

Foreign language teaching in the Netherlands, 1880-1940 : an outline of methodological developments

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Foreign language teaching in the Netherlands, 1880–1940: an outline of methodological developments

1. Introduction

The years around 1900, it is generally held, are of vital importance in the history of foreign language teaching (flt). As we all know, in these years the first serious attempts were undertaken to establish a new approach to flt based upon a realistic assessment of the aims to be achieved in the foreign language classes – highlighting, among other things, oral competence – and of the best didactic means to bring about the desired foreign language competence in the pupils. These were the times when fierce disputes were held between the defenders of the traditional Grammar-Translation Method and proponents of one variety or another of the Direct Method. As STERN (1983) has stressed, our knowledge of past events too frequently rests on generalities and very often lacks insights derived from any detailed analysis of the actual primary sources. Separate, detailed, studies of developments in individual countries, regions or institutes will no doubt provide part of the required insight that STERN (1983) was looking for.

1.1 The Netherlands, one of the first European countries where – according to HOWATT (1984, 61) – the teaching of English as a foreign language began, should certainly not be left out in such a series of detailed studies. It may well be an extremely interesting country to study in this context. First of all, it is among the few countries of the world where a substantial flt-component has always formed part of the school curricula. And, secondly, it is generally held that the Dutch have traditionally been very successful learners of foreign languages.

An additional reason for studying the Dutch situation in particular, however, seems to lie in the fact that the Dutch success in learning foreign languages is – paradoxically, one would think – not paralleled by an equally spectacular success in attracting the world's attention as a nation that flt-innovations stem from (see VAN ELS & KNOPS 1988, 309; VAN ELS 1990, 90). Neither the country nor any of its inhabitants, for example, figure in the list of significant dates and events drawn up by STERN (1983, 98–112) for the period between 1880 and 1980.

* I would like to acknowledge the very helpful discussions that I had with Frans WILHELM, Nijmegen, in connection with the writing of the present paper.

1.2 The historiography of flt in The Netherlands has attracted only scant attention from scholars so far, as may appear from the fairly recent survey of the publications in VAN ELS & KNOPS (1988). For the period under discussion there is actually only one historical monograph that we can refer to, i.e. KUIPER (1961) for German. This dissertation covers the 19th and 20th centuries mainly, and contains a thorough analysis of a small selection of coursebooks. The one monograph that deals in part with aspects of the history of English teaching, is the one on the well-known grammarian Etsko KRUISINGA (1875–1924) by VAN ESSEN (1983).

Mention may be made of two other dissertations dealing exclusively with the teaching of French and English, viz. RIEMENS (1919) and LOONEN (1991) respectively. These, however, focus on the 16th to 18th centuries and do not touch upon the turn of the 19th century.

Of course, there are a number of articles which, one way or another, describe flt history in general or for any one of the languages in particular. And also, there are the odd historiographical chapters in books whose main focus lies elsewhere. Articles and books that, among others, will come up for reference later on, are BAARDMAN (1953; 1961) and VLAANDEREN (1964) for French; DUDOK (1939) and AARTS (1990) for English; and, ROMBOUTS (1937), ZEEMAN (1949), and VAN ESSEN (1986) for flt developments in general.

But, on the whole, the ground has not been covered into any satisfactory detail so far. Fortunately, we are in the happy position to be able to avail ourselves of a number of student theses that have been completed in my own Department, covering – be it informally, in some respects, and provisionally – the period under discussion. There is the thesis by KNOPS (1982) on German coursebooks in The Netherlands from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century. DE BREET & CETON (1982), similarly, deal with the 19th century coursebooks for English, French and Spanish. SCHOLTEN (1984) presents an inventory of «authorities» referred to in titles and forewords of 19th century coursebooks. VAN LAAR (1985) has collected reviews of flt coursebooks in 19th century journals. And SMITS (1988) has made a first study of didactic theories and viewpoints expressed by authors in coursebook prefaces.

1.3 Of the five sources that, according to VAN ELS & KNOPS (1988, 291), are at the disposal of the flt historian for his studies – i. e., historic accounts of foreign language learning and teaching; historic observation of flt; historic coursebooks; historic theoretical treatises; and, previous discussions of the history of flt –, we will use a mixture of both primary and secondary sources. The students' theses with their various perspectives – bibliographi-

cal primarily, but also focussing on aspects of content as may appear from the phrasing of titles and/or prefaces and from reviews of coursebooks – will be among them.

