

# The Dutch National Action Programme for Modern Languages (NAP)

The Netherlands

Language Policy



## Good Practice Executive Summary

### Overview

In 1989 the Dutch Government commissioned the drawing up of a National Action Programme (NAP) on Foreign Languages in anticipation of the new demands of the European Single Market after 1992. This programme was produced over a 10-month period. A series of empirical studies, including earlier work of the Dutch Needs Research Project, provided the data-base for the project. The empirical studies confirmed increasing demand for foreign languages, including 'minor' languages such as Russian, Japanese and particularly Spanish. Provision was also increasing, although not as quickly. Diversification is a significant issue in the Programme. A disturbing finding was that whereas all students learned some English, 15% do not learn German and 40% do not learn French, even to the most modest levels of attainment. This is a tendency which has accentuated since then.

The NAP recommended (1) stricter control of foreign language provision, including a limit on the number of languages available to students in order to promote more advanced levels of competence in a smaller number of languages, (2) better coordination between the foreign language programmes of different sections of the educational system, and (3) an over-arching framework of teaching objectives for the educational system as a whole, independent of languages and of school types.

The NAP is a complete and full statement of the country's Foreign Language Training policy. It is all-encompassing and addresses all possible actors in the field.

### 1. Reflects current EU and regional policy on multilingualism

This initiative supports European strategies on multilingualism. It is aimed at providing reliable data on language teaching and learning for evidence-based policy formulation at national level. The Dutch Government commissioned the drawing up of a National Action Programme (NAP) on Modern Languages in anticipation of the new demands of the European Single Market after 1992. Its basic assumption is that internationalisation is impossible without foreign language skills. The National Action Programme had a measurable impact on increasing the possibilities for learning modern languages in secondary education and in general in creating a favourable society environment for language learning and improving language skills.

### 2. Includes incentives to enhance & sustain language learner motivation & employment

The Initiative targeted mainly policymaking in the field of foreign language teaching. This concerns the levels at which policy decisions may be taken, but in particular to such issues as the role of needs; the choice of which languages to offer and which to

learn; and the special role of different educational levels. The Task Force presented 34 recommendations to the government. Some components of the Action Plan include incentives to enhance and sustain language learner motivation and employment benefits, e.g. internationalization of the curriculum, employment of 'native speakers' of German and French as language assistants on the basis of both European and national programmes, etc.

### **3. Reflects regional strategy for employability and intercultural benefits**

The Policy practice clearly reflects new demands of the EU common market and Europe' competitiveness and the reality of increasing labour and educational mobility within the EU.

An important background assumption of the development of the National Action Programmes was the response to pressing needs of the world of work. Internationalisation is impossible without having proficiency in foreign languages. The importance of English as the international language of communication is beyond any doubt. An important aspect of the NAP was the aim to boost the learning and teaching of foreign languages with a special focus on the neighbouring languages French and German. At the time of the NAP implementation there were hardly any European instruments and tools in the area of language teaching and learning. However, it should be noted that in the subsequent action programmes that followed, the dissemination of European developments and developing European instruments was considered among the main priorities.

### **4. Addresses local language minority and migrant community language resources**

One of the main issues in the National Action Programme was the diversification of languages offer at all school stages. In the follow up of the NAP the following aspects were particularly strengthened and developed: support and developing teaching materials in newly taught languages such as Spanish, Italian, Arabic, Turkish, Russian. Some of them are minority and migrant languages. Brochures are published targeted at several specific groups of pupils, among them groups of migrants, to inform them of the possibilities in this field that are offered at schools for secondary education. There are teacher training colleges for teachers of Spanish, Arabic, Turkish and Russian.

### **5. Provides for international networking and/or mobility**

The National Action Programme and its follow up Action Plans and strategic documents reflect important geographical and political facts related to foreign language learning in the Netherlands. Internationalization of language education has been a major priority. It is carried out through stimulating language acquisition through international exchanges, internationalised curricula for schools, networks, language expertise and certification. In 1990 the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science established the European Platform as the Dutch national coordinating centre for internationalisation of Dutch education. It serves as knowledge centre for internationalisation in both school and teacher education.

