

Dutch language qualifications in a European perspective

Summary

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1. Introduction

This paper summarises the set-up and results of an exploratory research project into the level of Dutch language qualifications in relation to the language levels in the Common European Framework (CEF). The CEF describes a European scale of foreign language proficiency, which provides an international basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications, thus facilitating educational and occupational mobility. It describes the competencies necessary for communication, the related knowledge and skills and the situations and domains of communication (Council of Europe, 1998 & 2001).

The CEF consists of six main language levels:

- A1, Breakthrough (the lowest level);
- A2, Waystage;
- B1, Threshold;
- B2, Vantage;
- C1, Effective operational proficiency;
- C2, Mastery (the highest level).

Each of these levels has been divided into two sub-levels, e.g. A1.1 and A1.2. The levels are defined by means of language descriptors, so-called can-do statements, which indicate the expected language proficiency at a certain level.

The project was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and carried out by the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) and the Netherlands Institute for Educational Measurement (Citogroep). The research project (Van Hest, de Jong & Stoks, 2001) was part of the activities carried out within the context of the European Year of Languages 2001.

2. Research questions and objectives

Research questions

The research project addressed the following two questions:

1. To what extent can the Dutch examination programmes for the foreign languages be linked to the descriptors of language proficiency in the Common European Framework (CEF)?
2. How do the levels of Dutch foreign language examinations compare to the levels on the European scale of language proficiency?

Research objectives

The objectives of the project were:

1. To make a first step in a process of gearing Dutch foreign language qualifications to international, transparent levels of language proficiency;

2. To take stock of the problems and obstacles to be overcome in order to realise the intended linking of language levels.

3. Procedure

The problem of establishing levels was approached from two angles:

1. SLO made a detailed analysis of the examination programmes for pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) and for upper secondary education (HAVO/VWO) to ascertain which levels are aimed at by these programmes. For this the wording of the examination objectives was compared with the level descriptors of the CEF. For the results of this analysis see paragraph 4.
2. For a limited number of languages and a limited number of levels Citogroep carried out a survey in which a total of ten teachers of foreign languages - English (4), French (3) and German (3) - were asked to classify Dutch foreign language examinations for reading, listening and speaking in terms of the CEF. In other words, they tried to indicate at which CEF level the examination tasks had to be placed. The group of teachers consisted of beginning and experienced teachers at schools catering for all levels. The classification survey was carried out to investigate the relationship between the following three aspects:
 - a. The levels of the CEF;
 - b. The levels of Dutch foreign language examinations as estimated by the foreign language teachers;
 - c. The actual levels of language proficiency attained by secondary school students in their school-leaving examinations.

The classification procedure and research results are discussed in paragraph 5.

4. Analysis of the Dutch examination programmes in terms of the CEF

SLO analysed the Dutch examination programmes (French, German, English) of secondary education to discover what CEF levels are intended in these programmes (Staatsen & Stoks, 2001).

With that purpose in mind the formulation of the Dutch attainment targets for foreign languages have been compared with the descriptors used in the CEF.

Types of secondary education in the Netherlands:

VMBO: pre-vocational secondary education, 3 levels for foreign languages:

- basic vocational programme (level 1)
- middle-management vocational programme (level 2)
- theoretical or combined programme (level 3 - the highest)

HAVO: senior general secondary education

VWO: pre-university education.

It appeared that the system used in the examination programmes to distinguish between and to define the different levels for the various types of secondary education and languages does not really correspond with the taxonomic nature of and the methodology used in the CEF.

Listening & Reading

In the CEF the levels for the receptive activities and strategies (listening and reading comprehension) are mainly defined in terms of texts produced by one or more speakers/writers (spoken & written input), and the degree to which these texts are understood.

The different levels in the CEF are described in terms of text characteristics, e.g.:

- Text type;
- Linguistic complexity;
- Discourse structure (e.g. textual coherence, the implicit or explicit nature of information presented)
- Length of text;
- Medium by which the text is carried.

In the Dutch examination programmes for foreign languages the attainment targets are described in the form of a number of listening and reading skills/tasks, usually more or less formulated in the same way for all types of secondary education and the three foreign languages. A few examples:

- Specifying/identifying the main issue of a text;
- Specifying/identifying relevant information in a text;
- Comparing information and drawing conclusions.

Naturally these tasks can be interpreted as understanding spoken and written texts, but they do not reveal at what level or the degree to which degree these texts must be understood. The explanatory comment on the attainment targets, the so-called 'niveaumeter' (level indicator) gives more information on text types, difficulty of texts etc.

The information in the 'niveaumeter' has been analysed and compared with the descriptors in the five scales for reading and the six scales for listening in the CEF. On the basis of this analysis reading and listening in the Dutch examination programmes have been positioned in the CEF as follows:

Table 1: levels for reading and listening per stream, per language

Level	Reading			Listening		
	English	German	French	English	German	French
VMBO 1	B1.1	B1.1	A2.2	-	-	-
VMBO 2	B1.1	B1.1	A2.2	A2.2	A2.2	A2.1
VMBO 3	B1.2	B1.2	B1.1	B1.1	B1.1	A2.2
HAVO	B2.1	B2.1	B2.1	B2.1	B2.1	B2.1
VWO	B2.2	B2.2	B2.2	B2.2	B2.2	B2.2

Speaking

On the whole the descriptions for speaking in the CEF are much more comprehensive and detailed than the objectives for speaking in the Dutch examination programmes.

