

# BUILDING EUROPEAN IDENTITY THROUGH FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE NETHERLANDS

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## *Abstract*

*Promoting mutual understanding among European Union member states and building European identity in the process has been playing a significant role in European integration from the beginning. Communicating through common language(s) further contributes to the deepening of the consciousness of shared cultural roots and to the expression of shared interests by the member states. Foreign language education is thus a keystone that upholds such capacity of a member state. The current study takes the case of the Netherlands on and argues that in order to facilitate communication between member states and the people in the EU, a practical standpoint of foreign language education is beneficial. Analysis of the Dutch foreign language education policy of the primary, secondary and higher education is done in order to prove this point. Furthermore, building on the existing objectives of the EU is also a key feature of the case of the Netherlands which in turn integrates foreign language education and European identity building as one.*

**Key words:** Language Policy, Language Capacity Building, European Identity, European Studies, Dutch Studies.

## **Introduction**

As the European Union is a ‘Unity in Diversity’, moderating between different traditions and traits among the member states and promoting their shared values and roots among said countries have been a cornerstone for the foundation of the EU from the very beginning. Thus, in-depth discussion between governments and people within the EU is of the uttermost importance. During this whole communication process, language is one of the key factors.

In the perspective of language policy studies, the official language of a country is usually identified by the constitution. For example, the Dutch is the national language of the Netherlands and one of the three official languages in Belgium. That said, an EU member state relies on national language(s) and/or official language(s) to embody

culture and the way of life known to its people and pass them down through education, while it also pays attention to foreign language capacity building to facilitate the communication across borders. One might argue that the policy in place to promote the study of foreign languages aligns with the national governments to drive international trade, technological advancements and realizing a nation's interests, but such policy will inevitably result in the change of ideas conveyed in foreign languages, which further contributes to the European identity building process when the communication happens among EU member states.

The case of the Netherlands provides a salient example. On the one hand, the tradition of international trade and entrepreneurship are what the Netherlands is known for. On the other hand, the modern Dutch society is an open and multicultural one. The two sides combined grant the Dutch education sector an advanced position in promoting the learning of foreign language. The results are also prominent. According to the 2016 Eurostat results concerning EU citizens' foreign language proficiency, 36.7% of the working-age Dutch adults defined their command of the best-known foreign language as proficient<sup>1</sup>, which put the Netherlands among the top-ranking countries in this category. It is also important to point out that this survey was conducted in 2016 and that the participants were to be speakers of more than one foreign language. In this light, this study raises the question: which key characteristics does foreign language education in the Netherlands have and how do they contribute to the building of the European identity?

## **The Dutch education system**

To provide an answer to these questions, the current study takes the education policy of foreign language(s) in the Netherlands as a starting point. In order to make an analysis of said policy, an overview of the Dutch education system is needed. The following brief overview is based on the Nuffic (the Dutch organization for internationalization of education) introduction of the Dutch System.<sup>2</sup> As in many other European countries, the Dutch education system consists of primary education, secondary education, and higher education, with the possibility of re-training and skill advancement as part of the life-long learning sector. Primary education provides school education for children from the age of 4 to 12. Apart from regular primary education, special schools also provide education to students of special needs. The Dutch secondary education and higher education are built on a relatively comprehensive structure. As shown in figure 1, after graduating from primary school, a Dutch student may choose between 'hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs' ('havo', higher general advanced education), 'voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs' ('vmbo', preparatory secondary vocational education) and 'voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs' ('vwo', preparatory academic education) based on school results and advice given by instructors. Both

<sup>1</sup> Eurostat, (2016), Distribution of the level of command of the best-known foreign language, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Foreign\\_language\\_skills\\_statistics#Level\\_of\\_command\\_of\\_best\\_known\\_foreign\\_language](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Foreign_language_skills_statistics#Level_of_command_of_best_known_foreign_language) (Retrieved on 17 May 2023)

