

'ILLITERATES, INTEGRATED TO A JOB' A MODEL FOR INTEGRATED VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR ILLITERATE SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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1 Introduction

Illiterate second language learners have a very low attendance rate in educational and vocational programs in Flanders. The entry level of Dutch and literacy for these programs is a difficult threshold for this group to meet. As a result, illiterate language learners have to follow a general Dutch course for many years in order to reach the required starting level for vocational training.

The project 'Illiterates, integrated to a job' experimented with recent insights into educational organisation and methodology. The experimental training, which took place from January 2006 until October 2007 and prepared participants for a cleaning job, suggests that it is possible to give successful vocational training to illiterate second language learners and to prepare them for the job market in a reasonable amount of time. This experiment was the foundation for a model of an integrated vocational training for illiterate or low literacy second language learners.

This article deals with the context and general idea of integrated schooling; it also looks at some basic principles concerning the organisation and the methodology of the project. Finally, it suggests the factors which could contribute to the success of the project.

2 Backgrounds and general idea of the project

2.1 Current situation in Flanders with regard to Dutch as second language and literacy learning

In research carried out in 2003 the situation in the academic and vocational training in Flanders was compared to the situation in other European Countries such as The Netherlands, France, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and also to Canada and the United States (Pichart, 2003). This research showed that language courses in Flanders focus on a general content with several themes such as shopping, education, housing, mobility, etc. Moreover, as they are mostly not intensive it takes participants a long time to reach a basic level. With a course of nine hours a week, it takes at least about three years to

reach level A2, defined in the CEFR¹. Due to this long training program and to the lack of a concrete goal or concrete results, participants tend to drop out, which jeopardizes their chances of reaching level A2. As programs of vocational training mostly ask for A2 as a starting level, the participation of illiterate or low literacy second language learners (LESLLA learners) is very low.

2.2 *Objectives of the project*

In 2005 the Karel de Grote-Hogeschool took the initiative to try a different way. The University College set up a partnership with several groups to organize a vocational training for illiterate second language learners with no knowledge of the Dutch language, or any reading or writing skills. Half of the program was subsidized by the European Social Fund and the other half was paid for out of the regular funds of the partner organisations.

The program objectives were the following:

- To organize an integrated curriculum including language and literacy acquisition and vocational training, for a target group of illiterate second language learners.
- To increase the participants' employment opportunities and social integration.
- To develop a methodology and course material for future projects.
- To formulate policy recommendations in order to stimulate the use of this form of education.

2.3 *Target group*

The target group for this project included both new immigrants and long term residents. The entry level of the participants' oral skills was lower than the threshold level of the CEFR, and for written skills the participants were classed as illiterate or very low literate.

The participants were recruited from the reading and writing groups for illiterate foreign language speakers, organised by the Centre for Adult Basic Education in Mechelen.

2.4 *Critical factors*

Although experience abroad and theoretical frameworks gave a fundamental justification for this project, there were some critical factors which previous research and experience could not provide satisfactory answers for. The critical factors were the following:

- Will the participants be able to acquire all necessary skills and knowledge to function in an employment situation during the period of the program (18 months)?
- Will the low level of speaking and reading skills hinder the participants in the vocational training?

¹ CEFR or CEF is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001)

- Will it be possible to find partners willing to provide apprenticeships for people with low levels of literacy and Dutch?

2.5 *Partner organisations*

The partnership that was set up for this project was unique in Flanders. Normally, several providers are responsible for different parts of the integration route for immigrants. Co-operation between these organisations is encouraged by the government but it is not built into the structure of the integration route as a whole. This means that the different programs within the integration route are not really integrated with each other. For instance, the Integration Centre for New Immigrants ('Onthaalbureau') is responsible for a course to introduce newcomers to Dutch society. This course is mostly given in the mother tongue of the newcomers. At the same time the newcomers have to follow a Dutch language course at a Centre of Adult Basic Education ('Centrum voor Basiseducatie', CBE), but this course is not linked to the content of the course providing an introduction into Flemish society. This Dutch language course rarely gives specific preparation for the vocational training provided by the Government Agency for Employment and Vocational Training ('Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding', VDAB). It is also notable that although each organisation has its own learner coaches, there is little or no co-operation between them.

