleague, Rector Magnificus Carel Stolker, is of the same opinion. He wrote the following in the 2014 review *Neerlandia*: 'The Anglicisation of academia cannot be stopped. Our 'own' MA students receive an increasing number of lessons in English and that will soon be the case for many bachelor students'. The stealthy changeover to the dominant language of English in higher education in the Low Countries will of course not be without consequence for foreign language instruction.

## Bilingual education

If fluency in English is expected at the beginning of an academic programme, schools will necessarily have to take this into account. And we can already see this happening both in Flanders and in the Netherlands. One of the most striking changes in foreign language instruction is undoubtedly the adoption of bilingual immersion methods. Flanders is rather hesitant in this respect. As a result of the 2011 *Language Policy Document* schools may, as of 2013, start providing CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) in which parts of the curriculum (factual subjects such as biology, mathematics, history, etc.) can be taught in a foreign language. CLIL schools are now appearing in Flanders – exclusively in secondary education for the time being – at which a maximum of one fifth of factual subjects are taught in French, English or German. For this a CLIL standard has been developed that sets conditions which a school must satisfy in order to offer CLIL. In comparison to the Netherlands, Flanders is only reluctantly getting started with bilingual education. The situation in the Netherlands is more drastic. Of course, the reticence in Flanders is to some extent understandable. In a social environment in which Dutch is still on the defensive, the introduction of bilingual education is felt as being language and culture threatening, certainly in Brussels, where French is felt to be the dominant language in society.

This fear is absent in the Netherlands. There, in 2008, the Board of Education suggested without further ado in its *Foreign Languages in Education* advisory document that 'English be partly made an official medium in primary education for a maximum of 15 percent of school time'. In the meantime, the immersion method has really taken off in the Netherlands. An increasing number of schools have begun experimenting with bilingual education and, in places where bilingual education was originally limited to the more difficult sections

of secondary education intended to prepare students for university, it is now spreading to the mid-range sections and even vocational training. Of the more or less five hundred schools that offer a pre-university section, almost one in twenty have a bilingual stream providing factual subjects such as history, biology and physical education in a language other than the mother tongue. In September 2014 the following major step will be taken: twelve Dutch primary schools will commence a full bilingual programme. From infant school onwards, children will be instructed half of the time in English. The State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science, Sander Dekker announced this already in January 2014 and his reasons for doing so are significant: 'Dutch children will later on earn their crust in a world in which it will be more important than ever before to be able to speak English well, in addition to speaking Dutch. It is exactly when they are young that they can pick up a language with playful ease. Indeed, what's learnt in the cradle lasts till the tomb. Moreover, offering a foreign language early on in school makes education more challenging for talented pupils that have a gift for languages.' This is only in the experimental phase at the moment. In 2015 another 8 schools will be able to join this pilot scheme for fully bilingual education. If by 2019 the experiment carried out in these 20 primary schools should prove successful, the decision can be taken to allow more schools to convert to bilingual education. Only then will the Anglicisation of Dutch education really begin. Of course, this will call for a complete transformation of foreign language teaching, for the simultaneous provision of school subjects along with a totally new language will require a specific approach. But the Dutch have been preparing this for a long time. The Ministry for Education, Culture and Science have handed over the coordination and supervision of bilingual education to the European Platform, which set up a network for bilingual education back in 1994 and has even developed a set of bilingual education standards. Furthermore, this education system is being scientifically supervised and followed very closely. A team of researchers from Groningen University have already conducted research into the design and results of bilingual education in the Netherlands. They have published a detailed report on the research bearing a title that cannot be misunderstood: *A sustainable advantage. The findings of a study into bilingual education.*

One thing is immediately clear, bilingual education has the wind in its sails and the question now is whether traditional foreign language instruction will be able to handle the increasing competition from bilingual education. This explosive success is nonetheless somewhat surprising as there are as yet insufficient guarantees concerning the results of bilingual education and immersion methods. Even the research carried out by the team in Groningen does not justify the uncritically jubilant title of its report. The report only covers schools offering pre-university education that have opted with unqualified enthusiasm for bilingual education and that provide it, moreover, only for a target group of students that are amongst the strongest part of the school-going population. For students like these with this type of motivation, bilingual education does indeed seem to be an unqualified plus. But whether such elitist results can be extrapolated to education in general is very questionable. More specifically, there is the issue of whether children who speak another home language – Berber, Turkish, Polish, Chinese, etc. – will benefit from Dutch English bilingual education or whether English may not form an extra threshold for those who are still struggling with

the first language threshold. Moreover, it is doubtful whether children who do not have above-average school skills will be able to handle the extra pressure of bilingual education. In a recent report in *Mens en Maatschappij* (September 2014) Inge Sieben and Nathalie van Ginderen from Tilburg University actually show that the risk of increasing social inequality caused by the introduction of bilingual education is clearly present.

