

# Classrooms need research-based theory; how to get it there

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## Abstract

A remarkable project in the Netherlands aims to bring academic findings where they are most needed, the English classroom. The relevance of research for teaching practice is undisputed<sup>†</sup>, but teachers find it hard to implement them. By involving teachers in research projects it seems as if this gap can be bridged.

**Key words:** second language acquisition, research-based theory, teacher development.

*The teaching profession, as with all high-standard professions, needs the best available academic knowledge in order to fulfil its commitments to society... Teachers have to be familiar with the latest knowledge and research about the subject matter (Niemi, 2008)*

## The project

As a university for teacher education in the Netherlands we have direct links to schools for secondary education. Our students do their teaching practice there and often become staff members. Several of these schools perform well in general, but badly in English in final national tests. In order to raise the general level of English proficiency it was decided to first carry out extensive research to discover the underlying reasons for this persistent problem. A broad variety of both quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys, interviews and classroom observations, was used. Variables within these schools could be compared to the Dutch national average by using a vast control group. The second objective is to offer possible solutions.

We knew that only publishing the results of our research would not have much effect on classroom practice (Borg, 2009). Traditionally, education in the Netherlands has shown a remarkable flaw to the degree in which academic language research and the practical field

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of language teaching are connected. Whereas a strong and natural link existed between primary and secondary education with regular mutual consultation, such a link was largely lacking between language research and secondary classroom practice. It is commonly accepted that successful language teaching involves a positive amount of teacher willingness to keep up with developments in teaching. As such courses (pre- and in-service), conferences, reading (research, professional literature), recommendations of colleagues, feedback from students and classroom experience + reflection (Penny Ur, 2012) are all part of this process of 'education permanente.' Numerous sources stress the importance of regular teacher orientation on state-of-the-art language research (Bober, 2004, Guskey 2002). Especially the (research) reading and conference attendance of secondary school language teachers is low. Consequently, it appears that it is hard to implement new insights in the language classroom. So knowing it is difficult to change teacher behaviour, we approached our research project from a different perspective: that of the schools. Therefore, management, teachers and teacher educators were closely involved in the entire project from the beginning, including the research design, implementation and evaluation. Key representatives, each having pivotal roles in their respective secondary schools, were selected to form the research project group. They also are the initiators within their schools, in turning established practices into more effective language teaching. In this contribution I present this cooperative model and the key findings of our research.

### **How it started**

For well over 25 years the results at national exams for English in Reformed secondary education were considerably below the national average. Although general schools in the Netherlands sometimes struggled with exam results too, the problems within Reformed schools were more persistent, irrespective of incidental (annual or local) successes. Secondary education in the Netherlands can be divided into four groups ranging from vocational to grammar schools. The results for the vocational schools have been considerably lower than those in the grammar schools with the lower secondary schools consistently in between. Repeatedly, the Dutch Education Inspectorate urged the Reformed schools to take action but apart from local or small-scale common initiatives by the schools not much proved successful in fighting this problem. When the Dutch government initiated the formation of so-called "kennis lectoraten" (research group led by an associate professor)

at colleges of higher education, Driestar University of Professional Education in Gouda decided to start a *lectorate* on English.

The general aim of these *lectorates* is to enhance the quality of Higher Professional Education in the Netherlands. They also seek to strengthen their position as expertise centres, contribute to curriculum innovation and improve expertise and knowledge circulation. By their nature they form a bridge between the academic world and the practical educational field. A *lectorate* consists of a lector and several members of a research group. These members are generally drawn from various fields of expertise and take part in the research group on a full- or part time basis. A *lectorate* receives support from a resonance group, consisting of a number of national and international academics. The proceedings of the *lectorate* are monitored by both governmental and institutional control bodies that evaluate the work of the *lectorate* at regular intervals (cf. fig.1)

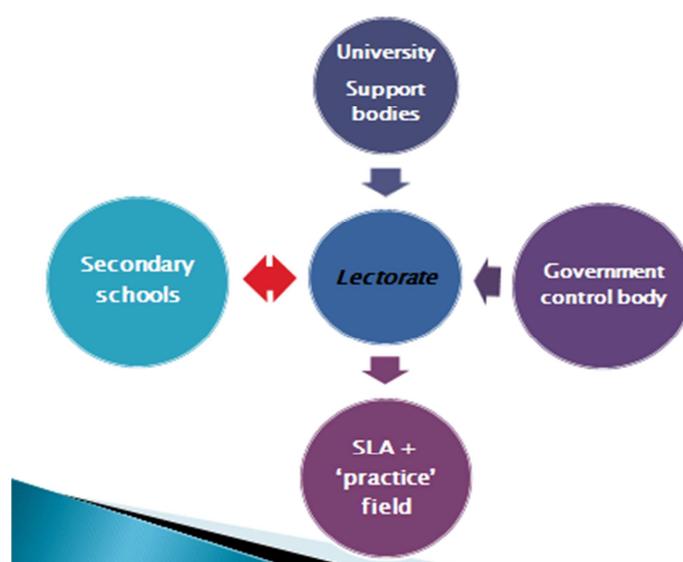


Fig. 1. *Lectorate* model (external)

