TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS (THE ALIGNMENT BETWEEN) GRAMMAR IN THE L1 LANGUAGE CURRICULA OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

In recent years, Dutch grammar education (L1) in Flemish primary (PE) as well as secondary education (SE) has been the subject of much debate. Research into the grammatical knowledge of students in SE (n=359) suggests that this expertise falls short of the final attainment targets. Additional research now tries to pinpoint the reasons underlying this trend, focusing on the attitude of teachers, which is an ‘understudied’ aspect of language teaching. This research, centring around L1 teachers of Dutch in SE (n=255) and PE (n=318), applies two methodological instruments: a Likert-scale attitude questionnaire and teacher interviews. Teacher variables include gender, years of classroom experience, school type and school grade.

The research in SE reveals that, in general, (1) teachers’ attitudes correlate with students’ performances, in that 52% of the teachers are rather pessimistic about their students’ level of grammatical proficiency, (2) 76% of them believe that the general level of language proficiency has dropped in recent years and (3) 47% of the teachers are of the opinion that grammar education is a poor relation in the Dutch language curriculum, especially with a view to learning foreign languages.

The second study conducted in PE shows that, in general, (1) 75% of the teachers think that their students’ general level of language proficiency has declined, (2) 71% of them want to spend more time on grammar than the curriculum prescribes, (3) 80% of the teachers believe that Dutch grammar in PE is insufficiently aligned with Dutch grammar in SE and (4) 81% of them are of the opinion that Dutch grammar instruction is out of step with foreign language grammar instruction.

One of the major problems this attitude study reveals, concerns the poor alignment between grammar in the Dutch language curricula of PE and SE. The majority (62%) of the teachers in PE, for instance, are completely oblivious to Dutch language expectations in the 1st year of SE. Additionally, 70% of them feel there is little, if any, interaction between teachers in PE and SE about the instruction of Dutch. Supporting this statement, the majority (63%) of the teachers in SE share this opinion. This perceived problematic alignment between grammar in the Dutch language curricula of PE and SE may have major implications for (future) curriculum design.

Keywords: Grammar education, teachers’ attitudes, curriculum design.

1 BACKGROUNDB: GRAMMATICAL KNOWLEDGE IN FLEMISH SECONDARY EDUCATION

In recent years, Dutch grammar education (L1) in Flemish primary (PE) as well as secondary education (SE) has been the subject of much debate. Research into the grammatical knowledge of senior pupils in SE (n=359) suggests that their knowledge falls short of the ‘final attainment targets’, which are briefly worded descriptions of the knowledge, insights and skills that pupils should have mastered by the end of each school year. In 2008, SE-pupils in ASO were asked to complete a Dutch grammar and spelling test in 20 minutes.¹ The exercises for the test were collected out of real examinations and Dutch handbooks and were approved of by teachers. The test consisted of 4

¹In Flemish SE, students can choose between four different branches of study: ASO, TSO, KSO and BSO. In ASO education, the students receive a thorough theoretical basis which gives them access to higher education or university. TSO and BSO schools offer their students a more vocational training. Most students graduating from BSO schools do not take up higher education, whereas students graduating from TSO schools do. Students who wish to study arts enrol in a KSO school.
categories (spelling of words, spelling of verbs, word classes and parsing) and variables were: (1) geography (Flanders versus the Netherlands), (2) gender (male versus female), (3) curriculum (Latin versus non-Latin) and (4) school type (athenaeum versus college). In this paper, we cannot possibly go into all variables nor into the spelling tests. We refer to [1] and [2] for an extensive treatment of the variables, and to [3] for an analysis of the spelling results.