One of the main aims of the project "Illiterates, integrated to a job" was to build up a strong partnership between the different organisations. This was an important issue for the ESF as a subsidiser. This project was carried out by the following organisations:

- The Centre for Adult Basic Education in Mechelen: they provided the Dutch language courses
- Prisma, the integration centre for new immigrants of Mechelen: they provided the career guidance, the introductory course into Flemish society, initially in the mother tongue of the participants and later, in the Dutch language.
- Levanto, a non profit organisation for vocational training: they provided career guidance, personal coaching and part of the Dutch language course.
- VDAB Mechelen, the Government Agency for Employment and Vocational Training: they provided the vocational training.
- Karel de Grote-Hogeschool: they co-ordinated the whole project and gave methodological support to the teachers.

The co-operation between these organisations was structurally embedded in the project. Each month there was a meeting of the persons in charge of the organisations to set out the lines and to solve problems concerning policy. The teachers themselves met almost every two weeks. They discussed the progress of the participants, the content of the program and the methodology.

3 *Some basic principles*

At the start of the program the partnership set out some basic principles. These principles were based on experience and research concerning effective language learning of low educated and illiterate adults.

3.1 Intensity

First principle: Make sure that the curriculum is as intensive as possible.

The programs currently available for illiterates in Flanders are not as intensive as programs abroad. Organisations often fear that illiterates cannot be motivated for intensive programs, because of their lack of organisational skills, and problems with combining the program with their private lives and responsibilities. Organisations sometimes also assume that the work load on an intensive program will be too heavy for people who have no educational background. Surveys (Kurvers 1990) on this issue and experience abroad (Plichart, 2003) show that this is a misunderstanding.

In the programme 'Illiterates, integrated to a job', participants initially undertook a program of 21 hours a week which increased to 28 hours a week. The attendance of the participants proved to be very high, higher than in other language teaching programs currently available.

3.2 Manageable goals

Second principle: Divide the training in little parts so that participants have a nearby and manageable goal.

To demand a commitment to a training program lasting for one and a half years from participants who hardly know what it means to follow a training program, who have little or no income, who don't know what they will learn or if they are capable of learning is not a realistic option. People take more easily to short term commitments with a defined end date and clear objectives.

Because of this, the program was divided into three parts. After the participants had completed one part of the program they could decide whether they wanted to go on to the next part. This means that although overall it takes a long time to prepare illiterate second language learners for a job, participants in this program only had to commit a short amount of time.

Part one of the program lasted for seven months. For the first four months, the participants followed an intensive general language and literacy course in combination with a social integration course given in their own language. After four months the participants evaluated the program and their learning progress and could decide whether they wanted to continue. Some found that an intensive course of 21 hours a week was too hard to combine with their private life; others were very enthusiastic about the course and wanted to continue.

The following three months of the program consisted of intensive language and literacy training, integrated with a social orientation program delivered in the Dutch language. Thorough career guidance was also part of the program at this stage.

Participants who were interested in the vocational training and responded to the physical and administrative criteria signed up for the second part of the program. The second part of the program lasted for seven months and consisted of intensive language and literacy training, vocational training and apprenticeships. All participants who started this part of the program also finished it.

Part three lasted for four months. During this time the participants focussed on finding a job. Support with job seeking was provided as well as help to refine certain skills. If required, further guidance was also provided at the participant's work place. It

is interesting to note that many of the participants were successful in finding work at this stage.

3.3 *Integrated program*

Third principle: Strong integration of various components of the program, namely language acquisition, social orientation, career orientation and vocational training.

When programs are linked, it is easier for participants to transfer knowledge from one part of the program to another part. This transfer is a very difficult competence for low educated participants; therefore it is the responsibility of the teachers to support the participants in achieving it. If the transfer of knowledge is successful, the participants will understand why they have to learn some things and how they can adapt this learning material to another situation. In order to enhance participants' competence in transferring knowledge from one situation to another, some learning content is dealt with more than once, but from a different point of view. For instance, an appointment with a doctor can be learned by focusing on the language, by focusing on the cultural conventions, or by focusing on the organisation of the medical system.

