

Foreign language teaching in schools

Summary

Recommendations to the Dutch Parliament

If the Dutch want to keep pace in a globalised economy, they will need to broaden and improve their language skills. Research shows that many people in the Netherlands overrate their foreign language skills. So how can we ensure that our educational institutes teach more people more languages at a higher level? This advisory report, was prepared following a request from Parliament. It aims to answer the above question for the sectors of primary education, secondary education, secondary vocational education and non-formal language teaching.

High ambitions

In the future, at least three-quarters of the Dutch population should speak two foreign languages at a level sufficient for them to make themselves understood in a variety of situations. This is the Education Council's interpretation of the Dutch and European ambitions. Is this achievable? Around three-quarters of the present population are estimated to have learned two foreign languages at school. However, less than half of the population reached level B1 or higher through school teaching. Also, they will only have maintained this level if they have kept using the languages they learned since leaving school. At level B1, a person is able to use his foreign languages skills independently in practical situations. It is the level school pupils currently need to obtain a common school-leaving diplomas (HAVO - senior general secondary education, VWO – pre-university education and MBO 3 and 4 – senior secondary vocational education – in combination with a foreign language). Students studying for the HAVO or VWO diploma must study two foreign languages. It is estimated that (only)30% of MBO students study two foreign languages.

Invitation to develop policy for 2009-2019

Parliament should invite the government to translate its ambitions for foreign language learning into actions. It could do this by asking the minister to produce a ten-year (2009-2019) programme of policies, based on a clear vision for the future, with a result-driven programme structure, and a coordinator who commands respect in the field. The Council believes that the focus should lie first and foremost on the teachers and on the further introduction of the European Framework of Reference for Languages. In the longer term, policy should also look at language learning in preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO) and in senior secondary vocational education (MBO) to ensure that a larger group of pupils are offered foreign language teaching than is presently the case. The Education Council recommends that Parliament approves a number of proposals for the medium term and presents them to the minister so they can be further fleshed out as part of the policy plan. The proposals are set out below.

Primary education: start earlier and establish end results

It is important to start foreign language learning early on in primary education. Children are generally well-motivated and able to learn a second language at an early age. Usually, the foreign language of choice would be English given that most children come into contact with English at an early age. In the border regions, German and French might be sensible choices. If total immersion methods were used (a term explained in the report) in primary education, the learning plan would not have to be expanded. The Council proposes that the law is changed to make it possible to introduce English as a language of instruction for up to 15% of the teaching time.

Primary schools could choose to start teaching English in either group one or group five. This would ultimately mean two differing end results in primary education. Secondary schools could tie their programmes in with these two standards. Due to their early start many children will master English earlier. This will free up time and energy for other languages in the curriculum of the education that follows.

Training for teachers

Specialist training programmes will be needed for primary and secondary school teachers. That training could focus on the various approaches and methods for teaching in English, French and German, covering, at the very least, the various total immersion methods. The cost of the training

programmes and the cost of supply teachers to cover training leave could be paid through a dedicated fund set up to provide grants to teachers, as set out in the Covenant on an Action Plan for the Teaching Profession in the Netherlands (*Convenant Actieplan Leerkracht van Nederland*).

Compulsory foreign language in secondary vocational education

Learning a foreign language is not compulsory for those attending secondary vocational education. The Education Council recommends that this be changed, starting with the introduction of one compulsory foreign language. Given that 30% of the population have secondary vocational education (MBO 3 or 4) as their highest level of academic attainment, this would bring the ambition of two foreign languages closer for a larger part of the population.

In time, two foreign languages would have to be made compulsory for MBO 4, especially as many people in this sector then go on to higher education.

Language schools

Non-formal teaching could be improved if Parliament explicitly pushed for the establishment of language schools at a local level, as the Education Council proposed in 2001. A language school might be an independent teaching facility, although this need not necessarily be the case. It might also refer to a process of packaging the existing offering of non-formal language teaching in a structured way. Or, for example, a local authority could take stock of all foreign language teaching available locally and present it to the local population (via a website, brochures, schools, etc.) in the guise of a language school.

Parliament could provide incentives for the Minister for Education to work together with the Minister for the Interior and VNG, the association of local authorities, to advance the development of various language schools models and to actively promote awareness of them. Parliament could also invite the Minister for Economic Affairs to examine – from an economic perspective – which languages require more attention outside of regular education. By way of a pilot project, this ministry could also introduce learning vouchers for adults who want to learn these languages at a language school to benefit their work or career.

Support for multilingual child raisers

Finally, the policy plan should detail ways of working with local authorities to provide support to multilingual child raisers. Currently, parents who want to raise their children multilingually often do not know who to turn to for advice, for example, on the best way to do so. Providing information to this group of people is a relatively simple (and efficient) way for society to expand the future language skills of these children.