

LANGUAGE TEACHING PRACTICES OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

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1 *Introduction*

The research by Plichart (2003) showed the traditional class-oriented approach in second language teaching is not very suitable for low-educated learners, especially not for LESLLA learners for whom it takes a long time to reach a basic level. Therefore, following Verhallen (1996), who initiated the development of language learning outside the classroom in Amsterdam, we introduced all kinds of extramural learning activities not only for the highly educated learners, but also for low-literate and illiterate learners.

In 2007, we contributed to the project 'Practical language training for non-native speakers: how to help people settle down in culturally diverse Flanders.' This project was carried out by the Flemish Ministry of Civic Integration in cooperation with VOCVO (Flemish Support Centre for Adult Education), Karel de Grote-Hogeschool (a University College) and two centres for basic education (CBE Willebroek and CBE Leuven).

CBE Willebroek developed and implemented the methodology while VOCVO coordinated the project and Karel de Grote-Hogeschool examined the effects of the project in relation to communicative competencies and social integration. The project also produced a complete manual (including a CD-Rom and DVD) with the underlying vision, all the necessary information about objectives, organisation, the target group, a step-to-step-plan and multiple types of exercises and tasks for low-literate and illiterate learners. It is meant for all teachers and facilitators interested in starting practical language training.

In this article we will introduce the manual and comment on the following triptych: 1) 'extramural tasks', 2) 'made-to-measure activities' and 3) 'practical language training'. The course participants we are referring to are illiterate learners and participants with learning difficulties.

2 *Why learning activities outside the classroom?*

2.1 *Vision and goals*

Learning activities outside the classroom have become of key importance in our vision of second language education, for literate, low-literate and illiterate learners. 'Klasse', a teachers' magazine edited by the Flemish Ministry of Education (Klasse, 2005) stated

that 70% of the learners can learn best by discussing, 80% through ‘acting’ and 90% by explaining things to others. Research and experience have shown that people learn to speak Dutch fluently much faster through everyday contacts, than through a programmed and restricted class drill (Verhallen, 1996). Moreover, throughout the years, we have realized that it does not matter whether the immigrant learners have been living here for two or for 20 years; when there is no real interaction in Dutch, they never learn the language.

Learners can also find that the transfer from what they learn in class is too restricted. As a result, participants of language classes may become frustrated because what they learn and exercise in class cannot be applied outside classroom. They wish for more opportunities to have real language practice as they cannot find it in their own language environment. And classical ‘homework’ that mainly consists of drill exercises, is not of much benefit.

2.2 Learning activities outside the classroom as part of an education programme

As the language acquisition process benefits from frequent real life contacts, learning activities outside the classroom have gone together with our in-class teaching practice. For several years now it has become a working method in Willebroek. In a first phase extramural tasks are introduced, the next step is the made-to-measure training; and finally there is a real practical language training. Practical language training can be used to wrap up language classes and it may act as an incentive for the learners to continue learning.

We start with these learning activities outside the classroom right from the beginning of the language classes, for literate, illiterate and slow learners. It is needless to say that there is an ongoing adaptation process with regard to these learning activities.

The teacher acts as a coach who helps learners learn to realise that extramural contacts are very important for language acquisition. Language education is linked to the learners’ actual operating areas through real-life tasks that are handled in class, with feedback being given afterwards. Awareness tasks are used in the beginning to help learners to see the various opportunities to learn language outside the classroom. Their attention needs to be focused towards all kinds of everyday situations where they can hear, speak, read and write Dutch. We focus on these things particularly in the literacy courses.

3 Extramural exercises

3.1 How to proceed as a teacher-coach?

Extramural exercises in the first phase are second language exercises where the preparation and processing and evaluation are done in the classroom but the tasks themselves are performed outside the class so that there can be real language in natural surroundings.

The first thing a teacher-coach has to do is to select a communicative teaching method with functional exercises and tasks, because then it will become easier to find appropriate activities connected with the theme and subjects in the class.

The teacher-coach must also provide functional material including a lot of visual material for illiterate participants. The teacher-coach must not forget that the core of a language task is doing something, acting in a real life setting; for example the learner must ask for directions; he has to make an appointment; he will take notes, etc.

