



Language Policy Division

Framework of Reference for Early Second Language Acquisition

by

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Framework of Reference for Early Second Language Acquisition¹

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the project

The poor performance of immigrant children in education is causing the authorities considerable concern. Despite efforts over many years and a policy on educational priorities, they remain over-represented in special education, more often have to stay down a class, and move up in relatively fewer numbers into higher education, so that their employment prospects are likely to be lessened.

It is obvious that a structural, joint effort by all concerned is needed in order to solve this problem: school teams, school advisors, inspectors, teacher trainers, materials designers, education centres, educationalists and scientists must, as a matter of urgency, bring together the potential and the expertise gathered over past years.

It is also recommended that the problem of immigrant children in education be tackled at the root, i.e. at the point where children start their school career. If in pre-primary or pre-school education immigrant children are able to lay a firm foundation of the language of schooling skills, their chances of educational success may thereby increase markedly. Here too, the saying that a good start is half the battle applies.

This is wholly in keeping with the policy guidelines that have been set by the Council of Europe, in Recommendation CM/Rec (2008)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on strengthening the integration of children of migrants and of immigrant background.

Anyone wishing to enhance the efficiency of teaching in pre-primary education must begin with some fundamental thinking about the goals which that teaching seeks to attain. Within the framework of its social language policy, in 2001 The Nederlandse Taalunie accordingly launched a project that was intended to lead to a common framework of reference of goals for the early acquisition of a second language by immigrant pre-school children. That setting objectives is a necessary first step in raising the quality of L2 teaching is explained in the following terms: “Unless what one seeks to achieve is clear, it is virtually impossible to take decisions about teaching methods. Once the objectives are clear, once one knows what is to be learnt, one has to decide how that learning is to be stimulated”.

In other words, objectives constitute the central pillar around which all the other aspects of language teaching exist. Objectives are the foundation for discussing the didactic shaping of education, and at the same time the starting-point for its evaluation. In order to assess whether education is efficient, the relationship between what children have learnt (learning results) and what they should have learnt (objectives) has to be charted. Without clear objectives, clear observation and evaluation are not possible. Only if clear objectives have been laid down can schools, parents, school advisors, inspectors and educational policy representatives make objective, firm judgments about the quality of teaching, and appropriate measures be taken to adjust and optimise. Not until clear objectives have been set and agreed on for L2 teaching can the (language) achievement gaps of immigrants, and remedies for them, be discussed, for one must first have a clear picture of what immigrants are able to do with the

¹ This text is a translation and adaptation of the paper by K. Van den Branden, D. Van den Nulft, M. Verhallen and M. Verhelst (2001), *Referentiekader vroege tweede taalverwerving*, *The Nederlandse Taalunie*, The Hague. The adaptations were made by Machteld Verhelst at the request of the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe.

school language at certain points in their development before one can make any valid pronouncement about how far behind they have fallen and about the steps that have been taken in the past, and those which need to be taken in the future, in order to make good those achievement gaps

1.2 Project phases

The first phase of the construction of this framework of reference involved an analysis of relevant documents. For this purpose, all local documents enjoying a certain status in relation to objectives for early L2 acquisition were screened and compared. In addition, the material available to organise L2 teaching for immigrant pre-school children was analysed. Of course these materials also adopt a particular standpoint (sometimes explicit in the textbook) on the priority objectives they pursue. Drawing on these sources of inspiration, a broad communication exercise with practitioners in the Netherlands and Flanders was then begun: the intention is of course that the ultimate framework of reference should be used by those directly involved as much as possible, so as to increase its potential impact. At the same time, communication with those in the field served to bring together the great expertise that exists on this subject. The communication exercise involved written surveys and meetings of experts with educationalists, materials developers, teacher trainers, school advisors, inspectors, policy-makers, teachers and managers.

1.3 A framework of reference for L2 objectives

The basic question which this framework of reference is required to answer is the following :

What should immigrant children be able to do with the language of schooling by the end of pre-school education?

The end of pre-school education constitutes the limit of what the title of this framework of reference calls “early second language acquisition”. That point was chosen because it constitutes an extremely important transition point – the transition to the period when children formally begin initial instruction in reading and arithmetics. If at this point children are already lagging behind in school language skills, they will have great difficulty in functioning properly when they receive initial instruction in reading and arithmetic as well as in the rest of their school career. So it is essential that those in charge of their education know clearly what children at the end of pre-school education must reliably be able to do with language, and what final objectives they must pursue in infant school or pre-school and early school education.

The above fundamental question is a general question which raises a number of incidental ones. Some of those questions, and the way in which they are anticipated in the framework of reference, are presented below.

1.4 Considerations on the fundamental question

1.4.1 Only language skill?

The fundamental question refers to what children should be able to do with the language of schooling. In other words, the focus of the framework of reference is on language skills. That skill can be defined in general terms as “the ability to understand and to produce linguistic messages in a communication context”. The term “message” must be interpreted broadly in this definition: it may cover instructions, stories, announcements, questions etc.

Skill and achievement gaps are closely interrelated. Anyone who is not sufficiently proficient to function in given fields (e.g. at school) runs the danger of falling behind in comparison with others. Anyone who does not understand the linguistic messages that are typical for a

given field, and who is able to produce no messages, or too few messages, within that field himself, cannot play a full part in the interaction and communication which occur in that field, with all the negative consequences that entails. A lack of linguistic skill can – directly or indirectly – affect all kinds of facets of a person’s development and personality: it can lead to learning gaps (not understanding the teacher’s linguistic offer makes it hard to learn from that offer), to poor participation in social life (if you cannot stand up for your rights, you risk being treated as an inferior), to unequal opportunities on the job market, and so on.

Linguistic skill – the ability to use language in a functional way – is therefore central to this framework of reference; linguistic knowledge and linguistic attitudes are subordinate to linguistic skill. What children are able to do with language, after all, has a greater impact on their educational and social prospects, and is therefore of greater importance to this framework of reference, than what children know about language and their affective attitudes to it. Pre-school children do not have to acquire knowledge about language for the sake of knowledge; and with a view to avoiding falling behind, there is no use of developing purely non-committal attitudes to language. In the first place, pre-school children must use language as a means of self-fulfilment – i.e. at the social, emotional, cognitive and motor levels – within their environment.

The fact remains, however, that the framework of reference also includes a number of objectives in relation to linguistic knowledge and linguistic attitudes. These are insights (linguistic knowledge) and attitudes which may be assumed to have important value for the pre-school child at this point in time and promote his functional language development in the short and long term. For example, within the “reading” skill, one objective included in the list is that pre-school children must develop a basic insight into the functions of written language (linguistic knowledge) and that they should develop a positive attitude to learning how to read and write the language in general (attitude). These are not conditions in the strict sense: children with relatively low reading motivation at the end of pre-school education can normally take part successfully in basic reading classes. We are referring here to insights and attitudes which have been shown, when present at the start of introductory reading classes, to have a positive impact on the development of reading skill. They are also insights and attitudes which are of lasting importance to the child throughout his further reading development.

1.4.2 *Minimum objectives*

Many people concerned with language acquisition, and thus with language teaching, usually think in terms of a particular level. In this connection, it is necessary to define clearly in advance what kind of objectives one is referring to. In The Nederlandse Taalunie’s mission statement, the term used is “minimum objectives”.

