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LITERACY AND SECOND LANGUAGE IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

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1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to give a brief and concise overview of the position of the illiterate and low-literate second language (L2) learner who, as an immigrant, comes or has come to the Netherlands or to Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. Although these two countries share a language and both have a great number of immigrants with a low level of education that have to learn this language, they do not share policies and practices, which has specific unintended consequences.

First, some background information will be given on the diversity of the population of immigrants. Since nearly all illiterates and low-educated learners are subject to integration policies, ample attention will be given to governmental policy on admission, integration and citizenship, and the relevant terms will be carefully defined to avoid misunderstandings. In the next section, we will go more deeply into the situation of low-literate immigrants with regard to the increasing demands imposed on them by the two respective governments in the form of a series of tests of their proficiency of Dutch and knowledge of Dutch/Belgium society. Lastly, the focus will be on the content of DL2 (Dutch as an L2) programmes: aims and frameworks used in L2 literacy courses or standard L2 courses, course materials, teacher training and teacher qualifications. The Netherlands and Flanders will be presented comparatively; whenever the situation in Flanders differs from that in the Netherlands, this will be described separately.

Dutch is the national language of the Netherlands, with a population of 16 million, and is one of the official languages of Belgium.² The largest minority groups in the Netherlands come (in this order) from Turkey, Morocco (labour migrants), Surinam (former colony), Antilles, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and from several African countries (refugees and asylum seekers). The main ethnic minority groups in Flanders come from Morocco, the largest group, and from Turkey. Another large group comes from the former colony of Belgium, the Congo in Central Africa, the majority of whom speaks French. Moreover, there is a group of former mineworkers of Italian origin. The more recent immigrants come from several East European countries, (north) African and Asian countries and from some countries in the Middle East.

2 Integration and Citizenship

2.1 Legislation

After centuries during which labour migrants, refugees and asylum seekers entered the Low Countries (an alternative term for Belgium and the Netherlands) with few impediments, this changed at the end of the 20th century when the number of non-indigenous people increased at a time when unemployment of this group rose sharply and there was great commotion in Dutch society after the murder of Pim Fortuyn

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² Dutch is spoken in the north-western part of Belgium by six million people and also by the population of a small part of northern France. In addition, Dutch is the official language of Surinam, a former Dutch colony, and of the Dutch Caribbean Islands.

(2002) and Theo van Gogh (2004)³ a major portion of the population wanted not only a restrictive but even a repressive policy on the admission of new arrivals (newcomers) and extensive attention to civic integration, or *inburgering* (the process of becoming a *burger* = citizen, not to be confused with the process of naturalization). This resulted in a series of regulations, acts and laws aimed at non-nationals serving to regulate, consecutively, their admission to the Netherlands (Act on Settlement), their integration (Integration Act) and their citizenship or naturalization (Citizenship Act).⁴ The most recent act dates from 2007, and was adapted in 2008.

As for Flanders, there is a federal act for non-nationals for Belgium, but there is an Integration Act specifically for Flanders which dates from 2006 and can be seen as a form of policy on settling. This is meant to provide non-nationals with an orientation to the new society and has nothing to do with naturalization.

2.2 *Integration Programme*

In the Netherlands, the integration programme is not only mandatory for new arrivals, but also for groups of low-educated long-term residents without Dutch citizenship. The integration programme consists of two parts. The first part is focused on knowledge of Dutch society. Main topics are history, politics, geography, health, education and the job market. For new arrivals, the language part of the programme is aimed at proficiency level A2 (Waystage) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF). For long-term residents who are most often low-educated and low-literate or illiterate caretakers or workers the target level is A1 for written skills (reading and writing) and A2 for oral skills. Moreover, the programme focuses on practicing functional competence of Dutch so that new arrivals can deal with the most essential situations and activities and so that long-term residents can function better in their interaction with local and national authorities, health service, education, and so on. Examples of these survival situations and activities (named: *cruciale praktijksituaties* 'crucial practical situations') are how to rent an apartment and how to communicate with the housing association. The first course materials based on this functional approach have since been published, including materials for low-educated immigrants. As in the Netherlands, the introduction programme for new arrivals and long-term residents in Flanders consists of two parts. The primary programme consists of Dutch as a second language to the first level, A1 or Breakthrough of the Common European Framework, and knowledge of Belgian society with the same themes as in the Netherlands. In addition, there is an individual coaching and orientation programme at professional, educational and social levels. In the secondary programme, the newcomer receives vocational training from the employment organisation.

