

## SUMMARY

### TARGET LANGUAGE – A VEHICLE FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

#### PEDAGOGY, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EFFECTS

This research study centres on the use of the target language in secondary foreign language education. It examines whether teachers are able to adopt the target language pedagogy that was developed in this study, whether they succeed in using the pedagogy over a longer period of time and whether their students profit from this intervention in such a way that their language learning process is more effective than it would have been had their teachers used the target language only intuitively. Using the target language effectively requires teachers to develop an advanced linguistic and didactic awareness. During their interaction with students, teachers should constantly apply the target language as a pedagogical tool rather than simply as a means of communication. Language is both the target as well as the vehicle for language learning. In other words: Target Language – a vehicle for language *learning* (*Doeltaal-Leertaal*).

For decades now, language teachers and researchers throughout the world have seemed to agree that extensive use of the target language during foreign language classes, so called *immersion*, contributes highly to the language learning process. Educational institutes, such as national school inspections and teacher education departments, also encourage teachers to use the target language as much as possible, but what exactly does successful target language use consist of? Exposing students to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985), stimulating student interaction and negotiation of meaning (Long, 1996; Pica et al, 1986), eliciting student output (Swain & Lapkin, 1995): these principles seem to be as important for language teaching as, sticking to the immersion metaphor, water is for learning how to swim. However, even after years of educational research, convincing evidence for the positive effects of target language use in regular secondary foreign language education is yet to be delivered. Moreover, in many countries including the Netherlands, target language use is far from common practice in foreign language classrooms. Research by Kordes and Gille (2012 and 2013) even states that Dutch teachers are lagging behind those in other European countries. When teachers do frequently use the target language, for example in some English classes, in DELF projects (*Diplôme Élémentaire de la Langue Française*) or in CLIL schools (*Content and Language Integrated Learning*), it remains doubtful whether they are consciously applying the target language in a pedagogically sound manner or whether they are mostly using the language intuitively, focused on communication rather than on language learning, assuming that language learning will take place automatically. This begs the question whether language learning theory has, up to now, provided sufficient detail as to the practice of effective target language use. What does exposure to meaningful and comprehensible input really look like? How do teachers manage to bring about useful interaction, negotiation of meaning as well as pushed output while applying the target language effectively in a class consisting of thirty teenage students? And if they do manage to organize all this, can we assume that this is indeed what effective target language use ought to look like, or is there more to consider?

A thorough analysis of language acquisition theory indeed implies that explicit descriptions of what could be called target language pedagogy is unavailable. Moreover, previous studies on target language use have generally focused on intensive language education for adult learners, immersion education in bilingual Canada or language education in small groups. These educational contexts are

rather different from the context in which the average teenager in most countries studies foreign languages at school. In the Netherlands, secondary school students generally receive 100 to 150 minutes of language teaching per language a week, classes count up to no less than 32 students and there are ten or more other subjects that require their attention. In other words, besides practical guidelines for the use of target language, previous research also lacks contextual harmony with common teaching practice. As Doyle (2015) argues, there seems to be a shortage of *practicality*: the complex ecology of the classroom prevents the actual practice of pedagogical interventions that, in addition, are described too abstractly. It is, therefore, perfectly understandable that many foreign language teachers often acknowledge that they fail to consistently apply the target language: Student motivation seems to drop, parents start to complain and the first language (L1) becomes too tempting an alternative. Teachers seem to be more than willing to use the target language, yet the question remains: *how?*

Although, recapitulating, it is highly probable that the use of the target language fosters students' language learning in regular secondary education, we find little evidence for this assumption in language acquisition theory, nor do we find practical guidelines for effective target language use. Not surprisingly, we observe that many teachers find it difficult to consistently use the target language during their language classes. One could argue that this is quite obvious: when the target language is used just to *communicate* during language class, we can only *hope* for language uptake by the students. When something as dynamic as a means of communication (language) is also used as a *learning tool*, it follows logically that all sorts of pedagogical requirements have to be added to this means of communication. Beyond any doubt, characteristics like speaking pace, word choice and repetition are of importance here. But just as important is how teachers immerse their learners in language, while at the same time preventing them, metaphorically speaking, from drowning; how teachers can create multiple occasions to train and elicit output, while avoiding endless drilling of language patterns (dry-swimming); how teachers can be a good example themselves, and facilitate and provide feedback, without scaring off their students. Guidelines for target language use should consider these and other aspects; they should be based on theory and tested in daily practice. Such evidence-based guidelines may then ensure that target language can actually be used in a consistent, challenging and accurate way with one distinct goal: *language learning*.