<sup>2</sup> Nuffic, *Education in the Netherlands*, <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/study-in-nl/education-in-the-netherlands> (retrieved on 17 May 2023)

havo and vmbo have a schooling period of four years. Havo graduates can advance to ‘middelbaar beroepsonderwijs’ (‘mbo’, secondary vocational education) and later ‘hoger beroepsonderwijs’ (‘hbo’, higher vocational education). Vmbo graduates are expected to enter hbo. ‘Wetenschappelijk onderwijs’ (‘wo’, academic education) is usually the first choice of vwo students. It is also important to note that it is still possible for a student to flow between different forms of secondary education after enrolment. The student’s will and prior results are usually the determined factors.

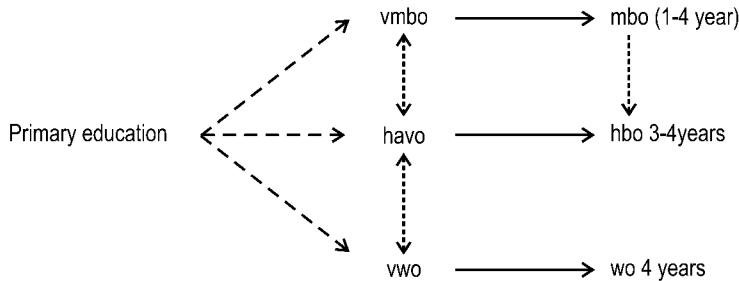


Figure 1. Basic structure of the Dutch education system

This complex education system grants the Dutch education sector more possibilities in foreign language education but also places high demands. The Dutch education policy has responded with three focus points when developing foreign language education policies.

## Multilingualism

As multilingualism ‘one of the EU’s founding principles’<sup>3</sup> and making sure that the EU retains its position as one of the most active participants in the global political, economic, and cultural arena, one of the major objectives of the language policy of the European Union is for each EU citizen to master two additional languages besides the language native to them.<sup>4</sup> To achieve this goal, the Dutch education system has detailed policies put in place on each level.

During primary education, a regular elementary school is obliged to provide teaching of the English language. The subject of English is seen of the same importance as Dutch, physical exercise and counting and mathematics.<sup>5</sup> If an interest is expressed by students, the subjects of German and/or French can also be added on the curriculum.

Although the general goals of different forms of secondary education institutions vary, emphasis on foreign language proficiency is showed throughout the schooling

<sup>3</sup> European Union, *Multilingualism*, [https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/languages\\_en#:~:text=Multilingualism%20is%20enshrined%20in%20the%20EU%20%99s%20Charter%20of,summaries%20are%20available%20in%20all%20official%20EU%20languages.](https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/languages_en#:~:text=Multilingualism%20is%20enshrined%20in%20the%20EU%20%99s%20Charter%20of,summaries%20are%20available%20in%20all%20official%20EU%20languages.) (Retrieved on 17 May 2023)

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, (2008), *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment*, Brussels.

<sup>5</sup> Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, (2023), *Wet op het primair onderwijs*, Den Haag, 9.1.

period. English remains a compulsory subject in all three forms of the Dutch secondary education. In addition to English Language and Literature, students of *havo*, should they choose to pursue the culture and society track (profiel cultuur en maatschappij), are also required to take one Language and Literature course in a modern foreign language or in the Frisian language, which is a regional language of the Netherlands. *Vwo* schools can take a step further than that and offer courses in both modern and classical languages such as Latin and Greek.<sup>6</sup>

On the higher education level, foreign language education results translate to two aspects: major programs in foreign languages and degree programs with English as the language of instruction. The first aim to educate language professionals for international relations, trade and cultural interactions. The latter aims to attract international talents which could further enrich the multilingual landscape of the Netherlands.

