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OBSTACLES ON HIGHWAY L2

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1 Dutch as a Second Language in the Dutch Context

To date (2007), the population of the Netherlands consists of more than 16 million people. Roughly ten percent of them are immigrants and refugees who do not speak Dutch as their native language. Refugees have come from countries in Southeast Asia, former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and African countries, while the largest groups of immigrants are from Turkey and Morocco. In addition, there is a growing international group of partners and spouses of native Dutch inhabitants. The number of low-educated adults in this group of immigrants and refugees is estimated at 70%. Low-educated in this case means having an educational level of elementary school and one or two years of secondary school at most. For women, full illiteracy or two years of education at elementary school level is no exception. This is the group of adults who usually learn Dutch as a second language (DSL) in centers for adult education where trained teachers are paid to teach DSL.

The present L2 teaching and learning context is one in which the communicative approach plays an important role: the focus is on the use of language, on skills, and on competencies, because this is considered the most efficient way of learning a new language; grammar receives scant attention although many teachers and learners would like to focus on form (i.e. grammar). Objectives are formulated in the form of can-do statements and communicative roles and situations in which the immigrant has to function. Examples of such can-do statements are: I can read [how many times] a day; I have to take my medication; I can write a postcard to congratulate a colleague.

When the new Immigration Act became effective (January 2007), an “integration exam” became compulsory, and a basic level of Dutch – A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEF (Council of Europe, 2001) – has become a part of the exam. This level must be attained within three and a half years of training and is required for getting a residential permit. Adult immigrants have to prove themselves able to function in Dutch society and to speak and understand enough Dutch to do so. The exam consists of a number of crucial practical situations in which the immigrant has to prove that he can function adequately, for instance in the domains of citizenship, of education, of health and upbringing, and in the domain of labor. Examples of such crucial practical situations are: application of documents at the municipality, contact with his/her children’s school teacher, and talking about conditions of employment.

Of course efficiency and speed are important: the costs of a course are high, whether paid by the municipality, the learner himself, or a combination of the two. An immigrant learner is not a language learning fanatic; for him the results count, he wants to have a job. Yet, I have the feeling that this orientation on functional skills and competencies is getting excessive and that it is no longer possible to pay attention to the building stones of language proficiency, viz. to vocabulary and grammar, that there is no more time left to let immigrants enjoy learning, reading and speaking a new language. And, what is more serious, the focus is directed so one-sidedly to the crucial practical situations that a solid basis of language knowledge is being neglected. There seems to be no time to register small scale progress related to vocabulary and grammar or the lack of such progress, for instance when the communicative approach does not work so well for specific learners. Time, attention, and maybe some specific instruction is needed to make progress again.

This paper focuses on one low-educated learner for whom the communicative approach was not very successful because she couldn't deal with the immersion situation in the lessons.

2 *A Case Study*

2.1 *Data Collection, Participants, Method*

The data used for the present case study come from a longitudinal corpus of semi-spontaneous and experimental data, entitled the LESLLA corpus because the eight Turkish and seven Moroccan female participants are typical representatives of the LESLLA group, as they all had received little schooling in their native country: from zero to seven years. They were learning Dutch in the instructional environment of a center for adult education, in which the teaching method and materials can be best characterized as reflecting a communicative approach. Some of the participants profited from the immersion situation at work or from contact with Dutch neighbors, mothers, authorities or social services. However, at the start of data collection, they were all beginners below level A1 of the CEF (see Section 1), although some of them had been living in the Netherlands for ten years or more when they started the course. The participants were observed for 15-18 months, during which the researcher had nine meetings with them, divided over three cycles. In each cycle, the same tasks were administered, ranging from free tasks (film-retellings, picture story-telling) to more controlled tasks. The present study is restricted to the data from one production task: the picture story-telling of *The Snowman* (Briggs, 1989), a wordless picture book. Participants were asked to tell in Dutch the adventures of a boy who made a snowman which came to life in his dream, as if they were telling

the story to their own children. The task was repeated twice so that any progress should become visible; it was registered on a Sony mini-disc recorder, digitalized and converted into PRAAT (Boersma & Weenink, 2003) files to enable a precise orthographic transcription.¹

The aim of the larger project was to investigate which syntactic and morphological aspects would be involved when learners do not make progress or stop making progress. We focus on one participant, Gülisar, and on one task because that will be sufficient to illustrate her problems with learning Dutch. Gülisar was 31 years old, had received an education of five years of elementary school in Turkey, and had finished a semi-intensive one year DSL course (10 hours a week) when data collection started. She was married but lived single with her 5-year-old son and had Turkish friends but no relatives in the Netherlands.