However, the word “minimum” can be interpreted in different ways. It may well throw up connotations such as to suggest that “the overall standard may be reduced a bit for immigrants”. But that is not what is meant by the term “minimum objectives” for the purposes of the framework of reference: it means those things which children must be capable of doing with language at the end of pre-school education, with certainty and as a minimum, in order to avoid falling behind. From the school’s standpoint, it means those skills for which the school must take full responsibility and inculcate them in pre-school children by creating a powerful learning environment. Pre-school children who do not attain the set objectives are, after all, at great risk of getting into difficulty quickly. Only in that sense are the objectives set down in this framework of reference “minimum objectives”: they are basic goals which all immigrant children ought to achieve, and to which the school must therefore direct maximum effort to ensure that all immigrant children do indeed attain them.

In formulating objectives of this kind, it is of course accepted that some children will advance much further in their linguistic development: for language acquisition is an individual process that is influenced by contextual and personality variables of every kind. Differences in the speed at which children acquire the language of schooling and the standard they eventually reach at the end of the relevant period are unavoidable, and at the same time quite natural. The essential thing is for all children to have achieved a certain level (minimum level) in order to safeguard their chances of further development and normal functioning. The prime purpose of the list of “minimum objectives” is to provide schools with clear pointers to the minimum level which all immigrant children, regardless of the social background against which they grew up at home and regardless of their mother tongue, must achieve in linguistic proficiency.

1.4.3 *Only linguistic objectives?*

The development of pre-school children’s language skills goes hand in hand with that of other skills, knowledge and attitudes. Their cognitive development, manual skills and socio-emotional development are just a few examples. In pre-school education, understanding of this is built into the approach to many schools’ teaching. It is not affected by the fact that the framework of reference focuses solely on linguistic skills.

Thus it is necessary, when formulating linguistic objectives, to keep sight of children’s development in other fields, and of the objectives already set in those other fields (eg. development objectives, intermediate objectives or core objectives). Furthermore, the emphasis on linguistic objectives leaves teachers perfectly free to bring into sharp focus what is wholly relevant, and what is less relevant or even irrelevant, to the linguistic development of pre-school immigrant children. If objectives are formulated in excessively general or inclusive terms, their relevance to (everyday) teaching practice may be weakened.

1.4.4 *Only the language of schooling?*

A similar reservation may be made with respect to the development of immigrant children’s own language (mother tongue). The fact that the framework of reference in this project confines itself to objectives in relation to acquisition of the language of schooling does not imply that development of the mother tongue is unimportant for pre-school children. So clear outlines must be drawn, in the context of other projects, for objectives relating to teaching in the mother tongue.

However, the framework of reference is limited to objectives for teaching in the language of schooling, on one hand by reason of their attainability and on the other because of the importance of developing skill in the language of schooling for the immigrant child. After all, it is the language of teaching, and of large sectors of social life, and the development of this linguistic skill has a major impact on the development prospects of immigrant children.

1.4.5 *Only immigrant children?*

The poor performance of immigrant children in our education system, and the role played by language acquisition in it, were the immediate motivation for this project. The objectives that will be set out in the framework of reference are consequently aimed primarily at immigrant pre-school children. The objectives must serve as clear guidelines to be followed as a matter of priority, where the acquisition of language is concerned, by everyone involved in teaching in, and of, the language of schooling to immigrant pre-school children.

However, that does not mean that the framework of reference is not relevant or useful in thinking about the objectives of language teaching to native pre-school children. On the contrary: the objectives set out in the framework of reference are applicable to all children.

After all, we are talking about the things which children should be able to do with language in order to secure their chances of full development and avoid getting into a situation of social disadvantage, and those things are valid for all pre-school children regardless of their skin colour or their origin.

In the process of communication with people in the field which operated throughout this project, a very strong consensus emerged among the experts questioned on this point. According to the experts, the term “L2 acquisition” employed in the title of the framework of reference must definitely not give the impression that different, or lower, objectives should be set for immigrant children than for others. So the fact that the term was kept in the title refers only to the social reality which gave rise to this framework of reference, and which at the same time highlights the necessity of the framework and its usefulness. Immigrant children are actually children who, in proportion to their numbers, find themselves lagging behind the others at a very early stage; for very many children, and certainly for immigrants, this framework of reference, and everything which may possibly flow from it in terms of better teaching practice, is of crucial importance.

1.4.6 Only objectives or also teaching methods?

The framework of reference confines itself to formulating objectives, in other words to the question “What?”: “What should children be able to do with language at the end of the relevant period?” As has already been said, this is “the necessary first question” for anyone wishing to reflect on the quality of education. Not until one has a clear view of where one wants to go can one start to think about the route to follow. What should education be like for all pre-school children to achieve the objectives in the framework of reference?

The framework of reference does not lay down any binding or detailed pointers to the route to be followed. The question “How?” is of course a very important and pertinent one, which keeps a great many people busy; that was apparent from the reactions of the experts who cooperated on the project. Thus many of them wondered whether the framework of reference, however summary, could offer inspiration in considering the question “How?” That question is answered, albeit minimally. At the beginning of the list of objectives for each kind of skill, a number of main approaches and basic teaching principles on which there is fairly broad consensus are set out. So here we have just broad outlines: it may be hoped that this project may impart further impetus to the debate on the question “How?”.

2. DESCRIPTORS

2.1 Parameters for the description of objectives

A number of choices have to be made when determining the minimum objectives for early L2 acquisition.

2.1.1 *How concrete? How general?*

One of the difficulties in formulating objectives is the degree of concreteness/generalness one seeks to achieve. Concrete objectives have the advantage of being very tangible and verifiable. They offer a high degree of adaptability in practice. But concreteness can also have drawbacks: the risk with concrete objectives is that education may focus on details and lose sight of the broad lines. Concrete objectives also have the disadvantage that their number climbs rapidly and that teachers come to see the list as unattainable.

General objectives, on the other hand, have the advantage of tracing broad lines which must run through concrete activities. They can serve as a better guide to teachers in setting the main priorities. However, they suffer from the drawback that they require of teachers an effort of transference to actual practice, and thus risk losing relevance.

This framework of reference has tried to strike a happy medium: a sufficient degree of concreteness such that transference (and adaptability) to practice remains guaranteed, but at the same time a sufficient degree of generality such that the number of objectives does not get out of hand and the main lines remain visible. In this document, concreteness is also ensured by giving an example from classroom practice alongside each objective formulated.

2.1.2 *Three levels of description*

The objectives are described at three levels – macro (fields), meso (language acts/tasks) and micro (elements). The three levels describe the same reality, but each looks at that reality from a different standpoint.

i) *Linguistic skill at the macro level*: this level stands for the main fields in which the immigrant pre-school child must understand and produce the language of schooling during the period in question. In theory, three relevant fields may be distinguished in relation to our target group²:

- the field of school; “school” here means any situation occurring within the educational sphere and intended to stimulate the child’s development;
- the out-of-school field: social relationships with friends, family members and acquaintances;
- the media contact field (for example, looking at TV, playing computer games in the language of schooling).

These three fields are not on the same footing where problems of achievement gaps are concerned. For example, in the case of five-year-olds the field of paramount importance is the school and development of the language skill they need in order to function within it. Pre-school children who do not sufficiently understand the school language, and who fail to express themselves adequately within the school, risk running into problems at a very

² Obviously, these three fields may intersect, as for example in the case of ICT.

early stage of their development. In the worst-case scenario they will have to drop out of initial reading and arithmetic classes, and this can have damaging consequences for their school career in the long term. For these children, school may risk losing its emancipatory function at a very early stage. It is increasingly stressed in the scientific literature that if ground lost at school is not tackled very quickly - or, better still, prevented - it becomes more and more difficult to break the downward spiral. So the development of “school language skill” at a very early stage is of crucial importance to the child’s overall development.

