

Education: Tailor-made or one-size-fits-all?

A project commissioned by the Nederlandse Taalunie¹

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Abstract

In the Netherlands, newcomers are obliged to attend integration courses, which are organised in so-called Dutch as Second Language (DSL) classes. In these classes, all learners are confronted with the same course of study that mainly focuses on the same “general” skills, such as how to ask for a loaf of bread, how to talk about the weather, and so on. Second language learners, however, have specific, even personal communicative needs. Some of them want to learn Dutch because of a specific profession, others mainly want to learn how to communicate with the teachers of the school their children are going to or want to know how to deal with official documents, etc. And as most of the above-mentioned situations are too specific and only reach a very small group, they are only dealt with at a later stage on their learning path (or not even dealt with at all). Furthermore, most second language learners are only able to attend DSL-courses for a short period of time. As a consequence, many of them never – or only barely– achieve the communicative goals they personally set for themselves. This is why it is very important to take into account the needs of every individual newcomer from the very beginning of their DSL learning path.

In the “Tailor-made” project, subsidised by the Dutch Language Union and carried out by the Centre for Language and Education (Leuven, Belgium) and the ITTA (Amsterdam, The Netherlands), several instruments have been developed that make it possible to respond to the individual needs of newcomers from the beginning of the DSL-courses. In our case-study we specifically describe the various products that have been developed and discuss the trials that have been carried out.²

¹ The Nederlandse Taalunie (www.taalunieversum.org): three countries united by one language. The Dutch language is spoken in the Netherlands, Belgian Flanders and Surinam. These three areas have been working together on linguistic issues, language policy, language teaching and literature for many years. In 1980, the cooperation between the Netherlands and Flanders was confirmed by founding the Taalunie. Surinam has been an associate member of the Taalunie since 2004.

² www.nt2beginnersdoelen.org

1. What is targeted customisation?

Consider the following: a man of Flemish-Turkish background has married the Turkish Ayse. She has immigrated to Flanders, and they are currently living with his parents in the Flemish coastal town of Oostende. He works in a sawmill; she had worked as a hairstylist in Turkey. Because they would like to save money to be able to afford their own home as soon as possible, they have decided that she will start to work as soon as she can. Although she would obviously prefer to work as a hairstylist, she is willing to work in the hotel industry if necessary. She would eventually like to open her own salon. In order to make their plans feasible, she is planning to begin language classes immediately.

The language instructor in this example faces a challenge: what can she offer Ayse? One possibility would be to provide her with a basic vocabulary and general linguistic aspects (e.g. grammar) through lessons that focus on such everyday topics as *buying bread* and *taking the bus*. Alternatively, the teacher could choose to relate to Ayse's practical goals by basing the lessons on the types of situations in which Ayse will be functioning (e.g. looking for a job, understanding customers' requests, paying bills). These topics can also be used to impart a basic vocabulary and general linguistic aspects, while offering other benefits as well. This approach would allow her to begin immediately learning words that she will need for the situations in which she will find herself.

Second-language instruction in the Netherlands and Flanders is not nearly as effective as we would like. Despite all efforts, many civic-integration participants (henceforth, 'learners') who have completed their Dutch-language learning paths remain ill equipped to use Dutch to function in situations that are crucial for them. One way to increase the effectiveness of second-language instruction would be to ensure better co-ordination between course content and the language-acquisition goals of learners from the outset. Such goal-oriented courses are likely to ensure that more non-native speakers will acquire the Dutch-language proficiency that they need in order to participate effectively in society more quickly.

2. Relating better to the needs of language learners

Information gathered from needs assessments and interviews with learners who had participated in integration courses shows that language needs are highly varied from the outset, depending upon the roles that learners assume at the beginning of their NT2³ learning paths and the roles that they aspire to assume. Moreover, the language needs of different learners can lie in completely different domains. The needs of learners also vary according to the pace and circumstances in which they wish to reach their goals.