In this paper, I focus on five grammatical items that are basic in spoken communication, so basic even that native speakers of Dutch have great, if not insurmountable, problems understanding the speech of L2 learners if these items are not realized properly. These basic aspects are: (i) presence and position of the verb, (ii) presence and position of a subject, (iii) prepositions, (iv) possessive constructions, and (v) the verb 'to have.'

2.2 *Gülisar's Picture Story-Telling*

In order to give the reader an idea of the language level of this learner and of the specific problems she encountered, one connected excerpt from the transcription of spoken text is given together with the relevant drawings. The same utterances are used for the specific grammatical items discussed later.



¹ PRAAT (= TALK) is a program for phonological analysis. Orthographic transcription was done by two persons and was checked by the researcher. The sound files of all production tasks with transcription are available on DVD by sending an e-mail to I.v.d.Craats@let.ru.nl.

1. Sneeuwman niet oog niet neus niet oor niet mond.

Snowman not eye not nose not ear not mouth.

Target: De sneeuwman heeft geen ogen, geen neus, geen oren en
The snowman has no eyes, no nose, no ears and
geen mond.
no mouth.

A target Dutch main clause has an SVO (subject-verb-object) word order.

2. Ja straks huis terug. Mama vragen.

Yes soon house back. Mummy ask.

Target: Hij gaat naar huis terug. Hij vraagt zijn moeder.
He goes to home back. He asks his mother.

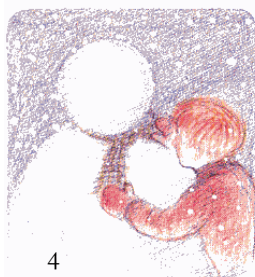
In Dutch, some verbs can be split in two parts: the inflected verb (*gaat*) follows the subject and the particle (*terug*) appears at the end of the sentence.

3. Kep en sjaal nemen thuis.

Cap and scarf take home.

Target: Hij neemt de muts and the sjaal mee van huis.
He takes the cap and the scarf with (him) from home.

In Dutch, as well as in English, a subject should always be present; the word order here is: OVX, where X stands for an adverbial adjunct.



4. Sjaal kleden sneeuwman.

Scarf put-INF snowman.

Target: Hij doet de sneeuwman de sjaal om.
He puts the snowman the scarf on.

In Dutch, the subject must be realized and the object should follow the inflected verb; the particle (*om*) is separate from the verb *omdoen* in sentence-final position.

5. Kep hoofd op sneeuwman.

Cap head on snowman.

Target: (Hij doet) de kep op het hoofd van de sneeuwman.

He puts the hat on the head of the snowman.

The preposition *op* behaves here like a postposition because it relates to *hoofd* (head).

6. En dan terugkom thuis.

And then backcome-1SG home.

Target: En dan komt hij weer thuis.

And then comes he again home.

When an adverbial adjunct (*dan*) is in the first position of the sentence, it is followed by the finite verb and the subject: XVS.

Tafel op koekjes.

Table on cookies.

Target: De koekjes liggen op de tafel.

The cookies lie on the table.

In Dutch, a copula or a positional verb (*zijn*/*liggen*) is obligatory. Note that *op* (on) follows the noun to which it belongs (*tafel*), so we deal here with a postposition. The subject follows the postpositional phrase (*tafel op*).

Niet koeke mandarijn.

Hand nemen koeken.

Not cookie tangerine.

Hand take-INF cookies.

Target: Het is geen koekje maar een mandarijn.

It is not a cookie but a tangerine.

Met zijn hand pakt hij de koekjes.

He takes the cookies with his hand.

A provisory subject (*het*) and a copula are obligatory; the overt realization of the subject (*hij*) is missing in the second utterance as well.



7. Mandarijn sneeuwman neus maakte
Tangerine snowman nose made-PAST.3SG
jonge.
boy.

Target: Met een mandarijn maakt de

jongen de neus van de sneeuwman.