Extramural exercises require these three steps:

1. Preparation in class. The learners must dare to speak, which is not obvious at all, therefore it must be learnt first in a safe classroom environment. This step is important, especially for literacy learners. Learners can practice in pairs or in small groups or the teacher can organise a role play.
2. Realisation of the task. For example, sometimes, the learners perform their task in pairs: then the weaker student can learn while listening.
3. Subsequent discussion in class on the basis of an handout. The learners must evaluate their exercise: What went well? What did not go well and what was the reason? Their experience might be negative or they may have had difficulties with the instructions. The teacher-coach must take sufficient time for the discussion and focus on those learners who try to avoid their extra-mural tasks. He must also try to encourage them to do it better next time.

3.2 Various kinds of extramural exercises

There are numerous opportunities outside the classroom for additional language learning. An example of a very popular task is: at the beginning of each holiday, participants are given a card to record the number of language contacts they have. They must indicate where and when they heard Dutch. It is notable that the higher number of contacts the participants made, the more they seemed to learn. This awareness can also help them to focus on 'how do I learn? It is important for the learning process to give awareness tasks at regular intervals, for example every week, or before or after a new subject.

Tasks can be adapted to all groups and levels: for example social talk with colleagues in the canteen at work, with neighbours or at their children's school with teachers and other parents ; it is also possible to give different tasks to different learners and to differentiate in this way. The contents can be adapted to the needs of the learners, for example for those who work and those who do not work. A lot of supporting visual material is used for the literacy tasks. So they find out that they are all able to do that for example by watching Dutch television, by talking to their neighbours or by actively participating in school.

Some tasks, like 'take a note', or 'understand information,' are linked to the objectives of the modules from the second language course; others like 'listen to people talking on the bus', 'read opening hours', 'ask for a flyer' or 'complete the coupon for a free catalogue' are connected with the four language skills listening, reading, speaking and writing.

3.3 *Conditions for extramural learning and results*

The teacher-coach must make the learner realise that they are responsible for their own language acquisition and that they can learn or pick up language everywhere. As extramural learning is usually done without a teacher, this should be made clear to the learner. This requires time and energy as it takes quite some time for learners to realize that learning opportunities are all around them.

The outcome speaks for itself: the learner is more motivated. In the end learners become more learning-conscious. Tasks help them to improve the 'language contact quality' in their environment; for example good contacts with neighbours, the courage to communicate with the child's teacher, being able to ask the doctor for extra information. Extramural activities may also be used as means for permanent evaluation in order to get a certificate.

Although there is no doubt about the possible positive results, extramural activities are time consuming in comparison with a normal teaching programme. Most of the tasks are 'classroom-oriented' and still controlled. Some learners, especially in the beginning of a course, do not always consider the tasks to be 'important' at that particular moment. Others are not motivated: they do not understand why these tasks are useful; they only want to do classroom exercises. So the teacher-coach must try to motivate and encourage the learners to do their best to carry out the extramural tasks.

Another important condition is that the language trainee should have the opportunity to have meaningful language contact by being involved in the organisation's daily work. We mostly work with non-profit organisations as they know our target audience and generally work with volunteers as well.

Research on the effects of practical language training particularly of the effects on the social integration and participation of the learners was also part of the project (Peytier & Vanpoucke, 2007). According to the learners, their ability to make language contacts and their 'daring' have increased besides a much greater proficiency of Dutch. So they have now a much better contact with their neighbours and their children's school and they are able to speak Dutch in all their contacts with social services and public authorities. The teachers stress a change of attitude towards work and greater self-confidence.

4 *Learning to learn*

'Learning to learn' is a method through which learners learn to think about their own way of learning. They must reflect on how they function in their practical experience in order to enlarge their self-reliance. Learning how to learn comes in a later stage as it is related to self learning in practical language usage situations. We observed that extramural exercises were still too classroom-related and that the transfer could be better; the learners also had little insight into their own learning process. We have chosen to use learning how to learn in some groups as this method emphasises the learners' reflection on their own language acquisition and language usage.

The method prepares learners by means of a 4-stage-plan. It is the teacher's task to coach them in order to find meaningful tasks.

1. Orientation

The learner reflects on his situation: what do I know about this situation in my own country? What do I know about the situation in Belgium? What is different? Do I need to know more about it?

2. Preparation
The learner reflects on the aim of the exercise. What kind of language is necessary?
3. Acting
The learners carry out what they have prepared.
4. Evaluation
What can I do better next time?

