

LITERACY: ASSESSING PROGRESS

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1 *Introduction*

In the past, assessment was mainly used to streamline second language education in the Netherlands. Levels of proficiency were based upon empirical data, gathered through language tests. The problems with this practical approach were manifold. Since it was not based upon a view of language, levels could not be properly described. There was also a lack of pedagogical underpinning of the use of these instruments, which resulted in the use, or some might say the misuse, of the tests for accountability reasons only. Although the test constructors tried to emphasize the function of measurement for learning by providing self assessment instruments along with formal tests, this did not lead to the intended results. Self assessment appeared not to be used at all. Another problem was that the data was collected from a very heterogeneous, but literate population. As a result, it was hard to tell whether the established levels were based upon language progress or upon complexity of tasks. This made these instruments less suitable for low-educated students and of no use at all for illiterate students.

Some of these problems were solved by the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEF) and the portfolio methodology. The former provided a description of language levels upon which assessment procedures can be based and the latter stressed the didactic function. In the Netherlands, this resulted in the development of the *Raamwerk NT2* ('Framework Dutch as L2') and the *Portfolio NT2* (Dalderop, Liemberg & Teunisse, 2002) for literate students. There were, however, still no suitable, valid instruments for literacy students.

This gap was partly filled by the development of the *Literacy Framework* and *Literacy Portfolio* as described in Stockmann (2005). In section 3 of this chapter the literacy portfolio will be discussed in more depth. Section 4 will focus on the development of placement and achievement tests for literacy students. In section 2 we will look at pedagogical considerations underlying the above mentioned instruments.

2 *Low-educated adult second language learners*

The people concerned in this issue have three main characteristics in common. They are adults, they are learning a second language and they have little or no formal

education. We will briefly explore these characteristics and their consequences for education.

2.1 *Adult education*

In 1989, Geoff Brindley (Brindley, 1989) stated that adult second language education ignored basic principles from adult education, such as encouraging the active participation or autonomy of the learner and using an approach oriented towards the learning process and towards transfer. The latter means: organising language education in such a way that what is learned can be applied adequately in real life situations.

Autonomy, however, is sometimes viewed negatively by both learners and teachers. Learners can show a lack of self-confidence or can have certain expectations on the teachers' role. Teachers can be over-protective and can feel that their students are not ready to make their own choices or to communicate in the outside world.

We believe that for learners who take up a dependent position, a learning how to learn approach seems an appropriate method. The aim of adult education, including adult literacy is to equip students for personal autonomy and life long learning.

According to Richterich & Suter (1988) components of learning how to learn are: learning how to identify needs and decide on learning objectives, becoming aware of the fact that learning is a matter for the learners themselves, learning how to use personal and institutional sources, learning to discover learning and communication strategies and how to use them. It also implies learning how to make choices and decisions in the learning process and, a very important feature in this context, learning how to evaluate learning and learning outcomes. The key word for all these components is reflection.

2.1.1 *Second language learning*

The second language learner is in the paradoxical position that he has to learn the language to be able to communicate and has to communicate in order to learn the language. Contact with native speakers is vital in the learning process. Within the dominant language community, however, social and cultural prejudices are confirmed by deviations in social and linguistic behaviour of the L2 learner. The perception of this behaviour often leads members of the dominant language community to consider L2 learners as persons with little communicative competence, with inadequate social behaviour and with little intelligence. This, in turn, discourages L2 learners from making contact with native speakers and creates feelings of incompetence (Perdue, 1982). It is, therefore, important that second language education provides opportunities for contacts in real life situations and also that second language learners learn how to deal with feelings of incompetence. It is also of major importance that learners learn to realistically assess their own learning performance.

While the frequency of language contact is important; the nature of it seems to be even more important. Most contacts that L2 learners make are with formal bodies, like doctors, school teachers, or immigration officers. Research (Klein & Dittmar, 1979) has shown that voluntary contacts in leisure time are much more beneficial for learning. Failure to communicate adequately in formal situations makes learners think that they did not learn anything in class. Often, in formal situations, the discrepancy between what they have learnt and the language level required to communicate effectively is too

great. It is, therefore, very important that education enables them to see progress and to experience success.