## Traditional foreign language instruction

Anyhow, the vast majority of pupils will still receive traditional foreign language instruction. But that too has undergone a number of changes. Firstly, two major changes have been introduced as far as the objectives of foreign language instruction are concerned. Attention to the code aspects of language, i.e. grammar and vocabulary, has given way to communicative skills. The learner has now primarily to be able to carry out a number of efficient speech acts, such as the expression of wishes, requests, orders, needs, advice, apologies, etc. But these objectives no longer suffice. The huge influx of migrants, the globalisation of culture and the rise in the number of international contacts over the internet or through exchange programmes, among other things, have added one essential task to the objectives of foreign language instruction, i.e. the fostering of intercultural relations. The 'intercultural speaker' is a learner who is aware of the culture specificity of language use and has some knowledge of cultural background, and based on this has developed the skill to analyse and interpret unknown cultural phenomena, thanks to which he/she is better able to understand the other. The ultimate goal in this case is the development of intercultural competence that allows the learner to function as a mediator between his/her own culture and the target culture.

Given the super-diversity in which the Low Countries find themselves, this has now become the central goal. And because the learner group has become so diverse, a set of teaching methods has to be found that can address and make use of such diversity. The fact that homogeneous Dutch-speaking classes are becoming a rarity should lead us to deal consciously with linguistic heterogeneity in multicultural classrooms. Pupils from very different cultural backgrounds, who speak different home languages, who are also used to very different culture-specific learning methods are now sitting next to each other in class and have to take on the same task, i.e. learning a foreign language. The solution to the problem that is being increasingly put forward is the introduction of task-based language learning. Task-based learning is designed to get pupils in heterogeneous classrooms to participate together in a shared task – each at their own level, using their own cultural resources – by drawing on their own specific language skills. In task-based learning, pupils no longer receive language lessons in the traditional sense of the term but have to complete a task together in which they use the target language both receptively and productively, while paying more attention to meaning than form. Such tasks are complete in themselves and have to be accomplished together by the pupils, using the foreign language and with the aid of the language teacher as an obliging coach. The teacher does not follow one or other orthodox teaching strategy but adapts creatively and flexibly to the pupils' learning styles and levels of language skill.



This does not mean that there are no final goals to be achieved. For such final goals, both Flanders and the Netherlands have unanimously agreed to use the same common European frame of reference. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) is a descriptive framework that sets out various levels of functional language competence for all European languages. In the meantime, this CEFR, which was put forward by the Council of Europe in 2001, serves both in Flanders and the Netherlands as a standard guideline for education, educational methods, examination boards, and courses. All new methods and courses use it as a model and all universities and colleges of higher education use it as a threshold description for their language requirements. The framework distinguishes three traditional language users: basic users (A1 and A2), independent users (B1 and B2) and proficient users (C1 and C2). All foreign language instruction in the Low Countries is now based on this European descriptive framework. It is striking to note, however, that the framework provides no clear guidelines for testing and yet it is used as a placement test in schools and companies in the Netherlands and Flanders. It is also disappointing to see that this framework as yet contains no intercultural dimension, which means it cannot be used in intercultural language instruction.

We conclude here by mentioning the latest development in foreign language instruction, a development with which teaching methods have difficulty keeping up, and that is the technological revolution. Of course, there is no language course without a CD or a DVD nowadays, but as far as the use of ICT is concerned, it is very much a matter of paddling one's own canoe. How can we make the most of tablets, iPhones and apps? Is there a place for language teaching games? What didactic possibilities can Facebook, internet forums and voice recognition technology offer us? It is vital that technologists, linguists and teaching experts sit together and steer all this innovation.

## Narrowed down to Basic English

It is probably clear by now that foreign language learning in the Low Countries is developing at a very fast rate as a result of social change. Increasing globalisation, explosive diversity and economic expectations all heighten the need to learn English as quickly as possible. The other languages are being pushed into a corner and the European wish for a 'mother tongue plus two' is steadily becoming a fantasy. And now that Flanders and the Netherlands are undermining language diversity in their language programmes, the fear that the once so-praised and valued foreign language skills of the Flemish and the Dutch will be narrowed down to *Basic English* is legitimate. ■

All illustrations show details from Brueghel, *Tower of Babel*,  
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna.



Translated by Peter Flynn