Because of the special nature of the task of this *lectorate* it was decided to approach this project from the perspective of the secondary schools. The seven Reformed secondary schools are stakeholders in this research project. Thus, each of the seven Reformed schools selected a key representative to take part in the research group. As a result, the research group consisted of eight members. Additionally, a project leader, a research fellow and a linguist were invited to join the group. So currently, 11 people form the English *lectorate* at Driestar University (cf. fig. 2). There are several underlying reasons to opt for a research

group that predominantly consists of teachers. In the first place they are the experts in the sense that they all know about second language teaching and about the problems that generally come with it. Secondly, they are the key representatives, each having pivotal roles in their respective secondary schools and they are the initiators within their schools, turning established practices into more effective language teaching. A third reason is to be found in the fact that if teacher behaviour is to be changed in secondary education this might well be initiated by their colleagues. Figure 2 shows how the research team is made up. Although the main focus of our research project is on lower (vocational) secondary education, since the problems are most striking and persistent there, we nevertheless decided to guarantee an evenly spread group of representatives from secondary education. Hence, apart from two teachers from the lower vocational schools and three teachers from lower grammar schools we also incorporated two teachers from higher grammar schools. Moreover, a good balance between older and younger colleagues, more academically oriented versus more practically oriented colleagues, and male and female colleagues was sought. As said before, the seven teachers of the research group have pivotal roles in their schools. Three of them are heads of department and one is deputy manager of a school, but all seven are required to communicate all *lectorate* issues within their schools. The research team meets for one day every fortnight. In the other weeks that same day is spent on research, self-study and work in the schools or on location. Several times a year conferences or study sessions are organised for secondary and primary school teachers, management of schools and representatives of external institutes.

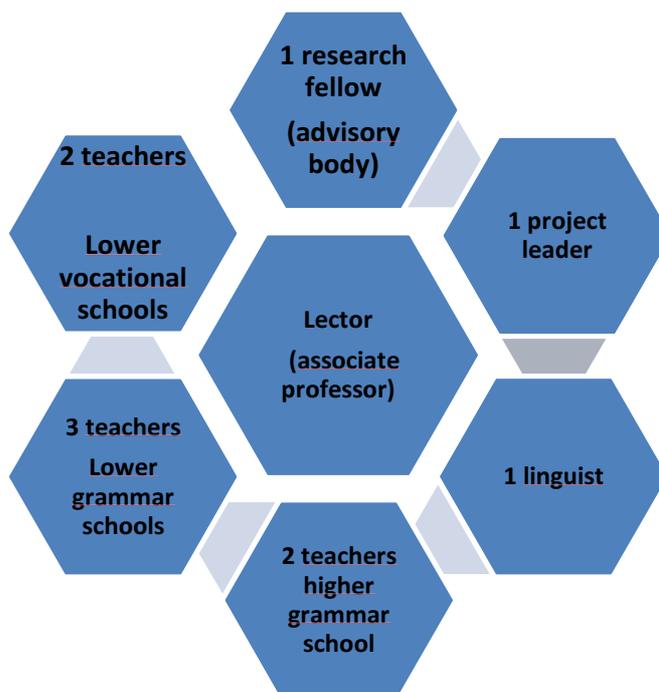


Fig. 2 *lectorate* model (internal)

### How the project was set up

A typical *lectorate* period is four years with a possible second term of the same length. A research program was set up which will be outlined briefly. The first year was spent on mapping out the problems in the secondary schools (Wijk et.al.2011). This was done by a comparative study on the exam results for the seven schools during a period of five years (2005-2009). The exam results for these schools were set off against the national average of each of the four school types mentioned before. In the course of the first year extensive questionnaires were set up that were carried out in the second year. More will be said about these questionnaires in the next paragraph. During the last two decades many attempts have been made by the seven reformed schools to set up interventions to fight the abovementioned problems. A part of the research team has spent ample time on studying these interventions in the second year. They will come up with thorough analysis of which interventions (have) proved successful and which have not. The current year will be largely spent on studying research literature on second language acquisition aspects. Feedback by national as well as international academics will be collected, analysed and wherever appropriate adopted and applied to our situation. The research group has selected four topics for this year, viz. reading, listening, grammar and vocabulary. Each of the teams will come up with an article on their respective topic which will contribute to the overall picture

of how to answer the major questions of our research project. The fourth and last year will be spent on pilots that are to be generated this third year also. These pilots seek to test relevant findings and will subsequently serve as tools to suggest changes in classroom teaching practice. During the second half of the third and also the fourth year a possible continuation of the English *lectorate* will be discussed with all parties involved.

