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## POLICY ON LESLLA LEARNERS IN FLANDERS

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### 1 *Introduction*

As an advisor to the Flemish Minister for Education I am involved in all aspects of lifelong learning; therefore, second language acquisition in low-educated non-native speakers of Dutch is only one of the many issues I advise on. However, language acquisition in non-native speakers of Dutch holds a very important position within adult education as a whole. In the past six to seven years the interest in the target group of low-educated non-native speakers of Dutch and illiterates has rapidly increased.

This increasing interest was addressed by a number of new policy initiatives that are based on a well-considered view of second language acquisition in low-educated non-native speakers of Dutch. These developments required investment from the government both in terms of budget and support. The government has tried to convert the most recent scientific developments regarding second language acquisition into a realistic and concrete policy which has political and social support and takes budgetary restrictions and the capacity of those who are to implement it into account.

These policy lines were built up following extensive consultation with the parties involved in the provision of Dutch as a second language (DSL). I will discuss this in greater detail later on. The consensus on which this policy was based to a large extent explains the success of the implemented measures.

From this perspective I wish to take you through the way that second language policy in Flanders was developed, a process which very much fits in with a broader migration and integration policy. I will give you a brief outline of the rapid changes that are taking place in Flemish second language policy, and in particular of the attention this policy devotes to low-educated and illiterate non-Dutch speakers. My aim is to offer you a greater insight into the overall vision of this policy. Naturally, I will also elaborate on the policy's successes and mention the aspects of it we still need to work on. I will also discuss the important challenges we believe we will be facing with regards to second language policy in the near and distant future.

### 2 *Flanders as an immigration country*

Antwerp is a melting pot of different nationalities and cultures. There are many reasons why Antwerp has become the benchmark for measuring the success or failure of integration policy in Flanders.

Belgium has had a high level of immigration country since the early fifties.<sup>1</sup> At the time, labour was actively recruited from countries such as Italy, Morocco and Turkey. Since the seventies, this type of immigration has ceased. To this day, dozens of new immigrants enter Flanders every day through asylum and family reunification procedures, as a result of illegal immigration, the free movement of citizens within the EU, labour migration or international student programmes.

This immigration has no doubt yielded economic, cultural and social benefits. A lot of immigrants have built a life and future here and contribute to this country's prosperity. However, increasing immigration also has a downside. Some newcomers find it hard to participate in society as fully-fledged citizens, and to be accepted or to make themselves accepted. The reasons for this are diverse and complex. They are mainly due to socio-economic factors, reinforced by socio-cultural and sometimes even religious factors.

Until the late nineties, people believed that this new group of immigrants would be swiftly and smoothly integrated into our society. By attending school and working they would acquire knowledge of the Dutch language and find themselves a place within our society. These expectations were not met. The disadvantages faced by the immigrant communities have insufficiently decreased. Moreover, as a result of the constant discrimination and deprivation, access to the labour market, higher education and housing also continue to be difficult. Because of these issues immigrant communities do not equally participate in society, they mostly compensate for this by falling back on their own socio-cultural groups. This results in increasing social and cultural segregation and the emergence of a growing subclass.

The consequences of this soon made themselves felt. The segregation of certain groups within the population led to increasing polarisation in our society and growing mutual intolerance, discrimination and racism. We find that the political and social climate is hardening.

It is within this context that in the mid-nineties we came to believe that we needed to adopt a more structured approach if we were to put an end to these negative social developments. This resulted in an adjustment of policy in many areas, mainly in the field of education and employment. I will not elaborate too much on this subject; however, it is important to mention that these developments also brought about a change in the Flemish policy on second language education, which I will now discuss in greater detail.

## 2 *Developments pertaining to Dutch as a second language*

Although there has been a formal educational provision of Dutch as a second language (DSL) in Flanders since 1970, until the mid-nineties this was mostly limited to local volunteer initiatives within non-formal socio-cultural education. Little attention was paid in this to common orientation, quality management and professionalising teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> The following paragraphs are largely inspired by Paul Scheffer's (2007) book *Land van aankomst* (Country of arrival).