This method is used with literate groups, including the participants with learning difficulties, but not with illiterate learners. Due to its abstract nature, it is difficult to apply this method to the latter. We are still looking for ways to make this method more transparent, and to introduce it into the higher modules in the literacy courses (*Richtgraad 1.2* level is equivalent to A2 of the Common European Framework).

5 Practical language training

The transition to practical language training appears to be a logical step for all our second language learners. Learners are offered practical language training as 'the icing on the cake'.

5.1 What is practical language training?

Practical language training gives non-native speakers the opportunity to improve their level of Dutch by letting them work for a period of time as voluntary workers in social organisations where natural language acquisition is stimulated. In practical language training the language contact is the most important thing and not the job itself. Language trainees find out that their language competence is not so bad, and that they have to learn to dare to speak.

Practical language training is possible in any organisation or institution.

What tasks can be given to the participants in these organisations?

- Selling in a third world aid shop.
- Collecting, sorting, repairing or selling goods in a centre specializing in recycled goods.
- Logistic support, providing transport to patients in an old people's home or hospital, doing activities with the inhabitants.
- Helping with school-activities in the kindergarten or at school (preferably with the 4 or 5 year old children), helping with the parents' party, supervision. All these activities are also to be encouraged as part of the parents' involvement at school.
- Kitchen help in a sheltered restaurant, running the bar or serving.

The organisation and the learner discuss the practical language training together. The minimum duration of the training is 40 hours, preferably twice a week four hours. The first practical language training session for literacy learners can occur in *Alfa 4* (which

corresponds with the end of Breakthrough 1.1 (A1) of the Common European Framework). This is meant as an incentive, to make their long learning path more interesting and practical; the second practical language training session can be done in the Waystage R1.2. Both learners and organisations can request a second practical language training session or extend the session.

5.2 *Who is fit for practical language training?*

As practical language training is supplementary to the regular lessons, it is suitable for all learners who have mastered basic Dutch to the extent that they are able to fend for themselves.

This group of language learners also includes learners from various modules who have come to a standstill or have repeatedly failed particular module targets. However, they need at least some knowledge of Dutch. It is important that the teacher-coach expects the learner to be able to succeed in practical language training even if this target group requires an intensive guidance. Sometimes learners with restricted language skills like the participants with learning difficulties discover that they are capable of doing a lot more than they expected, provided they are given the right boost.

This is true particularly for the literacy students who get often stuck during language instruction because of their 'restricted' writing abilities and are thus missing training and work opportunities. After *Alfa 3* learners have had 240 hours of verbal skills instruction so they are able to start practical language training. Ideally however, practical language training does not start prior to the completion of *Alfa* in the Waystage (600 hours R1.1 oral and written skills). That is why we recommend that these learners take a second practical language training session. Some learners do not dare to proceed to practical language training unless they have reached this stage.

In order to be able to start with practical language training a few more important requirements have to be met. Learners need a good learning attitude and they must attend class. Things like being on time or absence notification are important. The first language trainees from the group have to set a good example and be positive pioneers for other learners. Motivation is obviously important as well and is sure to go up when participants hear about the other learners' experiences.

5.3 *Coaching of the language trainees*

5.3.1 *Time to organise*

Coaching of the trainees is vital if the practical language training is to be successful; the first thing that has to be done when practical language training is planned is to make time for the teacher or coach to organise it. In a basic education centre there are various options: someone can be the teacher as well as the practical language training coach or a dedicated teacher-coach coordinates practical language training sessions for trainees from various groups (for example, a group with three participants with learning difficulties and two LESLLA learners).

5.3.2 *The learners' abilities and interests*

When choosing an organisation for practical language training the coach must take into account the learner's interest and abilities. For instance, when someone wants to function on a professional level, he or she may apply for a 'job' in a day-care centre

while a mother who wants to be more involved in her child's school and thus wants to function mainly on a social level, can help in that school. The participants' interest may also depend on the future education the learner has in mind: for a participant who wants to become a nurse, the training location could be a hospital.

5.3.3 The organisations

It is important to provide sufficient time to contact the organisations and to prepare the learners for possible practical language training, for example, by visiting them or by distributing flyers or hand-outs.

