

PORTFOLIO METHODOLOGY FOR LITERACY LEARNERS: THE DUTCH CASE

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1 Introduction

In 2001 the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) was published as the end product of the overall language policy of the Council of Europe. (See Janssen-Van Dieten, this volume.) Members of the European Union (EU) had already started to prepare the introduction of the CEF in specific EU countries and for specific languages.²⁴ In the Netherlands, for example, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science called for the development of several instruments indispensable to the introduction of a portfolio methodology, such as:

- a model of a European *Language Portfolio* for Dutch as a second language, consisting of a passport, a biography and a dossier.
- a *Framework for Dutch as a Second Language* (DSL) showing the reference levels for Dutch.
- *Checklists*, which provide example situations of the specific language scales and levels of the CEF. They are aimed at helping learners and teachers relate their individual DSL targets and skills to the framework.
- a *Sample Book* with examples of assessment assignments for DSL learners and a guidebook for teachers and other assessors.
- A *Manual* for teachers, instructors and others guiding the introduction of the portfolio methodology.

The project *Towards a Portfolio for Dutch as a Second Language: Framework DSL* (Dalderop, Liemberg & Teunisse 2002) was carried out in 2001-02 in collaboration with a large number of organizations and teachers in centers for adult education all over the country. At the end of 2002 implementation of the Portfolio DSL began.

²⁴ The present members of the European Union are: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands and United Kingdom. Candidate countries are: Bulgaria, Croatia, former Yugoslavia and the Republic of Macedonia, Romania and Turkey.

2 *The bottom of the Framework Dutch as a Second Language*

The Common European Framework is common for a reason. It is aimed at all types of learners, in all member countries, at all different ages and different educational levels. It is self evident that adjustments to specific language users is necessary, not only for language-specific use but also for users of different age groups and different domains such as daily life, education and work. In the Netherlands, a special language passport has been developed for pupils of elementary schools (Aarts & Broeder, 2003). In this way mother tongue skills and competencies of immigrant children takes on more importance than before. In the course of the development of the Dutch version of the Framework (*Raamwerk NT2*) and the portfolio, it became apparent early on that the present framework and the related instruments (portfolio and checklists) were not suitable for adult literacy learners and learners with low levels of education. The amount of written text, the manner of presentation, particularly its high level of abstraction, didn't fit the needs of non-literate and low-schooled learners. It became clear as well that reaching the lowest level of the CEF – level A1 of Basic User (see (1)) – would require quite a long time for most non-literate and low-schooled adult earners.

(1) *Common Reference Levels: global scale - scale of Basic User A1*

The user can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. S/he can introduce her/himself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where s/he lives, people s/he knows and things s/he has. S/he can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Particularly for those slow learners, it is important they can show they are making progress, that they can apply what has been learnt, and that they can gain insight into their own learning processes. The portfolio system provides more possibilities and challenges to enhance learning in context than a standard oral language test does. The same holds for learning how to read and write: it is more stimulating when a learner can show as soon as possible what s/he can read and write - however little in the eyes of an experienced reader - than having to wait until the readings skills of CEF level A1 (see (2)) will have been acquired:

(2) *Common Reference Levels: Reading level A1*

- The learner can understand very short, simple texts a single phrase at a time, picking up familiar names, words and basic phrases and rereading as required.
- Can understand short, simple messages on postcards.
- Can recognize familiar names, words and very basic phrases on simple notices in the most common everyday situations.
- Can get an idea of the content of simpler informational material and short simple descriptions, especially if there is visual support.
- Can follow short, simple written directions (e.g. to go from X to Y).