2.1.2 Learners with a low educational level

The impact of the above mentioned second language learning situation is even stronger for learners with a low educational level. They are more vulnerable and tend to avoid contacts even more. In educational situations they are strongly inclined to adopt a teacher dependent attitude.

When we add these observations to the fact that an approach in which initiative of the learner is expected, may be less effective in learning basic skills (Boekaerts,1987), one could wonder whether it is wise to promote such an approach. Nevertheless we hold that this approach, albeit in a moderate form, is still a good one. This opinion is backed up by a study by Decharms (1984) and an experiment carried out in the late eighties.

Decharms distinguishes origins and pawns. An origin is a person who determines his own behaviour and strives for his own goals. A pawn is, in his behaviour, dependent on what others do and want. Both notions are based on the concept 'personal causation'. Origins experience an internal, and pawns an external, 'locus of causality'. This means that origins feel that they manage the learning process themselves and pawns feel that they are directed by others or by the situation. People are neither origins nor pawns by nature but depending on the situation, they behave more like origins or like pawns.

Initially, learners may, in learning basic skills, need more support and guidance to gain success. A suitable amount of guidance does not necessarily diminish the feeling of personal causation. Decharms emphasizes that stimulating origin behaviour does not imply a 'laissez-faire' climate in the classroom. On the contrary, he promotes freedom of choices within boundaries and a disciplined climate. Gradual freedom goes along with responsibility for yourself and your fellow students. Decharms trained pupils in deprived schools and five years later these pupils still behaved like origins and had better results than the control group.

2.2 A field experiment

In 1989 we carried out an experiment, inspired by Decharms, by learning how to learn principles and by positive results in Sweden with self-evaluation (von Elek, 1982). Self-assessment and evaluation is a tool which enhances the learning process and its only, but very important, function in education is a formative one. In a setting in which one has to report to external bodies it is less usable. Self-assessment enhances the development of a reflective attitude. It helps to give insight in evaluation criteria. It stimulates goal orientation and task analysis. It facilitates communication between student and tutor on diagnosis and remedial follow up.

This is not the place to describe that study and the results in detail (Janssen van Dieten, 1992; Janssen-van Dieten, 2000) However, to summarise, three teachers were trained to apply a learning how to learn approach in their classes. There were no illiterate students in these classes, but all students had a low level of education. We observed these classes and their teachers once a week and we think that the conclusions based on those observations are of importance in this context.

First of all, from the three teachers only one succeeded in applying the approach in the intended way. She will be referred to as teacher three. It was only her class in which a change of attitude could be observed. Students in her class were able to describe what had changed and told us that they learnt more and enjoyed the new way of learning. Since we did obtain positive results in this group, we explored those factors that could have played a part in the success of their training in more detail by comparing the three teachers and their classes. We did that in close cooperation with the teachers involved.

First, we will discuss teacher dependent factors. A teacher's belief in the learner's abilities to direct their own learning process seems to be a very important factor. Teachers one and two often told us that their students could not or would not take responsibility for their own learning.

A second factor could be that teacher three showed a greater concern for the correct application of the underlying principles than teachers one and two who seemed to be driven by a technical cognitive interest, which means that the activities were central rather than the principles.

A third factor is the teacher's style of instruction. Teacher two was very dominant and he told us that he was unable to change that behaviour. In his class, there were almost only teacher hits, which means that all initiatives came from the teacher. In class one, nearly all hits were student hits and in many cases they came out of the blue and had nothing to do with the subject involved. In class three we observed a balance in teacher and student hits.

We already mentioned that Decharmes set great store by discipline. That was an obvious difference in these groups. In groups 1 and 2 students often did not attend at classes without giving a reason. In class 3, absence was rare and if so, fellow students delivered the absentee the necessary papers.

What we said about the teacher's concern for the underlying principles showed up in the way activities were carried out. All teachers discussed their student's needs but only teacher three met them. In group 3 students chose which problem they wanted to work on, in other words, they formulated short term goals. In groups 1 and 2 all class activities and homework were the same for all students. This differentiation was made possible by teacher three by providing a range of different tasks and exercises from which they could make a choice. And by providing a 'blue' binder in which was gathered what they already had done and on which they could look up the things that they had forgotten.