2.3 *Certification*

Three different certificates play a role. They are related to the point at which new arrivals are tested on their knowledge of Dutch society and skills in Dutch. These points are admission, integration and citizenship/naturalization.

2.3.1 *Admission*

The first certificate is required for admission to the Netherlands for migrants from non-European and non-western countries (note that U.S., Australia as well as Japan are

³ Pim Fortuyn was a controversial politician due to his views on immigrants and Islam. He called Islam "a backward culture" and said that if it were legally possible he would close the borders to Muslim immigrants. Theo van Gogh was a film and television producer and publicist and a friend of Fortuyn. He felt strongly that political Islam was an increasing threat to liberal western societies, and said that with an often aggressive tone. After his movie *Submission* he received death threats.

⁴ It should also be emphasized, however, that in Dutch society much protest has been raised against this integration policy, e.g. by a group of concerned citizens in the national media in 2004.

seen as western) who want to settle in the Netherlands. The majority of these immigrants consists of the (future) partners of immigrants already living in the Netherlands. The exam is taken at the Dutch embassy or consulate in the country of origin of the candidate. The candidate has to pass this exam to get an entry-visa for the Netherlands. First s/he has to pass a test of knowledge of Dutch society before taking a test of the Dutch language. This test is a computerized phone test of oral skills with four types of tasks: sentence imitation, answering short questions, giving lexical opposites and retelling a very short story (the latter is only meant to validate the test). The required proficiency level is lower than CEF level A1, referred to as A1- (minus). An example of each type is given in (1).

- (1) Sentence imitation: *Ik heb twee koffers.* ‘I have two suitcases.’
 Short question: *Wat is langer, een arm of een been?*
 ‘Which is longer, an arm or a leg’
 Contrasts: *Vader* ‘father’
Laatste ‘last’

For most low-educated candidates it is not easy to learn Dutch prior to emigration. In countries like Morocco and Turkey, private language institutes offer Dutch language courses tailored to future emigrants who possess a higher level of education. Some individuals even travel to the Netherlands to take a language course and return home when they have reached the requisite level, then taking the phone exam at their Dutch embassy or consulate. This, however, is not a realistic option for illiterate adults. For them it is hard to pass the first exam, particularly because there is no contact possible with the target language, they cannot use written information, they have not developed metalinguistic skills and they lack learning experience in the context of school. So in practice, most illiterates do not succeed; the screening procedure seems to be intended to keep out those who are less literate.

The first half of 2008, however, saw an important change when a judicial verdict pronounced that those who enter the Netherlands for family reunion cannot be obliged to pass an exam outside the country. Meanwhile legal proceedings have begun regarding the practice of preparing for and taking an exam in the immigrant’s country of origin, where this may contravene European Union legislation.

In Belgium, emigrants do not have to take an exam to be admitted and get a permit of residence.

2.3.2 *Integration*

The *Inburgeringsexamen* ‘integration exam’ consists of a centrally administered part and a practice exam. This exam consists of three parts: (i) Knowledge of Dutch society, which is tested through computerized multiple-choice questions and has to be passed before the language test is taken; (ii) A computer-based test in which oral and written functional Dutch is tested related to either work or OGO/*Onderwijs Gezondheid Opvoeding* ‘education, health and child raising’; (iii) the phone-based test for oral Dutch for which a higher level (CEF A2) is required. Part (ii) consists of either making a portfolio, a representative selection of proof of acquired skills and/or results of practice assessments given by certified assessors (required language proficiency level: A2). Immigrants must pass this exam in order to get a permanent residence permit. Immigrants who can show that they have already attained the required level through another exam, such as the National Exam Dutch as a Second Language (CEF level B1 or B2), are exempt. For low-educated long-term residents the level of A1 for written skills is required. In practice, only a low number of true illiterates can attain the A1 level for written skills, and even a lower number reach the A2 level. Reaching A2 for oral skills is also difficult (see Kurvers & Van de Craats elsewhere in this volume). As of this writing, no one had been deported and the deadline for passing the integration exam has been postponed until 2010.

In Flanders although taking courses is now required, exams testing Dutch language proficiency or knowledge of society are not compulsory. Instead, the Centre for Civic Integration grants a certificate to immigrants who have attended the lessons frequently.