### **Project proceedings**

A brief description of a number of phases in the research project is in place in order to exemplify the interconnectedness between the research group and the schools. After the first research phase in which exam results were investigated, a report was written and presented in a conference meeting with 180 teachers of English. Moreover, the findings were submitted to a professor of Groningen University and an associate professor from Leeds University who both came up with extensive feedback and suggestions. After this the questionnaires were set up and pre-tested in a number of schools. Advisors from Driestar University gave suggestions on the right methodology for setting up and holding the (web-based ) questionnaires in the schools. In all 4978 students answered 47 questions, 385 teachers of English answered 53 questions. Additionally, 700 parents answered 13 questions. Apart from this 380 primary school parents and 182 primary school teachers also filled in questionnaires. The latter will not be discussed here since they are not within the immediate scope of this research project.

The questionnaires were then statistically verified and mapped out by a university institution from Groningen. After ample discussion by the *lectorate* the findings were again presented to university scholars for feedback and are ready for publication now. The research team then proceeded to triangulation to verify findings thus far. Interviews were held with teachers, managers and students of the schools that had previously filled in the questionnaires. In all 21 teachers, 14 managers and 28 students were interviewed on their perception of the teaching of English. Similarly, observations were carried out in the English classrooms. Some 84 observations were held by students of English studying at Driestar University. It is worth mentioning that the observation list is now a compulsory part of the students' teacher training curriculum. It enables students to carry out focused in-class observation activities. The interviews and observations were held to verify the findings of the questionnaires. The overall conclusion is justified that the triangulation sessions have

confirmed the questionnaire findings. The publication of these findings will be presented to both secondary teachers of English and their heads of departments. Moreover, these findings will be published in various SLA magazines.

### Questionnaire

To arrive at a clear picture of how the questionnaires that were carried out in the schools, it is interesting to zoom in on some questions in the teacher and student questionnaires.

#### Pupil questionnaire

- ▶ skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking)
- ▶ teacher feedback (before & after)
- ▶ time spent on homework
- ▶ vocabulary learning; (how & how long)
- ▶ speaking and pronunciation of the teacher
- ▶ role grammar
- ▶ exposure; DVDs, music and games
- ▶ interest en importance of English
- ▶ extracurricular English
- ▶ stimulating and monitoring role of parents.



#### Teacher questionnaire

- ▶ prior instruction and feedback
- ▶ use target language in class
- ▶ vocabulary teaching
- ▶ grammar teaching
- ▶ intensive and extensive skills
- ▶ role reading and listening learning routes
- ▶ role testing
- ▶ staff policies



Fig. 3 student and teacher questionnaires

Perhaps one of the most striking findings in the questionnaires is the one on the teaching and studying of idioms. The first thing that caught the attention is the considerable difference in the perception on what successful vocabulary learning comprises. The first question wanted to know from teachers whether they use a separate vocabulary coursebook or not. Whereas a vast majority (> 75%) of Reformed teachers of English uses a separate course book for vocabulary learning only 25% of the control group schools does, revealing an almost opposite situation. The issue even got more complex after analysing the student questionnaire findings. Some students indicated to study idioms only sporadically.

Moreover, several students also revealed that their teachers hardly ever assign homework for idioms. So there seems to be a fair amount of disagreement on how to assign, test and teach vocabulary learning. The question that is most relevant for the research team of the *lectorate* is which aspects of successful vocabulary learning are essential and which are trivial. Several research findings suggest that vocabulary learning takes place rather indiscriminately within schools irrespective of student level or school type. This situation reveals the need for extensive study both inside and outside schools and, although more attention is paid to research on vocabulary learning (cf. Laufer, 2009, Pigada & Schmitt, 2006, Schmitt & Sonbul, 2010) than a decade ago, the question remains whether this research has reached the English classroom.

A second research result that called for attention was the use of English in the classroom. Whereas a considerable amount of students was critical about their teachers with respect to the use of the target language in class, the teachers themselves were more optimistic about their own role in this. Moreover, the teachers did not seem to emphasise the importance of the use of English by the students. A majority of the students indicated that they hardly ever speak English. Language research has convincingly shown that the proficiency in English will not increase significantly when only the teacher speaks the target language in class, but significant progress is made when both teachers and students speak English whenever possible (cf. Westhoff, 2012, Nystrand, 1997, Schooten, 1999).

Other issues that were of great interest in the comparison between teachers' and students' language behaviour were the homework assigned by teachers and the time spent on it by students, the role of grammar in the perception of both groups, and the role of teacher feedback on assignments and tests. Especially the latter issue caused surprise and led to much discussion. The students' questionnaire showed that strikingly little feedback on students' assignments was given by the teachers in spite of the fact that there is ample proof of the importance of teacher feedback (cf. Adamson, 2010, Glasson, 2008, Wiggins, 2004).

These and numerous other issues emerged with the questionnaires held in the schools. Apart from the information that is generated by the surveys held in the schools, the findings of the parents' questionnaires and those carried out in primary education will certainly ask for attention in a later stage. As said before, all findings will be extensively discussed and relevant research literature will be studied after which consultation with academic institutions will take place once more. Articles will be published in relevant SLA

periodicals and magazines. Findings will also be presented on national and international conferences and meetings. But first and foremost, extensive consultation will take place with the teachers in the reformed schools. After all, the project was meant to be for teachers by teachers!

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