We are of the opinion that to make NT2 instruction more effective, the initial phases of NT2 learning paths should be revised to meet the following objectives:

- The necessity and relevance of entering a beginners' course should be made clearer by making it possible for individuals to find instruction that relates directly to their needs within the courses on offer.
- In these courses, learners should be stimulated immediately and supported in relating the material that they learn to life in the outside world.
- It is crucial that the learning experience in the initial phase is positive so that learners develop competencies that will encourage them to continue the learning process, both within and outside the context of lessons.

³ NT2: Dutch as a second language

3. The beginning of the project: a website

To achieve these objectives, the Nederlandse Taalunie commissioned the development of a website that provides a wealth of information for those involved in arranging instruction for Dutch as a second language (NT2). The website is intended to encourage the establishment or further elaboration of NT2 learning paths according to roles that are relevant to individual course participants.

The model underlying the website focuses on individual course participants, who indicate choices (either with or without the help of instructors or intake agents) regarding their objectives for their language-learning paths. The core of the instrument includes a catalogue, which is categorised according to the various roles that learners can assume in Dutch or Flemish society (e.g. student/course participant, jobseeker, worker, parent/caregiver, household or family member, consumer, allocator of leisure-time). Each role heading is accompanied by a list of functional domains that are associated with the role and in which a learner might participate, either immediately or in the future (see Table 1).

Table 1

ROLE	FUNCTIONAL DOMAIN
Household/family administrator	Contact with official agencies
	Housing
	Monetary transactions and insurance
Consumer	Contact in stores
	Health
	Mobility
Course participant/student	Course or educational programme
	Higher education
Allocator of leisure time	Social contacts and relationships with neighbors
	Allocation of leisure time
	Media and current events
Parent/caregiver	Parenting/caregiving
	Healthcare
	Education
Jobseeker	Looking for a job
Employee	At the workplace, general
	At the workplace, specific (technology, trade and services, health and welfare)
	Running an independent business
	Volunteering

Each of these functional domains contains an overview of practical situations that learners could encounter within that domain, as well as possible actions or tasks that learners should be able to perform within them. Because the actions are defined at Level A1 or A2 (or both) of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*⁴ (CEFR), they offer a clear framework for goals to be pursued at beginners' level.

⁴ Council of Europe / Cambridge University Press, 2001. Available online on the Council of Europe website (Language Policy Division): www.coe.int/lang

Let us return to our original example. Because we know that Ayse would like to work, possibly in a hairdressing salon, we could choose the role of employee as one of the focal points for her initial steps to learn Dutch. We could then locate the practical situation ‘Consulting with colleagues’ within the functional domain of ‘Work – general’, under the role of ‘Employee’. One action that Ayse could be expected to perform within this context could be ‘Discussing task divisions with colleagues’. We may be tempted to think that this type of action inherently requires a much higher level of language than could be addressed in the initial stages. The value of the catalogue, however, is that it allows users to find descriptions of concrete actions with accompanying examples regarding what these actions could entail at beginners’ level (see Table 2).

Table 2

Practical situations: Consulting with colleagues

Specific actions:

- Course participants will be able to understand a request to do (or assist in doing) or to get something.
- Course participants will be able to indicate that they know (or do not know) what is expected of them.
- Course participants will be able to indicate a preference for particular tasks.
- Course participants will be able to ask questions for clarification.

Examples:

- *Course participants will be able to understand a (proposed) sharing of work or tasks. They will be able to indicate which task they can perform. They will be able to express a preference for particular tasks. They will be able to indicate that they are unable or unwilling to perform the tasks assigned and provide a reason. They will be able to ask for clarification if they do not understand what the other person has said.*
- *Course participants will be able to ask a colleague to exchange duties or tasks and indicate which tasks they would like to exchange. They will be able to indicate why they would like to exchange the duty or task and express gratitude if the other person agrees. They will be able to indicate that it is not a problem if the other person cannot exchange, or otherwise end the conversation.*
- *Course participants will be able to understand a request from a colleague to exchange duties/work/tasks. They will be able to agree to the proposed exchange. They will be able to indicate politely that they do not want to exchange.*
- *Course participants will be able to understand notes in the logbook made by a colleague on the previous shift.*
- *Course participants will be able to understand a short note from a colleague or customer regarding a machine/instrument/tools/supplies (e.g. ‘Out of order’, ‘Last’, ‘Can be discarded’, ‘Do not use!’ ‘Out of date’).*
- *Course participants will be able to read a schedule allocating work: date, type of duties, activities or tasks of that day/week.*