In many cases the training objectives were often not clearly defined, there was no evaluation or certification and the different providers did not recognise each other's courses. No differentiation was made between the level of education and the prior knowledge of non-native speakers of Dutch and, as a result, many class groups contained both university-educated L2 learners with high cognitive skills and course participants who had had little or no education. This policy had many negative consequences, in particular the lowest educated did not get any opportunity to learn Dutch and as a result, their chances in society were dramatically reduced.

In 1993, the Flemish authorities organised the first round table conference on Dutch as a second language with all key stakeholders. This conference can be considered a historic milestone. During the next ten years the provision of Dutch as a second language was uniformised along the lines of the policy recommendations formed during this round table conference. To this end, the Common European Framework of Reference for modern-foreign languages was adopted by all public provision providers as a common framework of reference. This framework enabled these institutions to recognise each other's courses and certificates, which greatly improved chances for L2 learners of Dutch.

Another important development was the fact that more attention was given to the prior knowledge and learning skills of L2 learners of Dutch. In 1997, the first model entrance examination was developed; it was designed to ensure that participants were placed in a second language provision appropriate to their capabilities. This resulted in a split between course providers, Adult Education centres focussed more on high-educated participants while Adult Basic Education centres dealt mainly with low-educated or illiterate second language learners. However, as a result of the competition between these institutions, a lot of course participants still ended up in a provision which was unsuitable for them. Most of these participants became discouraged, dropped out of their course and lost the opportunity to learn Dutch in a way that was suited to their needs.

In 2002, a second round table conference took place; this can again be seen as a milestone. The policy which was formed during this conference built on the existing policies. Eight Dutch Language Houses were established with the aim of referring non-Dutch speakers in a neutral and objective manner to the most suitable provision. A cognitive skills test was developed to this end which gives an indication of course participants' learning potential. To this day, thanks to the Dutch Language Houses, lower educated and illiterate non-native speakers of Dutch are offered a suitable provision of Dutch as a second language.

Another important element is that strong emphasis was placed on the professionalisation of the training provision of Dutch as a second language. Encouraged by the Support Centre for Dutch as L2, now renamed 'Centre for Language and Education', test databases and model material were developed, an in-service training policy for teachers was developed which helped all institutions to improve the quality of second language provision. This encouraged a growing number of non-native speakers of Dutch to opt for a formal training in Dutch as a second language and to make less use of voluntary initiatives.

One important development since 2003 is that the courses themselves have become more uniform across the different institutions. The Centres for Adult Basic Education and the Centres for Adult Education, for instance, provide DSL courses that differ in terms of training duration and teaching method, but that pursue the same goals and have a similar structure. This makes it easier for lower educated course participants who have completed an adult basic education course to follow in-service training at a Centre for Adult Education. I will discuss these similar courses later on.

The professionalisation of the training provision of DSL goes hand in hand with a reinforced striving to let the non-native speakers of Dutch actively participate in the society, for instance by being an (active) member of sport club, being a volunteer or feeling oneself responsible for problems between the native and non-native population in mixed quarters in the big cities. In 2003, the Flemish civic integration policy was adopted. Dutch language knowledge has been established as a prerequisite for successful integration. Anyone who seeks to participate in society, who wants to be part of the community, who wishes to help his or her children at school or is looking for a job can only do so if he or she speaks Dutch.

For this reason, newcomers are obliged to attend a reception programme. This includes a basic course in Dutch as a second language. If someone refuses to follow this course he or she may be fined. More recently, the activation policy has extended to employment and housing policies. People who wish to retain their right to unemployment benefit and do not speak Dutch must follow a course in Dutch as a second language. People who wish to apply for rented social housing must show a willingness to learn Dutch.

These policy measures were not without effect. Between 2002 and 2008 the participation in Dutch as a second language courses rose by 32% at the Centres for Adult Education and by 38% at the Centres for Adult Basic Education. Each year, some 62,000 course participants follow a course in Dutch as a second language. The obligation of non-Dutch speakers to learn Dutch also entails an obligation for the government, which has to make available a sufficient provision of Dutch language courses to meet the demand. Additional investments were made to reduce the waiting lists for the courses of Dutch as a second language. Currently, the Flemish government provides an annual budget of over 80 million euros for this purpose. About 2,500 teachers are occupied on a daily basis in giving Dutch as a second language classes.