In the CEF scales are provided for:

- five categories of oral production;
- three categories of production strategies;
- nine categories of spoken interaction;
- three categories of interaction strategies;
- and for five components of communicative language competence.

The different levels in the CEF are described in terms of characteristics of communicative activities and communication strategies (which are formulated as 'can do' statements), e.g.:

- length of the oral text produced;
- degree of detail in production;
- difficulty of language functions;
- fluency;
- degree to which an interlocutor is understood by the foreign language learner/user;

- degree to which the foreign language learner/user participates in a conversation, discussion etc.

As far as speaking is concerned the emphasis in the Dutch examination programmes is on spoken interaction.

The attainment targets are formulated in terms of language functions, e.g.

- give and receive information;
- ask for and give opinions;
- describe someone or something.

The sets of these language functions are more or less the same for all types of secondary education and for the three foreign languages. So again, information on different attainment levels has to be found in the 'niveaumeter'.

Analysis of the categories of the CEF and the Dutch objectives yielded the following interpretation of the speaking component in the Dutch examination programmes in terms of the common European scales:

Table 2: Levels for speaking per stream, per language

Level	Speaking		
	English	German	French
VMBO 1	-	-	-
VMBO 2	A2.1	A2.1	A2.1
VMBO 3	A2.2	A2.2	A2.2
HAVO	B1.2	B1.2	B1.1
VWO	B2.1	B2.1	B1.2

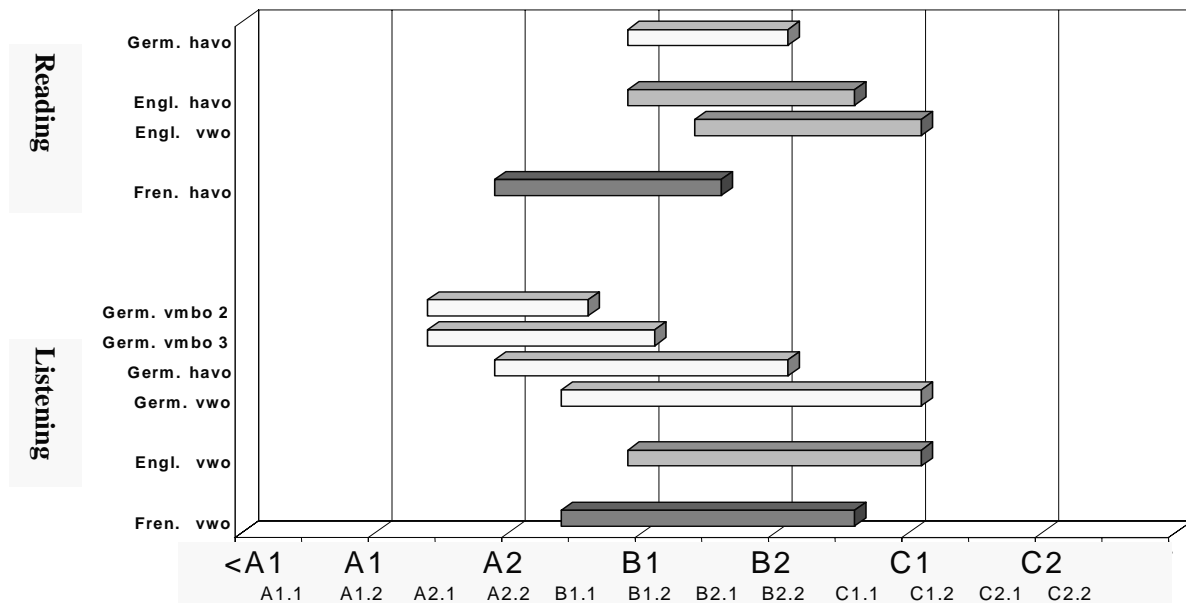
5. Linking the Dutch foreign language examinations to European language levels

The classification of the foreign language examinations went as follows (Van Hest, Beltman & Kleintjes, 2001). After an initial training in the classification of tasks in terms of the CEF, the ten foreign language teachers were asked to classify the foreign language examinations for listening and reading. They were instructed to first analyse (parts of) audio fragments or texts without the accompanying tasks. They then judged the fragments and texts together with the tasks. For speaking the language production of students was judged.

Teachers were instructed to judge the materials independently: they were only allowed to confer with their colleagues in cases of general interpretation problems. Teachers were asked to make their classifications using the sub levels (A2.1, A2.2, B1.1 etc) as much as possible. Where they could not distinguish sub levels they were asked to make a classification in main levels (A1, A2, B1 etc).