The languages to be dealt with are English, French, and German, the three most commonly taught foreign languages in The Netherlands. We will first briefly describe – for the period under discussion – the situation of flt in secondary and university education and of teacher training. Our main focus will, after that, be on methodological developments around the turn of the century. In particular, an attempt will be made, finally, to isolate what specific contributions Dutch universities have made.

2. The situation of FLT between 1880 and 1914

In this paragraph we will, very briefly, review a small number of facts and data that may give an impression of what the provisions for flt were like in secondary education, in universities and in teacher training, and how they developed in the period under discussion. Methodological matters will come up for separate discussion in the next paragraph.

2.1 Secondary education

Just before 1880 the system of secondary education had undergone some major changes. New educational legislation brought about a complete reorganization of the rather chaotic provision for secondary education so far. In 1863 and 1876 respectively the two types of general secondary education were given definite shape, which, basically, were to remain unchanged for the next century, viz. the «higher burger school» (hbs) and the grammar school. The latter was primarily meant to be university preparatory, the former – lacking the classic languages in its curriculum – was characterized by its professional orientation in the first place.

In both school-types foreign languages were put on the curriculum. English, French and German were made obligatory subjects for everyone. The struggle that had been going on all during the 19th century for a proper place for foreign languages in the secondary school system, had been won at last. French, the only language of the three whose position had been undisputed before that, was to remain the major language for some time to come. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the competence to be achieved in the language was to be no less than that possible for either English or German, so the number of hours devoted to French far exceeded those for the other two languages.

In primary education, both basic and prolonged, French had been taught for a long time and was still taught after the new legislation came into force. One of the subjects examined for entrance into either hbs or grammar school was French. This position was soon to come under fire, however. After fierce discussions both in flt circles and in Parliament, legislation was passed around 1920 to strike French off the list of entrance examination subjects and to remove it from the primary school curriculum. These decisions, of course, did affect the position of French in secondary education considerably. BAARDMAN (1961, 141) calls the abolition of the obligatory French entrance examination the most important single event in the history of Dutch flt in the first half of the 20th century. He concludes (p. 152) that as a result proper training of the language in secondary education had been made well-nigh impossible for good! The main argument, recurring again and again, against French – curiously enough – was that pupils were overloaded by the curricular requirements of the new school-types. Whereas «overloading» («Überbürdung», as VIËTOR called it) led Reformers elsewhere to advocate *methodological* changes, the Dutch simply decided to cut down on the foreign language provision.

2.2 University education

Before our period the position of foreign languages as academic subjects was very insecure. Foreign languages had been offered in academic institutes as subsidiary subjects to enable students to acquire a competence to read and speak the language. And in some of these institutes Readers had been appointed to lecture on, mostly, the literature of foreign languages, as for example at the municipal academy of Deventer (see the inaugural lecture by AREND 1825, who combined English and German with mathematics!).

Only in 1876 did the new Higher Education Bill open up the possibility to establish full chairs for the academic study of foreign languages in Dutch universities, even if not as part of the core curriculum yet. The first university that availed itself of this opportunity was the State University of Groningen. In 1878 Dr. B. SIMONS was appointed professor of both High German and English Language and Literature; in 1884 the appointment of Dr. A. G. VAN HAMEL followed for French; and from 1885 onwards Dr. J. BECKERING VINCKERS assumed the responsibility for English Language and Literature. The University of Amsterdam was the next university to establish chairs for foreign languages, as from 1912 onwards. The University of Nijmegen has had chairs for foreign languages right from its start in 1923.

The struggle for the recognition of foreign languages as proper academic subjects, beside the well established classical languages, had been a long one and still had not been won altogether. In his inaugural lecture BECKERING VINCKERS (1886) pays ample attention to the fact. But also as late as 1911 complaints are uttered about discriminatory treatment of all kinds against the foreign languages in higher and secondary education: in schools teachers of classical languages were still in the habit of looking upon foreign languages as only second rate subjects (see RAS 1961). RAS commemorates that, in 1911, one of the objectives in founding the Dutch Association of Teachers of Foreign Languages was to achieve full academic equality for the study of foreign languages with that of the traditional academic subjects. BECKERING VINCKERS (1886), finally, demonstrates how harmful the total lack of scholarly work in foreign languages had been, and still was, in The Netherlands. He also adduces comments of Henry SWEET, however, to the effect that the state of English studies in England was not very healthy either (p. 16).

A great deal was expected from the establishment of the new university chairs also for the improvement of foreign language instruction in general. We will find opportunity to return to this in the following paragraphs.