It is more difficult to draw conclusions about the students, since we looked at groups rather than at individuals. Most students, from all three groups, came from non western countries with a more authoritarian education. It is sometimes stated that the acceptance of autonomy goes hand in hand with level of education, but from the three groups group 3 had the lowest educational level. Group 3 consisted of females only, but it would be too speculative to draw conclusions from that fact.

Ideas like creating a reflective attitude, stimulating out of school contacts, short term objectives, making choices, self-evaluation and formal evaluation of learning outcomes can be found in the material that will be discussed in the following sections.

3 Working with the Literacy Framework Dutch as a Second Language (DSL) and the Literacy Portfolio DSL

The *Literacy Framework DSL* and the *Literacy Portfolio* have been exhaustively described in the proceedings of the first LESLLA conference (Stockmann, 2005). This section presents the most important properties of the Framework and the Portfolio, discusses the implementation of these instruments and reports changes made during the past four years.

3.1 The properties of the Literacy Framework

European countries utilise the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF). This framework was developed in order to establish a transparent, unambiguous interpretation of levels of language use in Europe. In the Netherlands, several frameworks and portfolios based on the CEF have been developed for various user groups. For literacy education, there was no framework in Europe or in the Netherlands. Hence, there was a need to expand the bottom range of the *Framework DSL* for the following reasons:

- To make it possible to speak transparently about levels in literacy acquisition (the same rationale as for the CEF);
- To make visible to students, teachers and local authorities (which function as funding organisation) all progress made by students, even very small increments;
- To use the framework as a basis for a portfolio approach and make the portfolio methodology available to literacy students.

The Literacy Framework incorporates both phonics and a functional description of literacy levels. This reflects the view that in literacy acquisition getting access to the writing code goes hand in hand with the increasing ability to use the written language in meaningful, everyday situations. To make users of the Framework focus on both functional skills and phonics, it was necessary to describe both. The framework describes three literacy levels: Alpha A, Alpha B and Alpha C:

- At level Alpha A, the learner has learnt the alphabetic principle and can read short words but still spells words.
- At level Alpha B, reading and writing is more efficient because frequently used consonant clusters and morphemes are read as a unit.
- At level Alpha C, reading and writing has been automated except for long and unknown words. At level C reading is no longer a cause of delay.

In the Netherlands, reaching level Alpha C is the essential goal of literacy training¹. Alpha C is identical to the lowest level of the CEF, level A1, which is defined as follows:

¹ This is a result of the adult language education policy in the Netherlands. Funding for literacy courses and funding for civic integration programmes come from different sources. Once the literacy student has reached the Alpha C level, he will be considered 'literate' and enter the civic integration programme.

Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences.
 Can understand very short, simple texts a single phrase at a time, picking up familiar names, word and basic phrases and rereading as required.
 (Council of Europe, 2001).

3.2 *The implementation of the framework*

The *Literacy Framework* was not developed by the government, but was a private initiative. The publication was funded by CITO, the institute of educational measurement in the Netherlands. There are several reasons why it was successful. The most important reason was that schools and teachers needed concepts and levels to communicate with the local authorities. Schools were not able to explain students' progress clearly and found communicating with the local authorities time-consuming. They were able to say what part of the course material students had done, but not to give information about student's performance or level.

The separation between phonics and functional aims in the Framework made the teachers less dependent on course material and textbooks. Experienced teachers were quite familiar with the process of acquiring literacy. However, the Framework gave them reassurance that they had not overlooked important aspects and also made it possible to control their course material better. In recent years, there has been a good deal of staff turnover at the regional education centres (ROCs). The Framework facilitated training of new teachers by helping them understand the steps in literacy acquisition. Many schools implemented the Framework through teacher training. Through training, teachers could learn to interpret the Framework and practise evaluating texts written by students.

The connection of the Literacy Framework to the European Framework (underpinning the courseware for literate students in the Netherlands) makes it easy for students who have completed the literacy training, to enter courses at their level. In the past, they were often made to start again at zero.

In 2007, the Framework was revised. The first edition had a few ambiguous descriptions and these have been replaced. The Framework is published on the Internet and is now freely accessible. The ministries responsible for education and civic integration have adopted the Framework and refer to it on their websites.