4. Catalogue, elaborated for CEFR Levels A1 and A2

The website thus offers assistance for goal-oriented integration paths, with the highest level indication being A2 of the CEFR. Many practical situations and actions, however, will require a higher level of language ability in order to function independently in society. For example, a number of the learners who were interviewed remarked that negotiating with property owners (e.g. regarding necessary repairs) was a very important skill to be learned under the category of 'Housing'. Such negotiations often involve conflict situations that require a relatively high level of language ability. In addition, some occupations call for greater language skill than others. The instrument would need to be elaborated for use with course participants who have greater language skills.

This model is intended to help people become capable of functioning in individually relevant Level A1 or Level A2 situations sooner, and to help them have a positive learning experience. This positive learning experience is likely to stimulate them to extend their learning process (rather than discontinue it, as is usually the case). For educational institutions, the increased effectiveness and efficiency that can be generated through such customisation will enhance the motivation of the course participants, while increasing the duration of and returns on particular learning paths.

5. Why customisation is not more common in the beginning

The obvious next step is to determine how to organise instruction in order to involve co-operation during intake and in the lessons. Arranging customisation according to the learning objectives of course participants requires that intake procedures focus on identifying these learning objectives, organising the learning path so that it corresponds to them and ensuring the availability of appropriate teaching materials for pursuing them. Furthermore, it requires instructional skills that the average instructor does not have. Because of the motivating role and the considerable potential effectiveness of goal-oriented customisation for learning a language, instructors should ideally work with course participants according to their objectives *from the very beginning* of the language-learning process.

Customisation is being used increasingly in the Netherlands and in Flanders. Many learning paths and teaching materials have already been developed according to the needs of specific target groups, and there are increasing numbers of dual paths, in which language lessons are combined with real-life societal activities (e.g. 'work' or 'assisting with activities at the children's school'). The use of practical assignments, language internships and similar activities is also increasing. Nonetheless, such customisation is often offered only to learners who have already attained a certain level of proficiency. After all, standard practice in the Netherlands and Flanders specifies that learners must first take a basic course in Dutch in order to acquire general basic language skills. Such courses should be as short as possible, and it should serve only as a steppingstone to a more needs-oriented learning path. It is therefore usually assumed unnecessary to offer goal-oriented courses at the basic level, aside from the provision of separate groups for course participants with different levels of education.

6. Limited understanding of the term 'basic level'

The misconception that is described above has to do with the fact that many unjustly assume that the component 'basic' in the term 'basic level' means that such courses should equip non-native speakers to use Dutch to get by in the most common day-to-day situations, albeit with limited resources. However, the aim of basic courses is not to ensure that course participants can get by; they are intended only to lay a foundation for language acquisition.

Another common misconception regarding the term ‘basic level’ is that the language activities that fall under this category should involve ‘basic needs’ that are crucial for everyone. In this context, ‘basic needs’ refer to non-language needs for survival in everyday reality (e.g. people need to find shelter, feed themselves, get around). The language that is needed in crucial (survival) situations, however, does not automatically correspond to the simplest linguistic level. In addition, the idea often persists that, at beginners’ level (A1 and A2), people are not yet able to work on such domain-specific language actions as introducing themselves in job interviews or negotiating about conditions of employment. Nor is it assumed possible to use customisation to work across levels, thereby transcending structural learning pathways or basic linguistic aspects.