In short, the process of learning a second language and learning how to read and write for the first time in a second language, or in a new alphabetic script are brought to the fore when progress can be made visible in small steps: more precisely, in the form of a portfolio. Using the checklist in the portfolio also provides the student with insights into what s/he wants to learn, and collecting in a dossier the concrete results of what has been learnt makes him/her aware of the learning process. When in the early stages of the literacy course, learners discover they can use their brand-new knowledge in the world outside the classroom, this has a tremendous influence on their motivation. The dossier clearly has such a function. Positive gains had already been experienced with the portfolio methodology when it was aimed at low-schooled adults in the domain of work. The portfolio methodology fits well, it has turned out, in the overall tendency to formulate targets not in terms of theoretical knowledge (e.g. of a language), but in terms of skills and competencies. Therefore, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science was recommended to investigate whether the *Framework DSL* could be extended by functional literacy levels below level A1 of the CEF and how the language portfolio could be made more suitable to DSL literacy learners.

3 *Framework Literacy in Dutch as a Second Language*

3.1 *Why a Framework for Literacy Learners?*

If one decides to use the portfolio methodology, this will have important consequences for the curriculum. Textbooks become less important. They will no longer be decisive for the curriculum; rather competencies, skills, objectives and targets the learner himself has selected will take over the structuring role in curriculum development. When this happens, new points of reference will become necessary as well. It is exactly this function a framework for the acquisition of literacy in Dutch as a second language should have. Without such a calibrated scale it is not possible to compare learner performances and assess how far a learner has progressed. Unambiguous level classification increases transparency both for learners and for teachers and curriculum designers. A consequence of a transparent level classification is that it is easier to make a distinction between groups or classes in adult education, and progression from group to group is promoted in a fair and transparent way. A clearly described framework is the basis for curriculum development, for designing appropriate, well-suited course materials and for test/assessment development.

What kind of decisions had to be made in order to create such a framework for literacy acquisition?

3.2 *Designing the Literacy Framework*

The first problem to solve was the question of how technical and functional objectives could be combined. As shown above, opting for a portfolio methodology implies opting for a functional language teaching approach. In the standard version of the language portfolio, only functional targets are formulated. For the literacy portfolio however, it would not be advisable to describe and work out only functional targets since the technical part of learning how to read and write constitutes a major part of the

those targets. If only functional targets were described, one would run the risk that learners would focus too much on functional targets and only learn by rote, for example, their home address and the days of the week without being able to truly read or write them. For the literacy portfolio, it was therefore necessary to develop a framework in which technical and functional skills would be interrelated. This was one of the most difficult parts of the enterprise, as teaching technical reading skills can easily be based on steps involved in learning the alphabetic writing system, the properties of Dutch phonology and its specific orthographic system. Words existing of one syllable are easier to read than multi-syllabic words with consonant clusters, and regularities are easier than exceptions. Functional reading and writing tasks, however, rarely match the requirements of a systematic plan to support learners in making the phoneme-grapheme connection. The solution we found was to distinguish two different types of skills: technical skills (i.e., basic reading or decoding skills) from functional skills (application in daily life).

A second problem faced was how to integrate literacy learning into the levels of the CEF at which a level for literacy learning is lacking. One option was to add a level at the bottom of the framework, an A0 level, a kind of preparatory route before starting to learn a new language. The objection was that this is not in accordance with the curriculum where teaching how to read and write is always linked to the development of oral skills. This was the reason for sketching a new alternative route for low-educated L2 learners of Dutch which was not added to but integrated into the levels of the CEF (Stockmann 2004). This was done by splitting up level A1 into three smaller parts: the levels Alfa A, Alfa B and Alfa C (Alfa is the abbreviation of *alfabetisering* = literally, alphabetization, i.e. teaching how to read and write, or literacy learning). The latter has the same targets as CEF level A1 (see Figure 1). Each of the three literacy levels describes technical as well as functional skills, but the division is based on the (technical) steps in the reading process itself. At level Alfa A the learner has learnt the alphabetic principle and can read short words, but he still spells words. At level Alfa B reading and writing is more efficient because frequently used consonant clusters and morphemes are read as a unit. At level Alfa C reading and writing has been automated except for long and unknown words. At level C reading is no longer a cause of delay.