Attention must of course also be given to the other two fields of language use mentioned above (the out-of-school field and contact with media), but these are less paramount because they are less strongly linked to the problems of lost ground at the pre-school age. Language problems which threaten to cause pre-school children to lose ground early do not arise primarily in the playground, during football practice or in understanding the dialogue of a children’s TV programme. So the first, primary concern of pre-primary education has no need to focus on them.

ii) *Linguistic skill at the meso level*: at this level the description shows which specific language use situations within the fields described above are relevant to pre-school children and which language tasks must be carried out in this connection. Unlike fields at the macro level which are described in fairly general terms, a number of parameters must be sought here which afford a clear picture of the language tasks that are really central. The starting-point for selecting these parameters is a functional paradigm, namely that pre-school children are willing to understand and produce linguistic messages with a view to achieving a purpose that is relevant and of interest to them.

The parameters used for description at the meso level are:

- skill : what skill is called upon in the language use situation? It is specified whether the situation is one of listening, speaking, reading or writing;
- interlocutor/public : who are the interlocutors in the language use situation ? A distinction is drawn here between the child him/herself, known peers (e.g. classmates), unknown peers (e.g. children from other schools), known adults (e.g. the teacher) or unknown adults;
- text type: this means the kind of message employed in the language use situation. Of course, the term “text” here does not mean only written messages but also includes verbal messages. Examples of text types are an instruction, a story, an account (e.g. of one’s own experience), a question, an answer to a question;
- subject: this specifies the subject of conversation in the language use situation concerned. As the number of possible subjects of conversation is virtually infinite, broad categories have to be employed here; furthermore, the categories are described from a functional perspective, viz. what the child wants to/has to achieve in terms of understanding and producing messages. For example, it may be specified in the case of an instruction (text type) by the teacher that the instruction is one which calls for a physical act by the child (= subject). Whether that physical act is specifically “jumping”, “running” or “climbing” is no longer relevant to the description of the objectives because that is too concrete;
- context: this parameter specifies whether the message which the child has to understand or produce is linked to a concrete here-and-now context or not. This

parameter has an impact on the child's assessment of the functionality of the language utterance for him/herself, but of course also on the degree of difficulty of the message;

- processing level: this parameter describes the level at which information in the message has to be processed by the child. Does the child merely have to reproduce the information in the message (copying level), understand or describe it as it stands (describing level), restructure the information in the message him/herself (structuring level) or even evaluate it by comparing it with other messages and sources (evaluating level)?

By applying the above (and possibly other) parameters together, objectives at the meso level can be described.

Example: LISTENING: the child understands instructions given to him/her in class by the teacher and requiring concrete action from him/her.

Translated into the above parameters, this becomes: Listening (= skill): the child understands (= processing level) verbal instructions (= text type) which are given to him/her (= public) by the teacher (= interlocutor) in class (=reference to macro level) and which call for concrete action from him/her (= subject).

iii) *Linguistic skill at the micro level*: This third description level indicates which linguistic elements are necessary (as a minimum) in order to perform the language skill tasks listed above in the stated fields. Inspiration for a description of the linguistic elements at micro level may be found in the traditional "disciplines" of linguistics:

- phonology: at this level the extent to which pre-school children must recognise or produce particular sounds is indicated;
- lexis: at this level reference is made to the vocabulary which pre-school children must acquire in order to be able to perform the tasks at meso level;
- morphology/syntax: statements are made about the morphological and syntactic rules which must be assimilated;
- pragmatics and socio-linguistics: here, statements are made about the conversational conventions and skills, in conjunction with register, which pre-school children may have to acquire.

2.1.3 Relationship between the three levels

It is important to emphasise that the three levels – micro, meso and macro – are very closely interrelated. They must not be regarded as three separate "programmes" or separate "sets of objectives" which have to be worked on. Rather, they resemble three different camera angles from which to view the same, viz. what children must be able to do with language in relevant communication contexts.

It is not advisable, for example, to consider the micro level (let alone implement it) in isolation: the link with the meso and macro levels is always essential. After all, children do not learn words for the sake of the words, but in order to communicate something through them (meso) in a given field. Ultimately, only the link between the micro level and the other two levels will make it possible to assess whether the child has responded adequately in communication terms in a given situation, and has thus proved linguistically proficient. For example, a child who is required to ask or tell his/her teacher something will often manage just with half-sentences or a few words. However, in order to convey that same message to the headmaster or a new teacher, that child will have to express him/herself

more explicitly: he/she will have to use more words, express clearer syntactical relationships or produce more complete sentences, certainly if the headmaster or new teacher is unable to interpret the child's first utterance.

In other words, when determining, describing and evaluating objectives, all three levels are always needed together, precisely because they are always present together in the communication situation and influence each other; for the pre-school child, taking all three levels into account in an integrated way is necessary in order to perform adequately in communication terms in the relevant situations. "Adequately in communication terms" here means the extent to which the child is capable, on the one hand, of interpreting and understanding the messages intended for him/her, in accordance with the intentions of the sender, and on the other hand of sending messages to a recipient such that his own communication intentions reach the recipient.

The experts who reflected on the framework of reference stressed almost unanimously that in the case of pre-school children, "communication adequacy" takes priority over "correctness". Correctness signifies that the child's productive use of language must formally satisfy certain fixed rules (e.g. the child must always speak in complete sentences and observe the word order of the principal clause). However, such a requirement as to correctness risks confusing the relationship between the description levels (e.g. in some contexts, one does not need to produce a complete sentence in order to perform with communication adequacy), but furthermore makes unrealistic demands of the child at whom this framework of reference is aimed. We must not forget that immigrant pre-school five-year-olds are still developing their linguistic skill, and that their language, even if it is adequate in communication terms, cannot be expected also to be correct according to all kinds of formal rules. The rule of thumb applied in this framework of reference is that the language of pre-school five-year-olds must be explicit and correct enough to fulfil its communication function adequately in the given communication situation. So correctness is not an end in itself. Nor is the micro level an end in itself.

Of course that does not detract from the fact that in the didactic shaping of education, each of the different levels (micro, meso, macro) can be taken as the starting-point. In other words, the answer to the question "How?" can originate at the micro level (e.g. in particular forms of vocabulary teaching), the meso level (e.g. in particular forms of task-oriented teaching) or the macro level (e.g. in particular forms of experience-based or development-based teaching). A framework of reference of objectives leaves each of these options, and combinations of them, open, but is quite clear as to the destination on the chosen route. Whatever starting-point one chooses, one must end up with a child who is able to perform with linguistic adequacy in situations that are relevant and important to him/her, and this implies that he/she pays attention to all three levels together.

2.2 Commentary on the list of objectives

The minimum objectives for early L2 acquisition are listed in the following pages. The following guidelines should be borne in mind when consulting the list.

- The list divides up the four skills. The list of objectives for listening comes first, followed by those for speaking, reading and writing. Naturally, this division does not imply that the objectives for the four skills are autonomous or mutually independent, nor that the four skills should be taught separately. The option to describe the objectives separately was chosen in accordance with the above-mentioned search for the happy medium between generalness and concreteness; the objectives for the different skills should however be seen in relation to each other;

- The macro fields are not mentioned on each occasion in the description; thus the reader should bear in mind that, of the three distinct fields, that of school has highest priority in the context of preventing children falling behind. The description of objectives concentrates on the meso level (What exactly must pre-school children be able to do with language?) and the micro level (What minimum of linguistic elements do they need for that purpose?).
- For each objective an example from classroom practice is given. It serves merely to illustrate in a more concrete way what the objective means. Examples are of course not exhaustive (many others could be imagined for each objective), nor are they prototypical (they are possible interpretations, not models). So if the child in some examples talks in beautiful complete sentences, that does not necessarily mean that the objectives in question can only be achieved by speaking in perfect complete sentences.

