

Bilingual education in Dutch schools: *a success story*



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Bilingual education in Dutch schools: a success story

The intention of this brochure is to inform interested parties outside the Netherlands about the increasingly popular system of bilingual education, more commonly known in Dutch as *tweetalig onderwijs* or **TTO**. Bilingual education is probably the most successful development in the history of the Dutch education system. This is likely due to the fact that it is the schools that have taken the initiative and it is the schools that organise standardisation and quality assurance. With regard to quality, such peer-to-peer coordination and organisation is a major advantage, as is the incorporation of international orientation as a fixed part of the curriculum.



1 An outline of bilingual education in the Netherlands

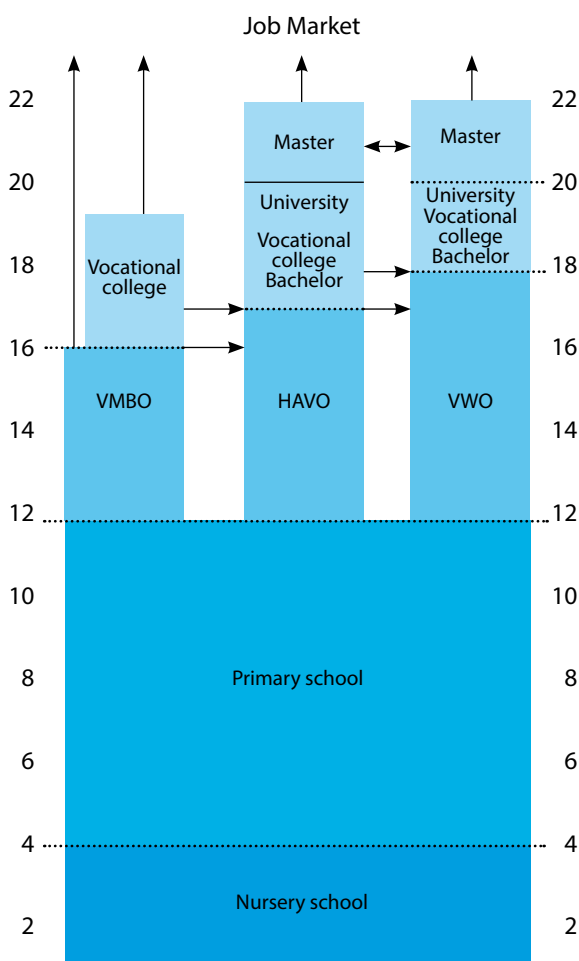
It is no secret that the Dutch speak good English. And with the Netherlands' extensive history of international trade and the UK as neighbours, it is hardly surprising. But Dutch secondary schools have been inspired even further to stimulate the teaching of English outside the regular English lessons and to encourage students to open their minds to other cultures.

It all started back in 1989, when an international school started a bilingual stream for Dutch children. A handful of regular schools already offering international projects to their students soon followed their example, and by the early 1990s these pioneering schools were helping other schools to also set up bilingual streams. Since then the concept has flourished.

The main difference between bilingual education and international education – apart from the fact that Dutch children are welcome – is that in bilingual education almost half the curricular subjects are still taught in Dutch. This is because the pupils still follow the Dutch curriculum and at the end of their school career must still take the Dutch school-leaving exams. Many bilingual schools complement the Dutch exams with the English Language and Literature Certificate from the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. Also, a substantial number of schools offer a Cambridge English language exam (such as CAE or FCE), or implement the Cambridge Global Perspectives course or Checkpoint tests. Fortunately, experience has shown that receiving tuition partly in English appears to have no negative effect on the students' knowledge of Dutch. Time has also shown that the two main aims of bilingual education – increasing students' language proficiency and providing them with an international outlook – are certainly being fulfilled.

At last count there were 120 secondary schools offering bilingual education in the Netherlands – almost one in five of all secondary schools – catering to nearly 30,000 students. Most of these schools offer TTO at the pre-university level, but an increasing number of schools also offer bilingual streams at the two other levels of the Dutch education system.

Briefly, the Netherlands has three levels of secondary education. On the basis of their primary school results, 12-year-olds are advised to follow education at one of three levels: 4-year pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO), 5-year intermediate secondary



Basic structure of the Dutch education system.

education (**HAVO**) or 6-year pre-university secondary education (**VWO**). A VMBO diploma prepares students for vocational college and a HAVO diploma provides access to institutes of higher professional education (HBO), also known as vocational colleges or universities of applied sciences (see figure). A VWO diploma gives students access to university. Most secondary schools offer education at all three levels but there are also designated VMBO schools, for example.