In practice, this meant that teachers were required to adapt the course to ensure that it was more integrated with the other parts of the training and was more relevant to real life situations. This was especially difficult for language teachers who were used to working with more general language courses. A close co-operation between the various teachers with some guidance from Karel de Grote-Hogeschool helped the teachers to achieve a real integration of the course content.

3.4 *Content based language learning*

Fourth principle: Content based language learning.

A recent research review (Cito 2008) shows that content based learning is a vital element in effective language acquisition. The study of Raaphorst (2007) also gives a convincing research review about this topic. Nonetheless, we still see many teachers giving texts and exercises which have no meaning or interest for their participants.

In the programme 'Illiterates, integrated to a job', the language teachers used the content of the social orientation course for the first months of the language training. Subjects such as mobility, social security and housing were linked to the real lives and questions of the participants. The texts and dialogues used were taken from real life and contained information relevant to the participants. After seven months of training, the content of the vocational training was used in the language courses.

3.5 *Key skills*

Fifth principle: Focus on all key skills.

In 2003 with the introduction of the modular structure in adult basic education, the Flemish Support and Development Agency for Adult Basic Education (VOCB) highlighted the importance of working with key skills in education for low-educated adults. They used the key skills defined in the British educational system and divided them into eight categories:

- Elementary calculus
- Spatial and temporal orientation

- Self evaluation and learning strategies
- Communicative skills
- Problem solving
- Learning to choose
- Learning to work together
- Working with ICT.

The VOCB integrated the key skills with the curriculum targets of the regular education programs for low-educated adults. However, these skills were subordinated to other skills. For example, in a basic adult education Dutch as a second language program, teachers are supposed to work on the key skills with the participants but, as the levels that the participants have to reach in these skills are so low, teachers often fail to place much emphasis on them. For that reason the program “Illiterates, integrated to a job” wanted to focus on the key skills in their training. Lack of these key skills is often a problem for low-educated people when they are looking for a job. For example, not being able to cope with the problem of organising childcare can prevent women from finding a suitable job and not being able to organise their day can mean that a low educated person may often arrive at work late. These are both examples of problems arising from a lack of the key skill ‘spatial and temporal orientation’.

In the program ‘Illiterates, integrated to a job’ the key skills were emphasised as much as the other skills. Some examples:

- When it was nearly Ramadan, the teacher discussed with the participants in the Dutch course what to do during the Ramadan, as not coming would mean less hours of learning. The participants had to solve this problem by themselves. They suggested changing the hours of the course so they would be able to get home earlier to prepare dinner.
- To find their way to the several work places, participants had to be able to find an address independently. They tried out several methods such as asking the way from passers by; using a simple map or asking a relative to show them the way. Afterwards, they were asked to choose the method they found most suitable. The key skills practiced here were making choices and spatial orientation.
- At the end of each lesson the participants were asked if they had grasped the content of the lesson and how they would use it in the following lessons. For example, would they like more practice or more information about an exercise or topic? So to a certain extent, the participants could decide what would be dealt with in the following lessons, based on an evaluation of their own skills. This made use of the key skill self evaluation.

3.6 *Independent real life learning*

Sixth principle: Independent real life learning: activities outside the classroom and real job experience (apprenticeship) as early on in the program as possible.

The model of integrated learning, as introduced by the ITTA (Institute of Applied Language Science at the University of Amsterdam), consists of three parts that are provided at the same time and that are linked to each other by content. These parts are:

- Education in general skills, such as language education, calculus education and other key skills. These skills are learned, for example, in the context of a professional or a social situation.
- Education in vocational, social or academic skills, such as learning a profession, learning to interact within a school community, or studying to be a doctor. These courses only require a low language level so that participants with a restricted knowledge of Dutch can follow them. Along side this, the teachers work at developing the language skills and other key skills.
- Real life experience, such as visits to a work place, apprenticeships, joining an organisation. By means of these experiences the information and skills gained from the program are given a meaning and use in the real world.

The benefits of integrated training are:

- A focus on skills and knowledge which the student needs in real life.
- A stronger motivation for the students, as they will be able to adapt and use the acquired competencies in real life.
- A more effective method of learning, because the transfer of the acquired competencies to real life means that the key skills and other skills are exercised repeatedly in different ways and from various viewpoints and in different settings.