| <i>Common European Framework</i> | <i>Framework Literacy in Dutch</i> |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Levels B1 – C2 | |
| Level A2 | |
| Level A1 | Alfa C (= A1) |
| | Alfa B |
| | Alfa A |

Figure 1: Levels of the Common European Framework compared to those of the Framework Literacy in Dutch as a Second Language

As can be seen in Figure 1, the Literacy Framework does not stop at level Alfa B because the acquisition process of reading has not been completed at level Alfa B. From that moment that literacy learners join a class of literates, they run the risk of delay and stagnation. Level Alfa C is therefore necessary. In this way the literacy route is no longer a separate one preceding L2 acquisition, but literacy has become an integrated part of the entire L2 acquisition process. When a literacy learner has reached level Alfa C, the transition to the standard levels of the *Framework Dutch as a Second Language* should go smoothly.

3.3 The Literacy Framework in More Detail

Table 1: Global characterization of the three literacy levels

| | Alfa A | Alfa B | Alfa C |
|-----------------|--|---|--|
| Autonomy | Can carry out reading and writing tasks with help and/or with the help of examples. | Can carry out known and trained tasks without any help. | Can carry out new tasks without help, is able to transfer things learnt in another context. |
| Fluency | Can read and write character by character. | Can spell and write no longer character by character, but by (consonant) clusters. | Can analyze and synthesize in silence; only long, unknown words cause problems. Can recognize words as a unit and can write them as a unit. |
| Word complexity | Can read and write global words trained, CVC words, words in which two graphemes represent one phoneme | Can read and write the global words trained, all short words, long words if known, all grapheme combinations; words may contain consonant clusters and morphemes. | Can read and write all words except for long and semantically unknown words. |
| Text properties | Texts are very short and concern familiar subjects. Texts have a clear typeface and line spacing. Capitals and punctuation marks occur in the text but are not relevant for understanding. | Texts are selected with purpose, are short and concern familiar subjects. Texts contain concrete and well-known words. Typeface may vary. Characters written by hand are recognized. | Texts are short and simple and concern familiar subjects. Texts contain high-frequency words and short and simple sentences with visual support. Typeface is clear. Capitals and punctuation marks are used as a source of information. |

Before going further into the distinction between technical and functional skills a more elaborate characterization of the three literacy levels is given in Table 1. The three literacy levels are described from different perspectives:

- the perspective of the performance: how well the task should be performed: with or without support (autonomy), character by character or words as a unit (fluency).
- the perspective of the task: how difficult the words are (complexity) and how difficult the text is (text properties).

This global characterization is the basis of the *Literacy Framework* for technical and functional skills.

3.3.1 Technical Skills

The *Literacy Framework for Technical Skills* is divided in three types of mechanics: reading, writing and auditory skills, as shown in Table 2. Each aspect, e.g. speed/fluency for technical reading, is specified in a separate cell (not shown in Table 2) in terms of what a learner is able to do.

Table 2: Overview of the *Literacy Framework for Technical Skills*

| | Level Alfa A | Level Alfa B | Level Alfa C |
|-------------------|--------------|---|--------------|
| Technical reading | | Specification for: graphemes/phonemes, words, sentences, text, speed/fluency, principles of literacy | |
| Technical writing | | Specification for: graphemes/phonemes, words, sentences, text, speed/fluency, principles of literacy | |
| Auditory skills | | Specification for: phonemes, words, sentences and discourse | |

The cells concerning ‘principles of literacy’ need to be clarified. Principles of literacy for reading refer to the knowledge that written language is the representation of:

- spoken language,
- the relationship between image and information,
- different text types.