## **6. Incorporates the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) with transparent validation/ credits**

This criterion is not applicable to the language policy good practice. However, it should be noted that the Policy clearly declares the ambition to correlate language learning teaching, learning and assessment to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

## **7. Can be readily and usefully implemented**

The National Action Programme can be transferred being first adapted to each regional and national context. The approach adopted based on extensive research and survey is of particular transferability potential. The political context is of a particular importance for the adoption of the Language Policy. There are examples of similar approach for developing evidence-based language policy. A good example is the development of the English National Languages Strategy following an Independent Review of national language needs (Nuffield Inquiry).

## **8. Transferability assessment**

There is no evidence of transfer of the concrete Language Policy although a lot of developments at European level have extensively used the approach, the data collected and the expertise developed has been a useful resource for European wide discussions, exchange of opinion, etc. Many of the issues dealt with in the NAP are more or less universal. They can and need to be approached in the same rational way as advocated by the NAP. Since its development and implementation procedures have met the expectations, other countries (and regions) can optimistically consider working along the same lines.

## 1. Reflects current EU and regional policy on multilingualism

This initiative supports European strategies on multilingualism and it is in many ways a pioneering piece of research and political initiative. It is aimed at providing reliable data through extensive and directed research on language teaching and learning for evidence-based policy formulation at national level.

It was set up in 1992 after a 10-month research phase when it was felt that the traditional Dutch asset (being able to speak three modern languages) was in danger of disappearing. Thus it is an example of language policy as a deliberate set of scientifically informed activities and measures designed to solve a particular problem..

The Dutch National Action Programme

- ✓ promotes a wider knowledge and use of all languages throughout the Union
- ✓ promotes lifelong learning and learner mobility
- ✓ seeks to improve the quality and efficiency of provisions and outcomes
- ✓ ensures the provision of the necessary skills and qualifications for the world of work

It includes reference the following key issues:

- *economic priority as driver*

The fundamental basis for the Dutch Government's decision to commission the drawing up of a National Action Programme (NAP) on Modern Languages was economic. It was in anticipation of the new demands of the European Single Market after 1992.

Internationalisation is impossible without foreign language skills. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science stated their responsibility for the proper equipping of the current generation of global citizens in the Dutch education system. That means investing in knowledge and skills so that young people today can make their contribution to the world of tomorrow

The feeling had been building for some time that FLT provisions were no longer coping adequately with growing demand for foreign languages. The fact that such worries were expressed by organizations from business and commerce significantly contributed to their urgency.

- *organisations targeted for implementation of the programme*

The NAP is mostly targeted toward secondary education where it is reported that there has been a success in increasing the possibilities for learning of modern

languages, teacher training and vocational education institutions, organization and stakeholders.

- *organisations instrumental for the oversight of implementation of the policy*

NAP's main goal was to produce recommendations for adequate measures to deal with present and foreseen problems in FLT. A small Working group was set up to develop the recommendations appointed by the Ministry of Education. The studies were carried out by the project staff and were contracted out. Additionally a Resonance group of 45 members was set up. The Resonance group was consulted both on the description and analysis of supply and demand and on suggestions for remedying the shortcomings detected.

The reaction to the NAP came in 18 months – the end of 1992. The main reason for that was the national character of the programme which meant involvement of a number of ministries. There was a reaction to all 39 recommendations in the NAP. They were discussed in the Standing Committee of Education of the Parliament in 1992. Almost all recommendations were endorsed by both Parliament and government.

A Task Force was then set up to see to the implementation of NAP. They were responsible :

- for NAP implementation
- to motivate those working in the field to take up the recommendations
- to take initiative in areas not covered.

The Task Force was small in size, it had a secretariat and finances for small-scale projects of their own. This was successful in increasing the possibilities for learning modern language in secondary education.