This insight led to two research questions, which focused on both teacher learning processes and student learning processes:

- 1 Are foreign language teachers able to acquire adequate target language pedagogy and apply it durably?
- 2 Is there a positive relation between teachers' adequate target language use and their students' performance and motivation in regular foreign language education?

In order to answer the research questions, this study has used a mixed methods approach combining elements from design research as well as quasi-experimental research. Research question 1 contained three subprojects: (1) developing a pedagogy for target language use, (2) developing a professional development programme for teachers in order to use the target language pedagogy correctly and (3) developing an adequate target language use observation instrument. In order to develop the target language pedagogy, characteristics of proper target language use were defined based on an elaborate literature study, which is described in chapter 2. The results of this study have been categorized in seven thematic sections of which the first section presents language acquisition theory with a specific focus on target language use. The subsequent sections consecutively deal with topics pertaining to language acquisition and more general pedagogy, such as language awareness, questioning, feedback, comprehension check and scaffolding, gesture, motivation issues, classroom routines, and the use of the school language (indicated as L1-use). These topics emerged from the

references found in the literature on target language use (using the snowball method) as well as observations of and interviews with language teachers and methodologists. Each section fed into the design principles that formed the basis for the target language pedagogy (*Doeltaal-Leertaal*).

The design principles that conclude chapter 2 bridge the gap between theory and method: they function as concise building blocks for the target language pedagogy. The full-fledged pedagogy is described in chapter 4. This chapter elaborates the design principles and provides a practical description of the pedagogy. It consists of a translation from theory to practice, which should be recognizable to both an academic as well as an everyday teaching perspective. It stresses that, although the didactic building blocks of the target language pedagogy certainly have their individual merits, they are meant to be applied as a coherent set of interventions that are mutually reinforcing. The second subproject, the professional development programme in which teachers were trained to use the target language pedagogy, was designed in a similar fashion as the first subproject: it was based on a literature study that focused on professional development didactics, which resulted in a set of specific design principles for a target language development programme. These principles were categorized in four groups: method, contents, progress evaluation and contextual conditions. The literature review and design principles are reported in chapter 3. The transfer from the design principles to the actual content and procedures of the development programme is reported and illustrated in chapter 5. Chapter 5 concludes with a brief outline of the two professional development courses that took place during the research project.

Altogether, two essential components of this research project, a target language pedagogy and a professional development programme, have been described in a theoretical part (chapters 2 and 3) and a more practical part (chapters 4 and 5). Chapter 6 adds an illustration of the way the professional development programme was carried out and the teachers' classroom experiences with the pedagogical intervention. It reveals the teachers' learning process during the project on the basis of their personal learning journals, systematic reflections and course evaluations. It offers a vivid insight into the daily practice of the teachers who worked for more than a year with the developed target language approach. In sum, chapters 2 to 6 present a coherent line from theory (on language acquisition and professional development) via two sets of design principles up to illustrated professional classroom practice and teacher development (see Figure 1, *Schematic structure of the research*).

The final subproject belonging to the first research question, was the development of an observation instrument which incorporated the previously identified characteristics of target language use. This instrument was necessary to ascertain whether, and to which degree, participants put the developed pedagogy into practice. The process of developing this instrument, from content to calibration, is described in chapter 7 (*Method*). This chapter also reports how the second research question was resolved: an extensive experiment was conducted, in which more than 600 secondary school students were taught French for a full school year by teachers using the developed target language pedagogy. One group of teachers took part in the one-year professional development programme *before* the classroom intervention year, while the other group took part in the programme *during* the intervention year. By monitoring and comparing the performances of both teacher groups, it was possible to ascertain whether the professional development programme was durable, in other words, whether teachers of the first group continued to use the new target language approach even a year after the course. At the end of the intervention year all students were tested on four language skills at the SEFR A1 level (for listening, reading, writing, and speaking) and were asked to fill out a motivation questionnaire. The student performances were compared to those of a control group and related to the target language teaching skills of their individual teachers (measured with the observation instrument). Chapter 7 presents the method, the participants and context, the research instruments, the research procedures, and the procedure for data analysis.