#### 4 *Development of separate programme for literacy course participants*

I have given you a very brief overview of the changes in Dutch as a second language provision that occurred in Flanders during the past two decades. The position of very slow-learning or illiterate non-native speakers of Dutch is of vital importance in these developments. This target group has been catered for by the Centres for Adult Basic Education since 1990. The social task of these institutions is to increase the general literacy level in adult Flemings. This also includes the organisation of courses in Dutch as a second language that are exclusively geared towards the least-educated.

The professionalisation and reforms in the Dutch as a second language field had a far-reaching impact on adult basic education. Until 2003, this sector worked with an open curriculum with vague, general objectives. The emphasis was on the social aspects of group learning and equal attention was given to the social aspects and to the knowledge and skills to be acquired. Teachers mostly concentrated on the development and optimisation of already available knowledge and skills. Here and now experiences were used as important subject matter. However, as the things that course participants wish to learn, rarely run parallel to the structure of a course, teachers had a great deal of freedom to organise their own tasks. The centres for adult basic education used their own methods to define targets and levels and to evaluate learning progress. Due to the lack of a systematic evaluation system it was impossible to properly assess the extent to which learning objectives had been met. In that respect this provision was very much in line with the volunteer initiatives of the eighties and nineties.

In 2003, this way of running second language courses was completely changed. Firstly, it was determined which courses could be organised by the centres for adult basic education. A structure and targets were defined for each course. These targets were minimum objectives in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes which the government considered appropriate for course participants.

This reform took place in two phases. In a first phase the Dutch as a second language course was reorganised. In adult basic education only one basic course could be organised at level 1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for modern foreign languages. The Breakthrough level consisted of 4 modules of 60 periods. The Waystage level was made up of 3 modules of 80 periods. It soon turned out that although this course was suitable for most low educated course participants with more limited cognitive skills, it did not bring any help very slow-learning course participants or illiterates.

That is why a separate course was introduced for this specific target group. In 2005, the modular DSL literacy training was introduced in adult basic education at the Breakthrough level.<sup>2</sup> This training consists of 10 modules of 60 periods each. One module, module 5, focuses specifically on writing skills. In 2006, this course was complemented with 6 additional modules at the Waystage level. The entire training programme at level 1 thus encompasses 960 periods.

Two aspects of literacy, namely prose literacy and document literacy are developed in this course. In terms of learning objectives and contexts this course fits in with the traditional DSL trajectory.

The development of this course was founded on a number of important basic principles, for example from a vision of second language instruction as a means to achieve more equal opportunities and a better integration into our society. That is why teaching Dutch can never be a goal in itself, but must be as functional as possible. Slow-learning or illiterate non-Dutch speakers who have followed a basic DSL course must be able to communicate in a Dutch language environment with very limited linguistic means. There is for instance no point in teaching these course participants the correct name for all the parts of the human body. Rather, we should make sure that

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<sup>2</sup> See the proceedings of the LESLLA symposium in Newcastle (Literacy and Second Language in the Low Countries) for more details of the modular DSL training.

non-Dutch speakers are able to explain to a doctor how they feel and which part of their body hurts.

The emphasis is not so much on the knowledge itself, but rather on the practical use of the correct spelling, vocabularies and parsing. There is much emphasis on the level of skills that can be used functionally in the context of the society into which non-Dutch speakers are to integrate. Naturally, this does not mean that no knowledge elements are imparted. However, this knowledge should provide maximum support to achieve the ultimate goal, which is a minimum basis for being able to function in a social or societal context.

This applies to non-Dutch speakers who want to find a job and therefore have a professional perspective and to course participants who learn Dutch for personal reasons, namely to be able to go shopping, to follow their child's progress at school, etc. This emancipatory vision of second language training thus suggests that something more than language objectives should be addressed in the training. It should also impart a number of general skills objectives and attitudes, such as courage to speak, willingness to communicate or perseverance.