The boy makes the nose of the snowman
with a tangerine.

The Dutch word order is SVOX or XVSO (with obligatory subject-verb inversion when the sentence is introduced by an adverbial).

2.3 *Word Order in Turkish*

Word order is rather free in Turkish, but SOV is the basic order, as in (1). See Kornfilt (1997) for details. In the sentence below the subject is not realized overtly, but it is clear from the inflected verb that you-PLUR is the subject. At the introduction of the subject or in cases of emphasis, the subject is realized overtly at the beginning or at the end of the sentence (following the verb). The finite verb is at the end of the sentence.

- (1) kitabı ver-me- yor- sin-iz.
 book-DEF give-NEG-PRES-2 -PL
 “You do not give the book.”

In colloquial Turkish, the finite verb can be followed by a subject, a direct or an object, an adverbial adjunct, or the possessor. It has a pragmatic function, viz., to present this element as background information.

The phrase structure in Turkish is such that the head of the phrase follows the complement, so the object precedes the verb (OV) in (2a), the possessor precedes the possessee (P'sorN) in (2b) and the noun precedes the postposition (OP) in (2c).

- (2) a kitabı ver-yor-sin-iz
 book give-2PL
 “you give a book”
 b Ayşe-nin araba-sı
 Ayşe-GEN car-POSS
 “Ayşe's car”
 c arab-nın iç-in-de
 car-GEN inside-POSS-LOC
 “inside the car”

Turkish lacks a verb expressing “to have.” Instead of being indicated by a possessive verb, the existence of a possessive relationship (*Ayşe-nin araba-sı*) is expressed by means of an existential verb (*var*), as in (3).

- (3) Ayşe-nin araba-sı var
 Ayşe-GEN car-POSS exists
 “Ayşe has a car”

2.4 *Presence and Position of the Verb*

Several utterances in the story-telling excerpt above do not have a verb at all. That is quite normal for beginners, but the word order is remarkable.

The object seems to occupy the position of the subject in the following utterances:

- (4) a Mummy *ask*
- b Cap and scarf *take* home
- c Scarf *put* snowman.
- d Tangerine snowman nose *made* boy.

The four utterances seem to have a certain regularity, but which? It is not so easy to formulate the grammatical rule that underlies these sentences, particularly not for teachers, whether they teach DSL or ESL. They are simply not trained to pay attention to this type of phenomenon. I have put the verb in italics in (4) to make it more salient that the verb is not inflected (4a, b, c); the (indirect) object precedes the verb (4a, b, c, d) and the verb figures in sentence-final position (4a) or is followed by one other element which can be either the subject (4d) or an adverbial adjunct (4b, c). Even when a verb is inflected (4d) it is placed after the object.

One may claim that the order is OV, not an English word order, nor a normal Dutch word order in main clauses (although this word order is permitted in Dutch subclauses), but a Turkish word order. In colloquial Turkish it is becoming more and more common to add an element after the verb, especially the subject. So, we are dealing with a real interlanguage that is based on the L1 with regard to the position of the verb. If this is an interlanguage, one may wonder how long this stage will continue.

In Table 1, the results are given for the picture story-telling in each of the three cycles with an interval of approximately five months. It can be observed that there is no progress at all with respect to verb realization, verb placement and the inflection of the verb.

Table 1: Utterances without and with verbs over 15 months (interval 5 months)

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
No verb	41 %	44 %	40 %
Verb-final (not inflected)	45 %	37 %	42 %
Inflected verb	14 %	19 %	18 %

2.5 Presence and Position of the Subject

Native speakers of Dutch and English are used mentioning the subject of a sentence explicitly. That is not what Gülisar does. When we focus on the utterances containing a verb in the excerpt given above (repeated in (5)), it can be seen that in most utterances, the subject is lacking (5a, b, c, d, e) and when the subject is present, it is in final position (5f).

- (5) a Mummy *ask* No subject
 b Cap and scarf *take* home. No subject
 c Scarf *put* snowman. No subject
 d And then *backcome* home. No subject
 e Hand *take* cookies. No subject
 f Tangerine snowman nose *made* boy. Subject present

Actually, in the fragment above, there is only one utterance in which the subject is realized in sentence-initial position, viz., the sentence about the snowman, but the verb is lacking here (6).

- (6) Snowman not eye not nose not ear not mouth.