Table 1 summarizes the main results for traditional grammar, i.e. word classes and parsing, in Flanders. Non-Latin pupils in Flemish athenaeums and non-Latin male pupils in Flemish colleges do not reach the final attainment targets for grammar (when taking 50% as a standard measure). Word classes cause many problems, while parsing poses a significant problem as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>athenaeum</th>
<th>college</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>non-Latin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>men</td>
<td>word classes</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>men</td>
<td>parsing</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>men</td>
<td>average</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>45.5</td>
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In general, Latin pupils performed much better than non-Latin pupils. This is clearly indicated by table 2.

Table 2: Comparison Latin and non-Latin SE-pupils in Flanders

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>non-Latin</th>
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<tr>
<td>word classes</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parsing</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>average</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The focus in language teaching could be a cause of the falling standards. In answering a parliamentary question about this research on grammar in SE in 2013, the Minister for Education for the first time admitted to the declining level of language proficiency: ‘Een eerste maatregel die we hebben genomen om tegemoet te komen aan het dalende niveau van taalbeschouwing is een wijziging van de eindtermen taalbeschouwing. We hebben de eindtermen voor taalbeschouwing versterkt en meer geëxpliciteerd of specifieker gemaakt’ ['A first measure we have taken to address the falling level of language proficiency is a change in the goals for language proficiency. We have reinforced the attainment goals for language proficiency and made those more explicit and specific'] [4](our italics).

However, the discussion about the focus in language education has been going on for many years. Despite the multiple discussions and opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of grammar education, there is no research so far on the attitude of teachers of Dutch towards grammar in SE.

2 TEACHERS’ ATTITUDE TOWARDS GRAMMAR IN FLEMISH SECONDARY AND PRIMARY EDUCATION

Additional research now tries to pinpoint the reasons underlying this trend, focusing, amongst others, on the attitude of teachers, which is an ‘understudied’ aspect of language teaching ([5]). This research so far contains three studies:

(1) an analysis of L1-teachers’ attitudes in SE in general (n=255) (cf. 2.1.);
(2) an analysis of L1-teachers’ attitudes in PE in general (n=318) (cf. 2.2.);
(3) an analysis of both L1 SE- (n=68) and L1 PE-teachers’ (n=106) attitudes in Flemish colleges (see note 2) (cf. 2.3.).

Those studies contain two methodological instruments: a 5- or 10-point Likert-scale attitude questionnaire ([6], [7]), and teacher interviews. Teacher variables include gender, years of classroom experience, school type and school grade.

2.1 L1-teachers’ attitudes in SE

2.1.1 Research questions and methodology

L1-teachers of Dutch in SE (n=255) were asked several questions ([8]). In line with the research mentioned in 1.1., we will focus on SE-teachers’ attitude concerning grammar (education) only, and analyse the following questions:

(1) what is the level of your pupils in the area of Dutch grammar (word classes and parsing)? For these questions, the teachers marked one of the five possibilities on a Likert-scale: very good, good, average, bad or very bad;
(2) have you noticed a decline in the general linguistic level of your pupils in recent years? This question could only be answered with yes or no;
(3) which subjects in the Dutch curriculum are your pupils best at? Teachers had to give a number from 1 to 5 in order of importance for five subjects.

Furthermore, we tried to link their answers to some variables, trying to assess whether there is a significant difference in the opinions between: (a) men and women; (b) experienced teachers and inexperienced teachers, (c) school type (ASO and non-ASO; see note 1) and (d) school grade, i.e. the three grades in SE. Full details are discussed in [8].

2.1.2 Results

Fig. 1 displays the results for question (1). It would seem that Flemish L1-teachers in SE are rather pessimistic about the grammar level of their pupils: 52% of them are of the opinion that it is ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’. Only 5% think the level is ‘good’ and none of them rate it as ‘very good’.

