

## The flow between theory and practice The teacher's point of view

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The above title shows that three aspects are involved: theory, practice and the flow between them. Various theories of language teaching and learning have been advanced and it can be stated that there is a broad consensus throughout Europe and beyond. Academics more or less agree on the direction teaching should be taking and as new insights are developed they are communicated in articles and books.

The actual practice of language teaching and learning, however, is more diverse and less well researched. Whilst one can point to certain tendencies in different countries based on cultural differences, traditions, curricula, examinations and common knowledge, the problem is how to ascertain what is exactly happening in class. Sending out questionnaires is one way of finding out and although these only give a limited sample and are fairly subjective, they do at least reveal certain tendencies. Another way is to have researchers visit lessons and have them evaluate what they see. The problem there is: what are they going to look at? What are the criteria they are going to use. In short, when is a lesson a good lesson? In the following I will discuss a research project carried out in The Netherlands some years ago, discuss some of the outcomes and give some ideas on how the gap between theory and practice can be bridged.

Between 1996 and 1999 a massive research project was carried out by the Dutch Inspectorate. In 1993 the Dutch secondary educational system in the lower forms was reformed. The introduction of basic secondary education meant the introduction of new subjects and content and skill objectives (referred to as attainment targets) within the existing system of different school types. It was agreed with the Dutch Parliament that an evaluation would take place after five years. That evaluation was carried out by the inspectorate between 1996 and 1999. They examined how schools organised their education, how they dealt with pupils with special needs, they looked at the atmosphere and working environment in the classrooms as well as at the instruction in the classroom. They visited 120 schools and attended some 7200 lessons (all subjects, not only languages) for pupils between 12 and 15 years old.

### **Criteria that were used to evaluate language teaching in the lower part of secondary schools in The Netherlands**

<b>Criteria - Modern languages</b>
<i>1 From the very beginning, the teacher uses the target language as the language of instruction to a reasonable extent.</i>
<i>2 The teacher encourages the students to use the target language.</i>
<i>3 The teacher provides communicative instruction.</i>
<i>4 The teacher gives functional grammar instruction, whereby the grammar is not the main objective to be achieved.</i>
<i>5 The teacher encourages a situation in which the communication in the classroom between him and the students and between the students among themselves is characterised by regular</i>

<i>'negotiation of meaning' and other communication strategies that are functional within the framework of the lesson.</i>
<i>6 The teacher ensures that students look up the necessary information and compare all kinds of information.</i>
<i>7 The teacher correctly pronounces the target language and uses the proper intonation.</i>
<i>8 The teacher encourages proper pronunciation among the students.</i>
<i>For the qualification 'strong rather than poor' to apply, a positive score needs to be attained on at least the criteria 1 to 4 plus one of the other criteria.</i>

(The Evaluation of Basic Secondary Education in The Netherlands (1996-1999), Summary of the evaluation by the Dutch Inspectorate of Education, March 2000, pp 45-46)

The general conclusion for English was that educationally teachers performed fairly well, but theoretically they performed badly. One of the main criticisms is the lack of the use of the target language, not only by pupils but also by teachers. Further comments: 'Only a small group of teachers succeeds in varying their teaching methods and have pupils working actively with the language. The majority of the lessons takes the form of class teaching and is very much based on the textbook: pupils simply work on exercises. The use of computers is not very common. There is little differentiation and teachers find it difficult to use the appropriate didactic instruments, either because the groups are too big or because there is a lack of expertise.'

Yet (remarkably?): the pupils' results for English are sufficient to good.

Gerard Westhoff, professor at the university of Utrecht, has proposed an explanation for this phenomenon (Levende Talen Magazine, February 2001). In brief, his theory is that successful language teaching first of all needs comprehensible input, this has to be processed for meaning and form, which then leads to output. The reason that Dutch pupils score so well for English is that the comprehensible input takes place outside the classroom: pop songs on the radio, films and series on television that are subtitled (the original English language is heard). The formal teaching is done in class (stress on grammar) and this is effective because the pupils have enough input. So these phenomena together result in the high level of achievement.