As long as the programme is adapted to their level, pupils of all abilities can benefit from bilingual education. Recent research has shown that a large majority of children starting secondary school are keen to be taught in English – not only because many of them already start speaking English at primary school, but also because it can be useful in their further education and future professions, whatever their academic level. Although when TTO started in the Netherlands it was considered only suitable for brighter pupils, the successes of bilingual VMBO have proved that this is not the case. A further advantage of TTO appears to be that pupils' language skills in Dutch also improve!

The schools interested in providing bilingual education at the pre-vocational level (bilingual VMBO or T-VMBO) now have their own national working group, made up of about 30 schools, 15 of which have already started teaching a T-VMBO programme. Each school decides for itself how to implement the required teaching time in English, which is less than that in the HAVO/VWO classes. Some schools choose an approach similar to that of HAVO/VWO, with some of the curricular subjects taught through English, whereas other schools prefer English-language projects. Others combine the two.

The fact that pupils can now also follow bilingual education at the pre-vocational level ties in nicely with the increasing number of primary schools offering early foreign language education. Although the level of English at the end of primary school varies enormously, depending on how much English teaching is done in the primary schools, there can now be a much smoother transition – as far as English is concerned – in the education of students from primary up to tertiary education. The provision of T-VMBO fills the missing link for children in the Netherlands who are less academic but who are keen to be taught in English. It also ties in with the increasing number of courses in English offered by vocational colleges.



2 Organisation: the European Platform and the Network

Once the number of schools offering bilingual education started to grow, it became necessary to establish guidelines and – following the example of the international schools – matters such as standardisation and quality assurance were discussed. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science appointed the European Platform as the coordinating body responsible for monitoring the development of TTO in the Netherlands. The European Platform's experience as a centre of internationalisation in the Dutch education system made it the ideal organisation to take on this role – independent from the government but working closely with the Ministry of Education to achieve its aims of excellence.

WHAT ABOUT TTO IN OTHER LANGUAGES?

There are two schools in the northeast and southeast of the Netherlands that offer bilingual Dutch and German education. Living close to the border means these students can easily visit their German neighbours. These schools also receive support from the European Platform.

The European Platform's specific role in bilingual education is to support the acquisition of English (or German, see box) through subject teaching and internationalisation. But as well as being the coordination point for bilingual education – providing support to schools developing or already teaching a bilingual stream – the European Platform continues to provide crucial support and funding to a wide range of educational institutions interested in organising international activities.

In 1994, the European Platform set up the national Network of Dutch Bilingual Schools to promote cooperation between TTO schools and to keep schools abreast of crucial matters such as certification, standardisation and the development of educational materials. These topics are discussed regularly between the TTO coordinators (see box) in the Network.

ROLE OF THE TTO COORDINATORS

Each TTO school appoints a TTO coordinator to lead the team of TTO teachers and to liaise between the teachers and school management. All TTO coordinators meet three times a year and also receive support from the European Platform in the form of training courses. Such courses help TTO coordinators to develop the particular mindset needed in this unique role within the school and provide them with practical advice on financial matters and on the writing of the required policy documents, for example.

The Network is led by a steering group, which is made up of five principals from schools with a well-established bilingual stream as well as two members of staff from the European Platform. The steering group leads the Network meetings of TTO coordinators. It also creates policy and takes a longer-term view on bilingual education. The European Platform also organises meetings between the school principals so that they remain involved and informed. But the main driving force behind TTO is the schools themselves, so not only the principals and TTO coordinators but also the subject teachers.

The teachers get together in greater numbers at the biannual TTO conference – a major date on the TTO calendar – and in smaller numbers at subject meetings. Each subject taught in English has a subject coordinator who coordinates the communication between teachers of the same subject and liaises with the European Platform.

As if that were not enough, the European Platform also helps organise student competitions between schools – an excellent opportunity to show off their English, whether it be during the Junior Speaking Contest, the Cricket Challenge, the Team Mathematics Challenge, the Debating Competition or the Drama Contest.



One thing neither the European Platform nor the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science does is to directly fund bilingual education. Although small subsidies are available for schools starting out with TTO, a school's primary source of funding is the parents. The level of the parental contribution varies greatly from school to school, depending on their circumstances, but the average amounts to € 450 per student per year. This is considerably higher than the contribution paid by parents of non-TTO children.

The money is used to cover the school's TTO-related costs such as teacher training (both at home and abroad), teaching materials (textbooks but also magazines, DVDs, dictionaries), extracurricular activities (visits to English-language theatre groups, participation in the Model United Nations), school exchanges and other international activities. In the future it is hoped that extra contributions from parents will no longer be necessary, and that the costs can be covered by the Ministry of Education and possibly through corporate funding.