The results of question (2), reflected in Fig. 2, are unmistakable: the standards of Dutch grammar have certainly fallen in recent years. No less than 76% of the participating SE-teachers share this opinion. Only 20% of them think that the grammatical level of their pupils has not taken a turn for the worst recently. 4% of the participating teachers did not have an opinion about this matter, but most of these teachers had very little working experience, so they were not able to notice a possible decline amongst their students.
Finally, Table 3 lists the subfields in the Dutch curriculum which, according to their teachers, pupils score best at. Subfields in the curriculum (oral communication, written communication, spelling, word classes and parsing) received a score from 1 to 5. A 5 point Likert scale was used in which ‘2’ stands for ‘very good’, ‘1’ for ‘good’, ‘0’ for ‘average’, ‘-1’ for ‘bad’ and ‘-2’ for ‘very bad’. All responses were processed and are reflected in Table 3.  

The teachers feel that the biggest problem areas are the classical grammatical subjects: parsing and word classes. The spelling level of the pupils can also be improved, while the communicative skills, especially oral, are well developed.

Table 3: Average score for subfields in the Dutch curriculum according to SE-teachers

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>oral skills</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>writing skills</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>spelling</td>
<td>-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>word classes</td>
<td>-65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>parsing</td>
<td>-68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.1.3 Discussion

In 2.1.1. we formulated three research questions:

(1) regarding the level of Dutch grammar (word classes and parsing), Flemish SE-teachers think the level of their pupils is rather poor. 52% are of the opinion that the grammar level is ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’. These results are in line with the research mentioned in 1.1.

(2) the general linguistic level of pupils has certainly taken a turn for the worse in recent years, an opinion that is shared by no less than 76% of the participating SE-teachers.

(3) as for the different subfields in the Dutch curriculum, again word classes and parsing are problem areas. From the interviews, it is clear that most teachers find all subfields in the Dutch curriculum important, though they think that traditional grammar has a supporting role to reach the ultimate goal of Dutch SE, i.e. developing good communicative skills.

Some other results confirm these trends: 47% of the respondents think that the Dutch language curriculum pays not enough attention to grammar. This is much higher than the 23% mentioned in a study by the Dutch Language Union ([9]). While 53% of the respondents are satisfied with handbooks in the Dutch curriculum, 40% of them claim that more attention should be paid to grammar. Especially SE-teachers in the first grade set great store by grammar, and they do pay more attention to grammatical subjects. A striking outcome is the fact that the general decline is most noticeable in the

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3 To arrive at this general result, the percentages of each category were multiplied in the following manner: very good * 2 (e.g. spelling = 5 % * 2 = 10); good * 1 (e.g. spelling = 24 % * 1 = 24); average * 0 (e.g. spelling = 38 % * 0 = 0); bad * -1 (e.g. spelling = 23 % * -1 = -23); very bad * -2 (e.g. spelling = 9 % * -2 = -18). The outcomes of the multiplications were then added to, or subtracted from, each other. E.g. spelling = 10 + 24 + 0 – 23 – 18 = - 7.
answers of first grade SE-teachers. This raises questions about the alignment between grammar in the L1 language curricula of PE and SE.

2.2 L1-teachers’ attitudes in PE

2.2.1 Research questions and methodology

The second study analysed the attitude of Flemish PE-teachers (n=318) towards grammar education ([10]). In this section, we will focus on the questions mentioned in 2.1.1., but also on some particular questions concerning the alignment of L1-grammar between PE and SE, the impact of L1-grammar in learning foreign languages (L2) in general, and the alignment between the Dutch and the French language curriculum in particular. Full details are giving in [10] and [11].

2.2.2 Results

From [10] it is clear that, concerning the general questions raised in the previous section (cf. 2.1.1.):
- 75% of the PE-teachers admit to the ‘language decline’ of their pupils. These results are in line with those of SE-teachers, i.e. 76% (cf. 2.1.2.).
- 71% of the PE-teachers are of the opinion that the L1 language curriculum pays not enough attention to grammar, which is much higher than the 47% for SE-teachers (cf. 2.1.2.).