When taking a closer look at the three stages of the Dutch education system, continuity in government's effort to achieve the objective of EU language policy can be easily observed. The Dutch language is native to students at elementary schools. At this level, the foundation of the ability to communicate in English in the future is laid. Since its EU citizens are expected to master two foreign languages, Dutch students can begin with the learning of these two languages fairly early: at primary school or during secondary education. Should students become especially interested in a foreign language, they can pursue a degree program in one or several foreign languages (Table 1).

**Table 1. Foreign language education  
at top Dutch universities (in brief)<sup>7</sup>**

Higher education institution	Bachelor program in language study and/or research	Courses offered by university language centres
University of Amsterdam	Arabic Language and Culture German Studies English Language and Culture Hebrew Language and Culture Italian Studies Modern Greek Language and Culture Russian and Slavic Studies Scandinavian Studies Spanish and Latin-American Studies	English Spanish Italian French German Portuguese Swedish Russian Chinese Arabic Japanese

<sup>6</sup> Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, (2022), *Wet op het voortgezet onderwijs*, Den Haag, 13.1c, 13.1e, 13.2c, 14.5b.

<sup>7</sup> For a complete overview, see: Zhang, J. (2023), *A Study on the National Language Capacity of the Netherlands*, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, p. 134-135.

<b>Utrecht University</b>	German Language and Culture English Language and Culture French Language and Culture Islam and Arabic Italian Language and Culture Celtic Language and Culture Spanish Language and Culture	English Chinese German French Indonesian Italian Japanese Korean Norwegian Portuguese Russian Spanish Swedish (offered by Babel)
<b>Leiden University</b>	African Studies Chinese Studies German Language and Culture English Language and Culture French Language and Culture Greek and Latin Language and Culture Japanese Studies Korean Studies Latin-American Studies Middle East Studies Russian Studies South and Southeast Asian Studies	Arabic Chinese German English French Italian Japanese Korean Croatian Persian Russian Spanish Swedish

Table 1 gives a brief view of language study or degree programs offered by top Dutch universities. From the distribution of where these languages taught at higher education institutions are spoken, it can be inferred that a majority of these languages are essential to communicating between EU member states. Moreover, languages such as Greek and Latin are also indispensable in research of the common European roots. Last but not least, graduates of these programs can not only function as bridges between languages and cultures within the EU, once choosing a political career, one can embody the European identity and represent the interests of the EU on international politic occasions.

To put it shortly, the major advantage of such continuity in the foreign language education throughout the Dutch education system is pursuing the national interests of the Netherlands and the European Union alike. On the national level, the open character of the Dutch society requires its citizens to be able to communicate in foreign language(s) and language skills and cultural knowledge can further facilitate international trade as it is one of the most important drives for the Dutch economy.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Wennekers, A., J. Boelhouwer, C. van Campen & J. Kullberg (eds.), (2019), *De Sociale Staat van Nederland*, Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

On European level, EU citizens who have foreign language skills can fully realize the possibility of mobility within the EU by profiting from top education resources, the Dutch higher education being one example, and pursue career opportunities both in the EU and for the EU itself.

## **Emphasis on intercultural communication**

In the process of building European identity, the ability to communicate with others is undoubtedly crucial. Yet, it is not only important to be able to express one's thoughts, but also convey messages that can, at the same time, facilitate cultural mutual understanding. In 2019, the National Expertise Centre for Curriculum Development (Nationaal Expertisecentrum Leerplanontwikkeling, SLO) in the Netherlands, which is responsible for translating the national education goals into practicable course planning, led a project joined by a number of national education consortia and produced an advisory report on the education section English and Modern Foreign Languages ('Engels/Moderne Vreemde Talen').

In this report, five tasks were set for education foreign language(s) at the primary and secondary education level: effective border-crossing communication, mastering creative forms of language(s), the ability to communicate cross-culturally, consciousness of language and multilingualism.<sup>9</sup> The last task is apparently set to collaborate with European language policy and the relevant points are analysed in the previous section.

