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## Language Learning beyond English in the Netherlands: A fragile future?

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**Abstract:** The Netherlands have had a long tradition of modern foreign language (MFL) education: French, German and English have been standard subjects at secondary school since the 19th century. After the introduction of the *Mammoetwet* in 1968, several major educational reforms have shaped the current practice of Dutch MFL teaching. On the one hand, a greater diversity of languages is on offer in secondary schools (e.g., Arabic, Spanish), and following the implementation of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001) MFL teaching has become more communicative. Additionally, more and more schools at all levels of education have adopted English as a medium of instruction. On the other hand, with the growing dominance of English in Dutch society, the time dedicated to languages other than English has declined substantially so that secondary school sections and university departments for other MFLs are closing down. In this article, we provide an overview of Dutch MFL teaching since 1945. We will sketch how the choices made by different parties involved, including learners and their parents, teachers, teacher educators, publishers and policy makers, have been shaping the teaching of MFLs at all levels of education with a special interest in MFL teacher education.

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# 1 Introduction

Being a small country (ca. 17 million inhabitants) geographically surrounded by larger European nations (e.g., Germany, France, the UK), the Netherlands are known for their strong international orientation. For centuries, trading relations have existed across borders, with Germany, Belgium, the UK and France being the most important partners (CBS 2018). The national languages, Dutch and Frisian, have a relatively small number of users. Dutch, the main language, is spoken by about 24 million speakers world-wide (cf. taaluniversum.org), and Frisian is spoken by approximately 400.000 inhabitants in the Northern province of Friesland. Consequently, the Dutch have a long tradition of foreign language learning. The focus of modern foreign language (MFL) learning in school lies on English, German and/or French. According to the European Commission (2012), 90 % of the Dutch claim to master English well enough to have a conversation, 71 % make this claim for German and 29 % for French. Moreover, 81 % of the Dutch agree that *Everyone in the EU should be able to speak more than one language in addition to their mother tongue*, which is the EU criterion of mother tongue plus two (European Parliament 2020).

In recent years, some changes to these multilingual traditions have become apparent. While the dominance of English as the international language for trade, education and media has grown worldwide, the particular situation in the Netherlands is that English is ubiquitous in public life, in particular in urban regions. Moreover, English-spoken programs on Dutch television are hardly ever dubbed, and subtitled media consumption provides hours of exposure to predominantly North-American English language. Unsurprisingly, English is perceived as the most useful language for personal development by 95 % of the Dutch (in comparison to German, 44 %, and French, 13 %, respectively; European Commission 2012). By now, some consider English no longer to be a foreign language in the Netherlands (Edwards 2016).

Against this background, our aim in this article is to provide an overview of the position of different MFLs taught in compulsory education in the Netherlands. For a better understanding, we will start with a sketch of the Dutch education system before giving a historical overview highlighting the major political and societal developments reflected in Dutch MFL education since 1945. We then discuss the challenges and opportunities of MFLs at all levels of education, from primary to tertiary education, including teacher training, before we formulate our conclusion for the future of Dutch MFLs education in a changing world.

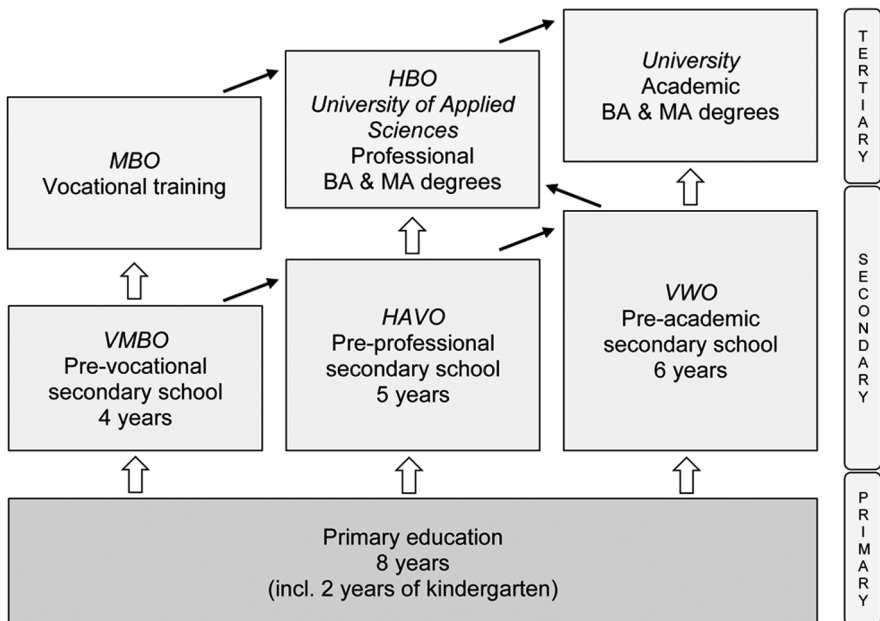
## 2 The Dutch educational system

The Dutch system for compulsory education is designed to give students the possibility to focus on those subjects they feel attracted to and are talented for, allowing them to choose a suitable profile for their final exams. In this sense, the Dutch system could be characterized as rather utilitarian (e.g., in comparison to a more egalitarian French system). A further aspect in which Dutch education distinguishes itself from other European countries is the fairly limited role of the government. The ministry of education decides what subjects are taught in each phase of education and sets attainment levels to be reached. The *Nationaal Expertisecentrum Leerplannontwikkeling* (SLO) gives advice only on the national curriculum for primary and secondary education and the government monitors schools' success in reaching the goals via the *Inspectie van het Onderwijs* [Inspection of Education] and several fixed national exams. Since the late 1960s, the national *Centraal Instituut voor Toetsontwikkeling* (CITO) designs those examinations, while the *College voor Toetsen en Examens* (CvTE) is responsible for their quality and validity. Yet, the government does not state how national standards should be met, does not determine pedagogic approaches or textbooks, and provides suggestions only regarding the number of hours per subject. Consequently, schools, many of which are semi-private, choose their own approach that is at times influenced by a certain (e.g., religious) denomination or follows a specific pedagogical approach (e.g., Montessori). Dutch parents have the constitutional right to freely choose a suitable school for their children ([www.government.nl](http://www.government.nl)). Schools tailor to parental demands and distinguish themselves from others by adopting a specific pedagogical philosophy and/or by focusing on a strategic target group by, for example, prioritising sports, music, international orientation or sciences ([www.vogids.nl](http://www.vogids.nl)).