2.3.3 *Citizenship*

Until 2007, there was a separate citizenship test in the Netherlands. On 1 April 2007, however, the test was replaced by the *Inburgerings* ('integration') Test. This meant that the granting of citizenship had become the end point of a completed integration process. Since 2008, those who either had no education or did not finish primary school in their country of origin have been categorized as illiterates on this basis receive dispensation for the written part of the test provided they can demonstrate on the one hand that they have made a considerable effort and on the other that they would not expect to attain the required level within five years. However, they still have to pass the test for oral skills, which is not easy for this group.

Flanders does not have such a series of tests for those who apply for citizenship.

2.3.4 *Funding*

In the Netherlands, in principle, new arrivals finance their own integration course⁵ unless they belong to a special group such as caretakers and unemployed adults for whom local authorities organize courses tailored to their specific needs. At the beginning of 2008, the newly appointed Minister of Integration, Housing and Communities announced an important reduction in new arrivals' own contribution. Local authorities are now responsible for the courses for illiterates, which are financed under the Education and Labour Act.

In Flanders, the Ministry of Education and Labour funds the integration programme for Dutch language lessons and for orientation to the labour market. The Ministry of Civic Integration finances social integration, individual coaching and orientation to educational and society. Attendance is compulsory for newly arrived immigrants, but the lessons are free.

3 *Literacy and Dutch as L2*

3.1 *Participants*

In both the Netherlands and Flanders, the participants of the literacy classes come mainly from Morocco⁶ – many of them speak a Berber language along with some Moroccan Arabic – but some also come from Afghanistan, Iraq, Thailand, several African countries such as Somalia, Ghana, Sierra Leone and (mainly in Flanders) the Congo and Burundi.

3.2 *Frameworks, aims and targets*

In the Netherlands, a national framework DL2 (Dutch as second language) has been set up based on the CEF (Council of Europe, 2001) with an accompanying Portfolio in which various 'can do' statements are included. Since the CEF adopts the end of primary school as its baseline, it does not cover basic skills such as reading and writing. In order to adapt this framework for use in L2 literacy classes, an additional framework (*Raamwerk Alfabetisering*) for Literacy in DL2 has been developed, i.e. three literacy levels have been added below the lowest existing level of the CEF. For reading and writing,

⁵ Such courses may cost 2000 euros but the cost varies. In principle, every immigrant can freely choose a course but the immigrant her/himself is responsible for obtaining the integration certificate.

⁶ The estimated percentage of Moroccans in literacy courses is 50%.

these levels are literacy level A, B and C, where level C indicates the level referred to in CEF level A1 (Breakthrough). At all three levels, technical and functional reading and writing skills are integrated in such a way that literacy learners are constantly working on functional literacy skills, initially with some help, and subsequently, when the functional level is much higher than the technical skills already acquired, gradually practicing independent functional literacy tasks. For oral Dutch (listening and speaking) the CEF up to level A1 is used (see Stockmann, 2006 for more information). The Portfolio is not only a personal dossier in which evidence of already acquired skills is collected, but also a diagnostic tool for teachers and an opportunity for DL2 literacy learners to control and evaluate their own learning process.

The L2 literacy lessons in Flanders can be positioned in a framework DL2 that is based on the levels A1 and A2 of the CEF. The framework has been developed into a centrally - for all of Flanders - designed curriculum of ten modules of 60 hours each up to level A1, five modules for oral skills in DL2 and five modules for written skills. This division creates the possibility for illiterate migrants with some proficiency in oral Dutch to enter the basic module for written skills while at the same time attending a higher-level module for oral Dutch. Another six modules of 60 hours each are designed for the second stage, from Breakthrough (A1) to Waystage (A2). In addition to listening, speaking, reading and writing, attention is given to key skills in participating in society, to social and cultural attitudes and to the development of learning and communication strategies.

3.3 Intake

In the Netherlands, an intake interview is done by the municipality or another organization. For the purpose of integration courses, a special test battery has been set up which is tailored to illiterates and low-educated immigrants. On the basis of these test results the newcomer will be placed in a stream related either to work or to OGO (education, health and raising children).

In Flanders, a similar intake interview for all immigrants is organized by the so-called Houses of Dutch. Here, a cognitive intake test is administered to literate L2 learners. On the basis of this test the immigrant is referred to a school that suits him or her best. At this school or adult education centre there will be another interview with the immigrant about his or her expectations, wishes, aims and obligations. Subsequently, another intake test takes place, dependent on the school or centre that s/he will attend.