Concerning the alignment issue, the following results are striking:
- 81% of the PE-teachers think that Dutch grammar in PE is not sufficiently aligned with Dutch grammar in SE. While PE-teachers think SE should adapt to the targets of PE, SE-teachers are of the same opinion: they think PE-teachers should adapt to the standards and expectations of SE;
- 73% of the PE-teachers think that their pupils are insufficiently prepared for learning foreign languages in general, and 81% of the PE-teachers in the third grade even think that Dutch grammar is not sufficiently aligned with French grammar (more particularly, they point to a difference in terminology and in order of acquisition).

2.2.3 Discussion

The alignment of L1-grammar between PE and SE, the impact of L1-grammar in learning L2 in general, and the alignment between the Dutch and the French language curriculum pose a major problem for PE-teachers and SE-teachers alike. The outcome of the study, however, has met with criticism from those who set out the L1-curriculum for free and subsidized education in Flanders ([12]). They claim that it is unclear which educational network the respondents belong to (see note 2), and that the study does not take into account whether the informants are acquainted with the L1-language curricula. They argue that ‘tussen de verschillende onderwijsniveaus bestaat er eenvoudigweg geen discrepantie in de leerplannen’ ['There is simply no discrepancy in the curricula between the different levels of education.‘]

Taking into account this criticism, we again analysed PE- and SE-teachers’ attitudes, focusing on Flemish teachers in free and subsidized education only (Catholic schools, hence CPE and CSE), and on the ‘curriculum’ and ‘alignment’ issues.

2.3 Confronting SE- and PE-teachers’ attitudes

2.3.1 Research questions and methodology

In a subsequent study, that took into account the criticism by [12], the attitudes of final year PE-teachers (n=106) and first year SE-teachers (n=68) in Catholic colleges were analysed ([13]). This research tried to provide an answer to the following questions:

(1) are L1-teachers in the sixth year of Catholic PE (hence CPE) and the first year of Catholic SE (hence CSE) familiar with their own L1-curriculum and with the L1-curriculum of the other level of education?;

(2) are L1-teachers in the sixth year of CPE and the first year of CSE of the opinion that the grammar instruction of PE is aligned with the grammar instruction of SE (for the instruction of L1 as well as L2).
For both questions, the teachers indicated a number between 0 and 10 on a Likert scale, from ‘0’ meaning ‘not at all familiar’ to ‘10’ meaning ‘very familiar’.

(3) what is the general opinion of the teachers about the following topics: the new L1-curricula; the number of hours spent on Dutch grammar instruction within L1-education; the extent to which the schoolbooks align with the new curriculum, and the interaction between L1-teachers in the sixth year of CPE and L1-teachers in the first year of CSE about the instruction of Dutch. These were open questions.

Full details on (3) are given in [13]. In this section, we will focus on the alignment question mentioned in (1) and (2).

2.3.2 Results

2.3.2.1 Familiarity with L1-curricula

The Flemish L1-teachers in CPE and CSE were asked the following questions:

(1) on a scale from 0 to 10, how familiar are you with the current Dutch language curriculum of your own level of education?

(2) on a scale from 0 to 10, how familiar are you with the current Dutch language curriculum of the other level of education?

The two questions are discussed separately so as to give a clear overview. For every question, a distinction is drawn between PE-teachers and SE-teachers.

Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 display the results for question (1). Most teachers of Dutch (both in CPE and CSE) are familiar with their own Dutch language curriculum, though this familiarity is slightly higher in CSE.

The results for question (2) are given in Fig. 5 and Fig. 6. Fig. 5 shows that, from the teachers in the sixth year of CPE, no less than 80% give a score from 0 to 5, which means 80% of them are ‘not at all’ to ‘a little bit’ familiar with the L1-curriculum of CSE. Fig. 6 indicates that, from the L1-teachers in CSE, 38% give a score from 0 to 5, which means that 62% of them are ‘familiar’ to ‘very familiar’ with the L1-curriculum of CPE.
To conclude: both L1-teachers in CPE and L1-teachers in CSE are familiar with their own L1-curriculum. Moreover, most teachers in CPE are not familiar with the curriculum of CSE. On the other hand, most teachers in CSE are familiar to very familiar with the curriculum of CPE. It can be concluded that L1-teachers in the first year of CSE are more familiar with the curriculum of the other level of education than the L1-teachers in the sixth year of CPE.