The National Bureau for Languages, which was set up for a period of two years in November 1996, carried out the work further and had a special focus on promoting languages in vocational education. The mandate of the National Bureau for Languages was further extended.

Following this, the work carried out under the NAP was taken over by the National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO), which has significant responsibilities in curriculum design and publications in the area of foreign language teaching and learning until the present day.

- *the extent to which it is driven by employer representation*

In August 1992 a report based on the extensive research on the future of modern languages was published. It drew upon a number of studies on supply, demand and knowledge of language and government strategies related to languages. It focused mostly on languages of wider communication relevant to trade and business such as French, German, English, Italian and Spanish. Information was also used from employer associations, the Dutch Export Federation, trade and business organizations.

- *Time frame of the initiative (long term or short term)*

The NAP is a long term policy which still has impact nearly 20 years later. The preparatory period for the production of the Policy was carried out within a period of 10 months. However, the research was also based on extensive studies in foreign language teaching conducted under the Dutch Needs Research Project in the 1970s in the Netherlands. The National Action Programme for Modern Languages was established in 1992 and it reached its conclusion in 1996. The National Board for Modern Languages, which took over after the NAP ended its period of implementation, was set up for a period of two years from 1996 till 1998. The policy still guides current practice

- *whether it is sector-driven and, if so, which sectors*

The Policy is not sector driven. It addresses both secondary and vocational education and has implications on public and private language teaching provision. There are significant implications for teacher training as well.

- *impact of the programme*

The National Action Programme had a measurable impact on increasing the possibilities for learning modern languages in secondary education. Extensive research data was gathered related to language learning at all stages of the educational system that provided a good basis for evidence-based policy decisions. There has been a series of successive steps in developing and updating the language policy via Action Plans by the Dutch public and expert authorities.

One of the outcomes of the National Action Programme was the founding of the National Bureau for Foreign Languages (NaB-MVT). Because of a positive assessment, funding was extended to the end of 2008 and beyond. NaB-MVT is a small bureau, operating on the brink between policies, theory and practice. It also manages projects involving several institutes.

## **2. Includes incentives to enhance and sustain language learner motivation and employment benefits**

Although it is fundamentally a policy for compulsory sectors of education and training the NAP does nevertheless address issues of motivation and demonstrate the benefits of language learning. It does this in a number of ways:

- *Specific incentives to encourage uptake of language learning*

For several years 'native speakers' of German and French have been employed as language assistants on the basis of both European and national programmes. They are employed for a few months up to one year mainly by secondary schools and to a lesser extent by primary schools and teacher training colleges. There are about seventy language assistants every year. Schools are extremely positive about 'their' language assistants. They offer support in the teaching programme

where extra time is needed, such as practising speaking skills and they contribute very much to the motivation of pupils for the learning of languages.

- *Channels used to deliver messages*

Policymaking in the field of foreign language teaching has been specially targeted. This concerns the levels at which policy decisions may be taken, but in particular to such issues as the role of needs; the choice of which languages to offer and which to learn; and the special role of different educational levels. The Task Force presented 34 recommendations to the government. In the 1990s when a National Action Programme for Modern Languages was published called 'Language Horizon' and the Dutch government's reaction was the report 'Talking across borders'.

### 3. Reflects regional strategy for employability and intercultural benefits

An important background assumption of the development of the National Action Programmes was the response to pressing needs of the world of work. Internationalisation is impossible without having proficiency in foreign languages. The Netherlands has never been able to operate on its own as a nation during the past few centuries. It is obvious that in the years to come their attention will be directed even more to other countries. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science declare their responsibility to the students to be fully equipped as world citizens. Investing in knowledge and skills is important, so that the young people of today can make their contribution to the world of tomorrow. Mastering languages is essential for them. The European goal of having every pupil learn two other languages in addition to his or her own language from a very young age is also a leading guideline.