3.4 Content and course materials

In both the Netherlands and Flanders, the contents of DL2 literacy courses can be characterized as focusing first and foremost on the functional oral and written skills in Dutch that immigrants need in their social and work-related contacts, social environment and personal family situation.

In the Netherlands the official legislation distinguishes two perspectives: work and OGO in which the educational track and the social track are more or less combined. In addition to the functional skills (such as vocabulary and speech acts for oral Dutch and reading messages from children's schools or filling in forms) in both the Netherlands and Flanders, special attention is given to learning to read and write. For decoding the written language, a phonics approach is used in which phonemes are related to graphemes or letters (a sight word method is not common in adult L2 literacy classes since Dutch has a relatively transparent orthography). Generally, some key words are first presented as sight words in the context of a meaningful text and these words are then used to teach students the alphabetical principle, i.e. learning phoneme-grapheme correspondences by analyzing the written words, sounding out phonemes and combining them into the spoken word. This process is automatized during the course until a certain level of fluency is attained. Functional written language is used as well

from the very beginning, although the students are not required to read independently. In Flanders, students can more or less choose between three tracks: a work-related track for those who work or who must apply for a job and who want to proceed to further (vocational) education, an education-related track for students taking DL2 courses at university and a social track for those (housewives for example) for whom work or further education is not an option.

Both countries also combine ready-made programmes for DL2 literacy learning, including computer-assisted materials, with self-made materials in which teachers try to adapt their teaching to students' social context and their needs. Teachers use all sorts of authentic documents from community (ranging from electricity bills to birth notification, advertisements and vacancies) and stories told by students that are rewritten into reading materials. The ready-made programmes are mainly designed for basic reading and writing skills (phonics) in combination with reading comprehension and functional reading and writing skills on the one hand, or basic oral skills such as vocabulary, verbal routines and functional speech acts on the other. Many of the ready-made literacy materials used are similar in the Netherlands and Flanders, with on-the-spot alterations in Flanders to adapt the language to those situations in which Flemish Dutch differs from Netherlands Dutch.

4 *Teacher qualifications*

In the Netherlands, as in Flanders, there is no specific teacher qualification for second language teaching. Many teachers working with adult second language literacy learners have either a qualification to teach primary school or to teach a foreign language in secondary school. As in Flanders, all those who had no specific teaching qualification but had been working in adult second language education for some years have had to attend special teacher training courses to receive a basic education certificate.

In Flanders, where there is no teacher qualification for second language and literacy teaching, until 2007, a specific training programme existed that all basic education teachers were required to attend. This programme has paid attention to - in addition to general topics related to teaching low-educated adults - second language learning and second language literacy. This certificate was compulsory for teachers without any teaching diploma, such as teachers who were employed in basic education on the basis of a specific professional background in social or cultural work. Many other teachers have completed tertiary or university education and are qualified teachers, of for example, a foreign language. The post-academic training "Didactics Dutch as a second language" at Antwerp University is now the only option for teachers who want to take courses on this subject.

In both the Netherlands and Flanders, regular in-service training is offered for those who want to refresh or update their knowledge or who are just entering the field. The professional association of adult second language teachers has recently been engaged in the developing a specific second language certificate which individuals and institutions can use as a hallmark for quality control.

5 *Conclusions*

Above, it is shown how two neighbouring countries in western Europe which share one language differ in policy regarding the currently great influx of immigrants and asylum seekers. The Netherlands has been much stricter in its admission, integration and naturalization policies. As we have seen, in comparing the Dutch context to the one in Flanders, the climate in the Netherlands has become much more restrictive than in Flanders. Although in the Netherlands it is not claimed that illiterates and low-literates are not welcome, the reality is that it is almost impossible for this group of

adults to pass the testing regime that the government has erected for both new arrivals and long-term residents. One of the responses has been - especially by low-educated individuals - that they first move to Belgium, follow a course there, get a certificate (based on attendance and not on proficiency), obtain a residence permit and move to the Netherlands where they are then allowed to stay because the permit is valid for all of Europe. Although the policies and testing regimes in the two countries differ, the ways in which adult second language and literacy teachers coach new arrivals in acquiring basic skills in both language and literacy and in assisting them with relevant social and labour market needs are roughly similar.

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