5.3.4 Preparation in the classroom

When the language course starts, the learners are prepared to undertake practical language training. Gradually their motivation should increase and their fears diminish.

There will be an intake interview with the organisation which is prepared for in the classroom. The purpose of the intake interview is to have an initial introduction and to discuss terms. The teacher-coach sees to it that the learner is sufficiently prepared to handle any problems, like for example, whether or not to wear a scarf.

A scene from the DVD shows how learners are prepared by the teacher. They have arrived at about week 3, where the teacher tells them that they had been given the opportunity to think about their language training location the week before. Today the learners may discuss their preferred training location. The teacher questions each participant and then tells a language trainee that she can go ahead. So Nadine, who is planning a traineeship in "i W'rak" (a centre specialised in recycled goods), may call at the centre to confirm the appointment. ... In another scene we witness the intake interview with everybody engaged in the language training job introducing him/her, including the human resources manager and the trainee's coach on the shop floor. There's also the signing of the contract and Nadine at work.

5.3.5 Evaluation

As the practical language training is part of the language course, the trainees are regularly evaluated during their practical language training. There are mid-course evaluations by tasks the trainee has to fulfil and by means of contacts between the teacher and the mentor at the practical language training location. A final evaluation is also prepared by all parties involved.

On the DVD there is also a scene with a final evaluation.

5.3.6 Tasks

During practical language training learners are given a list with tasks to do, for example, interviewing colleagues. All tasks are prepared and discussed in class.

DVD-scene with Boukabar

Boukabar is a trainee in an old people's home and distributes water to the elderly people. Boukabar has difficulties with reading and writing; he has to read from a piece of paper how much water he needs to fetch from the storage area. The old people's home did not allow us to film the inhabitants so that Boukabar isn't filmed while doing his job.

The coffee break room is the ideal location for the language trainee to speak Dutch. His fellow workers ask questions about his spare time. So Boukabar was told to have a social talk during the coffee break. He was individually prepared for this task. He had to ask his colleagues some questions like:

- "Do you like watching television?"
- "What do you watch?" "I like watching ..."
- "Do you like listening to music?"
- "What music are you listening to?"
- "Have you got any hobbies?"

We can see that they have some difficulty with understanding each other, but the most important thing is that they are speaking Dutch.

5.4 Conditions for successful practical language training

5.4.1 The trainees

The trainees must invest time and commit themselves to reach the goal. They must attend the classes regularly; otherwise they can never be successful. Illiterate learners require more guidance during the lessons as well as at the practical language training location.

As previously stated, the trainees need a suitable job. We were advised by the staff of Assisted Living Homes that were often used as a location for practical language training. They told us that active trainees who prefer to do things are usually better placed distributing meals and drinks, while talkative learners are better off doing entertainment activities.

5.4.2 The practical language training location.

- A maximum of language contact for the trainees in the training location is required, as language acquisition is the major goal and work is less important.
- Because of the importance of language contact, participants should not be left on their own, for example, to do the cleaning.
- Participants need to do tasks that stimulate intensive language contact.
- An open-minded attitude towards migrants is required from the organisation.
- Ideally, there should be one permanent trainer at the location itself.
- The mentor or trainer must also have insight into the learners' profile.
- It is important for the practical language training location to be prepared to handle the LESLLA learners and the participants with learning difficulties.
- They must have some knowledge about the language background, the possible language barriers and the culture of the trainees (like for example, saying 'yes' when meaning 'no', out of politeness!).

5.4.3 The teacher-coaches

As we said before, the teacher-coaches need sufficient time to prepare and coach the practical language training. They have to be committed to their learners in every respect. They need enthusiasm and must be able to kindle enthusiasm in learners. At the same time they must be able to assess sufficiently the linguistic skills required by the organisation, as well as the learner's linguistic skills level.

6 Conclusion

How relevant are all these activities outside the classroom? What do the participants learn from all these things?

The most important thing is that they 'learn to dare'. Apart from their natural language acquisition the participants learn things they will never learn in class for example, they can observe behaviour on the shop-floor; learn to work with others; and deal with real problems. At the end of the training they all come out much stronger. It is like one of our trainees said in an interview: "I 'm now looking at the world with different eyes!"

This initiative also aids integration. The local organisations and the local population come into contact with non-native speakers and immigrants in a natural way, thus a new world opens to all!

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