One of the cells at level Alfa B for reading, for instance, is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Example of a cell for technical reading skills in the Literacy Framework

| Technical reading skills / Level Alfa B | |
|---|---|
| Principles of literacy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - knows what frequent logos refer to. - knows where a text comes from. - knows that, e.g. on signs, words and pictures together may provide information. - starts, after a first orientation, with decoding instead of with guessing in order to understand the text further. - knows that the context may indicate that digits refer to money, dates and telephone numbers. - knows that a word is the representation of a combination of phonemes. |

In Table 4 another example of two cells is given for technical auditory skills at level Alfa A. These illustrations are provided specifically to demonstrate the difference between the technical skills and the functional skills, which will be discussed in the next section.

Table 4: Example of two cells for technical auditory skills in the Literacy Framework

| Technical auditory skills / Level Alfa A | |
|--|---|
| Sentences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - can isolate words in a short sentence. - can count the number of words in a short sentence. |
| Conversations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - can distinguish difference in intonation when, for example, questions or warnings are involved in a conversation. |

3.3.2 Functional skills

The *Literacy Framework for Functional Skills* focuses on reaching not only level A1 of the standard *Framework DSL*, but also the three literacy levels Alfa A, B and C. The corresponding technical skills constitute the basis of the functional skills at a specific level. In some rare cases, however, daily life doesn't respect these technical levels, for instance, when a learner has a complicated address that is too long to memorize (an objective at functional level B). In such cases it is better for the learner to bring a card and copy the address.

The framework for functional skills has a similar division in descriptors and sub-skills as the standard CEF. In Table 5, the sub-skills are given for reading and writing.

Table 5: *Sub-skills for functional reading and writing in the Literacy Framework*

| Functional reading skills | Example |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Reading correspondence | Letter from school |
| Reading for orientation | Find the opening hours of an office |
| Reading for information and argument | Newspaper |
| Reading instructions | Manual, price label |
| Functional writing skills | |
| Writing correspondence | Filling out a form |
| Writing notes, messages, forms | Informal message, memo |
| Free writing | Short poem |

For each sub-skill a couple of descriptors are provided in the checklists together with examples of how and when these skills can be used. Those checklists show concrete situations and constitute adequate means for usage in the classroom. The examples for level Alfa A are of a more general character, but for the levels Alfa B and C the examples are related to three learner perspectives: participation in society, participation in the labor market and participation in the education of one's children. Obviously, it is possible to provide new examples relevant to a specific student. The specific way the descriptors are adapted to be used by low-schooled learners will be shown in the next section.

4 *The Portfolio for Literacy Students*

As said before, literacy students seem to make little progress when their performance is measured by existing standardized tests. Therefore it is important that other means be used that can show they do make progress, to themselves as well as to others. The portfolio has this double function: a pedagogic-didactic function and a reporting function.

By working on their portfolio adult learners gain more insight in what they are learning and in what they want to learn. Their objectives become clear and that makes them less dependent on the education they receive. Working on the portfolio invites the involvement of the outside world into education, or into what they learn. Acquisition of literacy, just like the entire second language acquisition process, is focused on applicability in daily life.

The reporting function of the portfolio becomes manifest in the dossier, in which learners collect evidence in the form of samples of their work which show what they can do and what they have learnt. It may be a form filled out by the learner her/himself or a postcard written by her/him. It may be also a statement by an interlocutor, or a statement by the schoolteacher of her/his children. It may be a report about the learner's mechanical skills or judgments of a communication assessment that are included in the dossier. This evidence can be shown to an employer (the showcase function of the portfolio). This collection of work can also be used for the assessment function of the portfolio: has a learner collected enough samples of their work that level B for reading has been reached?

Previous experiences with a portfolio for career orientation and planning have shown that a portfolio can only be successful for low-educated learners if it is entirely

tailored to the user. For that purpose the biography, the checklist and the dossier have also been adapted to the low- and unschooled learner.

4.1 *The Biography*

The biography is a difficult but essential part of the portfolio methodology. It consists of the following parts:

- Personal facts
- What have you learnt?
- What is your strong point?
- What language(s) do you speak?
- To whom do you speak Dutch?