This is confirmed by the results of the research project mentioned above for German and French (English, French and German are obligatory subjects for all pupils at lower secondary schools in The Netherlands). The criticism of the way of teaching is almost the same for French and German but for these two languages the input outside the classroom is almost non-existent and has been steadily diminishing in favour of English. As a result, the achievement level for these two subjects has recently been declining considerably.

### **Using the target language**

Most people would agree that in order to learn a language it is important to listen to and speak that language as much as possible. Yet using the target language has been a serious point of contention even within the teachers' association in the Netherlands over the last few years. There are language teachers who argue that it is not possible to use the target language in

class, especially when explaining grammar. There are others who say that because the classes are too big (30 or more pupils) they lose control by using the target language.

The above-mentioned research shows that in a lot of language lessons the target language is not used. Teaching is still very much based on grammar and on correctness of language use: far away from what the theories of language teaching and learning consider good language teaching.

### **Textbook centeredness**

The same problem applies to how the textbook is used: teachers tend to follow the textbook without thinking and seem to be rather insecure about what to leave out. This means that they cannot evaluate why exercises are included by the authors and whether the exercises are suited to their purposes. They do not seem to have enough knowledge of the theories underlying certain exercises in order to use their books critically. This also means that their teaching is not based on the learners' needs. Teachers still like to be in control of the whole learning process. Insecurity is usually not a good basis for change.

Moreover, modern published materials are more and more comprehensive (with CDs, extra exercises, videos, correction sheets, tests) so it is very tempting just to use everything and not think about it. As I mentioned before, the pupils' results for English are not bad so a lot of teachers do not see any problem: why change if the results are good?

### **Need for change**

But change is necessary: first of all, to keep pupils and teachers motivated. At the moment, being a teacher at a secondary school is not regarded as a very desirable profession. A shortage of teachers already exists for some subjects and in some parts of the country; moreover, a considerable number of teachers are in the age group over forty and not many young people are attracted to the profession. Discipline is a great problem at schools nowadays. The position of languages other than English needs more attention. These are just very briefly some of the problems of language teaching in The Netherlands.

One difficulty when discussing the practice is that teachers work on many different levels (the subject one is teaching, the actual teaching in class, the contacts with colleagues, the social functioning of pupils, the school organisation, the curriculum). Being a teacher is a very complex profession. One cannot simply say that if teachers know more about theories, their teaching will become better. Teachers need to become better professionals in order for their teaching to improve.

### **Role of Teachers' associations**

Getting teachers to become more involved in innovation can only be achieved if they themselves feel the need for change. For that they need access to theories, their problems need to be taken seriously and their expertise must be recognized. Changes in the curriculum imposed on schools are no guarantee for change: on the contrary, they make a lot of teachers very cynical since they are seen as being based on political issues and decided upon by politicians who do not really know what is happening in schools. Too many changes seem to be counter-productive and they do little more than only increase the workload of teachers.

An important first step is that teachers need information: background reading on new and existing theories of language teaching and also examples of 'good practices'; accounts written by teachers themselves on how they have tackled certain problems to show others how they can be dealt with in class. These can help in building up the confidence of teachers. One of

the tasks of a teachers' association is to do just that: inform teachers as fully as possible about what is happening, give information on how they can become better professionals and invite them to actively participate in innovatory measures.

But just providing teachers with information is not enough – even if they have time to read at all. An important step is for teachers actually to do something with the information they receive. They have to be convinced that change is necessary and that it is worthwhile for themselves and for their pupils. I think that most teachers would be willing to work on changes if they had the feeling that they were taken seriously. There seems to be a great gap between what methodologists and other professionals focus on and how far teachers make use of this work. For both sides this is frustrating. Ways must be found to bridge the gap. And ways must be found to reach more teachers and get them actively involved. This first of all requires a real debate but this can only be achieved if teachers feel proud of their profession, if they are well informed and if their expertise is recognized.

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