A teacher may wonder if there is a grammatical rule underlying those utterances and, if so, what it may be. The most important rule seems to be: Do not explicitly use a subject when it is clear from the context who or what the subject is. Therefore, Gülisar does not express the boy as a subject, as he is the protagonist. If a speaker has the feeling that some explanation is needed, the subject can be added at the end of the sentence (5f). The second rule is: Explicitly express a subject (i) when there is a topic shift or (ii) when you want to express emphasis or contrast. The latter rule is applied in (6) because the boy is no longer the topic but the snowman. These grammatical rules are not a personal invention of Gülisar but are based on the L1: Turkish (cf. Kornfilt, 1997, or other grammar books on Turkish). Table 2 gives an overview of subject realization in Gülisar's picture story-telling. Utterances without a verb and those without a subject are counted, e.g., when a simple one-word utterance as: *buiten* (outside) was meant as a whole sentence: he is going outside.

Table 2: Utterances with and without subject verbs over 15 months (interval 5 months)

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Subject and verb present	21 %	19 %	16 %
No subject, verb present	38 %	37 %	44 %
Subject, no verb	22 %	17 %	21 %
No subject, no verb	19 %	27 %	19 %

As can be inferred from Table 2, Gülisar's interlanguage in which subjects can be "omitted" under certain conditions is still used at the end of the project in Cycle 3. The number of subjects explicitly expressed does not increase and neither does the number of verbs.

2.6 *Prepositions*

The most important feature with regard to the realization of prepositions in the fragment cited above is that there are only a few of them, also in cases where they are obligatory in Dutch. In fact, none of the utterances (5a) - (5f), contain a preposition. Two prepositions can be found in the fragment, when Gülisar described pictures 5 and 6 using the preposition *op* ('upon' or 'on'), repeated in (7a) and (7b). And there is one more preposition in (7c) in her description of picture 8.

- (7) a [tafel op] koekies
table on cookies
"cookies on the table"
- b [kep [hoofd op] sneeuwman
 cap head on snowman
 "the cap on the snowman's head"
- c [glaasje water in] de tanders
 glass water in the teeth
 "teeth in a glass of water"



First, we are dealing here with postpositions rather than prepositions; second, the subject may follow the postposition phrase, as in (7a) and (7c); third, the copula is lacking. This interlanguage can be fully explained by the L1. Turkish has a morphological system of cases where location can be expressed by a suffix. In addition, there is a small number of postpositions expressing location and the realization of the copula ('to be') is optional in the present tense. Table 3 provides an overview of Gülisar's results for prepositions.

Table 3: Overview of the use of pre- and postpositions over 15 months (interval 5 months)

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
No pre/postposition realized	68 %	56 %	54 %
Postpositions	19 %	27 %	22 %
Prepositions	13 %	17 %	25 %

As Table 3 shows, Gülisar makes (a modest) progress in the use of prepositions. The number of zero realizations decreases (note that this is no more than 14% over a period of 15 months), and the number prepositions has doubled after an increase of postpositions in Cycle 2.

2.7 *Possessive Constructions in Nominal Phrases*

In Dutch, possession within nominal phrases (e.g., John's bicycle) can be expressed in two ways, as shown in (8). In (8a) the possessor precedes the possessee, in (8b) the order is reversed and a dummy preposition *van* ("of") has been inserted.

- | | | |
|-----|---|--|
| (8) | <i>nominal</i> | <i>pronominal</i> |
| a | Jan's / z'n fiets
John's / his bicycle | zijn fiets
his bicycle |
| b | de fiets van Jan
the bicycle of John | de fiets van hem
the bicycle of him |

In the excerpt below, the possessive noun phrases in (9a) and (9b) are found, the example in (9c) comes from another fragment of the same sample.

- (9) a sneeuwman neus
snowman nose
"the snowman's nose"
- b kep hoofd op sneeuwman
cap head on snowman
"the cap on the snowman's head"
- c vader moeder slapenkamer deur
father mother sleeproom door
"the door of father and mother's sleeping room"

What these examples have in common is that the possessee, which is the head of the noun phrase, is in initial position; a native speaker of Dutch would also place the head (nose, head and door) in initial position, e.g., *de neus van de sneeuwman*. So, the interlanguage grammar seems to have the following rules for Gülisar:

- the head of the phrase is on the right side;
- the possessor is in initial position;
- the possessor can be separated from the possessee (9b) and placed at the end of the sentence (comparable to what happened with the subject).