All tasks are to be carried out at primary school and different forms of secondary education institutions. Effective cross-border communication aims at grooming students to become efficient language users. At elementary schools, pupils are encouraged to reach certain goals using language skills after understanding simple instructions in English or even other foreign languages. On secondary level, this task demands the students should still be able to cross the language borders when the context, circumstance, medium and/or goal of communication vary. The ability to communicate cross-culturally plays a crucial role in how students can discover the differences and similarities between cultures (elementary level) and how these factors can influence the process of communication (secondary level). These two tasks serve the same purpose: preparing the students for intercultural communication which could already play a role in their daily life and certainly will, at different degrees, take up parts of their social life in the future.<sup>10</sup>

It is obvious that the starting point of such tasks is not making sure that every student can write and speak in flawless English or other modern foreign languages. The ability to comprehend complexed cultural and social information, construct appropriate message and successfully achieve communicative goals are valued more than grammatical accuracy and school results. While it is indeed the question if

<sup>9</sup> Corriculum.nu, (2019), *Engels/Moderne Vreemde Talen*, Enschede: Nationaal Expertisecentrum Leerplanontwikkeling, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Corriculum.nu, (2019), *Engels/Moderne Vreemde Talen*, Nationaal Expertisecentrum Leerplanontwikkeling, Enschede.

these set tasks can be accurately carried out in the education practice, it is the practical and intercultural starting point of the foreign language education policy that deserves attention from a European identity building perspective. Moreover, it can also be argued that these two tasks also pave the way for the student to prepare themselves linguistically for the possible challenges of the future. Such preparation is discussed in the next section.

## Beyond language skills

Language can construct societies. When it comes to building European identity, tapping into the shared historical roots and enriching it with modern interpretation should also be considered to be beneficial. The task of mastering creative forms of language(s) is being set so that students can put themselves in the place of characters in poetry, literature, drama, films or even podcast episodes to experience a foreign culture as if they live in it. When coming into contact with creative texts, students will be shown how reading and listening to such creative materials can provide an exciting experience and thus they grow to be fond of reading and listening in foreign language(s). It is also important to point out that the Dutch media policy also contributes to this habit-building process: public broadcasting networks are only obligated to provide original content in Dutch (and/or Frisian) for 50% of their total airing time, while the requirement by law for private broadcasting networks is merely 40%.<sup>11</sup> Adding on that fact that media content in foreign languages aired by Dutch public broadcasting networks are only required to have Dutch subtitles, the inherent advantage of learning language from creative materials for Dutch students and other groups of language learners is quite extensive.

Moreover, the world is a rapidly evolving with technological advancements changing people's way of life in a growing tempo. The ways of communication and platforms on which messages are exchanged renew themselves by the year, if not by the month. In the eyes of the Dutch government, helping students finding their place in a digital society with sufficient foreign language skills is also a part of the language education goals.

## Conclusion

After a brief overview of the Dutch policy on foreign language teaching, two key features presented stood out. The first is student centred. Not only do students have the possibility of decidedly, to some degree, which form of secondary education to choose and flowing between different forms, the evitability of living in a technically advanced, culturally diversified, and communicative skills required society is also considered to be a tone-setting factor of foreign language education policy. This has a strong tie to the building of European identity. If all members of the European community are exposed to the fact that the community is still striding towards a culturally rich yet diversified future and can be shown that many of the cultures in this community share the same cultural, philosophical, historical or even religious

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<sup>11</sup> Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, (2023), *Mediawet 2008*, Den Haag, 2.70.

roots, one can expect that the European identity becomes part of the personal one. The second feature is to be looking beyond language itself. When teaching foreign language, education objectives are often specified in certain aspects of language proficiency. Yet it is precisely the traditions and traits, the way of life, the metaphor with historical significance that make a language unique to the people using or learning it. Building European identity through foreign language education should respect this unique role of language to both culture and society. What is being exchanged, is not only texts on paper of sound coming out of people's mouth, but also the way of life and wisdom gained by generations.

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