3. LIST OF OBJECTIVES

3.1 Listening

3.1.1 Meso level

Objectives for listening skills come first when formulating language skill objectives. Naturally, from the didactic standpoint “listening” is a skill which cannot be isolated from the other three skills (speaking, reading and writing).

The fact that the *objectives* are elaborated separately does not mean that “listening” can *in practice* be detached from the other skills. In teaching, the development of listening skills must receive properly integrated attention (meshed into the overall syllabus and together with the other skills). One cannot work on listening skills in separate activities and pay no attention to them for the rest of the day. In the classroom, children listen in situations of all kinds, both to the teacher and to each other. It may from time to time be necessary to practise particular aspects of listening skills, but in general listening is inextricably bound up with the various activities of day-to-day classroom practice.

A range of listening activities take place in school. Children have to listen to various kinds of “text” such as questions, tasks, stories, explanations, comments from every quarter, all with differing content or on different subjects. The various listening objectives have been framed around these tasks. When children have grasped the message, they can indicate this in different ways, for example by answering or by passing a message on to another child (see 2.2, Speaking), performing an action, putting pictures in the right order, etc.

We are dealing here with *skill* objectives. Attitude and language awareness objectives have not been explicitly elaborated. Needless to say, a child must have a good listening attitude and a sense of the functions of spoken language, and this must accordingly be promoted. For example, if a child is not inclined to listen to spoken language and has no intention of understanding the utterances of others, then no communication is possible. A good listening attitude is so fundamental that it must be seen as a general basic condition: consequently, attitude objectives such as “Readiness to listen” or “Being interested in what another person has to say” have not been included as individual objectives in the list; they are fundamental and must be regarded as part of the pedagogic-didactic effort.

In general, we see listening as an *active* process in which the child as listener seeks to construe meaning from a series of sounds produced by an interlocutor with a specific intent. In this framework of reference, “listening” always signifies “listening and understanding”: discovering the other person’s message and if necessary acting appropriately on it. In order to listen and understand properly, the child has to call upon many partial skills, for example the ability to analyse and break down what has been said, possession of sufficient vocabulary, reliance on relevant general knowledge, the ability adequately to anticipate what is offered, the ability to recognise connections and to build up a mental picture of the overall content of the verbal message, etc.

At pre-school level the intention is not to practise and train the child in all these partial aspects and partial skills separately: it is best to work with communication situations in which the child is addressed through what interests him/her, and in which, by doing, the child builds up the overall skill to understand verbal messages. In addition, of course, the teacher should give attention to the quantity and quality of the messages conveyed to the child: pre-school children are able to construct their listening + understanding skill if there is a rich, extensive, interesting and comprehensible language offer present in their

environment. This rich language offer need not necessarily be a unified whole, let alone remain confined to the “language lesson” or “language work”. In fact, everything that happens in the classroom, from early morning to late afternoon, offers an opportunity to develop children’s listening skills – whether it be handicraft work, movement training, walks or free play, there are untold opportunities to organise communication and interaction with children and enrich the verbal offer. With listening skills, just as with the other three skills, the motto should be “Language all day long”!

The four general language skill objectives for listening are as follows:

LISTENING (1): The pre-school child is able, at the descriptive level, to understand a verbal task or instruction (and show the fact by responding adequately to it)

1.1 The pre-school child is able to understand tasks relating to the performance of a concrete physical action in a here-and-now situation (and show the fact by performing the action).

E.g. “Walk to the cupboard and get the puzzle”.

1.2 The pre-school child is able to understand tasks relating to the performance of a mental or linguistic action relevant to him/herself (and demonstrate this fact).

E.g. “Tell all the children to pick up the brushes”.

LISTENING (2): The pre-school child is able, at the descriptive level, to understand a question intended for him/her (and show the fact by answering / responding adequately to it).

2.1 The pre-school child is able to understand questions intended for him/her concerning intentions, interests or preferences, possibly backed up by picture and/or sound (and show the fact by answering/responding adequately to them).

E.g. “Which book will you choose, this one with the bear or this one about the playground?”

2.2 The pre-school child is able to understand open questions about his own experiences and adventures (and show the fact by responding or answering).

E.g. “Ugur, where did you go with Mummy yesterday?”

2.3 The pre-school child is able to understand questions intended for him/her about his feelings or those of relevant partners in his environment (and show the fact by responding or answering).

E.g. “Karim, have you hurt yourself or are you angry?”

2.4 The pre-school child is able to understand questions intended for him/her about situations, acts or objects in the concrete environment (and show the fact by a responding or answering).

E.g. “Ahmed, where is that piece of paper now?”

LISTENING (3): The pre-school child is able to understand a verbal account, e.g. a picture book and/or story intended for his age group.

3.1 The pre-school child is able to follow and understand a story intended for him/her (and show the fact, e.g. by acting it out while the teacher narrates it, or by putting pictures in the right order afterwards).

E.g. Using the picture book “We’re Going on a Bear Hunt”: ‘We run through the forest. We swim through the water’, etc.

E.g. Using the picture book “The Hungry Caterpillar”: after the story has been read aloud, the child puts 4 pictures in the right order.

LISTENING (4): The pre-school child is able to understand informative statements intended for him/herself or his peers (and show the fact by reacting/responding adequately to them).

- 4.1 The pre-school child is able to understand informative statements about concrete events and facts relevant to him/her in the context of the here-and-now (and show the fact in the way he/she reacts).

E.g. “The puzzle is in the drawer”.

- 4.2 The pre-school child is able to understand informative statements about concrete events and facts relevant to him/her outside the context of the here-and-now (and show the fact in the way he/she reacts).

E.g. “Next week we are all going by bus to the zoo”.

- 4.3 The pre-school child is able to understand information about rules and regulations relevant to him/her in concrete situations (and show the fact through his behaviour).

E.g. “When you play outside you are not allowed to leave the playground”.

3.1.2 Micro level

The description of listening tasks at meso level implies objectives at micro level. This applies firstly at the lexical level. Certain words will keep coming up in many of the tasks described above, for words are the building-blocks of language and the basis on which information is conveyed. Words are primarily carriers of meaning, and children must know words in order to link the language they hear around them to the things and concepts referred to.

This is a matter of receptive knowledge of:

- content words (referring to the child’s environment at home, outside the home and in school);
- function words, prepositions and adverbs.

In particular, words in the following semantic fields are relevant here:

- words referring to everyday occurrences and things around them (e.g. words referring to movement (*standing, sitting, walking, turning round* etc.); parts of the body (*head, eyes, nose* etc.); surroundings (*cupboard, floor, window, sandbox* etc.); objects (*pen, pencil, book* etc.);
- main numerals;
- spatial concepts;
- main colours;
- length and size indicators;
- words relating to feelings.

There exist a number of word lists containing this vocabulary.

At the morphological level (word construction), children must be able to interpret the difference between singular and plural forms, and understand elementary verbal conjugations (e.g. the difference between present and past forms) and negation. These are rules which may induce a fundamental difference of meaning where tasks at the meso level are concerned.

At **sentence level**, the emphasis in early second language acquisition lies on:

- short (initially simple) sentences;
- interrogatory sentences (how, what, why)
- constructions which indicate tasks and instructions (requiring action)
- negation (none, nothing).

At the **phonological level**, children must master the significant differences in sound (e.g. the difference between “pen” and “pin”).

It goes without saying that knowledge at the micro level is not an end in itself, but must always be seen in conjunction with the functional communication objectives as described at the meso level.