Figure 1 provides an overview of the Dutch school system. Most children start school at age 4 when they enter kindergarten (compulsory from age 5) and continue for eight consecutive years in primary education. At the end of primary education, when the children are at the age of 11/12, based on the average achievements on national examinations together with school grades, in advice of their teacher and in consultation with caretakers, the school gives a binding recommendation on the type of secondary education for each child. Children may enter three different types of secondary school depending on their scholastic aptitude: (1) VMBO (pre-vocational) prepares adolescents in four years to enter vocational training (Dutch MBO) to become, for example, a hotel receptionist or animal trainer; (2) HAVO (professional) prepares youngsters in five years to enter higher education at universities of applied sciences (Dutch HBO), for instance to become a teacher or a technical engineer; and (3) VWO (pre-academic) prepares adolescents in six years to study at an academic university.

In general, the first three years of secondary education cover a wide area of subjects. At the age of 14/15, children choose a profile that guides then on the choice of subjects they will be focusing on for the years to come. HAVO/VWO distinguish (a) science and technology, (b) science and health, (c) economics and society and (d) culture and society. While these profiles impact on the possibilities in tertiary education (e.g., the science and health profile ensures a smooth entry into studying medicine), students can take electives, and there are ways to make up for a missing subject (e.g., in summer courses). Also transfers between different levels of secondary or tertiary education is fairly easy. For example, after finishing VMBO a high-achieving student might decide to study two upper years at HAVO.

Dutch tertiary education distinguishes vocational MBO, professional bachelor/master programs in universities for applied sciences (HBO), and academic bachelor/master programs in research-oriented universities. Teacher education is offered at both types of universities, with a different structure and focus. Again, a student who just completed a degree at a university of applied sciences can make a smooth entry into a related academic degree and follow a fast-track to gain an academic diploma.



**Figure 1:** Schematic overview of the Dutch school system at primary, secondary and tertiary level with thick arrows indicating how students typically move on to a next level and the different follow-up options (thin arrows)

### 3 Historical perspectives

To put the current developments into perspective, we briefly touch on times before World War II before we illustrate the position of MFLs in compulsory education since 1945.<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.1 French, German and English – a historical triptychon of Dutch MFL education

When teachers in the Netherlands talk about MFLs they typically speak of “French, German and English”, which reflects the order in which the languages historically appeared in the Dutch curriculum (Kwakernaak 2009). Already in the 16th century, children whose parents could afford sending them to school, went to *the French school*, where they would study French next to Latin and Greek. From the 18th century onwards, German and later English, were added. These three MFLs were also standard in the so-called *Latin Schools* where the grammar-translation method was dominant be it to teach modern or classic (Latin/Greek) languages (Kwakernaak 2011).

In 1863 the Dutch government implemented the *Hogere Burgerschool* (HBS), which is the basis of today’s secondary school system. Teachers became public servants and were obliged to get a national teaching degree: the *middelbaar onderwijs (mo) akte*. This first attempt to harmonize the Dutch education system induced several societal changes: Factory work for children under 12 years was prohibited in 1874, and from 1900 onwards primary education was compulsory for children aged 5 to 12 years old. Within the HBS, French, German, and English became mandatory and subject to examination. In 1911, the first national teachers association for MFLs was established, and from 1921 onwards students could major in an MFL at university. Today, the *Vereniging van Leraren in Levende Talen* (the Association of Teachers in MFLs) is still an active association with more than 3500 members, hosting annual conferences and publishing a scientific journal and a practically oriented magazine for language teachers in the Netherlands ([www.levendetalen.nl](http://www.levendetalen.nl)).

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<sup>1</sup> This overview is largely based on Hulshof, Kwakernaak and Wilhelm (2015) and the Dutch website [www.talenexpo.nl](http://www.talenexpo.nl), which was created by the *Vereniging van Leraren in Levende Talen* association for Dutch language teachers to mark their 100th anniversary in 2011.

## 3.2 The Mammoetwet of 1968

For almost a century, French, German and English formed a stable part of Dutch general education. However, in 1968 a large educational reform (*Wet op het voortgezet onderwijs – Law for secondary education*) was implemented, called the *Mammoetwet* (mammoth law) reflecting its enormous size. It aimed to streamline the landscape of compulsory secondary education in the Netherlands, that, despite the efforts of the HBS, was still composed of a myriad of different school types. The *Mammoetwet* also aimed at adapting the curriculum to the needs of modern society in the early 1970s. Due to the importance of English as the language of the UK and the USA, both thriving cultural, economic and political nations in those days, the position of other MFLs was heavily debated, and French almost lost its position as a mandatory school subject (Kwakernaak 2011). In the end, all three MFLs remained compulsory subjects in the first three years of secondary school (called *onderbouw*, i.e., junior secondary school). For the *bovenbouw* (senior secondary school), a minimum of one (in some tracks two) MFL was set for the final exam. Virtually all students opted for English. Many policy changes followed in the 1970s, resulting in decreasing numbers of contact hours for MFLs (Voogel 2016).