The reader will understand that these rules correspond to Turkish grammar. Table 4 provides the number of nominal possessive constructions found in the picture story-telling, not in percentages but in raw numbers due to the low number of items.

Table 4: Overview of possessive nominal phrases

		Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
	(example)			
Possessive pronouns	zijn kamer	1	-	-
Possessor - possessee order	Jan fiets	7	13	14
Possessee - possessor	fiets Jan	-	-	3
Insertion of <i>van</i>	fiets <i>van</i> Jan	-	-	-

As can be seen in Table 4, Gülisar’s dominant strategy of constructing possessive noun phrases is that of the L1. In the last cycle the L2 order emerges, though without the linking element *van*. There is only one suppliance of a possessive pronoun in Cycle 1. The noun phrase, which can be used without any inflectional marking, is obviously preferred by Gülisar.

2.8 To Have

The verb “to have” expressing a possessive relationship occurs only once in the three cycles, right at the beginning of Cycle 1, in the third month of the data collection. As can be seen in (10), it is far from easy for Gülisar to produce such an utterance.

- (10) kind bedkamer hebben /heb /hebben hef //heeft (month 3)
child bedroom have-INF /has-1SG /have-INF/hef-3SG //has-3SG
“the child has a bedroom”
(/ = repetition without correction ; // = repetition with correction)

The utterance in (10) shows her difficulties in producing the correctly inflected verb form. After four attempts, Gülisar succeeds, but the position of the verb still corresponds to the L1 order. In spite of the fact that the verb “to have” occurs frequently in the textbooks, she cannot produce it any more spontaneously in the next 12 months. The verb “to have” remains unexpressed, as shown in (11).

- (11) sneeuwman niet oog niet neus niet oor niet mond (month 15)
snowman not eye not nose not ear not mouth
“the snowman has no eyes, no nose, no ears, no mouth”

These examples show that even frequently occurring verbs, such as “to have” cannot be used after 15 months (plus 12 months before the data collection started) of instruction. The reason why Gülisar was able to produce the utterance in (10) may be that much attention was given to the

conjugation of the verb in the lessons at that time. Instead of having this knowledge become automated, she seems to fall back and to rely on her L1, where a specific word for “to have” is lacking (see Kornfilt, 1997; Van de Craats, Corver & Van Hout, 2002).

3 *Is Gülisar the Only One?*

The above examples and tables lead to the conclusion that there is hardly any progress in Gülisar’s L2 acquisition process, that she mainly relies on her L1, and that both free and bound morphology (viz., free morphemes like *van*, “of,” and bound inflection morphemes) are great obstacles. What about the other participants in the corpus?

I cannot go into full details here by providing tables for all grammatical issues discussed so far for all participants in the corpus, but I want to make two exceptions: for the realization of the subject and for the position of the finite verb. Table 5 gives an overview of missing subjects for four other participants, two Turkish and two Moroccan learners.

Table 5: Percentages of missing subjects in a retelling task of 2 Turkish and 2 Moroccan learners

Cycle	Ayfer Turkish	Emine Turkish	Najat Moroccan	Mina Moroccan
1	60%	60%	62%	40%
2	80%	57%	58%	20%
3	60%	44%	57%	18%

After 15 months of Dutch lessons, Ayfer has not made any progress in realizing the subject, Emine is more successful, the Moroccan Najat has progressed slowly, Mina has made progress like Emine, but her final result is much better.² It should be noted that Mina did not have any formal education. She is more or less an self-made woman in literacy acquisition: with a little help from her brothers and an uncle, she learned to read and write in Arabic script at age 12. In the Netherlands, at age 20, she took a literacy course in Latin script with the result that she was the most advanced learner and fastest reader of all 15 participants in the present corpus. All in all, it is clear that subject realization in Dutch is a serious obstacle in learning Dutch, particularly for learners with a Turkish language background.³

² Moroccan, like Turkish, is a language that permits subject pro-drop (i.e. non-realization of the pronominal subject).