3.3 *The properties of the Literacy Portfolio DSL*

In the portfolio, the descriptions of functional reading and writing skills from the Framework are placed in an everyday context. The portfolio provides a checklist for students in which examples of real life tasks are used. Students are encouraged to reflect on questions like: 'Can I find the phone number?', 'Do I understand what this note tells me?' 'Could I copy this address?', 'Could I write my name on this form?' To 'prove' they can do it, students collect evidence of their performance in comparable real life tasks. Three varieties of the checklist have been published, focusing on the domains of bringing up children, labour and general participation in society.

The portfolio methodology is an important innovation in literacy education. It contributes to students' autonomy by providing insight into the objectives of literacy training. This makes them less dependent on their teacher and the education they receive. They can develop activities by themselves to improve their language skills.

The portfolio methodology contributes to learning how to learn: students reflect systematically on their own capacities when they use the examples of the checklist. Also organising the evidence they have collected in their portfolio contributes to the development of study skills as does the responsibility students carry for their portfolio. Many students feel extremely encouraged and stimulated in this approach. They experience success. They become proud of their results. The portfolio empowers the literacy student. The language can be used in a personal context and students can experience use of written language in meaningful situations. Working on the portfolio brings the outside world into the class room.. Acquisition of literacy, just like the entire second language acquisition process, is focused on applicability in daily life. Last but not least students can clearly see the progress they make.

3.4 *The implementation of the portfolio*

The *Literacy Framework* and the *Literacy Portfolio* have been published at the same time. Not only the Framework but also the Portfolio was received very well. As we mentioned before, teachers and schools were in need for instruments that provided insight into literacy students' progress, not only because standardised tests that existed at that time were not meant for and could not be used for measuring progress in literacy students, but also because existing portfolio-tools had been developed for literate students. So evidence of progress could hardly be given, which was a serious problem for both students and local authorities. The evidence that students collect in their portfolio provides insight into what they have achieved, insight for the student in the first place. This turns out to be of major importance for students, who are proud of the work they have done and are, much more than before, aware of the steps they make. The portfolio evidence has also been used to prove that the course is successful to local authorities.

A fact that may have contributed to the success of the Literacy Portfolio is that the portfolio approach is widely used in the Netherlands. In the past six years, there has been a movement to more competence-based education in elementary, secondary and higher vocational education. In this kind of education the portfolio is a powerful instrument. As a result, it became a known approach, and not just one used only by literacy students.

Many schools implemented the portfolio together with teacher training. In training, teachers learn how to use the portfolio in their classrooms and to do 'homework' in their classes. They exchange experiences in order to stimulate each other. The fact that schools spend time and money on this innovation makes it more important for those involved.

The portfolio is not a fixed instrument. Schools and teachers can adapt the portfolio by choosing examples from the local environment. At present, Cito is developing a new portfolio which is linked to the content of civic integration courses in the Netherlands. This should facilitate meeting the civic integration standards for literacy students and save time reaching this goal.

4 *Assessment*

This paragraph explains the development of formal testing instruments based on the *Literacy Framework*. After the launch of the *Literacy Framework* and the *Literacy Portfolio*,

teachers began to express the need for standardised measurement instruments in addition to the Portfolio. The need for two types of tools was felt:

- Tools that would help in decision making relating to the placement of new students. This can be either placement in the right group at the student's level, or the choice of the right course materials at the students' level in an individual course.
- Tools that would more reliably and more objectively help determine if a step from one level to the next has been made. The main reason for teachers to want a test in addition to the portfolio is accountability. In the Netherlands the local authorities (as funding organisation) increasingly want more insight into the results of their investment in courses.

There are several reasons to be reluctant about test development for low educated learners. It is easy to develop a test that fails to provide insight in these students' skills. The main challenge was, therefore, to design a test in such way, that it would meet both the interest of students and the needs of teachers, schools and local authorities.