The *Mammoetwet* also introduced the so-called “vakkenpakket” (subject bundles): students were no longer obliged to take exams in all subjects, but they could choose a bundle of subjects that were deemed relevant for further education. The government appointed a new testing institution, CITO, that was tasked to develop a national assessment system to ensure objective, transparent, reliable and valid examination of all subjects. Today, CITO is still in charge of the national curriculum-based examinations at the end of Dutch secondary education. Students take the final CITO exam (called *centraal schriftelijk eindexamen*) and local exams implemented by individual schools (called *schoolexamen*), both of which count for 50 % towards their final grade. For MFLs, pragmatic criteria led to the decision that the central exam would include reading comprehension only, not least because this can be tested using automatically scored multiple choice questions at a high level of reliability. Unsurprisingly, the fact that reading counts for 50 % towards the final grade, teachers and students often spend substantial time on reading comprehension training in their final years (Fasoglio et al. 2015). In addition, this washback effect leads some students to think that reading is more important but also more difficult than other skills (Westhoff 2012).

### 3.3 Reforms since the 1990s: communicative in English

In 1993 the Dutch government decided it was time for a substantial revision of junior secondary education, that is, for children aged 12 to 15. These reforms allowed for growing diversity in the languages on offer, including a stronger focus on a communicative approach. In the 1970s, languages such as Spanish, Italian and Russian had been introduced as optional/elective school subjects. In 1990, also Turkish and Arabic, the languages of large immigrant populations in the Netherlands, were included to a very limited extent. Students could take exams in any of these languages, as long as they were offered in their school's curriculum. At the same time, this reform put further pressure on MFLs other than English. In pre-vocational VMBO schools, English remained a compulsory subject, but children were now allowed to select only one other MFL. As the schools could decide what language(s) they offer, the students' possibilities would often be limited to one other MFL (i.e., German, French *OR* Spanish) available at their institution.

In the pre-professional (HAVO) and pre-academic (VWO) tracks of secondary schools, the trio of compulsory English plus two MFLs (typically, French and German), remained mandatory in the first three years. Yet, in these higher-level tracks, changes for senior secondary education affected MFLs. In the late 1990s, the aforementioned subject bundles -a relic of the *Mammoetwet*- were replaced by four profiles (see section above on the Dutch educational system). While all four profiles allowed taking additional languages next to English, only at the VWO level an additional foreign language (which could also be Latin or ancient Greek) remained as a compulsory exam subject. Especially at HAVO level, very few students opted for an additional language. From today's European perspective, it seems ironic that this happened just before the EU implemented its policy for education in the mother tongue plus two additional MFLs in the early 2000s.

### 3.4 The CEFR: language aims to be reached since the early 2000s

With the latest reform of secondary education (*basisvorming*) in 1993, English was established as a core subject next to Dutch and Mathematics (Fasoglio et al. 2015). In other words, today every Dutch adolescent has to finish high-school with an exam in English, turning it into a basic skill for a globalised world (cf. Lo Bianco 2014). For all MFLs, following the establishment of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001), the CEFR attainment levels were implemented in the official Dutch exam syllabus for VMBO (in 2009), for HAVO (in 2010), and for VWO (in 2011)

<https://www.slo.nl/thema/vakspecifieke-thema/mvt/erk/>, see the summary in Table 1. To support teachers and learners, the *Taalprofielen* [language profiles] were developed, that provide examples of language acts per CEFR level (<https://www.slo.nl>). Given that those goals are binding only for the central reading exams designed by CITO, schools might decide to aim higher or lower for their local school exams.

In general, higher levels are expected for receptive skills, and for English and German, because these languages are both typologically related to Dutch. For example, at the end of pre-vocational VMBO, students' proficiency needs to be at B1 for English reading and listening but only at A2 for speaking and writing. For French, A2 is the goal for all skills. Pre-academic VWO students are expected to reach C1 in reading English/German, while receptive B2 and productive B1 suffices for French/Spanish. A disturbing fact is that large groups of learners do not reach these levels, particularly for writing: only 50% of the final year students reach the target attainment levels for writing in English, German or French (Fasoglio et al. 2015). Interestingly, the speaking proficiency levels in English reach or exceed the target attainment levels in all school types: B1 instead of A2 in upper VMBO, B2 instead of B1 in HAVO, C1 instead of B2 in VWO (Fasoglio & Tuin, 2018). So far, no such studies have been conducted for speaking in German or French.

**Table 1:** Attainment levels for MFLs within different school tracks for the four skills (cf. <https://www.slo.nl/thema/vakspecifieke-thema/mvt/erk/leraar-vo/>)

	Reading	Listening	Writing	Speaking
<b>VMBO*</b>	En: B1	En: B1/A2	En: B1/A2	En: A2
	Ge: B1	Ge: B1/A2	Ge: A2	Ge: A2
	Fr: A2	Fr: A2	Fr: A2	Fr: A2
	Sp: A2	Sp: A2	Sp: A2	Sp: A2
<b>HAVO</b>	En: B2	En: B1	En: B1	En: B1
	Ge: B2	Ge: B1	Ge: B1	Ge: A2
	Fr: B1	Fr: B1	Fr: B1	Fr: A2
	Sp: B1	Sp: B1	Sp: B1	Sp: A2
<b>VWO</b>	En: C1	En: B2	En: B2	En: B2
	Ge: C1	Ge: B2	Ge: B2	Ge: B1
	Fr: B2	Fr: B2	Fr: B1	Fr: B1
	Sp: B2	Sp: B2	Sp: B1	Sp: B1