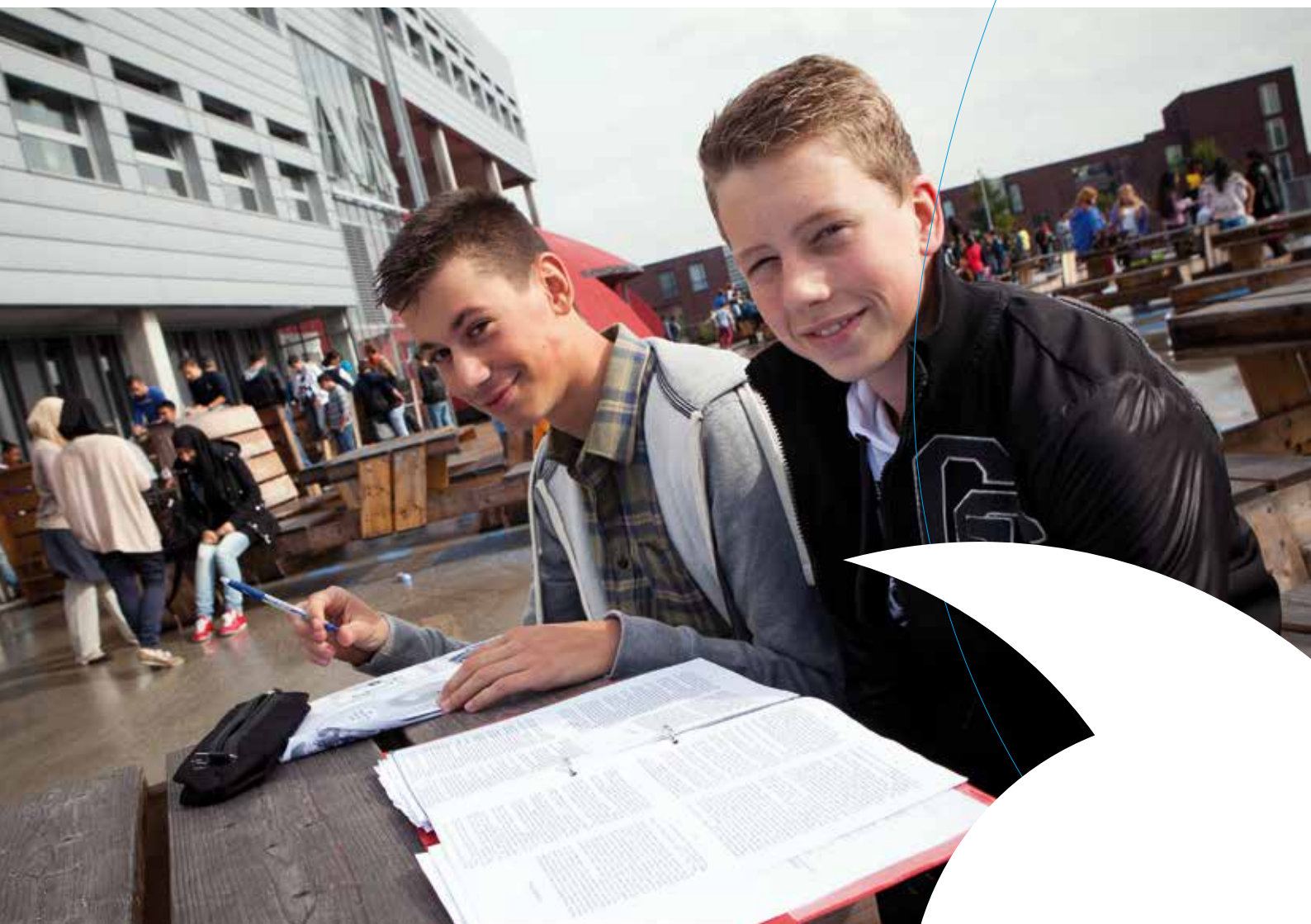
3 Teaching through a foreign language: CLIL

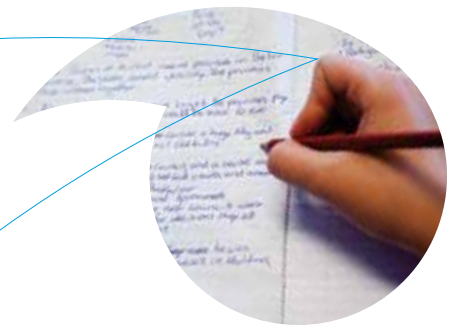
CLIL stands for **Content and Language Integrated Learning** and is crucial to the success of bilingual education. Bilingual teaching in the Netherlands is not just a matter of switching the language in which classes are taught, but combines subject teaching with the teaching of language skills. So teachers of subjects such as Biology, Maths and Physical Education are expected not only to talk English during their lessons but also to stimulate their students to use language; and use it in a way that not only improves their vocabulary and fluency but also helps them to become more confident speakers.