The results of the classification exercise by the teachers showed that teachers often did not agree in their classifications of text materials and tasks and that there were indeed large differences between these. The classifications for reading and listening tended to be placed at a lower sub level (e.g. B1.1 instead of B1.2) when teachers took into account the accompanying tasks. The tasks belonging to a given examination proved to belong to a number of levels within the CEF. Classifications that the majority of teachers did agree upon were inputted into data file. Figure 1 shows the classification of reading and listening tasks in the examinations that were analysed.

Figure 1: Classification of examination tasks for Reading and Listening in terms of the CEF



Next, the classifications were linked to actual students' performances on the examinations under investigation. In this context the question arose how to determine the actual level of a student. On the basis of long-term experience with the analysis of examination results it was decided that for listening and reading students need to have a score of 60 - 65 % correct to be given a sufficient mark. This would mean that a student in a given stream should show mastery of at least those tasks that are situated at two thirds of the highest CEF level. For example (see Figure 1), German students in senior general secondary education should be able to master reading tasks at level B2.1, whereas students in pre-university education should be at level C1.1 for reading.

For speaking the level requirements were directly deduced from the students' performances: as only students with a mark of 5.5 or higher were included in the survey, the lowest classified students indicate the cut-off score.

The foreign language teachers were positive about the introduction to the CEF and liked working with the level descriptors. However, a uniform classification of examination tasks in terms of the CEF proved no easy task. One problem is distinguishing examination levels. In the Dutch educational system these are relatively close to each other. Another problem is that the examinations under discussion only test a relatively small portion of the skills as described in the CEF. Generally speaking, the examination requirements are in the A2-B2 range of the CEF. As to differences between languages it can be concluded that reading and listening in German and English are classified at about the same level, while for French these classifications are one level lower on average. For speaking the level requirement is highest for English, lowest for French and German is in the middle. However, with speaking no distinctions could be ascertained between HAVO and VWO, possibly due to the limited size of the data set. The comparisons between the examinations in reading and listening for the three types of education (VMBO, HAVO and VWO) show increasing demands from A2 at VMBO to B2 at VWO.

Because of the exploratory nature of the classification survey only a limited data set has been used. On the basis of the results tentative hypotheses can be produced that can later be verified in a possible further study.

6. Conclusions

1. In a comparison between the Dutch examination programmes for VMBO, HAVO and VWO it proves to be possible to make a reasonable estimation of the levels aimed at in the examination programmes.
2. In this exploratory survey it has not been possible to ascertain conclusively which level a student has reached in terms of the CEF when having taken part in a Dutch language examination. Although examinations consist in tasks at various (CEF) levels, most examinations fall within one of the main categories of the CEF.
3. The exploratory survey shows a discrepancy between the levels that are intended in the examination programmes and the actual language levels attained by the students (see Table 3).

Table 3: Comparison between estimated levels on the basis of examination programmes and results

Skill	Language	Stream	Estimation on the basis of examination programme		Estimation on the basis of examination results
Reading	English	VWO	B2.2	<	C1.1
	English	HAVO	B2.1	<	B2.2
	German	HAVO	B2.1	=	B2.1
	French	HAVO	B2.1	>	B1.2
Listening	English	VWO	B2.2	<	C1.1
	German	VWO	B2.2	=	B2.2
	German	HAVO	B2.1	=	B2.1
	German	VMBO 3	---*	--	B1.1**
	German	VMBO 2	B1.1	>	A2.2**
Speaking	French	VWO	B2.2	>	B1.2
	English	VWO	B2.1	>	B1.2
	English	HAVO	B1.2	=	B1.2
	German	VWO	B2.1	>	A2.2
	German	HAVO	B1.2	>	A2.2
	French	VWO	B1.2	>	A1.1
	French	HAVOo	B1.1	--	No data

* The attainment targets for VMBO 3 do not include listening comprehension.

** The estimations for VMBO 2 and 3 are based on the results of the old MAVO C and D examinations. VMBO was introduced on 1 August 1999 and replaced pre-vocational education (VBO) and junior general secondary education (MAVO). The first VMBO examinations will be administered in 2003.

7. Recommendations

- In a future revision of the Dutch examination programmes it is advisable to formulate attainment targets that are consistent with the terminology used in the CEF descriptors.
- As soon as the examination programmes have been revised in terms of the CEF, it will be possible to develop foreign language examinations that show a more direct link with the CEF scales.
- It deserves serious consideration to try and link the core objectives for basic secondary education (the first phase of Dutch secondary education) to the CEF. The core objectives could be reformulated to establish a closer link with levels A1 and A2 of the CEF.
- The CEF lacks a separate category for understanding fiction & (young adult) literature (reading for pleasure). In view of the importance of extensive reading within the Dutch examination programmes, Dutch experts should develop an additional scale for this category.
- It is advisable to prepare and carry out a large-scale follow-up study with more teachers to classify examinations, tasks and students and with more tasks to be classified per examination. A possible research topic could be an investigation into Dutch students' level of oral proficiency in relation to the CEF.
- The survey should be extended to (a) general language examinations or tests that are administered to a wide group of students (b) language tests that are used in adult education and/or job-related language tests in vocational education.
- Teachers should be familiarised with the European language levels and the CEF in order to enable them to tune their level requirements and their assessments of students' performances to the CEF.

8. Bibliography

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