- *Planned surveys of employer need, including details of questions to be asked and information targeted*

For Dutch industry and commerce a good command of languages is of the utmost importance. In a recent report two-thirds of the exporters interviewed observed that an insufficient command of languages forms one of the greatest threats to the country's export position. The number had more than doubled in comparison to the previous year. And this is not about English only: more than 80 percent of the exporters say that a good command of English is not enough. (Fenedex website, Export news section)

Germany is still the most important country within the European Union as far as the country's exports are concerned. Belgium is second and France and Great Britain are third and fourth respectively. Spain took the fifth place for the first time in 2005. These data give a rough indication of the direction that should be taken when priorities in modern languages teaching and learning is concerned. ([www.europeestalenlabel.nl/Boekje\\_Talenlabel5.pdf](http://www.europeestalenlabel.nl/Boekje_Talenlabel5.pdf). Only in Dutch)

- *Whether a diverse range of languages is foreseen, and which languages are seen as a priority*

The importance of English as the international language of communication is beyond any doubt. To establish further priorities policy making considered

economic, geographical and cultural factors. All these factors point to studying German and French, the languages of the Netherlands' direct neighbours, without excluding other languages. An important aspect of the NAP was the aim to boost the learning and teaching of foreign languages substantially and the most logical way is to focus on the neighbouring languages French and German. The level pupils reach in these languages is not as high as in English because they start later and considerably less time is spent on learning French and German.

- *Funding or similar support for language training as an output of the policy*

We do not have information about the direct funding of training as part of the plan, but this is probably not applicable given the scope of the policy which is directed towards the compulsory sector which is in any case funded by general educational and training budgets. Specific funding has however been made available for supporting language teaching and learning. The funding of the National Bureau for Foreign Languages (NaB-MVT) was extended to the end of 2008 (and beyond) . NaB-MVT is a small bureau, operating on the brink between policies, theory and practice. It also manages projects involving several institutes. For examples the project funding for the period 2004-2008 was as follows:

#### National Bureau for Foreign Languages

Coordination of activities in several different sectors, management of projects, scientific advice:

2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8
€ 226,000	€ 350,000	€ 350,000	€ 350,000

- *Use of Europass or similar benchmarks to confirm language ability*

At the time of the NAP implementation there were hardly any European Instruments and tools in the area of language teaching and learning. However, it should be noted that in the subsequent action programmes that followed, the dissemination of European developments and developing European instruments was considered among the main priorities. In the Action Programmes following the European Commission's report 'Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An action Plan 2004 - 2006' the introduction of the Europass scheme is identified as an immediate task. In the Netherlands the National Europass Centre is formed by a consortium of eight parties of which the Information Management Group (=IB Groep) is the main partner.

The language passport included in Europass is based on the European Language Portfolio. It is also linked to the European Framework of Reference. This means that developments within schools and those outside schools are run along the same lines.

#### 4. Addresses local language minority and migrant community language resources

One of the main issues in the National Action Programme was the diversification of languages offer at all school stages. In the follow up of the NAP the following aspects were particularly strengthened and developed:

- *Developing teaching materials*

During the past few years the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has funded the development of teaching materials for the newly taught languages. This was partly done within a European scheme. For Spanish and Italian new methods were developed by ABC in Amsterdam for all educational sectors that can offer these languages within their curriculum. Arabic and Turkish teaching materials have already been made for general secondary education. Educational Development and Advice (CPS) and the National Centre for School Improvement are developing Arabic and Turkish teaching materials to be used in vocational training (VMBO).

- *Supporting newly taught languages*

Teachers of Arabic, Italian, Russian, Spanish and Turkish often have a very isolated position within schools. In order to function well they need extra support. Educational Development and Advice (CPS) has been commissioned, with the help of the teachers involved and the other National Educational Advisory Centres, to ensure there is an adequate supply of information available. Because the target group is spread over the whole country the information is first of all be available on internet. The specific communities for teachers (vakcommunities) and for pupils (vaklokalen) already functioning on Kennisnet can be used to disseminate the information. They offer the opportunity for teachers to exchange experiences and can provide them with information and instruments. But there are also a number of meetings for the teachers involved every year. Important issues discussed in 2006 were the educational reforms in the first and in the second part of secondary education. Also the use of the European Framework and the Language Portfolio were items on the agenda of newly taught languages.