Note: En = English; Ge = German; Fr = French; Sp = Spanish; \* within VMBO there are higher and lower level tracks, with higher/lower aims for English and German



### 3.5 Bilingual schools: Content and language integrated learning (CLIL)

A different story pertains to bilingual schools, in Dutch *tweetalig onderwijs (tto)*, where subjects are taught in the foreign language. Bilingual schools, the first of which were established in the early 1990s, are supported and monitored by the Dutch organization for internationalization in education *Nuffic*. By now, there are more than 130 schools offering bilingual secondary education for all three scholastic tracks (i.e., 125 VWO, 72 HAVO, and 31 VMBO, cf. Nuffic 2019). Only two schools close to the German border have chosen for German, and all other *tto* schools use English as medium of instruction (de Graaff 2015). This means that subjects as diverse as history and maths (with the exception of other MFLs and Dutch) are taught in English. For HAVO and VWO a minimum of 50 % of the curriculum must be taught in the MFL in the first three years, for VMBO it is a minimum of 30 % (Mearns & de Graaff 2018). After three years of *tto*, students are expected to reach English B2 (VWO) or B1 (HAVO and VMBO; Nuffic, n.d.), often certified by external international exams (e.g., Cambridge). Teachers in *tto* tracks also require a B2 starting level, aiming for C1/C2. In addition, the teachers are being trained in bilingual pedagogy and in applying a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach (Coyle, Hood & Marsh 2010). Irrespective of the scholastic track, at the end of secondary school *tto* students are required to participate in the standard final examinations designed by CITO – which are in Dutch for all subjects. As a result, several *tto* schools offer the bilingual education at junior-secondary school, but switch to Dutch for senior-secondary school. Schools that remain in a *tto*-mode, can only offer English in a limited number of subjects (Nuffic n.d.). HAVO and VWO bilingual schools can offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in the upper forms for English.

### 3.6 Strengthening the trend: English at primary schools

At primary school level, foreign language teaching was made compulsory in 1986, as of when early English has been offered in the last two years of primary school (children aged 10 to 12). Again, the Dutch system does not provide extensive guidance on how to implement this, nor are there standard coursebooks, methods or tests that schools have to use. For many years, there was governmental advice to provide 80 hours of early English during the two compulsory years at the end of primary school. Accordingly, most schools implemented English for one hour a week, to help children with their entry into secondary school English classes. The teaching put emphasis on basic oral interaction with other speakers of English

and understanding simple written information (Fasoglio et al. 2015). By now, more than 1000 out of 7000 schools have chosen to adopt an earlier start (for children aged 6–10), and some even start in the kindergarten years of primary education (age 4). From 2016 onwards, the government has allowed a maximum of 15 % of English in primary education, be it English lessons or other subjects taught in English.

Similar to secondary schools, bilingual education at primary schools holds different standards. In 2014, a pilot project started with 17 bilingual primary schools, where 30–50 % of the curriculum is taught in English. Results of accompanying research suggests that the English level of bilingual primary school (*tpo*) students is consistently higher than that of low-intensity early (age 4 or 6 start) or regular (age 10 start) students, although large individual differences exist, also between the teachers' English level (Jenniskens et al. 2020).

Nowadays, some governmental guidance is available for each of the three approaches to early English (i.e., starting at age 4, 6 or 10, respectively): SLO has formulated core aims and gives examples of how those could be reached ([tule.slo.nl/Engels/F-KDEngels.html](http://tule.slo.nl/Engels/F-KDEngels.html)). Similarly, CITO offers a (non-compulsory) assessment at the end of primary school that focuses on receptive skills at the A1 to A2 level. Every six years, the government arranges a study into the level of English at the end of primary education (see *Inspectie van het onderwijs* 2019, for results from 2012–2018).

### 3.7 Interim historical conclusion

To recap, we can see how building on a long tradition of French, German and English in compulsory secondary education, policy reforms starting in the 1970s have put languages other than English under pressure. While all three languages are taught in junior secondary schools of HAVO/VWO, a second MFL next to English is a compulsory exam subject at the end of secondary school only for VWO students. This steady decline in status by policy (see Lanvers 2017 for a critical review highlighting similar trends for the UK) that threatens French and German as MFLs goes hand in hand with a growing dominance of English, both in education and society. This phenomenon is well reflected in the recent establishment of almost 150 bilingual primary/secondary schools – all but two offering English as the language of instruction. Against this background, we will discuss the challenges and opportunities Dutch MFL education is currently facing.

## 4 Current issues: challenges and opportunities

We will discuss primary and secondary education before describing tertiary education including MFL teacher education. Among the many different aspects affecting MFL teaching and learning, we focus on those that are currently at the heart of national debates in the Netherlands.

### 4.1 Primary education

After 30 years, English is well-established in Dutch primary schools. At this point, we would like to foreground three challenges: (1) drip-feed classes vs. out-of-school exposure; (2) growing socio-economic differences in times of superdiversity; (3) teacher language proficiency.

Compulsory English education starting in grade 5 or even earlier, builds on the idea of ‘the earlier the better’. Yet, apart from bilingual schools, current practice of early English delivers drip-feed education: a small amount of classroom time, typically one 45 minute lesson a week, provides a fairly limited amount of English exposure to children. Extensive research by Muñoz (2008, 2011) suggests that for children in an instructed setting this might not be the most effective way to learn language, because young learners draw much more on implicit processes, which need substantial amounts of exposure. Muñoz concluded that adolescents benefited more from the limited input in school context than younger children as they were cognitively more developed and could draw on more explicit processes for language learning. In the Dutch context, Unsworth et al. (2015) investigated vocabulary knowledge of young children (aged 4 and 5) and found small advantages for those receiving more than 60 minutes a week over those with only 45 minutes. Similarly, de Graaff (2015) and de Graaff and Costache (2020) report that children starting with early English in grade 1 reach higher levels at the end of primary school than those starting in grade 5. They highlight however, that the small differences might be overruled by school population and teaching quality differences, as well as individual differences in attitude and out-of-school exposure.