These and other misconceptions combine to form a situation in which learners are often confronted with courses that are extremely general at the beginning of their NT2 learning paths. Learners are bombarded with contexts that are generally assumed relevant for every learner (e.g. taking the bus, separating rubbish, going to the bakery), while occasionally being ‘taught’ basic elements, often through vocabulary lists, fill-in-the-blank assignments and similar context-neutral exercises.

7. Customisation in practice: Supplements to the website

Most educational institutions in the Netherlands and Flanders are not yet ready to work independently towards achieving all of the requirements described above. Reasons may include organisational priorities, a lack of sufficient in-house expertise to offer NT2 procedures that are sufficiently diverse and varied to be directed towards various groups of non-native speakers, or a lack of time to figure it out for themselves. Under the guise of ‘customisation’, some institutions separate groups according to learning pace or language level, although this constitutes only a minimal form of customisation. In this respect, language instruction can make great strides towards improvement by adopting true customisation. For this reason, the Nederlandse Taalunie funded a number of pilot projects in co-operation with educational institutions in order to seek solutions for problems that arise in the realisation of customisation. In addition to a catalogue of learning objectives, therefore, the website contains a wealth of information that can help users develop instructional customisation according to roles.

The pilot projects are focused primarily on the following five topics: intake, available materials, organisation of instruction and teaching skills. A FAQ list regarding the organisation of customisation has also been compiled. These topics and the results of the pilot projects are discussed below.

Intake

We considered how the catalogue of learning objectives should be used with regard to intake. Even during the Framework for Concretising Customisation project, it became obvious that the list should not be discussed with course participants. What should be discussed? We developed an intake form that requested details concerning roles and objectives, in addition to the usual questions (e.g. name, education). We chose to use open questions regarding what course participants currently do in their daily lives, as well as why they do or do not do these things. For example, we do not ask, ‘Would you like to learn about this or that?’ Instead, we ask, ‘Do you handle your household administration?’, which allows us to obtain details about why they do not perform these tasks and whether they would like to be able to perform them. We incorporated all of the roles and objectives from the catalogue into the form, clustering them around topics in order to allow natural conversation to emerge. The forms are available on the website, along with a description of

the intake procedure of which the forms are a part, as well as descriptions of experiences using instruments and other recommendations.

After the forms were developed, the partner organisations tested them in practice. The intake procedure apparently works well for participants who already have a certain level of skill with the language. It obviously does not work for those with little or no Dutch-language ability, as it is impossible to communicate with them in Dutch. In addition to attaining a certain level of proficiency with the Dutch language, learners may also need to develop a trust in the learning path that is to take place before they are willing to say everything they have in mind. For both of these reasons, a pilot programme was established within the project, in which learners were recruited by compatriots who were already integrated and with whom they had their intake conversations. This type of approach could be particularly effective in convincing women to enroll. After receiving training for their tasks, the potential interpreters were put to work. This pilot programme yielded considerable material that can assist website users in developing the concept of 'interpreters in integration' within their own contexts: a framework for training and teaching content, a profile for interpreters and a list of tasks that they could perform, along with descriptions of experiences with the use of the interpreters.

In the pilot programmes, we asked the partner organisations to conduct 'repeated intake'. This procedure involves reviewing the action plans of individual course participants, which include their desires regarding roles and functional domains, once every six to eight weeks. Participants develop during their courses; they gain increasing insight into what the course can offer them, and they build trust in their instructors. Some course participants who are accustomed to conforming to what their surroundings consider best for them do not dare to admit what they actually want for themselves until considerable time has elapsed. Some course participants only start to develop such ideas further along the learning path. A form available on the website allows instructors to refer back to previous conversations regarding the determination of the roles and objectives.

Available teaching materials

New learning paths call for a new procedure, a new approach and new language-learning resources. People often cling to existing learning paths because they are so accustomed to working with them, because teaching resources for those learning paths are readily available or because they believe that such resources are not available for alternative learning paths. A number of partners therefore considered the currently existing teaching materials, charting the roles and functional domains for which specific materials, tasks and activities are available. Their efforts resulted in an overview of existing teaching materials that are suited for use with customisation according to roles. The overview also clearly identifies the roles and functional domains for which there continues to be a lack of materials.