Brochures are published targeted at several specific groups of pupils, among them groups of migrants, to inform them of the possibilities in this field that are offered at schools for secondary education.

- *Higher (vocational) education*

In higher vocational education most of the language training courses lead up to the profession of teacher in that particular language in secondary education (or secondary vocational education). For the traditional languages English, German and French most institutes offer programmes. For Spanish, Arabic, Turkish and Russian there are only a few teacher training colleges. The number of students has dropped considerably since the 1990s, especially for English and French. From the new millennium onwards the interest in languages has remained relatively stable.

An example of the funding of developing of teaching activities for the period 2004-2007 for newly taught languages including minority and migrant languages.

Developing teaching materials for newly taught languages

Teaching materials for Arabic and Turkish for VMBO (ISCED 2)

2004/5	2005/6	2006/7
€ 230,000	€ 230,000	€ 230,000

## 5. Provides for international networking and/or mobility

The National Action Programme and its follow up Action Plans and strategic documents reflect important geographical and political facts related to foreign language learning in the Netherlands. The geographical position of the Netherlands is considered as one of the determining factors. The Netherlands and Flanders form a small language community and are situated between the regions where the three most important languages of Western Europe are spoken: German, French and English. Language borders used to be real borders in former days, but nowadays people more and more live and work across language borders. This also goes for the schools pupils attend. Service industries on both sides of the border (not only in the border regions) often work together and cooperate, e.g. educational institutes, hospitals or fire brigades. The importance of speaking the neighbouring language is therefore increasing.

- *Stimulating language acquisition through international exchanges*

Every year more than 20,000 pupils go abroad as part of national, bilateral or European programmes for internationalisation. Even though Germany and France are countries that are in high demand, the language of communication in these countries is often English. The Institute for Educational Research (GION) has recently investigated, partly commissioned by the Ministry, whether or not pupils have greater skills in listening and speaking after exchange visits, in combination with a specific preparation for English or German. From the study it appeared that there are positive effects, especially in the field of speaking but only if pupils are well-prepared.

The European Platform, the body in charge of internationalisation of language education in the Netherlands, uses the results of this study when arranging international exchanges, in such a way that exchanges can help to improve language skills, especially of the neighbouring languages. The European Platform has been running a special programme called PITON for the internationalisation of language education in the Netherlands for years. Early language education, reinforced language education and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) are being supported through these programmes.

The European Platform was established in 1990 by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science as the Dutch national coordinating centre for internationalisation of Dutch education. It is mandated to introduce and integrate a European and international dimension in Dutch education and to support the internationalisation of education in the Netherlands.

The European Platform serves as a knowledge centre for internationalisation in both school and teacher education. It offers a platform from which schools can share knowledge, further develop and receive certification by:

- offering guidance and support to either individual schools or school networks. It performs this task in relation to programmes and projects carried out by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, as well as at the request of the schools themselves
- maintaining knowledge in the area of internationalisation in education in the Netherlands and abroad, as part of our goal to increase the level of internationalisation in Dutch education
- bringing together ideas, people and organisations active in the area of internationalization

To these ends, the European Platform focuses on European and international orientation, internationalised curricula for schools, networks, language expertise and certification.

The European Platform coordinates the network of *Elos* (*Elos - education stretching borders*) school. They offer students the option to learn two foreign languages at a high level (in accordance with the school type). All *Elos* schools in the Netherlands are members of both the national network and the European network, which they share with their foreign partner schools. The European Platform coordinates other networks, such as:

#### Network for Internationalisation in Secondary Education (*Nivo*)

This network brings schools in secondary education together and offers advice and guidance on the development of their internationalisation policies.

#### Centre for Internationalisation of Teacher Education (*Cilo*)

The *Cilo* Network is there for all teacher education programmes at all levels. The network brings together teacher education programmes that include internationalisation and focuses attention on a policy plan for internationalisation with a compulsory course in the curriculum and a compulsory work placement abroad.