2.3 Teacher training

The new chairs for foreign languages at Dutch universities were primarily seen as instrumental towards the improvement of scholarly work in the respective language and literature of the modern languages. In BECKERING VINCKERS' inaugural lecture there is no trace of concern with teacher training aspects as such. His main concern is with English as an academic subject and not with methodological problems. His expectation is, implicitly, that raising the standards of the study of the subject proper will automatically have a favourable effect on the quality of English teaching in secondary education. The university was not looked upon as a teacher training institute, even if SIMONS – the first professor of foreign languages at the University of Groningen, as we have seen – very much regretted that the new requirements for secondary school language teachers, decreed in 1864, had also been declared applicable to future university graduates. His worry, however, was not the professional aspect so much, but – again – the level of scholarly knowledge of the language and literature (see KOOPS 1980, 19). KUIPER (1961, 32ff.) reports how in 1876 the new higher education bill actually abolished the 50 year old requirement that all universities should offer a practical pedagogical course to their students, mainly because none of the universities had ever taken the requirement seriously.

The struggle that was fought from the moment of the establishment of the chairs, related, therefore, to the recognition sought by the universities for their graduates as prospective teachers. That status was only achieved, when in 1921 regular degree courses in foreign languages were officially included in the Academic Statute. Etsko KRUISINGA was very prominent, in 1906, among the protesters against the discrimination of university-trained students, although later he drastically changed his appreciation of the suitability of such trainees for the profession, which had to do with his low estimate both of their scholarly and of their professional qualifications (see VAN ESSEN 1983, 9).

The certification of teachers took place outside of the universities. As a matter of fact, there were no teacher training courses as such, there were only state examinations the requirements for which were established by the central educational authorities. For primary school teachers such examinations had been in existence in one form or another from the beginning of the 19th century. Until, in 1864, separate examinations were established for secondary school teachers, those who were qualified to teach in primary schools were also admitted to teach their respective subjects in secondary schools. In 1864 separate committees were set up for each of the subjects on the curriculum, also therefore for English, French and German.

From the start, two components were distinguished in teacher certification, i. e. a subject component and a pedagogical-methodological component. The latter was referred to as the «Q certificate», which could be taken separately and which those who were qualified to teach in primary education were exempted from, even if their primary school qualification was for another subject than for modern languages. This exemption rule was only abolished in 1935. From 1864 until the latter year the requirements for the «Q certificate» remained unchanged. They held that the candidate should have a clear understanding of classroom-procedures and of various methodological principles, their origin and history, and that the candidate should have the capacity to impart acquired knowledge to others. As such this may sound very reassuring, but, according to ZEEMAN (1949, 8), the examination sessions devoted to the «Q certificate» usually did not amount to much. It was only much later, in the second half of this century, that the pedagogical-didactic component of the teacher training programme was given serious and consistent attention.

3. Methodological developments

We now turn to the developments in the field of flt didactics and methodology in a more general sense. After that we will pay separate attention to the contributions from the universities to these developments.

3.1 Changes in flt

In our country the tradition is for government interference in education to be restricted to a minimum. If that holds for curricular affairs in general, it certainly holds for matters of didactics and methodology. The central authorities control what goes on in education only in very indirect ways. The major instrument used by the government is a fairly extensive system of centrally organised school leaving examinations. Examinations of that type, of course, have a backwash effect on the preceding teaching. The exam requirements, therefore, are not without importance. They may, moreover, very well hold indications of the actual teaching going on in classrooms.

Between around 1870 and 1920 the basic requirements in the flt examination programmes of the hbs schooltype were altered a couple of times. Two of these changes are noteworthy in the context of this paper:

In the 1870 version an oral component is indicated, but it is optional: schools are free to insert it. In 1901 the oral is made obligatory; the requirement is that the candidate is able to express himself orally reasonably well. In 1917 a specification is added concerning the pronunciation; again, a «reasonable level» is required.

The 1870 text specifically mentions that the candidate should be able to account for the application of the rule system of the foreign language. This requirement is dropped in the 1901 version, mainly because of complaints from the examination committees about the level of grammar knowledge exhibited by candidates. From subsequent committee reports, however, it appears that both exam questions on and the teaching of grammar continued well after 1901!

With regards to the examination programmes for the grammar schools in our period, the one noteworthy point is that right from around 1880 onwards translation from the foreign language was the one and only requirement. This requirement persisted until about 1970, when a major change of the school system was introduced and a multiple choice comprehension test came in its stead. The translation, moreover, was also incorporated in the hbs-examinations in 1920.