By following this training very slow-learning course participants should at least have minimal ability to manage in our society. We must of course remain realistic. The language level, no matter how functionally we try to teach this, will continue to be limited. It provides an insufficient basis, for instance, to successfully attend a vocational course without following an additional intensive language course. This is precisely why it is essential to have the learning efforts of low-educated course participants be as beneficial as possible by making the taught matter highly functional. Once again, lower-educated non-Dutch speakers gain more benefits from being able and having the courage to use the Dutch language in everyday communication with Flemings than they would from scoring maximum points on a parsing exercise.

## 5 *Preconditions*

In order to enable the Centres for Adult Basic Education to organise these courses in a proper manner, the government has provided the necessary human and financial resources. Full financing is offered for each group of eight course participants. The centre is also allowed to organise courses for smaller groups, but this must be compensated for by working with larger groups in other courses.

In addition to the regular teaching hours we provide an additional support of 10% for the organisation of individual pathway guidance for course participants, for the organisation of an open learning centre or for the coordination of the training. This individual guidance in particular is of vital importance. In the past, adult course participants were too often expected to have acquired certain 'automatisms' such as the ability to make independent decisions about the courses they were taking. However, we are convinced that in adult education, just as in compulsory or higher education there is a need for learning pathway guidance.

Individual learning pathway guidance means that the centre helps to guide the course participant through his or her learning process, taking his or her individual needs into account. This guidance begins with the application, intake and placement of the course participant in the most suitable training provision. During the training the pathway guidance consists of the individual monitoring of the course participant's

progress and of remediation when the course participant fails to meet the set objectives. At the end of the training the course participant has a right to receive feedback about their results and advice about any possible further education courses. Since 2007, in exchange for these additional resources, however, the centres for adult basic education have been obliged to provide this individual guidance.

Another important thing is that the training must be made as attractive as possible for course participants. We try to achieve this by adopting the most flexible working method and by keeping the training cost to an absolute minimum. The training provision of the centres for adult basic education is a decentralised provision. There are 13 centres for adult basic education in Flanders, but they have many different teaching locations, spread throughout the Flemish Region. This allows course participants to find a suitable provision close to home.

We also try to encourage the centres to offer a differentiated provision by organising both day and evening courses, sometimes with a different intensity. The number of training hours can vary between 6 and 15 per week. Our goal is to reach all the different target groups as effectively as possible. Working people should also be given the opportunity to learn Dutch.

Moreover, this is a modular training programme. Each module is a well-defined learning package that encompasses language competences combined with the support knowledge, key skills and attitudes. The modular system allows for a flexible organisation of these courses. Course participants have more freedom to choose the modules they wish to attend. Thanks to interim certification, course participants can more easily take a break from school to subsequently re-enter the course at a more appropriate level.

Courses can now also be given in a combined learning format. This means that part of the course is taken at home through distance learning. To this end course participants are given access to an electronic learning platform where they can do exercises or submit assignments. The number of combined learning courses is rapidly growing. However, at the moment no provision has been developed for low educated or illiterate non-Dutch speakers. The specific ICT and learning skills that are required to be able to participate in combined learning often cause problems for low educated or illiterate learners. However, the Karel De Grote Hogeschool has plans to develop materials and methodologies for this target group and, as of next year, they can submit a project application to this end and may receive funding to carry out their plans.

Unlike most other adult education courses, the DSL course for low-educated or illiterate L2 learners is free. Some centres do ask to pay a small contribution towards the purchase of course materials, but in most centres course participants do not have to pay anything. In other words, there is no financial barrier to prevent people from participating in this course.

People who follow the training through the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training in order to find a job even receive a small allowance and are reimbursed for the costs of transport and child care.



## 6 *Results*

The introduction of a separate training programme for illiterate and slow-learning L2 learners has had a huge impact. In 2002, 22 out of the 29 Centres for Adult Basic Education organised a separate training programme for this target group. However, this provision was more concentrated in urban areas. In the rural regions no specific provision was available for illiterate non-Dutch speakers. Today, in 2008, all centres organise this course for literacy learners.