Although the biography is very simple, it gives the learner the opportunity to become aware of what s/he is able to do and what s/he still wants to learn. This has two effects: the learner gets a better feeling that s/he is responsible her/himself and for her/his learning process and that s/he can learn independently of what is in the textbook or taught in the classroom. The second effect is that learners discover that for many years they have been functioning in social life in spite of their low level of reading and writing skills. This discovery has the effect of empowerment. Parts of the biography can be filled up regularly. It is up to the learner her/himself to indicate when the moment is there. However, the guidance of the teacher is indispensable here.

The biography can function as an introduction, a kind of visiting card, in the showcase portfolio. The biography provides in short who the portfolio holder is.

4.2 *The Checklist*

The checklist is an important part of the portfolio. The description of the various skills in the checklist is the translation of the *Framework Functional Skills* at level of the learner. The checklist provides examples of speech acts and skills, ordered in the three levels Alfa A, B and C. As a description in words is often too difficult to grasp for literacy learners when they are asked to assess the following skill: *I can read the instruction on my medication*, many learners will say that they cannot, or only with difficulty, but if they see the same skill illustrated as in Figure 2, their reaction will more often be: *I can. It is easy for me.*

I can read how many times a day I have to take my medication.



Tablet 10 mg

1 tablet a day

| | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|---|------------------------|---|--------------------|--|--------------------|---|
| It is easy for me |  | It is difficult for me |  | I cannot do it yet |  | I want to learn it |  |
|-------------------|---|------------------------|---|--------------------|--|--------------------|---|

Figure 2: Example of level Alfa A for reading skills in the checklist.

In the portfolio revised for literacy learners all examples in the checklist for all types of skills have been tailored to suit users with a low level of schooling. Figure 2 showed an example for reading skills; Figure 3 shows an example of writing skills at level Alfa C, in the domain of work.



**A colleague is getting married.
I can write a postcard to congratulate her.**

Hartelijk Gefeliciteerd

| | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|---|------------------------|---|--------------------|--|--------------------|---|
| It is easy for me |  | It is difficult for me |  | I cannot do it yet |  | I want to learn it |  |
|-------------------|---|------------------------|---|--------------------|--|--------------------|---|

Figure 3: Example of level Alfa C for writing skills (domain labor) in the checklist.

With help of the checklist the teacher can show what skills are expected at a specific level. In addition, by means of the checklist, learners develop their capacity of self assessment. They guess what speech acts and skills they think they have mastered and which skills they have not. They also learn to indicate what is important for them to learn. The next step is that teacher and student determine what the next target will be. In the beginning, teachers are worried about the idea that learners underestimate or overestimate themselves. That is not a real problem. If a learner overestimates her/himself, the teacher may propose to look for a sample of that specific skill. When the evidence cannot be found, the learner has to revise her/his opinion. In this way

students learn how to deal with self-assessment and to be more realistic.

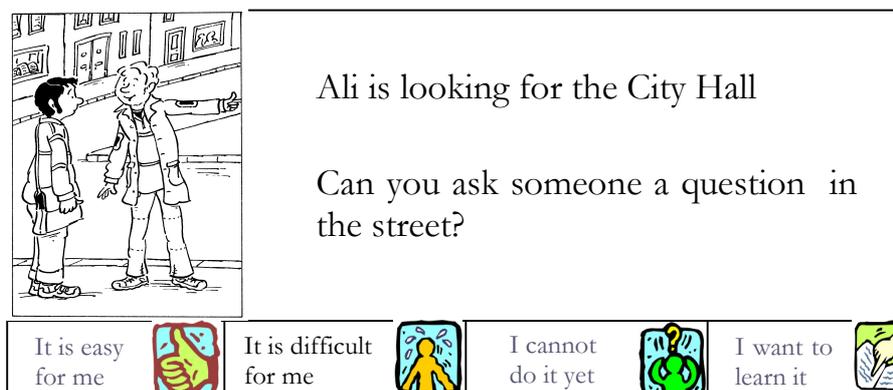


Figure 4: Example of level Alfa C for Spoken Interaction (domain: social participation)