4.1.1 Students' interest

It can be in the interest of students to take tests. Students, who start in a literacy class in the Netherlands, have often been living in the country for a while, and many have been in literacy classes before. As a result of the Civic Integration Act that was launched in 2007, many low-skilled students have started to join courses again. A short course, or a course that is as short as possible, is in the interest of almost every adult, since studying the Dutch language and literacy is a requirement that has to be met alongside fulfilling different kinds of tasks such as working or bringing up children. Adequate placement helps the students to start from the right point so they will not feel frustrated because they are being made to do tasks which are not the right level for them.

Once students have started their course, it is important for them to get insight into their progress. This will help them to keep up their motivation and contributes to attendance and persistence. The portfolio meets this aim in several ways, as said before, but a test can also boost the student's self confidence, as long as it provides a positive experience. Therefore, the literacy assessment toolbox we aimed to develop should have several characteristics to meet the needs of the students:

- Test tasks must allow students to perform their skills. The focus must be on what students can do, not on what they cannot do.
- Test tasks must make sense. Students must be able to recognize tasks. Tasks must have the characteristics of real life tasks.
- The test must provide a positive experience.
- The test must not rely on study skills, computer skills or experience in taking tests.

4.2 The interest of teachers and local authorities

Students are of course the very important 'party' in the triangle that is formed by students, teachers and the local authorities. However, both teachers and local authorities are of great importance, and it is vital to address their needs when it comes

to testing and test development. To understand the importance of test development in the Netherlands, it might be necessary to explain something about the current Civic Integration Act (*Wet Inburgering*). A civic integration programme is obligatory in the Netherlands for both new arrivals and certain groups of immigrants that have lived in the Netherlands for a longer period of time but do not meet certain standards. Civic integration courses are provided on a commercial basis. This means that local authorities ask several parties to bid for a certain programme and they choose one or more. The emphasis on accountability, therefore, is strong: if an educational institute cannot show clear results, it will probably not be chosen again.

So far, literacy is not part of the Civic Integration Act as literacy students are expected to take a literacy course before enrolling in the civic integration programme. However, as an emphasis on accountability is beginning to enter the literacy field, there will be more importance placed on it in future education and regulations.

Both schools and the local authorities could benefit from a tool that provides insight into progress. This insight starts with the entrance level. As previously mentioned, most students are not new arrivals, many have been on courses before and many have some literacy skills. The more a course can meet student's needs and fits with a student's entrance level, the more cost efficient it will be.

A second component of accountability is a measure of progress. As the *Literacy Framework* is implemented more or less all over the country, this progress must be reported in terms of the *Literacy Framework*.

Progress in literacy students often comes slowly, therefore, for both schools and students, it is important that the tools help to make small steps visible. On a big-step-scale, a student who does make progress would not be able to show this progress in the tests. This could cause the funding to be cut as the course would appear to have no effect. On the other hand, we have not tried to meet the wish of those funding organisations that ask for reports of progress every six weeks. We do not think it can lead to reliable measurement and it would put too much focus on testing and would be too time-consuming for both students and teachers.

The time consumed by administering the test is an important point for teachers. As their time is limited, they prefer tests that can be administered quickly.

4.2 What does the literacy tool box look like?

The toolbox consists of a placement test and an achievement test. Both focus on the measurement of reading and writing. The placement test combines two levels in one booklet: there is an AB-booklet for reading skills and one for writing skills, both containing tasks on the levels Alpha A and Alpha B, and a BC-version which contains tasks on the upper two levels. The B-level tasks are presented in both versions. A pre-selector (a very short test) helps deciding which booklet should be offered to the student.

The achievement test consists of one booklet for each level and each skill. Both the placement test and the achievement test have an extended teacher's manual. The tests are administered orally by an assessor in a face to face and one to one setting. The assessor reads the instructions to the student and makes sure the student has understood the instructions. The student can ask questions if the instruction is not clear. The manual tells the assessor exactly what help he can provide. In general this is:

- explaining difficult words;
- repeating the instructions;
- repeating the instructions using different words.

In writing tasks, the assessor can help the student by telling him where to write unless the task in question is testing whether a student knows where to write, for example, a task asking a student to fill in a form. In the reading test, most questions, apart from those tasks that focus on comprehension of written instructions, are provided orally by the assessor. Answers are given orally by the student. In general, for each test task we have developed, we have asked ourselves the question: ‘what skill do we want the student to perform?’ and we have removed as many other difficulties from the task as we can.