In the Netherlands, out-of-school exposure to English via different forms of (social) media is often substantial. Recent Flemish research, drawing on a comparable society in this respect, has shown that 10-to-12-year-olds that have not received any formal in-school instruction of English reach on average the A2 level (de Wilde et al. 2020). The authors hypothesize that the lack of in-class exposure might be partially compensated for by out-of-school English media consumption. Yet, an investigation commissioned by the Dutch government into the state of

English at the end of primary school does not confirm this hypothesis (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2019). Data of 2088 children showed that out-of-school use of English did only play a minor role in predicting students' English levels and even more surprisingly, the primary-school foreign language curriculum (early English versus regular English) did not make a major difference when corrected for other factors. In contrast, individual differences were an important predictor with the school advice for the follow-up level of secondary education, a measure of scholastic aptitude, showing strongest effects.

Indeed, socio-economic status is likely to affect English learning at primary schools. While Dutch compulsory education is free of charge, most schools ask for a voluntary parental contribution, typically less than €100,- a year – yet, fees for elective bilingual education can be several hundreds (which at most schools may be covered by the school when parents cannot afford it). Consequently, the benefit of early immersive English may contribute to a socio-economic gap, as children attending bilingual schools are likely to be from more affluent households. Also, Jeffery and van Beuningen (2019) argue that in superdiverse Dutch society, where schools educate many children with a multilingual background, there is a need for more inclusive practices. There are successful initiatives that could serve as examples such as Euregio schools in the southern province of Limburg where German and French are taught at primary level (Claessen 2014), or the *3M-project* that supports teachers in trilingual Dutch, Frisian, English primary schools to implement a translanguaging approach and value the linguistic contributions by migrant pupils (Duarte & Günther-van der Meij 2018).

Not least, teachers' language proficiency is a concern in primary education. Dutch primary schools decide themselves who is teaching English: it might be the pupils' regular teacher, a (native speaker) co-teacher or a trained MFL teacher. In other words, the person delivering early English has not always received training in foreign language pedagogy. To enter Dutch primary school teacher training, students need English B1 but there are no standards for the end of that education (Fasoglio et al. 2015). Therefore, it is currently unclear what the English level of primary school teachers is, including those who are tasked to deliver English lessons. HBOs offering primary school teacher training provide comprehensive programs that cover all subjects, of which English as MFL forms a small and at times only optional part. It is ensuring that more recently, some institutes offer an elective minor program for Early English teaching. Unsworth et al. (2015) found that teachers' language proficiency explained 31 % of variation in the attainment of the young learners in their study, while de Graaff (2015) and de Graaff and Ostache (2020) argue that the didactic skills of a teacher are at least as important.

In summary, the major challenge for English at Dutch primary schools is to ensure that pupils receive high-level language education, and that irrespective of

socio-economic status, all students will learn English to such an extent that they can participate in secondary schools.

## 4.2 Secondary education

At the level of secondary schools, there are many intricacies affecting all MFLs that are taught, be it as mandatory subjects in junior secondary education or as elective in senior secondary schools. Like in other parts of the world, the most prominent challenge is that the dominance of English takes a toll on other MFLs. In the Netherlands, it is a chicken and egg issue whether the declining status of other MFLs in secondary schools that is reflected in the educational policy changes over the past decades is a reaction to its perceived role in society or a result of utilitarian Dutch policies. The facts are that the number of students finishing high-school with an exam in English has grown from almost 95 % in the 1980s to compulsory 100 % now. In contrast, figures for German and French show a steady decline from almost 60 % and 30 % in 1980 to 32 % and 16 % for German and French, respectively (cf. Voogel 2016). A growing group of students opting for Spanish (2 % according to Proft, Böttger & Ide 2016) does not counter the development that the English-only attitude goes hand in hand with declining plurilingualism (Lanvers et al. 2019).

We will discuss four developments that are currently debated in the Dutch context around the interrelated factors of (1) student motivation to learn other languages than English; (2) the washback effect of current practice in MFL assessment; (3) the target language as language of instruction; (4) the content of MFL classes.

Apart from its dominance, reasons that are given for the low uptake of languages other than English relate to myths such as, English is easier than French and German, and that for future careers those languages are less meaningful (cf. [www.buurtaalonderwijs.nl](http://www.buurtaalonderwijs.nl)). The former seems not to be warranted for German, which is a typologically close linguistic neighbor of Dutch (Roelands & ten Thije 2006). Indeed, students of all scholastic tracks report that they find German easy (van Dée et al. 2017). The latter myth stands in stark contrast to Dutch reality: Germany, Belgium, the UK, and France are the top-four trade partners (in this order, cf., CBS 2018). Good social relationships that are established via a trading partner's language (i.e., French, German) serve as an important factor for healthy economic relationships, which is unlikely to be compensated for by English as a lingua franca. In addition, Lanvers (2017) suggests that a mere focus on utilitarian needs might be counterproductive to positive MFL attitudes. Yet, the vicious circle is further fed by schools deciding to dedicate fewer hours a week to other languages, particularly to French. Consequently, students reach lower proficiency

levels, and feelings of low self-efficacy tend to lead to a declining motivation to take non-mandatory classes in senior secondary school (Voogel 2018). Furthermore, governmental campaigns to strengthen STEM profiles in senior secondary schools (and the fact that these profiles allow for greater choice of follow-up university programs) meant that the culture and society profile with a mandatory additional MFL lost ground at VWO level (only 9.8 % of students in 2018 opted for the culture and society profile, NPT 2019).