3.2 Speaking

3.2.1 Meso level

In communication situations, listening and speaking are inseparably linked. From their earliest days, children develop language through interaction and in conversation with others, not just by listening but also by speaking themselves. Participation in interaction is necessary for the development of verbal language skills, one of the central objectives of pre-school and early education. Children must not only be able to understand the language of schooling, they must also be able to express themselves comprehensibly: in the interaction process they must be able to answer questions, to express in words something inside themselves, to ask for an explanation or clarification; in conversation, they must be able to respond to the utterances of others. In the course of conversation, children must be able to make their own meaning clear to different people (friends, adults, whether known to them or not). Their meaning is not confined to just immediate everyday needs – like greetings, asking for help, thanking people – but also includes exchanging information at the level of personal experience and opinions and that of knowledge acquisition.

For the purpose of developing verbal language skills, it is important that pre-school children (especially those learning L2 and those with “language weaknesses”) should have plenty of room and opportunity to speak. However, in the earliest initial period this speaking must not be forced. It is known that children learning a second language (like those learning L1) may go through a “silent period” in which receptive skills develop without direct speech being produced. The pre-school child must be allowed time for this: he/she must of course not be forced, but as far as possible he/she must be stimulated to produce language in safe situations. However, if a pre-school child just goes on listening and seldom takes the opportunity to speak him/herself, he/she learns to speak less quickly. Children should have plenty of scope for speaking in a range of situations (perhaps with visual and tangible support), so that they have ample opportunity to experiment with language. The fact is that children become language-proficient through trial and error by using language in activities of every kind. When listening, children set up hypotheses about the language to be learnt on the basis of the language input. In productive verbal language use, those ideas are tried out. Through the process of trial and error and on the

basis of the feedback they receive, hypotheses are adjusted and children learn to express themselves to a better and better standard. By speaking him/herself, the child thus elicits a continuously adapted language input. With some talkative children, this happens automatically. But immigrant children in particular, and those who find it more difficult to take part in linguistic interaction, need extra help and have to be challenged to express themselves in class, in meaningful situations.

As with other skills, this will develop better if it is linked to what motivates children, and if this takes place within a safe, positive environment in which the child is willing, and dares, to speak. In such a climate, care must be taken to ensure that the child feels that it is not just useful to listen to what others have to say but that others are listening to what he/she has to say him/herself. Where speaking is concerned, just as with listening, the starting-point is that *attitude* objectives such as willingness to speak and daring to speak are not separate objectives but must be continuously stimulated in the classroom atmosphere and the educational offer available to the children.

In a language-rich environment, *language attitude objectives* are also developed. Children acquire experience of various conversational conventions in a broad range of language activities. Insights into speaking such as taking turns and holding back, conventions governing politeness, the starting and terminating of conversations etc. will be continuous features of classroom interaction and so do not need to be formulated as separate objectives.

In developing speaking ability, attention will focus primarily on effective communication (“communicative adequacy”) and less on the structure and form (“correctness”) of utterances. The correctness of the child’s language use must be regarded as a purposive growth process. Through systematic *implicit* feedback, children’s utterances in interaction can be supplemented, improved or amplified in a natural way, while the communication content remains paramount. Implicit feedback is imperceptibly interwoven with conversation: the improvement or amplification is effected casually, the right example naturally being provided without the mistake being explicitly mentioned. Children’s communicatively adequate utterances form the basis of gradual refinement and amplification and growth towards correctness.

Here again we see how speaking and listening skills develop as closely interwoven abilities, and we would again observe, no doubt superfluously, the extent to which, from the didactic standpoint, the different speaking objectives must receive integrated attention (closely linked to listening skill and pervading the entire syllabus).

Four general language skill objectives for speaking are listed in the following pages.

SPEAKING (1): The pre-school child is able to answer questions intended for him/her at the descriptive level and in a communicatively adequate manner.

- 1.1 The pre-school child is able to answer concrete questions about his/her own life in the context of the here-and-now.

E.g. “What nice things have you got in your lunch box?” “AN APPLE AND A SANDWICH”

- 1.2 The pre-school child is able to answer concrete questions about his/her own life outside the context of the here-and-now (questions about where and when).

E.g. “What did you do in the holidays?” “WENT TO GRANNIE’S WITH MY SISTER”

- 1.3 The pre-school child is able to answer questions about his own feelings, intentions and interests.

E.g. "What are you afraid of?" "OH, THE MONSTER !"

- 1.4 If asked, the pre-school child is able to give a description of a relevant concrete object or of a person which/who is/was in a – to him/her – concrete situation.

E.g. "What's your new baby like?" "VERY SMALL AND WITH VERY BLACK HAIR".

- 1.5 If asked, the pre-school child is able, possibly with the help of gestures and pictures, to give a description of an event in his/her own life.

E.g. "What happened to your head?" "I WAS RUNNING FAST AND THEN I FELL DOWN, AGAINST THE WALL".

- 1.6 If asked, the pre-school child is able to explain, possibly with the help of gestures and pictures, how he/she acted in a concrete situation.

E.g. "So you built a big tower. How did you manage it?" "I'VE GOT BIG BLOCKS AT THE BOTTOM AND THESE (points) ON TOP. I PUT THEM ON TOP OF EACH OTHER LIKE THIS" (gestures/pretends to do it).

SPEAKING (2): The pre-school child is able to talk spontaneously, if asked, about subjects of interest to him/her in a communicatively adequate manner.

- 2.1 The pre-school child is able to announce or relate, to known peers or known adults, things which exist in the context of the here-and-now.

E.g. "LOOK MISS, I'VE DONE A DRAWING. THIS IS ME. THAT'S DADDY. THAT'S MUMMY, AND THAT'S MY LITTLE BROTHER".

- 2.2 The pre-school child is able to announce or relate, to known peers or known adults, things – his own experiences, feelings, or events from the past or in the future - which take place in a concrete situation that is relevant to him/her.

E.g. "Where did you go yesterday?" "TO THE SEASIDE"

- 2.3 The pre-school child is able to give a description, to known peers or known adults, of a concrete object or a person.

E.g. "MISS, I'VE GOT NEW TROUSERS, WITH THESE BIG POCKETS AND A BELT".

SPEAKING (3): The pre-school child is able to restate an item of information or a story intended for pre-school children in such a way that the content comes across comprehensibly.

- 3.1 The pre-school child is able to convey a simple, concrete item of information to known peers or known adults.

E.g. "Please tell Marit to tidy the jigsaw up again". "MARIT, TEACHER SAYS YOU HAVE TO TIDY THE JIGSAW UP".

- 3.2 The pre-school child is able to act out recognisable roles and situations and to (re)produce particular utterances in play situations.

E.g. "GOOD MORNING MISS...WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BUY?...THAT COSTS..." (playing shopkeeper/role playing)

- 3.3 The pre-school child is able to retell a simple story in his/her own words to known peers or known adults.

E.g. Based on the picture-book 'There's a Crocodile Under My Bed': "BABY IS AFRAID BUT CROCODILE COMES AND HE IS NICE AND NOW BABY IS NOT AFRAID ANYMORE".

SPEAKING (4): The pre-school child is able adequately to seek help from others.

- 4.1 The pre-school child is able to ask for clarification from known peers or known adults.

E.g. "OH MISS, I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. WHAT HAVE I GOT TO DO?"

- 4.2 The pre-school child is able to ask known peers or known adults for (more) information that is important to him/her.

E.g. "SARE, WHERE ARE THE SCISSORS?"

- 4.3 The pre-school child is able to ask for help independently.

E.g. "MISS, CAN YOU OPEN THAT BOX?"

3.2.2 Micro level

At the micro level, it is necessary for the pre-school child to have a number of linguistic elements at his disposal to which he/she can resort when performing (or trying to perform) the language tasks described above at meso level.