The one to one administration of tests is time consuming for teachers. One teacher taking part in the field experiment for the development of the achievement test told us that although this was the first time that she had been able to get insight into the students’ skills as individuals, the time investment required was more than she could afford. This brings up the question of what the individual programmes actually achieve when you do not know what your students can do. On the one hand, it seems unfair given the time investment they make, to provide students’ with a course that ‘might’ meet their needs, however on the other hand, we realise that teachers are busy and there is no reason to consume more of their time than is necessary. Therefore, the tests are as short as possible, as long as the test reliability could be guaranteed.²

In the achievement test, on the higher levels, some multiple choice questions have been introduced. This is for two reasons. Firstly, as these parts of the test can be administered in a group, it makes administration easier for teachers and consumes less of their time. Secondly, introducing multiple choice questions in the test will also mean introducing multiple choice questions in courses, which will help students to prepare for their civic integration tests, which will follow once the literacy programme has been completed.

4.3 *Development*

The literacy tool box was developed for a small market. There are about 10.000 literacy students in schools in the Netherlands. It was developed by Cito, the Dutch Institute for Educational Measurement and without external funding. As a result, the budget was limited and it was important to think of measures that would guarantee that a certain amount of booklets would be sold. In the Netherlands, as in other countries, teachers photocopy many of their materials. To avoid photocopying, in the last few years, Cito has frequently published web-based tests. For this target group however, a computer based tool was not suitable as many students lack computer skills when entering a course, and because literacy courses are often provided in small local centres with poor facilities. Therefore we have chosen a paper based test in full colour. Some test tasks rely on colour, so a black and white copy will not provide a reliable result. In this way

² We have put the standard for reliability of each booklet on .85 and have, after a field experiment, selected only as few as possible tasks for each booklet, as long as the reliability did not come below .85.

we hoped to guarantee that now and in the future, when necessary, tools for this group could be developed without external funding.

5 The future

In the last few years important steps have been made in the literacy field in the Netherlands. The tools that have been developed have made it easier to adopt a goal-oriented approach in literacy training and assessment. Portfolio methodology has helped students in taking an autonomous role or, in terms of Decharms, to become origins. Another benefit of the implementation of the Framework and toolbox is that it aids research in the literacy field. The University of Tilburg (Kurvers & Stockmann, to appear) is currently carrying out a project that should provide more insight into the question of how many hours students need to progress to the next level and what factors may help to make the literacy training effective. Without the Framework which clarifies the concept of levels and steps from one level to another and without tools to measure progress, a study like this would not be possible.

There are still some concerns and some things yet to be achieved in this field. One concern relates to the role of oral skills. As the *Literacy Framework* and the *Literacy Portfolio* both focus on the development of reading and writing, there is a chance that these skills will be over-emphasised and that oral skills will be forgotten or no longer get the important position in the L2 literacy class which they should have. The choice to focus on reading and writing was a practical one: the problems were biggest. That has to do with the fact that the process of developing oral skills is very similar for both L2 literacy students and L2 learners that already are literate. The Common European Framework is useful to refer to in the development of oral skills for both groups of learners.

However, the assessment tools that are available in the Netherlands to assess oral skills are not equally suitable for literate and non-literate students. This really is a gap in the tool box that will hopefully not lead to a lack of attention on oral skills in the training of literacy students.

Another concern we have, relates to the adult education policy in the Netherlands. As we have mentioned before, civic integration courses in the Netherlands have recently become a commercial concern as they are provided by both private and public educational parties. In this process a lot of experienced teachers lost their jobs and a great deal of knowledge and experience in the field was lost. Nowadays, the literacy field seems to be developing in a similar way as policy on literacy education and the funding are to be revised. We can only hope that this will not lead to a similar loss of achievements in the literacy field.

We believe that it could be important for the future to think about the development of an international literacy framework, with enough room for defining language-specific characteristics, and enough common ground to enable international communication about literacy levels, assessing progress, the 'how many hours' question and so on. If we can share our knowledge and experience we can more effectively contribute to the learning process of literacy students. Also, this would open possibilities to co-operate in the development of more costly tools like multi-media applications that would be too expensive to develop in a small country or for the use for one language only.

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