The most striking thing, however, is the increase in the number of course participants. Between 2002 and 2008, the number of illiterate course participants grew by no less than 28% on average each year. Within a period of five years, the number of training hours performed has tripled. Because of the modular nature of the training system, it is difficult to count the number of individuals following this course; however, their number is estimated at just below 3,000 in Flanders and Brussels.

Last year, the adult education inspectorate conducted a study into the results of this training. Because the complete training programme only dates back to 2006, it is still a bit too early to draw any definitive conclusions. However, the first results already give a clear indication of the training programme's strengths and weaknesses.

What really interests us as policymakers, is the social return of this training, in other words whether or not a larger number of illiterate non-Dutch speakers are learning Dutch. Important elements to consider in this context are the interim dropout rates and the pass rates. The study shows us that throughout all the modules 77% of the registered course participants actually participate in the evaluation. 69% of this group passes the evaluation. A similar study into the regular Dutch as a second language training trajectory reveals that here 75% of the course participants participate in the evaluation, of whom 81% pass. This teaches us that the early dropout rates are the same, but that the pass rates are much lower.

There are very large differences between the centres that organise this training, which is remarkable. The participation in the evaluation varies between 40% and 100%. The pass rates range from 39% to 95%. It is not clear what causes these differences. It definitely requires further examination. Currently, the adult education inspectorate is carrying out an audit in all Centres for Adult Basic Education and is performing further research into the benefits of this training. Hopefully, this research will produce some explanation of these findings.

Another conclusion is that not all centres have the capacity to organise a literacy training provision that fully meets the demand. In some regions the intake of course participants is too limited to be able to organise each of the 16 modules of the training programme with a varying intensity and at different teaching locations. The waiting times for illiterate non-Dutch speakers to enter a DSL module can be very long. This also means that course participants, who do not pass a particular module and must therefore re-sit it, must often wait for a long time before they can re-enter the module. Sometimes course participants have to travel a long distance to a different teaching location. However, this problem cannot be solved as this is due to the target group's geographical spread. They can mostly be found in urban centres, as a result of which there are too few course participants in the countryside to be able to set up a training programme for them in their local area.

As previously discussed, the training programme has been developed on the basis of a functional view on second language acquisition. Still, we find that the classroom practice of teachers often does not reflect this vision. In practice this means that in many cases too little attention is devoted to the acquisition of key competences and attitudes and that the support knowledge is taught without the application of functional language acquisition. In other words, teachers give separate spelling or parsing exercises despite the fact that it may not actually help the course participant to use the language in a functional manner. High educated people often have explicit requests to this end. However, for low-educated people this unnecessarily slows down the learning process. In order to remedy this, the government invests more heavily in in-service training and support for teachers, among other things through a newly established Flemish Support Centre for Adult Education.

A fourth important issue concerns whether learning objectives can be met in proposed duration of the training programme. Many teachers find that the duration of the programme is too short for the weakest learners. That is why the adult basic education sector has been advocating an extension of the length of training programmes for some time now. The government acknowledges the fact that the current training is not always practicable for the slowest-learning course participants however; there is no consensus on the view that an extension of the training duration would solve this problem.

We find that, despite the obligation to provide individual pathway guidance, too few centres are actually putting a lot of work in remediation. This remediation is mostly limited to providing extra exercises during the lessons. Yet, the centres have other options open to them. They can, for instance, organise open learning centres where course participants can do exercise or catch up on their learning on an individual basis.

The extension of the training duration does not really solve the problem of stagnating course participants. We find more and more that a particular group of course participants gets stuck at a point in the learning programme and cannot make any more progress. For the moment it is not clear how we can best cater for this group. Today a number of centres are organising refresher courses, using the extra resources they receive to help course participants maintain the language level they have achieved. The question is whether formal adult education should play a role in this or this should be the task of social clubs and societies.