The results of the experiment are revealed in chapter 8. Three successive sections report on the results of the statistical analyses of data generated during the experiment. Firstly, the outcomes of systematic classroom observations show the professional progress of the participating teachers *during* and *after* the professional development programme (research question 1). Second, a

comparison between the performances and motivation of the intervention group to those of the control group reveals the effects of the target language pedagogy intervention on the students. Finally, the analysis concentrates on the value of the pedagogy by relating the target language performances of individual teachers to the linguistic performances and motivation of their classes (research question 2).

The results reported in chapter 8 lead to several clear-cut conclusions, to issues for discussion and to recommendations for further research, which are presented in chapter 9. First of all, the answers to the research questions are discussed. Teachers were indeed able to adopt the target language pedagogy and to apply it durably (question 1). The *Doeltaal-Leertaal* professional development programme assured substantial progress in the adequate use of the target language by all participating teachers. Teachers who took part in the programme a year before the intervention, continued to use the target language adequately. In general, however, some elements of the pedagogy (i.e. stimulating interaction between students), demanded more time and energy to acquire, while other elements were acquired at an earlier stage (i.e. a knowledgeable use of the L1 during language class).

Aspects of the professional development programme that appeared to be of great value during the project were the practical observation instrument, the number of *deliberate practice* activities during sessions, the consistently strong transfer between innovative theory and daily teaching practice, and the fact that the programme was extensive (Intensive?) and contained multiple opportunities to work together with colleagues in a safe learning environment. These aspects were also repeatedly mentioned in the professional development theory, as reported in chapter 3. Finally, many participants mentioned the importance of supportive colleagues and supervisors in their schools, while others pointed out that a lack of interest by colleagues decreased their professional motivation. It can be concluded that the educational context is pivotal to the potential success of educational innovation; this may need extra attention in further research.

A positive relation was found between the developed target language pedagogy and the language skills and motivation of the students (research question 2). Students who were taught French for a year using the *Doeltaal-Leertaal* pedagogy certainly profited from the new approach. They outperformed their peers in the control group on all skills, but most notably on *writing*. Worries that the omnipresence of the target language might weaken student motivation appeared unnecessary: intervention group students were just as motivated for French class as control group students. This may have to do with the safe learning environment and motivation strategies that are essential to the *Doeltaal-Leertaal* pedagogy. The lack of positive motivational effects may be an issue for future research.

Teacher performance appeared to be related to student performance. Teachers who acquired the target language pedagogy better than average, also attained better than average results with their students. It was impossible to identify specific target language criteria that might be responsible for this relation. A more probable claim would be a so-called *surplus* effect: the most notable effects become visible when applying the complete target language pedagogy, not just individual criteria. Moreover, the analysis of students' writing scores showed a possible positive relation between L1-use and feedback techniques (such as comprehension checks and scaffolding). Such an interaction has been mentioned in previous language acquisition theory (i.e. Cook, 2001 and Grasso, 2012) and supports the idea that metacognitive exchange between teacher and students could benefit from L1-use. Three other aspects emerged: first, there were only small differences between the test scores of the two intervention groups (classes with teachers who followed the professional development courses *before* or *during* the actual classroom intervention). Second, students of teachers with higher teaching degrees got better results than students of teachers with lower teaching degrees. This observation is consistent with research about teacher education (Garet et al., 2001 and Hatty, 2009) which claims a clear and positive link between teacher education and student performance. Third, it appeared that experienced teachers participating in the project did not have better results than teachers with less experience. This observation does not correspond with previous findings (i.e. Van der Grift & Van der Wal, 2010) that, on the contrary, show a positive

relation between professional experience and pedagogical ability. It is, however, encouraging that *Doeltaal-Leertaal* seems to be accessible and feasible for every teacher. Although it takes quite some effort (?), an extensive professional development programme does enable teachers, ranging between relatively unexperienced and highly experienced, to acquire the complete target language pedagogy.