³ The results are better for Moroccan learners, as can be seen in Table 5. The fact that Moroccan Arabic makes use of a dislocated topic – often a subject – seems to be the cause

The second example is the position of the verb. In a drag and drop task, the participants were asked to make a sentence by dragging constituents to a line and dropping them at the right position. The task differed from a normal drag and drop task in that there were too many constituents. In that way, Turkish learners could construct an L1-based sentence and Moroccan learners could do so as well. An example is given in Figure 1. When Turkish learners rely on their L1 structure, the result will be: *Freek een bon krijgen / krijgt* (Freek a fine get/gets), and when the Moroccan learners do the same, the result will be: *Freek krijgt een bon* (Freek gets a fine). The results for the two language groups are given in Table 6.

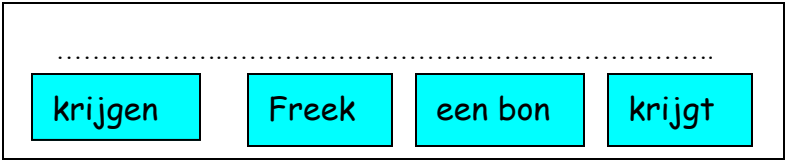


Figure 1: Example of an item from the drag and drop task: “Freek gets a fine.”

Table 6: Overview of the responses on the item from Figure 1 in Cycle 1

Turkish learners	Moroccan learners
Freek een bon krijgt.	Freek krijgt een bon.
Freek krijgt een bon.	Freek krijgt een bon.
Freek een bon krijgen.	Freek krijgt een bon.
Freek een bon krijgt.	Een bon krijgt Freek.
Freek krijgt een bon.	Freek krijgt een bon.
Freek krijgt een bon.	Freek krijgt een bon.
Freek een bon krijgt.	Freek krijgt een bon.
Freek krijgt een bon.	

50% of the Turkish learners constructed the sentence based on their L1; all Moroccans did the same and arrived at a target-like sentence. This task was repeated twice. In the last cycle, three out of eight Turkish learners still showed full reliance on the L1. Gülisar was one of them. Unlike in the spontaneous production task, there was no time pressure in this controlled task. Nevertheless, the Turkish participants found it hard to carry out this task with correct results.

of this difference between Turkish and Moroccan learners, which has been manifested for the other participants in the project as well.

4 *Conclusions and Recommendations*

The results of the grammatical aspects we have considered above show that, for most low-educated Turkish learners of Dutch, the structure of the L1 is the cause of individual and collective obstacles in the acquisition of Dutch. The context of the school, the instruction of the teacher, and help of textbooks do not seem to have much impact on the results. In 99% of the cases, the teacher is not aware of what the problem is for the learner, since she is not familiar with grammatical properties of the learner's L1, although Turks are the largest ethnic minority group in the Netherlands. Talented learners like Mina are not hindered by these problems: for them, the communicative approach and all tasks carried out in the world outside the classroom have their benefits. For many others, obstacles as shown above cause stagnation and sometimes even fossilization. Low-educated learners normally have little metalinguistic skill and are not able to discover the differences and similarities between their L1 and the L2 without the help of the teacher or a language-specific support. Program designers, coordinators and the like are generally not inclined to see the benefit of such support, because it has been impressed upon them for a long time that immersion and communicative approach is the best way and that one should not give privileges to specific groups. I am convinced, however, that initially, many low-educated learners with little metalinguistic skill may benefit from instruction and some explanation in their L1 about differences between L1 and L2.

What can be done to improve the instruction given to L2 learners like Gülisar? First, I would recommend that there be given more attention to linguistic differences and similarities between L1 and L2 in teacher training, in any case with regard to the main immigrant languages, i.e., Turkish and Moroccan Arabic, so that teachers will get more insight into the developmental errors of their students and be trained to explain to low-educated students and to practice with them the specific and basic features covered in this article. This can also be done by training teachers with a Turkish and Moroccan background or by setting up special computerized language programs tailored to one specific group of learners. If this turns out to be impossible, at least remedial teachers should be made aware of these special problems so that they can detect problems and organize help.

This presentation was followed by a screening of Nouredine Erradi's film "Newcomers to Morocco," which demonstrates the reactions of Dutch teachers when they became newcomers in an unfamiliar culture and had to learn a new language without knowledge of the script in that language. These high-educated learners clearly admitted how very useful some help in their L1 would have been.

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