Organisation of instruction

How is it possible to work according to needs in an average NT2 beginners' group? In what way is it possible to work concretely when the course participants in a group have extremely varied profiles and perspectives? How should instructors talk to beginners with regard to the roles that they will assume in society? The Flemish pilot organisations found answers to questions such as these through the concept of 'customisation corners': areas in the classroom in which course participants work with particular roles and functional domains. The 'corners' in which they work are determined in an initial orientation exercise. Expressive photographs and simple listening texts are used to introduce seven characters, each with a different profile. Through this activity, course participants are introduced to the various roles; they become actively involved in the activity through questions from the

instructor (e.g. ‘Do you take your children to school as well?’). The course participants use this orientation to choose the roles that most closely relate to their personal situations. In general, the course participants were well capable of making such choices; when necessary, they could request further clarification in the corners regarding the meaning of particular roles. Materials for this orientation activity, a short film of a group of course participants who are working on it and a description of experiences with it are available on the website. These resources make it easy for other instructors and educational institutions to adopt this working form.

In the customisation corners, course participants work with a ‘Box of Roles’. Based on the inventory that is described in the section on available teaching materials, sets of materials for various roles at a given language level and for the various skills are placed in a file folder. This allows instructors and course participants to find appropriate teaching materials for particular roles and desired language skills. Because instruction sheets are available for each task, the tasks are immediately usable – sometimes with slight modifications for specific groups. During the pilot projects, the instructors noticed that their roles changed automatically: they were transformed from instructors who provided all of the information into supporters and coaches. The Box of Roles can be supplemented with additional materials and with assignments that are derived from the realities of course participants. Several short films showing participants working in the customisation corners are also available on the website.

Teaching skills

In the past, many materials that had been developed for customisation ultimately remained on the shelf, as instructors were not sure how to organise or guide customisation and the learning processes of course participants. Successful customisation depends on the presence of relevant teaching skills. During the project, therefore, we also considered which teaching competencies are needed and how they can best be developed. The effectiveness of transferring information through training is limited. The project also showed that instructors should be aware of the necessity of developing these competencies and that they should have the desire to do so. A variety of information was gathered for the website, including information about which competencies play a role in providing customisation. The skills that were identified include the ability to provide feedback that focuses on the content and the role, the ability to make individual study guides for each course participant, the ability to cope with differentiation and the ability to support and stimulate independence, co-operative learning and other skills among course participants.

We paid particular attention to how instructors could be invited to consider their own competencies and how they can be stimulated to reflect and to learn from one another. A number of working forms have been developed for doing this in a light-hearted way. In addition, a training course has been developed for a variety of competencies according to the principle of ‘practice what you preach’; in this course, instructors are divided into groups according to their own choices to work on particular competencies.

Customisation FAQ

The organisation of customisation is not obvious to everyone. Instructors have a variety of reasons (whether founded or unfounded) for choosing to offer a generic array of courses. In an attempt to break this pattern, we enquired among organisations that do and organisations that do not choose customisation. We compiled an inventory of reasons underlying choices for or against customisation, as well as for any solutions for particular problems. This allowed us to gather arguments for customisation and to refute arguments against

customisation. The results of this enquiry were transformed into a list of ‘dos and don’ts’ for organisations that are considering introducing customisation.

8. The near future

In both the Netherlands and Flanders, a number of initiatives have recently been established to supplement, refine and implement the results of this case study. The Box of Roles has found its way into practice and a global list of crucial situations in which a self-employed entrepreneur should be able to function has been incorporated into the catalogue of learning objectives on the current website. In the Netherlands, government-funded initiatives are focusing on the elaboration of language actions intended to support learners who wish to start their own businesses. The list on the website could therefore be supplemented and completed in 2008. The Nederlandse Taalunie is preparing to establish a taskforce that can track and use these types of developments, which could contribute information for the website.