At the time when in other countries of Western Europe proposals for methodological changes originated with what looked like «schools», or rather «movements» with some degree of organization, in The Netherlands

nothing of the kind emerged. Of course, there were proposals for change, as we shall presently see, but there was no organized or concerted action worth mentioning. Curiously enough, the first group – or school – of that kind was only formed, and was active, as late as the 1920s and '30s. Their methodological principles, basically, were those of the Reform Movement, which they frequently referred to in very explicit terms. Central in this group was Etsko KRUISINGA, for many years the head of the School of Linguistic and Literary Studies in The Hague. This Institute prepared people for the State Examinations for Teachers, and – as can be read in VAN ESSEN's (1983) detailed account – was engaged in a constant struggle for the improvement of the quality of teacher training programmes. KRUISINGA expressed his views on flt methodological matters in an enormous amount of minor articles, pamphlets, letters-to-the-editor, etc. (see VAN ESSEN 1983, *passim*). The best fullscale exposition of principles of the School is to be found in ROMBOUTS (1937), a very clear and thorough analysis of foreign language learning and teaching and also of the most effective way of handling flt classroom procedures. Although the primary stress is on inductiveness and on direct method procedures, features of rule-awareness on the basis of «analysis» and of translation from and into the foreign language are also incorporated (see also DE LIEFDE 1936). ROMBOUTS' (1937, 169) appreciation of the average teacher's interest in methodology in previous days was not very high. The irony of things is that also the proposals for change that he and his friends made were to fall on barren ground afterwards: in essence, flt in The Netherlands was to remain grammar-translation method oriented for a long time to come.

However, even if no «school» was formed around the turn of the century, discussions of methodological matters were not altogether absent. BAARDMAN's (1953, 549) summary of the situation is that the field exhibited a wide diversity of approaches at the end of the 19th century. As a matter of fact, quite a few things were going on at the time. And, there had to be, simply because the expanding provision for foreign languages in the secondary schools made the production of more and of renewed coursebooks necessary. AS DE BREET & CETON (1982) note, there was an explosive growth of new titles all through the second half of the 19th century. But, as BAARDMAN (1961, 161–162) notes, coursebook writers on the whole showed little or no awareness of what was happening around them. They were all practising school teachers, who translated their own deeply felt need for a new coursebook into writing one themselves, in complete isolation, it seems.

From the provisional analyses made by KNOPS (1982) and SMITS (1988) of coursebook titles and prefaces respectively, it clearly transpires that

some coursebook writers did have a preference for Direct Method principles. «Inductiveness», the use of the target language, and orientation towards oral competence are frequently discussed. Such preferences show up more and more regularly in titles and prefaces towards the turn of the century. What also appears, however, is that these principles were already getting attention from coursebook writers well before 1880. Especially pronunciation seems to have been an issue in The Netherlands all through the century, both in German and in English courses (KNOPS 1982, 49; SMITS 1988, 36ff.). SMITS notes that BECKERING VINCKERS, the first professor of English language and literature, refers to the application of phonetic science in the preface of a coursebook for English that he published in 1875.

KUIPER (1961, 130) makes mention of one specific instance of a German coursebook where the author explicitly sets out to incorporate the Reform Movement principles in his new product for the Dutch market. The book, entitled *Hochdeutsche Sprachschule*, published in 1883, was written by one Joh. A. LEOPOLD and is highly praised by KUIPER, even if it does not follow the Reform principles consistently all through.

In particular, however, François GOUIN's method was, at one time, promoted fairly extensively and intensively by some people. Prominent among the promoters of the GOUIN method was a teacher of English, L. P. H. EIJKMAN, later wellknown as a phonetician and a friend of KRUISINGA's (VAN ESSEN 1983, 107). EIJKMAN gave a demonstration of the method at the annual meeting of the «Dutch Philologists' Congress» in 1898 (see GRASÉ 1904). Particularly important, however, in this respect is the work by J. J. A. A. FRANTZEN, who in 1895 published a teachers' manual to introduce the teacher into GOUIN's method. Important about FRANTZEN's work is that he was not an uncritical follower of GOUIN. As KUIPER (1961, 177–178) notes, FRANTZEN took exception to GOUIN's utter neglect of pronunciation and phonetics. In his own adaptation of the method he systematically incorporated instruction and exercises on aspects of pronunciation, thus building a bridge between GOUIN and the Reform Movement and continuing a tradition in Dutch flt that we had already occasion to refer to.

3.2 The role of the universities

In the preceding paragraphs we have made some reference, in passing, to contributions from university-based scholars to the developments in the field of flt methodology. In this last paragraph we will focus our attention on those contributions, distinguishing between those relating to the professional component and to the subject component.