Chapter 9, finally, reports on additional outcomes of the study; these are results other than answers to the research questions. In the course of this project, both the target language pedagogy and the framework for a professional development programme for teachers have proven successful. The framework for professional development programmes may also be used in projects and research by other teacher educators and researchers, while the target language pedagogy, *Doeltaal-Leertaal*, can be adopted by all teachers aiming at efficiently teaching their students a foreign language. Teachers should realize, however, that in some cases the effects of the pedagogy may be limited by the educational context: schools that, for example, employ a highly individualized approach to their students' learning process, where teachers are first and foremost *learning coaches* and where whole-class activities are rare, seem less suitable for the type of language education this pedagogy aims for. *Doeltaal-Leertaal* presumes interaction between teacher and students, a context where the teacher can navigate, push forward or slow down, foster individual work, lead or follow. Another useful tool is the target language observation instrument. Aside from research, it can also be used in teacher education as a tool for reflection for foreign language teachers or CLIL teachers (*content and language integrated learning*). Lastly, teachers who participated in the *Doeltaal-Leertaal* project emphasized the relevance of the learner awareness activities they did with their students and they underlined the importance of the pedagogical elements *repetition*, *inductive activities* and *classroom routines*. With this statement, the participants implicitly disclosed a connection between the target language pedagogy and the applied teacher education pedagogy: in both approaches the aspects repetition, inductive activities and routines appear to be of great importance.

In conclusion, it seems very plausible that the use of the foreign language during language class (by teachers and students) is an important and effective teaching tool, as is water to those who learn to swim. When teachers apply the target language in their classes, an interesting phenomenon occurs: the language used for classroom interaction stops being just the means of communication and *becomes* the means for learning. In other words, *target language* plays a crucially different role during language class than *language* does in any other class. This insight, that target language is the vehicle for learning, which needs specific teaching awareness in order to be used effectively, lies at the heart of this research project. It is a vitally different perspective on target language use than the prevailing practice in which target language is, often intuitively, used by teachers as a communication tool, which supposedly spontaneously leads to language acquisition. In this research, the target language is presented as a powerful and malleable learning tool that is to be applied with full attention of the teacher if enhanced foreign language learning is aimed for. In other words: *Target Language, A Vehicle for language Learning (Doeltaal-Leertaal)*.

The most tangible results of this research are an accessible pedagogy for target language use and two positive answers to the research questions: *yes*, teachers are able to learn to use the developed pedagogy (durably) and *yes*, if that pedagogy is applied, it reinforces the students' learning process, without showing negative effects on student motivation. An additional outcome, that should certainly not be overlooked, is the professionalism and joy many teachers felt, often together with their students, while participating in this project. Many of them indicated (in evaluation forms or journals) that they looked back on the programme with great satisfaction and that they believed themselves to be a better teacher than before. Participants characterized their new approach as foreign language education with ample but consciously practiced target language use, with a strongly inductive nature in a safe learning environment, where classroom routines provide structure, reassurance and occasions to learn, where there is room for the L1 and where teachers are in charge, whether this means keeping control or giving room. Some of them feared not being able to build a strong bond with their students when applying the target language abundantly.

This did not happen. Overall, students were willing to take part in the lessons and developed a positive relation with their teacher and subject.

This research not only celebrates pedagogical results, it also celebrates the phenomenon *Learning*: How we can all continue to learn and how learning affects ourselves and, consequently, the people around us. *Learning* started, in this project, with the researcher himself, but quickly spread to the participating teachers and their students. In all this, one notion took a central position: learning, whether by students, teachers or researchers, seldom comes freely. It demands that the learning context and the pedagogical source are of high quality: a well-designed professional development programme, a conscious teacher and a noticing student, an adequate pedagogy, ample collaboration opportunities and a safe context. In this research, a clear parallel can be found between the target language pedagogy *Doeltaal-Leertaal* and the approach chosen for the professional development programme. In both cases, what we know from decades of pedagogical and linguistic research (psychological?), should be applied consciously in the context of the classroom and be focused on profound and durable learning. Intuitive and spontaneous professionalization activities will, just as intuitive use of the target language, only have accidental learning effects. In order for students to truly learn, adequate target language use, and good education in a more general sense, demands conscious teachers.

Chapter 1 Introduction	
Theoretical framework	Chapter 2 Literature review – theoretical basis for target language pedagogy
	Chapter 3 Literature review – theoretical basis for professionalization programme
Pedagogical design	Chapter 4 A target language pedagogy <i>Doeltaal-Leertaal</i>
	Chapter 5 A professionalization programme <i>Doeltaal-Leertaal</i>
	Chapter 6 Practice and reflections of teachers and students using <i>Doeltaal-Leertaal</i>
Structure	Chapter 7 Method
Evaluation	Chapter 8 Results <i>Doeltaal-Leertaal</i> : teachers and students
Chapter 9 Conclusion and discussion	

Figure 1. *Schematic Structure of the Research*. Chapters 2 and 3 provide the theoretical basis for chapters 4 and 5.