At the lexical level, there is important emphasis on the acquisition of a basic vocabulary with which the child can express him/herself.

This relates to the use of:

- content words (referring to the child's environment at home, outside the home and in school);
- function words (pronouns and conjunctions).

In particular, words in the following semantic fields are relevant here:

- words referring to everyday occurrences and things around them (e.g. words referring to movement (*standing, sitting, walking, turning round* etc.); parts of the body (*head, eyes, nose* etc.); surroundings (*cupboard, floor, window, sandbox* etc.); objects (pen, pencil, book etc.);
- main numerals;
- spatial concepts;
- main colours;
- length and size indicators;
- words relating to feelings.

Here too, word lists can serve as guidelines.

At the morphological level, children must be able to express the difference between singular and plural forms, and understand elementary verbal conjugations (e.g. the difference between present and past forms) and negation. These are grammatical rules which may induce a fundamental difference of meaning where tasks at the meso level are concerned.

At sentence level, the emphasis in early productive second language acquisition lies on:

- short (initially simple) sentences;
- interrogatory sentences (how, what, why);
- constructions which indicate tasks and instructions (requiring action);
- negation (none, nothing).

At the **phonological level**, children must be able to produce the significant differences in sound (e.g. the difference between “pen” and “pin”). In order to convey meaning adequately through speech, it is necessary to be able to pronounce the words intelligibly, with the closest possible approximation to standard pronunciation (this is a minimum objective: not all sounds have to be correctly pronounced straightaway, but the language utterance must be comprehensible).

Again, it goes without saying that knowledge at the micro level is not an end in itself, but must always be seen in conjunction with the functional communication objectives as described at the meso level.

3.3 Reading

3.3.1 Meso level

Verbal and written language skills are closely interrelated. Just as listening and speaking are interwoven, so are reading and writing; in turn, for pre-school children reading and writing are closely related to listening and speaking. The skills develop together, not separately. We see this inter-connectedness in the competencies acquired: as a general rule, children with high levels of verbal language skill do better in reading and writing. The fact that this framework of reference deals separately with reading objectives does not detract from this observation. A rich verbal language skill is an ideal springboard for the development of writing skills; Britton’s well-known dictum “Writing floats on a sea of talk” is revealing in this connection.

For a large proportion of children, literacy is developed at school. At home, children have already come into contact with written language to some extent, and in general children find reading and writing activities interesting and challenging. It is an important aspect of development: once you have discovered how to decipher the secret code of scrawls and squiggles, a new world, a world full of stories, opens up.

Teaching reading and writing is an important function of the school. The point in time at which this should start, and the manner in which that should happen, are constantly recurring items of discussion in the education debate. Until half-way through group 3 (Netherlands) or the first grade (Flanders), oral interaction is predominant in teaching. A great deal of attention must of course be given to burgeoning and incipient literacy, but this usually happens via oral interaction. Listening to picture-books being read aloud stimulates incipient literacy (children become acquainted with the structure of texts and familiar with the functions of written language, and learn through repeated readings that oral language is set down in writing, etc.).

If we look at the reading objectives set for pre-school and early school education (cf. development objectives in Flanders and intermediate objectives for incipient literacy in the Netherlands), in the early stage of incipient literacy they are mainly described in terms of: becoming acquainted with, having experience of, being aware of, becoming familiar with, and acquiring a liking for. These perception objectives and attitude objectives must be interwoven in such a way that they can give a strong boost to the development of incipient

literacy. Precisely because these perception objectives and attitude objectives occupy such an important place in the continuous thread of reading and writing instruction, they are set out separately (unlike the case of “listening” or “speaking” in pre-primary education). Thus they are explicitly formulated, together with reading and writing, alongside the language skill objectives, in the list of objectives. It should be clear that this must not result in a one-sided focus. The objectives should serve as guides, and can be worked on in an integrated way in the framework of broad development in creating a rich environment.

The objectives for learning to read are as follows, divided into four general ones (one language skill objective, two language perception objectives and one language attitude objective):

READING (1): The pre-school child is able adequately to link meaning to written symbols or written language intended for pre-school children (and show the fact by a verbal response or through action).

- 1.1 The pre-school child is able to interpret visual language (pictures) intended for pre-school children and say what the pictures represent (and show that fact by, for example, telling about it).

E.g. The child is given a picture of an action such as brushing teeth and is able to put the meaning into words or act it out.

- 1.2 The pre-school child is able to ‘read’ pictograms intended for pre-school children (and show the fact by responding to them if asked).

E.g. The pre-school child is able to select the right picture (sun, cloud or rain) for the daily weather map to indicate that it is raining outside.

READING (2): The pre-school child is conscious of various functions of written language (and shows the fact in his use of, or response to, written language).

- 2.1 The pre-school child understands that written language can bridge time and distance.

E.g. Write a card together and actually send it to a (sick) classmate, or to Granny, to his home etc.

- 2.2 The pre-school child understands that written language can be preserved and retrieved.

E.g. Read the same book again and find that exactly the same text is being read.

- 2.3 The pre-school child understands that written language can serve as a memory aid.

E.g. Together with the teacher, write something down so as not to forget it, such as a shopping list, item of information, date and time of a party etc., and later actually check or use it as a ‘reminder’.

- 2.4 The pre-school child discovers the importance and usefulness of written language for him/her personally.

E.g. ‘Read’ name and/or pictogram on the coat-rack, on drawings.

READING (3): The pre-school child develops a basic insight into aspects of written language (and shows the fact by his responses to books, letters or short written sentences).

- 3.1 The pre-school child builds up insight into certain conventions relating to reading direction and book orientation which apply to written language.

E.g. A fixed reading direction – from left to right, from top to bottom; front and back of a book; the fact that letters reoccur.

- 3.2 The pre-school child builds up insight into the basic relationship between the formal aspects of spoken and written language.

E.g. The child links particular letters to sounds.

- 3.3 The pre-school child builds up insight into narrative structures.

E.g. The teacher reads the picture book aloud and the child is aware of the beginning/middle/end of the story.

READING (4): The pre-school child is motivated to find out the meaning of written texts (and shows the fact by inquisitive/positive responses to books, letters or written sentences).

- 4.1 The pre-school child is happy to read (or learn to read) or to be read to.

E.g. The child happily listens to texts or letters being read aloud.

- 4.2 The pre-school child becomes absorbed when picture books or cartoon strips are being 'read'.

E.g. The child is absorbed when a letter or book is being read aloud.

- 4.3 The pre-school child enjoys (picture) stories of various kinds and from different cultures.

E.g. The child lives along with the story 'Anansi the Spider' when it is read aloud.

3.3.2 Micro level

With reading, there are still not many language elements which can be highlighted as being necessary objectives at the micro level. At the end of the period concerned, children do not absolutely have to be capable of making particular sound-letter connections or of reading particular words or sentences.

There are nonetheless certain 'signs' that can be highlighted, which the child should be able to recognise and interpret:

- recognise certain pictograms, logos and labels intended for pre-school children;
- incipient literacy (e.g. a circle for the letter 'O', letters in his own name).

As regards lexis, the objectives at meso level presuppose a certain passive vocabulary which can be particularly functional and useful for the pre-school child, in particular a basic vocabulary relating to books and reading (e.g. page, turn pages, word, letter, sentence, title, chapter etc.)

The vocabulary which children can use to express their motivation and readiness to read can also be highlighted here as a vocabulary goal (e.g. read out, picture-book, reading corner etc.).

In terms of phonemic awareness, it is important that pre-school children:

- discover that words are made up of letters;
- are able to distinguish sounds.