Principle in practice

In the first part of the program the participants did a lot of extra curricular activities. For example, they visited different organisations; they took the bus; they tried to read a time table and they went to the bank.

The most important experience in real life learning for these participants was the apprenticeships. These apprenticeships were scheduled very early on in the training. Usually in other programs apprenticeships are organised at the end of training when participants are supposed to have acquired all the skills they need in order to work independently. In this program the apprenticeship was introduced as soon as possible so that it could be used as another way of learning general and vocational skills.

After three months of vocational training all the participants started as an apprentice in a real company. The apprenticeship took one and a half days a week over a period of 12 weeks. The participants still followed Dutch courses and vocational training during the apprenticeship. The apprenticeship was cyclic: this means that they went to three consecutive apprenticeships. By doing so, the participants had the opportunity to exercise certain skills several times, for example introducing themselves to new colleagues, getting to know the rules of the work place, finding their way to the work place, organising themselves to get to work on time, understanding the instructions given to them and finding out about the work schedule and safety rules.

To guarantee that participants made use of language and communication skills, language assignments were given to them. These assignments were also cyclic. On each apprenticeship they had to do the same language assignments. For instance they were asked to: ask their manager for some information about job rules such as holidays and what to do in case of illness; to collect some written instructions at their work place; and to start an informal conversation with one of their colleagues.

The participants were encouraged to do permanent evaluation. At the end of each apprenticeship the participants were asked how they had done, what went well, and where they needed some more practice.

The mentors, the staff of the companies that guided the participants, also received some training. In this training they were given some tips and tricks on how to guide illiterate second language learners. The major topics that were discussed with them were: characteristics of the target group; communication with the target group and empowerment of the target group.

Important results of this model of apprenticeship:

- The apprenticeships had a very positive effect on the motivation and self esteem of the participants. Most of them were surprised to see how well they could function within a real work place.
- The apprenticeships gave the participants a better understanding of what it takes to function in a real work situation. Previously, the participants tended to use their own experience and frame of reference from their own country, which is often completely different to the situation in their new country. The apprenticeships gave them a more realistic perspective on the job they were preparing for.
- The apprenticeships gave the participants the ability to feel how well they would be able to function in a real work place.
- The participants acquired a better insight in the pros and cons of various work settings. For example, after the apprenticeships, they had a better idea of the difference between working in a cleaning company and working as a cleaner in private houses.
- They had the opportunity to try out the techniques learnt in the vocational training in real life context, which was much more difficult than in a 'safe' environment.
- They were able to inject some real life experience into the classroom. For example, problems that confronted the participants in the work place, could be discussed, solved and rehearsed in the classroom.

3.7 *Extensive individual coaching*

Principle six: the participants could count on an extensive individual coaching.

An important characteristic of this target group is that they not only miss the essential basic language and literacy skills, but that they often combine this with other characteristics of deprivation. They may lack a decent income, have poor housing, have a limited social network, have problems with all kind of papers and documents, or lack knowledge on how to use social services. The need for individual coaching is therefore more urgent for this specific target group.

Principle in practice

The project provided extensive individual coaching for the participants. At the beginning of the project this coaching was given in the participant's native language, but later in the program it was given in Dutch. The coaches had an important role in this project and were vital to its success. Because of the extensive coaching the coaches soon became very close to the participants which was very important for this target group. The coaches had several tasks to fulfill:

- First of all, the coaches informed the participants about the content of the program. They explained the organisation, the intensity, how much participation would be required and the possibility of finding a job afterwards. Providing the participants with all the information they need about the course meant that they were not given the wrong expectations about it and that they were able to make a better choice.
- Low literate people often don't have a clear perspective of what they want to do in life and what their talents are. After the first, more general part of the training, the coaches helped to guide the participants in finding out what society can offer them in relation to their own competencies and talents and what they want to do with their lives.
- During the training program the coaches checked up on the participants' performance and motivational issues in close consultation with the participants. If there were problems, the coaches helped the participants to find solutions. For example, when participants tended to leave the apprenticeships in order to take short term jobs, the coaches tried to convince the participants of the importance of education and long term employment.
- Issues concerning the training program are not the only problems the target group has to cope with. A lot of other problems such as child care, mobility, financial problems, paper work and their situation at home may also undermine their attendance and motivation. The coaches also dealt with these types of problem.