In 2018, teachers, teacher trainers and universities offering French and German joined forces in the organisation *Visiegroep Buurtalen* (Voogel 2018). Their manifesto, which was signed by, among others, the Goethe Institute and the chamber of commerce for the French industry in the Netherlands, lobbies for more attention to and a stronger position of French and German in Dutch secondary education. Given that the government is currently preparing a curriculum reform (cf. [www.curriculum.nu](http://www.curriculum.nu)) we might be cautiously hopeful that the future will guide more young people to aim for high proficiency in languages other than English be it traditional MFLs like German and French or upcoming Spanish and Chinese.

A recurring discussion of Dutch MFL secondary school education is the negative washback effect of the national central exams. As mentioned before, the standardized CITO exams (determining 50 % of the final grade) focus on reading comprehension tested through multiple-choice questions. Accordingly, a considerable part of MFL teaching has turned into an exam training for a multiple choice test, which scores low on student and teacher enjoyment (van Dée et al. 2017; Voogel 2018). Teachers complain that the emphasis on reading comes at the cost of the other skills, particularly, oral interaction, and leaves little room for discussing content related to language awareness, the target language society, culture and literature (van Dée et al. 2017).

Generally, productive target language use, including teachers speaking the language they teach, seems to be a problematic issue in the Netherlands (see e.g., Dönszelmann et al. 2016; West & Verspoor, 2017). In van Dée et al. (2017) only 29 % of students learning German at HAVO/VWO and 36 to 40 % at VMBO report to use the target language often in class – meaning that the majority of students does not do so. More detailed figures reveal that students use the target language during 5 to 10 % of a lesson only, that is, about 2 to 4 minutes per lesson.

*Doeltaal is voertaal* (freely translated as ‘using the target language’) initiatives train teachers to employ the target language consistently in class (e.g., Dönszelmann et al. 2016). It seems that teachers often keep target language use to social talk (e.g., opening/ending of class) while other instructions (e.g., grammar) are provided in Dutch (Haijma 2013) – a behaviour that is further induced by coursebooks printing instructions in Dutch.

Others try to challenge the prevailing tradition of explicit grammar instruction, which naturally induces more target language use. Communicative input-based pedagogy, such as AIM for French (Gombert et al. 2018; Rouse-Malpat et al. 2019), implicit instruction (e.g., Piggott et al. 2020), and job-specific interactive tasks at VMBO (van Batenburg et al. 2019) show first positive results: teachers and students are more confident with using the target language and productive language is authentically more fluent and more lexically diverse (accuracy measures provide a mixed picture). These continuous efforts will hopefully make classrooms more communicative so that secondary school pupils and their teachers gain first-hand experience with target language use, raising attainment levels, self-efficacy and motivation.

The aforementioned current curriculum.nu reform draws on a bottom-up approach ([www.curriculum.nu/curriculum-nu-english](http://www.curriculum.nu/curriculum-nu-english)): with advice from SLO experts, teams of teachers and school leaders have created a first draft of the main building blocks of the future Dutch curriculum, and now core objectives and attainment levels for the final exams are being formulated. Critical review sessions invite teachers, teacher trainers, testing and curriculum experts and researchers to provide feedback. After adjusting the exam program to these new objectives, piloting in some schools will take place in 2022/23. For the domain of English and other MFLs the *Visiegroep Buurtalen* is involved, as is the *Meesterschapsteam*, an inter-university group of experts in foreign language literature, second language acquisition and language pedagogy. Among others, they stress the need for more engaging and challenging content (Meesterschapsteam mvt, 2018). In particular for the pre-professional (HAVO) and pre-academic (VWO) tracks, language and culture related content taught using CLIL methodology (Mearns & Platteel 2020) might inspire more students to choose a MFL for senior secondary school.

To recap, there are manifold challenges for MFL education at secondary schools where the majority of MFL instruction takes place. Attempts to revalue languages other than English and to increase target language use through meaningful (oral) interaction are ongoing. The current major reform by curriculum.nu opens exciting avenues for the future of MFLs in order to attract more students to learn a foreign language, also at tertiary education.

### 4.3 Tertiary education

As shown in figure 1, tertiary education in the Netherlands is organized along the same three tracks of scholastic achievement as secondary schools, that is, vocational (MBO), applied-professional (HBO) and academic (universities). We will sketch currently debated issues around MFL teaching for each of them.

### 4.3.1 Vocational MBO: job-specific language skills vs. internationally standardized diplomas

As of 2010 English has been a compulsory subject at vocational MBO with an official central exam (since 2017) designed by CITO focusing on reading and listening (standard B1; special track B2; <https://www.slo.nl/thema/vakspecifieke-thema/mvt/erk/erk-mbo/>). These exams assess general English proficiency, while local school exams focusing on oral interaction are designed to assess students' job-specific skills (Raaphorst 2013). For example, a future hotel receptionist learns how to answer a hotel guest's questions, while the doctor's assistant needs to be able to book appointments by phone. Reaching A2 proficiency in a further MFL is advised for certain specific professions and students can choose to take additional classes aiming for B1 or B2, for example, in the tourism industry. A growing number of MBO schools offer bilingual English-Dutch programs (nuffic.nl). The choice, however, also depends on schools that decide what languages they have on offer. Utilitarian tendencies have resulted in some schools limiting or even closing down language sections other than English (Servicedocument 2015). One reason might be related to the fact that a large number of students at an MBO have a migration background and MBOs dedicate language teaching time to improving students' competences in Dutch (van Knippenberg 2012).