2.3.2.2 The alignment issue

For the research question related to the ‘alignment’ issue, the teachers were asked the following questions:

(1) on a scale from 0 to 10, to what extent do you think L1-grammar instruction in CPE is aligned with L1-grammar instruction in CSE?

(2) on a scale from 0 to 10, to what extent do you think L1-grammar instruction in the sixth year of CPE prepares the pupils for L2-instruction (French, Latin) in the first year of CSE (especially concerning grammar instruction)?

For both questions, the teachers indicated a number between 0 and 10, 0 meaning ‘no alignment’ and 10 meaning ‘total alignment’.

Fig. 7 shows that the opinions of CPE-teachers are divided. 47% of them indicated a number from 0 to 5, which means that 47% think there is little or no alignment between L1-grammar instruction in CPE and CSE. A similar division in the opinions of CSE-teachers is shown in Fig. 8: 53% of them take the view that there is little or no alignment between L1-grammar instruction in CPE and CSE education.

The more familiar teachers are with the L1-curriculum of the other level of education (cf. 2.3.2.1.), the more they find that the curriculum of PE aligns with that of SE.
Fig. 9 and Fig. 10 show the results for question (2). From Fig. 9, it is clear that no less than 66% of the teachers in the sixth year of CPE gave a number from 0 to 5, which means that 66% of them think that the learning aims for L1-grammar do not prepare the pupils enough for L2-instruction, in particular grammar instruction, in the first year of CSE. Fig. 10 shows that no less than 65% of the teachers in the first year of CPE indicate a number from 0 to 5, which means that no less than 65% of these teachers in CSE think that the learning aims for L1-grammar do not prepare the pupils enough for L2-instruction, in particular grammar, in CSE.

2.3.3 Discussion

Most teachers think that the learning aims for L1-grammar instruction in CPE do not prepare the pupils enough for L2-instruction in CSE. Therefore it can be concluded that most teachers think there is no alignment between L1- and L2-grammar instruction in CPE and CSE. One striking result about question (3) in 2.3.1. is that in the opinion of the majority of CPE-teachers (70%), there is little or no interaction between CPE- and CSE-teachers about L1-instruction. The majority of the CSE-teachers (63%) share this opinion.
3 GENERAL CONCLUSION

In recent years, Dutch grammar education (L1) in Flemish primary (PE) as well as secondary education (SE) has been the subject of much debate. Research into the grammatical expertise of senior pupils in SE suggests that their knowledge falls short of the ‘final attainment targets’. Research into teachers’ attitudes confirms this trend: 52% of SE-teachers think that the grammar level is ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’, and 76% have noticed that the general linguistic level of pupils has taken a turn for the worse in recent years. As for the different subfields in the Dutch curriculum, traditional grammar, i.e. word classes and parsing, are considered to be problem areas.

One of the major problems this attitude study exposes is the poor alignment between grammar in the L1-curricula of PE and SE. The majority (62%) of the teachers in PE, for instance, are completely oblivious to Dutch language expectations in the 1st year of SE. Additionally, 70% of them feel there is little, if any, interaction between teachers in PE and SE about the instruction of Dutch. Supporting this statement, the majority (63%) of the teachers in SE share this opinion. This perceived problematic alignment between grammar in the Dutch language curricula of PE and SE may have major implications for (future) curriculum design ([14]).

Further research on these matters might focus on aspects of possible change in the educational system as far as L1-grammar education is concerned ([14]). If educational change depends on what teachers do and think, and if conflict is essential to any successful change effort, then the research outlined in this paper may contribute to an innovative approach to L1-grammar education.

REFERENCES