Although literacy classes focus on reading and writing skills, auditory skills play an important role. So, it was obvious that assessment of auditory skills - in particular the skill *spoken interaction* - should be carried out in the same way. After lengthy consideration it was determined to add not only pictures, but also a CD to the checklist so that it would be possible to listen to a learner's conversation and assess whether one is able to conduct such a conversation. Pictures illustrate the context of the conversation and help the learner to guess whether s/he is able to do the same. At a more advanced level (Alfa C / A1) the conversations are written down. An example of the part *having conversations* is given in Figure 4,

5 Assessment

So far the *Framework (Literacy) DSL* and the *Portfolio (Literacy) DSL* do not have formal status in the Netherlands. Legislation and regulation require other instruments such as the National Exams DSL or the Profile Test (*Profieltoets*) at the end of the Dutch citizenship course, obligatory for newcomers from outside the European Union.²⁵ Yet, it is important to add an element of closure to the dossier by an assessment on the basis of the guidelines and the calibration points provided by the *Framework Literacy in DSL*. In the dossier, the learner proves that s/he has mastered a skill. This has obvious advantages compared to more standardized instruments of assessment (i.e., official tests), as this evidence relies on authentic acts in real language use situations. The fact that the samples of work have been collected over time shows that it is not just by chance that the learner has succeeded. The fact that the learner is able to apply her/his knowledge in daily life, supports its validity. Yet, the question remains how the various samples collected by the learner can be weighed. In the manual to the portfolio two

²⁵ At the moment of writing, both the course and the test is obligatory for newcomers outside the EU. New legislation, however, is expected.

ways of assessment are proposed: (i) assessment by means of the evidence guide and (ii) assessment by means of protocol portfolio scoring.

An evidence guide provides guidelines for the assessment of a collection of pieces of evidence. Those guidelines have the status of proposals, not of formal guidelines. Starting-points are the following:

- the assessment occurs for each cell of the *Framework Functional Skills*, writing Alfa A or reading Alfa C.
- for each cell five different pieces of evidence are required.
- the pieces of evidence are relevant, authentic (made by the learner himself), up to date (not older than one year), and reliable.
- the pieces of evidence are distributed over all sub-skills. When the conclusion is that the learner has reached Writing Level A, this judgment is based on those related to the sub-skills: correspondence, notes, messages and forms.

No pieces of evidence are collected for the technical skills for reading and writing. Development of the technical skills is simply reported in a form meant for diagnostic purposes.

The second way of assessment has been developed by the Citogroep (Straetmans, 2004) because of increasing interest in portfolio- and competency-directed education. In this way competencies and linguistic skills can be assessed in the same way. The procedure is as follows: for each cell of the *Framework* a matrix is set up. On the horizontal axis the assessment criteria are summed up, on the vertical axis the assessment tasks. For each task it is indicated what aspects of assessment may be possible. The advantage of this procedure is that it results in a good overview of the tasks and the extent to which they represent the skill and the level required. The requirements are:

- at least five different tasks are presented;
- each aspect is assessed at least once.

5 Conclusion

Initial experiences with the *Portfolio Literacy in Dutch as a Second Language* are promising, based on observations of teachers in adult education centers. Literacy learners can work much more independently and take more responsibility than teachers have ever thought. Learners see the benefit of what they learn. For teachers it is not the easiest way of working with a group of adults. They feel obliged to carry out far-reaching differentiation in the classroom, since an individual selection of objectives chosen from the checklist determines the curriculum of each individual learner. This implies another way of thinking and working, and a lot of book keeping for the teacher, but teachers who get used to this methodology do not seriously complain.

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