In conclusion, contrary to current EU policy, and even though employer organizations have been stressing for years how important knowledge of German and French is, in particular for those working in SMEs close to the border ([www.evo-fenedex.nl](http://www.evo-fenedex.nl)), the uptake of MFLs other than English has declined (Servicedocument 2015). A new trend that might help to counter these figures is that some schools encourage their students to participate in internationally recognized language exams, for example, by the Goethe Institute (cf. <http://duitsmbo.nl>) as well as in international exchange or traineeship programs.

### 4.3.2 Professional HBO: The core of MFL teacher education

Any student with a secondary HAVO or VWO diploma has access to universities for applied sciences (professional HBO) programs. The main language of instruction at HBOs is Dutch, with some exceptions being bachelor/master programs with an international professional focus (e.g., International Business & Management) or in order to attract and cater for an international student target group (e.g., International Teacher Education). In 2017, 6 % of bachelor and 11 % of master programs at HBO level were taught in English (KNAW 2017). Some of these programs offer compulsory or elective language courses for English, and in a few



cases also for French, German, Spanish or Dutch (as a second language). Yet, regularly English Medium Instruction (EMI) is used without dedicated courses for or assessment of English. Currently, there are no national standard language requirements for staff in English-taught programs. However, some institutes might require teachers to demonstrate a C1 proficiency level, and most HBOs offer their staff language courses or coaching for EMI.

Foreign Language and Culture programs at HBOs are by default teacher education programs where students major in English, French, German or Spanish. The four year bachelor's track prepares for teaching at the junior levels of secondary education (prevocational VMBO, and the first years of HAVO/VWO). A two year in-service master's program prepares for teaching at the senior levels of secondary education (upper years HAVO/VWO). English is by far the most popular and most populated MFL teacher education program, while French and German have difficulties to attract enough students to cater for the needs in secondary education.

HBO teacher education at the bachelor's level builds on four pathways: (i) general pedagogy, (ii) subject-specific pedagogy, (iii) subject-specific content, and (iv) language proficiency. The general and subject-specific pedagogy pathways are both theoretical-conceptually and practically oriented and include a traineeship in a secondary school, from one day a week in year 1 to three days a week in year 4. The subject-specific content pathway consists of modules on linguistics, literature and culture. The learning objectives for this pathway are specified in a common Knowledge Base (cf., [www.10voordeleeraar.nl/](http://www.10voordeleeraar.nl/)) that HBO teacher education programs have implemented nationwide to guarantee equivalent content and level. Finally, the language proficiency pathway prepares students to reach C2 (English) or C1 (German, French, Spanish) in their target language, sometimes assessed by means of an internationally certified test (e.g., Goethe Zertifikat).

Most master students in teacher education possess their junior level teaching degree (bachelor) and draw on years of experience as they aim for the senior level degree. The majority of these students follow a dual track in which they combine their teaching job with the (part-time) teacher education program.

A positive development is that while MFL teacher education at HBOs' main focus is on preparing teaching professionals, many Universities of Applied Sciences conduct excellent research into teaching practice at all levels of Dutch education. Recent years have also seen growing governmental support for didactic oriented research, for example, by funding in-service teachers who aim to do a PhD on a topic related to their practice (<https://dudoc-alfa.vakdidactiek.nl/>).

### 4.3.3 Academic university: English as medium of instruction and losing ground in teacher training

With growing internationalisation of Dutch universities (23.9% international 1st year students in 2019, VSNU), the last decade has seen an increasing number of programs that have switched to English as medium of instruction (EMI). While German-speaking students can attend tailor-made summer courses preparing them within four weeks for Dutch-language academic instruction (receptive skills only), most internationals and now many Dutch students (have to) opt for an EMI track. Table 2 summarizes the figures for the language of instruction at bachelor's and master's level, with specific numbers for language degrees. Accordingly, bachelor programmes in languages are for the majority taught in the target language (e.g., *Littérature française*, *Germanistische Linguistik*) with some overarching courses being taught in mostly Dutch, while EMI is dominant in other domains and at master's level.

**Table 2:** Language of instruction at BA and MA level in Dutch universities

	Dutch	English	Mix Dutch-English
BA	29 %	55 %	15 %
BA languages	62 %	16 %	22 %
MA	14 %	76 %	10 %
MA languages	13 %	61 %	26 %

Source: VSNU (2019)

There is an ongoing public debate – sometimes fierce – about the dominance of English in higher education and society (e.g., Edwards 2020; van Gulik et al. 2019). Research on the relationship between academic language proficiency and academic achievement (e.g., Kuiken and Vedder 2020; Trenkic and Warmington 2019) generally supports a critical position towards EMI (though see de Jong, 2018 for contradictory findings). The critics point to the fact that (i) secondary school VWO English does not always fully equip young adults to study in English at university (De Vos et al. 2020), (ii) that many graduates will continue into a predominantly Dutch-speaking professional environment, and (iii) that not all university staff is trained to teach well in EMI. On the other hand, Dutch universities are increasingly international communities of research in which the language of communication happens to be English.

A worrying development for MFL is that over the past 30 years universities have seen a steady decline in young people choosing to study languages from

about 17 % in 1992 to about 13 % (N≈4000) in 2018 (Edelenbos et al. 2004; NPT 2019). In particular, the figures for languages taught at school (e.g., German, French, Spanish) raise concerns: only N=952 (i.e., 1.7 %) of the 1st year students in the whole of the Netherlands (VSNU 2019) have opted for a language degree. To soften the alarming picture, it should be noted that more students major in general BA degrees (e.g., European Studies, International Relations) that often have a compulsory or elective language component. Yet, other subjects that traditionally required a specific foreign language (e.g., Italian for History of Arts) have made them optional or dropped them completely.