4 *Methodology*

Some basic principles also tell us something about methodology, for example, integrated and content based language learning. However, in this paragraph we want to focus more in detail on how the teachers facilitated the learning process in 'Illiterates, integrated to a job.'

The methodology is based upon two theoretical frameworks which will be introduced here briefly.

4.1 *Theme-centred interaction (TCI)*

Theme centred interaction is described by both Cohn (1993) and Hendriksen (2004). The most important features are:

- Be your own chairperson. Participants are invited to think, decide and choose for themselves. They are challenged to take responsibility for their own learning process.
- Teaching is maintaining the dynamic balance between the task in hand (It), the group dynamics (We), the individuals in that group (I) and the context factors.
- Priority should be given to disturbances: they are real life learning opportunities in disguise.

These features have some implications for the teacher. Because of the priority given to disturbances, there is a high level of unpredictability in lessons. The teacher should be able to give structure to disturbances and connect them to participants' learning aims. Furthermore the teacher has to challenge the participants to take responsibility for their

own learning process. A positive approach, meaning a belief in the power and possibilities of the participants is also very important.

4.2 *Powerful learning and constructivism*

Views about learning processes are influenced by cognitive psychology and are described in the constructivistic learning theory (Dochy, 2003). This theory suggests that the learners should have the prime role in acquiring their competence, while the teacher serves to facilitate this acquisition. These views suggest a new teaching methodology with the following features:

- Goal oriented learning: the participants' orientation towards clear recognizable goals is essential for their learning output. Teachers should therefore make the targets of all learning activities explicit and link this purpose to the participants' personal learning questions.
- Assessment: Self-assessment, peer assessment and co-assessment aim at the participants' self-knowledge. By assessing their own progress in terms of well-defined goals, the participants can give direction and meaning to their learning process.
- Active learning: Learning equals 'knowledge building' instead of 'knowledge consumption'. One learns to speak by speaking, one learns to clean by cleaning.
- Authentic learning in a meaningful context: Organizing learning situations that resemble the future job situation and that require identical skills and competence.
- Interactive learning: Learning is a social activity that can take place only within a discursive community bringing together reflection and experience. Teachers should utilize the strength of group learning to its fullest.

5 *Concluding remarks*

The project gave an interesting perspective on how to organise a vocational training for illiterate second language learners. For this research project only one experience group was used so no statistically proven results can be drawn. We have, however, made the following observations which may give interesting results if researched further.

First we deal with observations concerning methodology. The type of methodology used in this program is in accordance with the needs of the target group, because illiterate learners use learning strategies that are based upon practical experience. Therefore active learning and authentic learning is in the line of earlier experiences. Illiterate learners have to deal with low self-esteem, therefore self-assessment and a positive approach improves their self esteem. Illiterate learners have poor mastery of key skills such as solving problems, making choices and self-assessment. Active and authentic learning in a real life setting creates a lot of opportunities to work at these key skills.

With regard to organisation it was observed that the target group can cope with and benefit from an intensive program. The target group needs extensive guidance on career coaching, job seeking and other personal problems during the programme. The target group benefits from an integrated programme that combines language acquisition

with vocational training. A regular and close consultation with all partners is necessary. In short, it became clear that the apprenticeships were a big success because they helped participants to overcome reluctance towards working and gradually enabled the participants to become more self-reliant. The apprenticeships bring the real world into the classroom and are an important surplus (content-based language learning). They contributed to the positive perception of illiterates by employers and bridged the gap between the learning and job situation.

Moreover, it can be stated that the vocational skills were easily acquired and the motivation and dedication and class attendance rate were high. The participants' acquisition of reading and speaking skills was varied and unpredictable.

Concerning employment it can be noted that all participants managed to find a job in cleaning: four participants in regular economy, five participants in subsidized economy. Employers were satisfied with participants, as attitudes towards work and a high level of motivation compensated for low linguistic competence. In short, apprenticeships contribute to positive perceptions of illiterates by employers.

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