3.4 Writing

3.4.1 Meso level

In the broad sense, **writing is reproducing thoughts and spoken language in visible signs**. Verbal language forms the raw material of writing and reading (see Introduction 2.3.1, Reading). The content-based relationship between speaking, listening, writing and reading becomes clear when the teacher writes down (listening and writing) a message which the children ‘dictate’ (speaking) and which is later read by the parents (reading). In pre-primary education these are motivating, meaningful activities through which children acquire personal experience of the functions of written language.

In the first instance it is the teacher who converts spoken language into written words. In this way children are able to gain insight into the functions of written language before they are themselves capable of putting specific signs down on paper.

It is important for children to learn that verbal language is converted into written language. By asking “How do we write that?/What must I write?”, the teacher stimulates children to think about the way in which language is formulated. The difference between productive verbal and written language is relevant here. The children subsequently see how the spoken text is put down on paper: the message must be expressed briefly and succinctly in complete sentences, those sentences are broken down into words, the word order must be adhered to, the words are broken down into phonemes, and the graphic signs are attached to them. Because the teacher goes through this process together with the children, they gain insight into writing: they are involved in putting their own message down on paper in such a way that it remains available to anyone interested in reading it again later.

Writing is a complex motor act. To learn to write successfully, a child must follow a particular development in knowledge of his own body, spatial orientation, refined motor function and hand-eye coordination. Not until about age 6 are children capable of writing letters fluently themselves.

In pre-primary education, the emphasis is on preparatory work – familiarity with writing through play. Children scribble things on paper at a very young age. Gradually they use shapes which resemble letters. For example, a drawn circle indicates a head and later stands for the letter O. Scribbled messages increasingly take on the shape of texts. Through play, children develop pleasure, motivation and self-confidence and obtain room in which to develop writing technique at their own level. Naturally, writing objectives are an extension of reading objectives and, logically, sometimes identical. Of central importance here are the construction of basic insight and motivation to want to write. For this reason, as with reading, we take language awareness and attitude objectives as the guideline for writing.

The objectives for writing are as follows, divided into four general ones (one language skill objective, two language awareness objectives and one language attitude objective):

WRITING (1): The pre-school child is able, with adult help, to set down his own messages in a primitive ‘written’ version.

- 1.1 The pre-school child is able to reproduce and ‘read back’ an experience or account in visual terms by attaching the original intended meaning to it.

E.g. The child is able to make a drawing of a class trip to the recreation area and use the drawing to recount to someone else what it depicts.

- 1.2 The pre-school child is able to use his own written language in play and say what that written language stands for.

E.g. For the 'museum' project, the children can make admission tickets and direction signs for the exhibition.

- 1.3 The pre-school child is able to complete an incomplete story using picture language.

E.g. In a strip cartoon, draw the missing pictures him/herself or put missing pictures that have already been drawn in the right place.

WRITING (2): The pre-school child understands what the different functions of writing are.

- 2.1 The pre-school child understands that one can bridge time and distance with writing.

E.g. Write out invitations and send them to (grand)parents, family etc.

- 2.2 The pre-school child understands that one can preserve and repeat written language.

E.g. The children 'write' in their personal books (together with the teacher) particular experiences which they have had in class with each other.

- 2.3 The pre-school child understands that written language can serve as a memory aid.

E.g. The teacher and the children together draw up a shopping list for baking biscuits next day. The list is constantly used so as not to forget anything.

- 2.4 The pre-school child learns the personal importance and usefulness of writing.

E.g. The children make up a wish list for the St. Nicholas party at school by drawing and using stamps (with or without help).

WRITING (3): The pre-school child is aware of the most important conventions of written language.

- 3.1 The pre-school child understands that when using the written language, certain conventions on direction of script and page orientation apply.

E.g. A fixed writing direction – from left to right, from top to bottom; letter by letter, word by word and sentence by sentence.

- 3.2 The pre-school child is able 'write' the letters in a word (with or without an example, using stamps, Lego letters etc.) and realises that the letters are linked to the sound of the word.

E.g. The child 'writes' or stamps his own name and then 'reads' it aloud.

- 3.3 The pre-school child develops an understanding of text structures and shows the fact, for example by putting picture material in the right order and/or thinking up an ending or beginning him/herself.

E.g. Together with the teacher, the child writes a letter to Granny. When the teacher asks "How shall we begin?", the child dictates "HELLO DEAR GRANNY".

WRITING (4): The pre-school child is motivated to learn writing him/herself.

- 4.1 The pre-school child demonstrates audacity in writing, experiments with writing and thinks about it.

E.g. When colouring a picture of the zoo, the child asks the teacher how to write 'monkey' so that he/she can write the word next to the monkeys him/herself. He/she then asks the teacher whether 'monkey' is right.

3.4.2 Micro level

Where writing is concerned, the initial objective at the micro level is a basic ability to divide words up into sounds:

- children develop phonemic awareness; they discover that words are made up of sounds and that letters correspond to those sounds;
- children are able to react to and play with particular sound patterns in words (end rhyme and alliteration).

Writing means producing signs with a particular message attached to them. For a limited number of signs, this understanding must be well developed by the end of the relevant period:

- making pictograms, copying logos and labels;
- first stage of incipient literacy (e.g. a circle for the letter 'O', the letters in one's own name).

At the lexical level, of course, the child also relies on his own productive vocabulary when writing. So for this purpose we refer to 'speaking' skill at micro level. In addition, attention must be paid to passive knowledge of the words used in classroom language for the teaching of writing. These are function words in such semantic fields as:

- parts of the body, e.g. thumb, first finger, hand, head, etc.
- concrete spatial concepts, e.g. circle, rectangle, etc.
- concepts defining position in space, e.g. on-under, above-under- in the middle, inside-outside, etc.
- concepts indicating movement in space, e.g. forwards-backwards, far-near, towards, back, etc.

4. THE LINK WITH TEACHING PRACTICE: A PRESSURE POINT ANALYSIS

As was said in the introduction, this framework of reference describes a common list of minimum objectives for early L2 acquisition. The ultimate purpose of this text, and of the project which lies behind it, is of course that immigrant children should benefit from it – that their chances of succeeding in our education system should be enhanced, through the maximum development of their language skills. But immigrant children can only build those skills up if the system gives them optimum support. This means that the quality of teaching, and of classroom language, must be of so high a standard that language operates as a stumbling-block for as few children as possible, and that as many as possible, if not all, children achieve the objectives described above in the framework of reference.

In this context, it may be asked to what extent pre-primary education is performing that task at the present time. Some part of the answer to that question is given here in the form of a ‘pressure point analysis’. Such an analysis gives an indication of the gaps between the ultimate objective to be attained and the current state of affairs, in turn suggesting that a diagnosis ought to be carried out of the strengths and weaknesses of educational provision, that priorities be defined and that specific action be taken to remedy those weaknesses.

PRESSURE POINT 1: ASSESSING LANGUAGE SKILLS

Question 1: To what extent do immigrant children at present possess the skills, attitudes and understanding listed in the framework of reference? In other words, to what extent are immigrant children achieving the objectives set out in the framework of reference?

This question requires an answer to an underlying one, viz:

Question 1bis: To what extent is it possible at this point in time to assess whether (immigrant) children achieve the objectives set out in the framework of reference by the end of group 2 or the third pre-school class?

If, for the sake of convenience, we assume that there is the political will, readiness on the part of schools and scope to carry out an assessment of the skills concerned, question 1b can be reduced to the question whether at the present time assessment tools (tests, observation instruments and so forth) exist whereby the skills, attitudes and perceptions listed in the framework of reference can be measured in a valid, reliable way.