Similar to developments in the UK (cf. Lanvers 2017, Polisca et al. 2019), the declining student numbers have forced language departments to merge or close down. Groningen University is an example of the former: There used to be different departments for English, German, Romance, Scandinavian and Slavic languages. These have now been transformed into one Department of European Languages and Cultures. For their BA, students take English or Dutch taught overarching classes on linguistics, literature and politics, and choose one of eight target languages for language proficiency classes as well as language-specific courses in, for example, German linguistics or Russian literature. Even though these innovative approaches have attracted higher student numbers, the general lack of interest in languages as an academic field of study will inevitably result in scientific knowledge and expertise being lost, not least because retiring professors in MFLs are not being replaced (NPT 2019).

An important consequence of low student numbers is the fact that fewer language teachers are being trained at university (for MFLs and Dutch). Traditionally, Dutch universities prepare teachers that are allowed to teach in senior secondary school levels of HAVO/VWO. It seems that training teachers (for both junior and senior secondary school) has mainly become a HBO task, as universities struggle to attract enough students for their educational MA programs. Recent years have seen numerous initiatives to make the academic teacher education more appealing, such as creating various tailor-made pathways that lead to the MFL teacher degree. For example, 1-year educational pre-masters offer courses to students with C2 level in the target language and a background in a related language degree (e.g., journalism) so they can enter the educational MA program afterwards. Similarly, governmental campaigns aim to motivate professionals with high target language skills to become a teacher following a dual pathway (part-time studying while part-time teaching). However, figures remain low. In 2019, the number of students graduating from all university teacher education programs in all modern and classic foreign languages together added up to 200 ([www.onderwijscijfers.nl](http://www.onderwijscijfers.nl)).

Consequently, there is a worrying shortage in secondary education language teachers, particularly for French and German (NPT 2019). Schools that cannot find

appropriate teachers, either opt for hiring an unqualified teacher (e.g., a native speaker without teacher training) or decide to offer fewer or no classes in that language any more. The effects on the quality of the teaching and how this might influence student learning, motivation and the uptake of MFL in the future has, to the best of our knowledge, not been subject to scientific research.

## 5 Conclusion

Modern foreign language learning has a long tradition in the Netherlands. Even before the European council decided to ask for it, many Dutch fulfilled the aim of speaking their mother tongue plus two MFLs. Yet, the growing Englishization in public and private life together with utilitarian political decisions affecting all levels of education have led to the current situation. On the one hand, we see a younger generation that has attended bilingual Dutch-English education, continues their higher education in EMI, and has received so much English input throughout their lives via (social) media, that they could be considered as bilingual language users living in a bilingual country (cf. Edwards 2016). On the other hand, the fact that EMI is growing at all levels of Dutch education puts other MFLs under pressure and induces the fear that the Netherlands might follow the UK's example (Lanvers 2017). That is, other MFLs may find themselves in a vicious circle where low uptake and attainment levels in secondary schools – in part motivated by the idea that global English as a basic skill suffices – led to fewer students picking up MFLs in teacher training, which results in shortages of (well-trained) teachers, which in turn carries the risk of secondary school students not reaching high levels of proficiency to continue down the negative cycle.

Time will show whether the many initiatives from within education – supported by calls from businesses representatives trading with the neighboring countries – will lead to a more prosperous status of MFLs in the future. In particular, the new Dutch curriculum (*curriculum.nu*) may induce policy decisions based on insights, expertise and experience of teacher education programs and research (cf., Meesterschapsteam). A changing world, where the anglo-saxon ideal suffers from Brexit and the US' focus on themselves, may be a wake-up call for Dutch policy makers. The Dutch owe their younger generations to train them in 21st century skills including multiple modern foreign languages, as is advocated by the EU.

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CBS (2018) Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek	<a href="https://longreads.cbs.nl/trends18/economie/cijfers/internationale_handel">https://longreads.cbs.nl/trends18/economie/cijfers/internationale_handel</a>
Europees Referentiekader	<a href="https://www.slo.nl/thema/vakspecifieke-thema/mvt/erk/">https://www.slo.nl/thema/vakspecifieke-thema/mvt/erk/</a>
Government.nl	<a href="https://www.government.nl/topics/freedom-of-education">https://www.government.nl/topics/freedom-of-education</a> <a href="https://www.government.nl/topics/freedom-of-education/public-authority-and-private-schools">https://www.government.nl/topics/freedom-of-education/public-authority-and-private-schools</a>
Onderwijsinspectie	<a href="https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/onderwijssectoren/hoger-onderwijs/sectoren/onderwijs/subsectoren/universitaire-lerarenopleidingen">https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/onderwijssectoren/hoger-onderwijs/sectoren/onderwijs/subsectoren/universitaire-lerarenopleidingen</a>
VO Gids	<a href="http://www.devogids.nl/extra-aanbod">www.devogids.nl/extra-aanbod</a>
Taaluniversum (2011)	<a href="http://taaluniversum.org/inhoud/feiten-en-cijfers">http://taaluniversum.org/inhoud/feiten-en-cijfers</a>
Tweetalig Onderwijs	<a href="http://www.ikkiestto.nl">www.ikkiestto.nl</a>
VSNU (2019) (Vereniging van Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten)	<a href="https://vsnu.nl/f_c_instroom_bachelor.html">https://vsnu.nl/f_c_instroom_bachelor.html</a>