The request of adult basic education to extend the training pathway in fact contrasts with the expectations many course participants with a professional perspective. A lot of newcomers want to find a job as soon as possible. They want to build a new life here and the best way to do this is to provide themselves with an income. However, illiterate or slow-learning course participants who wish to learn Dutch face a training programme of 960 periods just to reach the Waystage level. Even if the course participant passes each of the modules, he or she will be in training for at least three years. The employment service often even expects him or her to also follow a vocational course afterwards. As a result, this is a too distant a goal for many non-Dutch speakers. They become discouraged and consequently drop out much sooner. As a consequence, these people often end up in structural unemployment or in the illegal labour market.

This is precisely why the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training as well as many other external partners are asking to reduce the duration of training programmes. The Equal project 'illiterates at work' which Els Matton of the Karel de

Grote Hogeschool talked about can be put to use in this debate. By providing vocational training, social orientation and language training in an integrated manner, combined with a work placement and an active employment policy we seek to shorten the pathway for low-educated non-native speakers of Dutch to employment. The project that was organised in Mechelen clearly showed that it is possible to give these people sufficient training over a period of one year to allow them to be employed as cleaning personnel, for instance.

As you notice this debate is still in full swing. While the government is by no means in favour of further extending the duration of the training pathway; the Minister for Education does see a great future in continuing work on the integrated provision of language and vocational courses in order to greatly reduce the duration of training. To do this, we must build on the results of the Equal project 'illiterates integrated at work' and the Minister for Civic Integration must make an effort to establish an alternative integration route for this target group.

This links in with another challenge we have established today regarding performed evaluation of the language and integration trajectories. The uniformisation of the Dutch as a second language training has led to the standardisation of the curricula at the level of the centres and even of the learning materials. Unlike to most adult education courses, well-developed handbooks, exercise sheets and digital teaching materials are available for DSL training. Naturally, this is an important service to the teachers. This development has also resulted in a much better quality and more equal orientation between the different providers of DSL courses.

The downside is that we now find that too little room is left to respond to the functional learning needs of course participants. L2 speakers of Dutch who want to learn Dutch to find a job in the hotel and catering business, for instance, will have quite different learning needs than a mother who wants to learn Dutch in order to be able to communicate with the teacher of her school age child. The Inspectorate tells us that there is currently too little differentiation in the classroom. The handbook has become the only guideline for DSL training and it is often followed too strictly.

As a result of these findings, the government is currently supporting experiments that focus on translating the existing training into more specific contexts. One important project in this field is the 'School and Parents' project, developed by the Centre for Language and Education. In this project, parents of school age children attend a Dutch course at their child's school. They learn a series of functional language objectives in the context of their child's school. The aim it pursued is twofold; on the one hand it seeks to improve the general functional language skills in non-Dutch speaking parents, so as to allow them to integrate more easily into our society and on the other hand, it improves and increases the contact between parents and the school. This enables parents to monitor their child's progress more closely and allows the school to inform parents more easily about any problems that may occur. This is a problem with many children of non-Dutch speaking parents. Due to a lack of language knowledge, there is little contact with the school, the child's progress is scarcely monitored and their school results are often below par. This turns into a vicious circle because this educational disadvantage is in its turn a barrier to better integration. The School and Parents project is currently running in Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, Mechelen and a number of municipalities around Brussels and will definitely be extended to the rest of Flanders.

## 7 Conclusion

I would like to conclude my discussion of the Flemish policy regarding L2 acquisition in lower educated and illiterate non-Dutch speakers here. Although it was a long discussion, I have tried to give as brief an outline as possible about the ongoing evolutions and policy developments in this field. As you notice, there are a lot of changes taking place.

As a government we are very pleased with this. My minister has made increasing equal opportunities a priority throughout his policy. This also applies to adult education, which means that even the weakest learners must receive maximum opportunities. Together with the experts, centres and teachers we are working to create the best possible framework for this. To this end we will organise a new round table conference on Dutch as a second language in December. The purpose of this round table conference is to put a number of new movements in the field of Dutch as a second language into practice, these initiatives will hopefully eliminate a number of issues that we have identified.

We thus still have a lot of work ahead of us for the coming years. I hope that my discourse has made clear that Flanders has really invested a great deal already in trying to achieve a better second language acquisition for low-educated and illiterate non-native speakers of Dutch.

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