#### Platform for Early Foreign Language Education (*Platform vvt*)

This platform aims to promote early foreign language education in the Netherlands in the broadest possible sense and is coordinated by the European Platform. It was established at the request of schools involved in early foreign language education and involves representatives from many areas within education.

Pupils respond positively whether they choose, for example, to take part in *Elos - education stretching borders* (Europe as a Learning Environment in Secondary Schools) or bilingual education, often recommending these programmes to their peers.

Example of the support funding of the Programme for international language teaching and learning in the Netherlands for the period 2004-2007:

Piton, Programme for international languages teaching and learning in the Netherlands.

Support for extension of early language education, reinforced language and CLIL; More than 50 language assistants

2004/5	2005/6	2006/7
€ 586,000	€ 586,000	€ 586,000

## 6. Incorporates the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) with transparent validation/ credits

Not applicable as the EQF did not exist at the time that the National Action Programme was being developed. However, the Policy clearly declares the ambition to correlate language learning teaching, learning and assessment to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

## 7. Can be readily and usefully implemented

The approach and methodology of the National Action Programme could in our opinion be relatively easily adapted for implementation in a variety of regional and national contexts. The only obstacles are those of time and resources, and perhaps political will.

The approach adopted, which was based on extensive research and survey and involved a range of key stakeholders, is of particular transferability potential. There are other examples of similar approaches for developing evidence-based language policy. A good example is the development of the English National Languages Strategy following an Independent review of national language needs (Nuffield Inquiry). <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/subjects/languages/>

Reference could also be made to developments in Scotland and Wales <http://www.languagescompany.com/policy/basic-documentation-on-english-and-uk-policy.html> and to the Languages Education Policy Profiles carried out under the auspices of the Council of Europe [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Profils\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Profils_EN.asp)

## 8. Transferability assessment

### 8.1 Evidence

There is no evidence of direct transfer of the specific Language Policy, although many developments at European level have extensively used the approach adopted by the NAP (see point 7 for examples). Furthermore, the data collected and the expertise developed have also been a useful resource for European wide discussions, exchange of opinion, etc.

We have little hesitation in saying that such an approach – adapted for specific concerns, priorities and conditions - could be transferred to any country, region or locality. The key success elements are considered to be –

- A period of initial research and expert testimony
- Evidence based analysis of priorities
- Involvement of key stakeholders
- Long term perspective on change

### 8.2 Innovative nature of project

Although in one sense innovative – the NAP was a pathfinder in the area of general languages policy (see also Australian National Policy), since its approach was based on tested research and consultation methodology, such innovation is not any kind of impediment to adoption or replication.

### 8.3. Dependence on political context

The political context is of a particular importance for the adoption of the Language Policy. Many of the issues dealt with in the NAP are more or less universal. They need to be approached in the same rational way as advocated by the NAP.

Since its development and implementation procedures have met expectations, other countries or regions might consider working along the same lines. However the corollary of this is that if such a plan or programme does not meet current political priorities or concerns (which may go beyond strictly language or education issues) it is unlikely to succeed. It may for example be a relevant factor in relation to the Dutch national plan that the Netherlands's traditional linguistic strengths which had been so important given its geopolitical situation were perceived to be under threat and that this could have a deleterious economic and political effect for the country.

Similar politically motivated impulses can be found in relation to other national policies – the English National Languages Strategy which followed a high profile and critical Independent Review of national language needs (Nuffield Inquiry), and the Australian National Language Policy which was articulated at a period when Australia was redefining its relations with the “old” European world and the new economies of Asia.

#### 8.4/8.5 Flexibility issues

Since the core to the NAP's strengths is its evidence based approach (see above), it is extremely flexible and applicable to a range of contexts. It would not be a question of applying the particular priorities identified by the NAP to a new national or regional context – for example Navarra, but rather one of adapting the methodology to carry out a new analysis leading to a specific plan for a specific place, involving in the process key stakeholders and policy makers.