Regarding the professional component, we can more or less leave it at KUIPER's (1961, 133) summary assessment that Dutch universities as such

did not contribute to the field in any sense. The Reform Movement may basically have been university-based in some other countries, in The Netherlands the concern for the professional component was left fully to the practising teacher. In none of the inaugural lectures of the time does one find a mention of this component. The new professors for the foreign languages did have a concern for the quality of flt, as we have seen, but they saw their contribution as lying in the subject component only, even if they personally had been, or possibly still were, engaged in writing coursebooks for use in secondary schools. The tradition of «Bildung» that VON WALTER (1982) notices as being very strong in German universities, was also prevalent, it seems, in Dutch universities for a very long time. Scholarly interest in the didactics and methodology of teaching foreign language competence was just out of the question, and it remained so right into the second half of the 20th century. As VAN ELS (1990, 88–89) points out, only from the 1960s onwards has there been a growing interest in research questions of this type.

The major contribution of the universities was to lie in the subject component, although it was to take some time before Dutch universities actually took the lead even in that field, it seems. Let us take English as an example. It is wellknown that the Dutch have traditionally been foremost in the writing of grammars of contemporary English. AARTS (1990) speaks of «The Great Tradition» (see also BUNT et al. 1987). AARTS points out, however, that of all the grammarians of the Great Tradition, from H. POUTSMA to R. W. ZANDVOORT (whose *A Handbook of English Grammar* was first published in 1945), only ZANDVOORT was a university professor (see also VAN ESSEN 1983, 75). It should be noted that of these grammars E. KRUISINGA's (: *A Handbook of Present-Day English*, 5th ed., 1909–1912) was the most innovative, in that it took the «goals of the future teacher» as its starting-point. KRUISINGA, thus, came to integrate the «professional» and the «subject» aspects and chose for an «inductive» approach: «the language facts should speak for themselves» (VAN ESSEN 1983, 172).

4. Conclusion

Two things clearly emerge from the preceding discussion of methodological developments in The Netherlands in the period around 1900. In the first place, it is evident that the belief that the methodological debate raging internationally left practitioners in the field of flt in our country fully undisturbed, is quite incorrect. In the second place, it is clear now that at that time Dutch universities played no part of any significance in the debate concerning flt methodology.

With respect to the first conclusion some further comment may be in order. If our investigations have brought clear proof of methodological discussions also in our country, we are still not in a position – on the basis of the sources that we used – to assess properly whether the changes proposed by reformers ever actually affected the day-to-day teaching going on in the classrooms. Later developments seem to point in another direction, i.e. it looks as if Dutch flt followed its own steady pace of development, never adopting in full proposals for drastic change, but always absorbing them in part into the main stream of traditional practice. For, if changes around 1900 were minimal and gradual, the year 1920 more or less marks the beginning of a period of about 40 years in which almost no changes occurred. The fact that the Dutch variant of the Reform Movement, worked out by the very powerful group around Etsko KRUISINGA, had little or no impact in the 1930s, as we have noted before, some would call typical of four decades of utter stagnation in Dutch flt.

But, does that prove that an approach to flt as displayed by the Dutch in the methodological debate – assuming for a moment that the general belief that the Dutch are about the most successful learners of foreign languages in the world, is correct – is to be recommended for all? A warning seems to be in place here. The Dutch reluctance to consider seriously proposals for (drastic) change may well simply stem from the very favourable conditions under which foreign languages have always been taught in the country: the need to acquire competence in foreign languages has hardly ever been called into question by the Dutch, and pupils, therefore, have usually been reasonably motivated to learn languages. It would be unwarranted to conclude that the Dutch habit of dismissing – self-confidently, it seems – new ideas proposed by others concerning flt proves that the Dutch way of teaching foreign languages must be the right way.

However, there is at least one respect in which it may be more profitable to study specifically the Dutch situation in a historical perspective rather than that of a great many other countries. It is reasonable to suppose that what seems to have been more or less successful flt practice for a great many years, may well hold (some of) the ingredients of «the best method» for teaching foreign languages. What historical accounts of Dutch flt should aim at, I think, is to provide us with an inventory of the most characteristic features of Dutch flt practice through the years. The most persistent and consistent of such features could, then, serve as hypotheses to be tested in truly experimental studies. It is my contention that it may be more fruitful to test such features than the ever recurring set of methodological principles that theorists come up with time and again. In that way, even if history would not be in a position to teach us any direct lessons, indirectly it would

give us indispensable assistance in solving some of the seemingly insolvable and vexing problems of flt methodology.

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