The data and analyses available to us do not permit of an unqualified affirmative answer to that question. It may be observed here that those who developed the tests currently available could not call upon the framework of reference during the process of their development and were forced to employ different criteria or blueprints. On the other hand, the framework of reference did not just appear out of thin air: it is based in large measure on earlier documents and blueprints relating to early language learning. So there would be real cause for concern if there were no overlap at all between the existing assessment tools and the framework of reference.

An analysis of the overlap between the framework of reference and existing assessment tools shows that the overlap is fragmentary, and that many of those tools currently present one or more of the following shortcomings:

1. The assessment tools cover the macro level of the framework of reference only to a small extent, viz. the field of school which is emphasised as being of crucial importance. The assessment items (whether vocabulary items, listening tasks, speaking tasks or items of other kinds) are not always directly related to the things which pre-school children have to do with language at school.

2. The assessment tools focus on only one or two of the four skills. Many of them opt for a 'receptive approach' and merely, or mainly, test listening and/or (incipient) reading; far less attention is paid to speaking and writing skills.

3. Some assessment tools lean towards a knowledge-based approach (indirect testing); they test children's knowledge of language (or language elements) rather than communicative language use. Tests are often sparing in the creation of functional communication contexts in which children are asked to understand or produce meaningful messages.

4. Some assessment tools remain stuck at the micro level: they focus on vocabulary or grammar and do not link these items with language tasks at the meso level.

We should add that the above comments in no way imply that the assessment tools analysed are not applicable or useable. On the contrary, most of them have been developed in a highly professional manner and score highly in terms of reliability. They are certainly suitable for testing particular aspects of the framework of reference. But the fact is that no one instrument covers the framework of reference on its own: whether a combination of existing assessment tools is able to do the job is still questionable in the light of the shortcomings mentioned above.

PRESSURE POINT 2: PERCEPTIONS AND ACTIONS BY SCHOOL TEAMS

Pre-school children will not achieve the objectives of the framework of reference on their own: for this, they need the professional support and stimulus of teachers. This is especially true of disadvantaged (and) immigrant children. So school teams have a duty and responsibility to create the most powerful possible learning environments within which every individual child can achieve maximum linguistic development. Consequently, teachers must be professional, capable of casting a critical eye over their own teaching practice and constantly refining it.

The question of the extent to which teaching practice at the present time assists children in attaining the objectives of the framework of reference breaks down into two parts: the first has to do with the question WHAT? (what are the essential objectives for school teams?) and the second with the question HOW? (how do they work towards them in their teaching?).

Question 2: To what extent are teachers at present fully aware of the objectives of the framework of reference? To what extent do the objectives set the main guidelines for their classroom practice?

On this question too, on the basis of the data available to us, we can only convey impressions, even if many of those impressions are shared by a fair number of the experts involved in the project.

a) Teachers of pre-school children do not always work in a goal-oriented way but rather in an activity-oriented way. Subjects and activities (e.g. from reading material) determine the agenda and offer the teacher guidance in answering the 'Question What?'. Those subjects and activities are not always regarded as the means of helping children towards particular language objectives, but rather as ends in themselves;

b) Teachers are often blinkered by objectives at the micro level. For many teachers, language objectives, when explicitly put into words or consciously pursued, are formulated at the level of language elements – vocabulary, grammatical rules, expressions or isolated language acts. The communicative language use context of the meso level, and the macro aspect of the pupil as learner, are not always taken into account. The risk here is that the relevance of the language elements supplied by teachers is not always guaranteed. In

conjunction with a), it is often more a matter of acquiring the vocabulary relating to certain subjects or activities than of using language in a relevant, functional context.

c) Teachers have a tendency to relate objectives too strongly to their teaching than to the children. Objectives are seen primarily as programmes which the teacher must complete (“I must deal with these objectives”, “I must give this lesson”) rather than skills which the child must be helped to hone or which (all) children must be taught to acquire. The result is that teachers assess the objectives in a teaching-oriented instead of a pupil-oriented way. The objective of a lesson has been “achieved” if the teacher feels that the lesson has been well given: it is not necessary for all the children to have been involved.

Even if teachers keep the objectives of the framework of reference clearly in their sights, the question remains how they go about their pedagogic work in order to make the learning environment as potent as possible for all the children.

Question 3: To what extent is current classroom practice suited to helping all pre-school children attain the objectives?

Our data indicate that the following pressure-points exist in this field. (As no classroom observations could be carried out in the context of this project in relation to this point, the list below should certainly not be regarded as exhaustive).

a) Teachers often link work towards language objectives very closely to a subject (‘language’ or ‘L2’) or specific activities; they still make too little use of the opportunity to pursue the language objectives of the framework of reference throughout the school day; for children with language problems these specific activities will probably not suffice.

b) Teachers find it hard to allow for differences between children: they sometimes assume all too readily that all the children will learn exactly the same things at the same time on the basis of the same material. In particular, it is difficult for many teachers to help children with language problems and engage in linguistic interaction with them. They tend to reduce their language provision and nip the child’s linguistic production in the bud.

c) Teachers find it difficult to move outside their prescribed syllabus and take advantage, in a natural, spontaneous way, of the children’s contributions, interest, questions and needs.

PRESSURE POINT 3: PERCEPTION AND ACTION AT THE SCHOOL SUPPORT LEVEL

Pre-school teachers cannot discharge on their own the difficult task of developing to the maximum the language skills of all their children. They need, and are entitled to, professional support. That support will be forthcoming, on the one hand from interaction with their colleagues in the school team and their school manager, and on the other hand from the various persons on the periphery of the school and those involved in ‘their’ teaching – teaching assistants, inspectors, materials developers, educationalists, parents, pupil helpers, politicians etc.

Any pressure-point analysis must obviously include this wide-ranging circle, since all these players ideally contribute to the expertise of the teaching staff and thus to the quality of teaching. However, where this pressure-point is concerned we need to adopt a more modest, cautious approach than with the other two, because our analysis at this level yielded little direct data. Only the materials developed were analysed in depth: as regards the other factors, the project team had only fragmentary data, plus statements made at the two meetings of experts and in the written survey, at their disposal.

a) The materials developed reveal a number of shortcomings, already referred to above in connection with assessment and didactics: the link with objectives at the meso and

macro levels is not always consistently established, and the micro level is too strongly or too exclusively stressed as a result; the materials are occasionally guilty of excessive 'activity-based thinking' and do not always create equally functional communication contexts; the four skills are not always present in proportion.

b) We make just one comment on other people involved, one which came up in communication with those in the field: unanimity is needed but not always present. All too frequently, different players active in connection with the same school say very different things on the subject of language teaching. This is not invariably to the benefit of a school's language policy. There is a need for clear vision, and for consensus on a number of starting-points: a framework of reference of objectives towards which all schools must strive, regardless of the didactic choices they make, is surely part of that vision. If one and the same framework of objectives for materials developers, inspectors, test developers, educational theorists/those providing out-of-school courses, teaching assistants and politicians can operate as a guide, significant progress can be made in this sphere. Indeed, it is only if the various components of education steer the same course that genuine renewal and innovation in education are possible.

5. CONCLUSION

There is still much work to be done where early language acquisition by immigrant pre-school children is concerned. The authors of this paper therefore hope that it may offer inspiration to many of those involved in teaching and teaching support for pre-school immigrant children. This text has a particularly large number of potential applications. It can serve as a guideline for the teachers of pre-school children and their hierarchy in scrutinising their language teaching and establishing a language policy, for materials developers as a framework for developing L2 reading material, for inspectors as a framework for evaluating schools in respect of their L2 teaching, for teaching assistants, teacher trainers, educationalists and those providing out-of-school courses as a basis for thinking about and designing L2 teaching, for policy in the light of measures to promote and evaluate L2 teaching, and for test developers in developing tools for language skills.