For HAVO and VWO classes, the TTO Standard (see below) dictates that at least half the teaching time is in English. Together with the extra English

lessons that most schools provide, this means that in the first three years of secondary school TTO students are exposed to approximately six times more English in class than their non-TTO peers; not to mention the extracurricular activities – both within school and together with other schools.

From day one, the main instruction language in the TTO subjects is English and students are expected to speak English whenever they can. This can be quite daunting for many students, especially those who were taught the minimum of English at primary school, but experience has shown that the great majority rise to the challenge.





Due to its broad approach CLIL can have many benefits, as mentioned on the European Commission's web page on language-teaching:

- it increases learners' motivation and confidence in both the language and the subject
- it diversifies methods and forms of classroom practice
- it builds intercultural knowledge and understanding
- it develops intercultural communication skills
- it improves language competence and oral communication skills
- it develops multilingual interests and attitudes
- it provides opportunities to study content through different perspectives
- it allows learners more contact with the target language
- it does not require extra teaching hours
- it complements other subjects rather than competes with them.

Reaping the reward of such benefits naturally requires a change in a teacher's skills set and it can take several years for a school to sufficiently train its teachers. Firstly, to be able to give a good example to their students and to feel confident when teaching in English, the teacher's own English must be good. Since very few Dutch secondary school teachers are themselves bilingual and even fewer are native speakers of English, the first logical step for a school starting out with bilingual education is to start improving the level of English of its teachers. This often takes place through the Cambridge English exams, such as the Certificate in Advanced English (CAE) and the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE). The second – often simultaneous – step is for them to undergo training in CLIL methodology. The degree to which teachers follow such training depends on the school itself: a school with a large bilingual department usually invests more time and effort in CLIL than a school with just a single class.

To a certain extent, subject teachers in CLIL are therefore also expected to be language teachers. They have a responsibility for the students' language development and they need to understand the

language challenges students are likely to encounter, as well as how such challenges may contribute to students' language development. They should understand the type of language that students need to develop within the subject they teach, as well as how the language learning process works in a school context. This knowledge helps them to take decisions on where to place the focus in their lessons.

The best way of ensuring that teachers apply CLIL in their classrooms is to provide them with in-service training. It is desirable for all teachers to have a wide repertoire of student activities for each topic dealt with in their subject, but when teaching in a different language this repertoire must be even larger and involve a wider variety of teaching methods. CLIL teachers therefore need access to many different examples, as well as feedback from CLIL trainers on what they are doing in their lessons and how they can improve their teaching methods.

While training of teachers in CLIL methods involves a major investment in time and effort for a school, the benefits to the school as a whole should not be forgotten. TTO teachers often do not only teach TTO classes and there is no reason for them not to apply their CLIL skills in their Dutch classes – in fact they do. The interactive activities they use in TTO classes are generally just as applicable in Dutch as they are in English. The active learning methods are usually also more appealing to students. A second advantage of such training is that teachers trained in CLIL are often more likely than their peers to try out new teaching methods in their classes, methods which may in turn spread to their other classes and to their colleagues.

Finally, CLIL methodology has a positive influence on the general teaching of languages in a school. Whereas in many non-bilingual schools Dutch takes over from French and German all too often in such classes, in bilingual schools all languages in the curriculum are paid more attention: the principle of using the target language as the instruction language is a requirement not only of TTO classes but also of lessons in other modern languages.





4 Internationalisation: European and International Orientation (EIO)

As mentioned above, TTO was the brainchild of a handful of schools that were not only interested in teaching through English but also in internationalisation. This interest in other countries and other cultures sets bilingual education in the Netherlands apart and gives it a double focus: the acquisition of a second language alongside the international context in which this acquisition takes place. While many secondary schools in the Netherlands do organise international student exchanges, generally little attention is paid to European or international orientation in the lessons themselves. Bilingual education stands out in this respect by integrating such orientation into the curriculum so that the students' contacts across the borders are far more than mere tourism, thereby generating knowledgeable, confident world citizens.

While the international orientation of TTO students is stimulated through a whole range of activities – such as school exchanges, international email projects, theatre visits, participation in the European Youth Parliament and English-language debating competitions – the school also encourages subject teachers to discuss international topics during their regular lessons and to take part in cross-curricular activities and in study visits and training programmes abroad. These activities encourage both students and teachers to communicate in another language, bringing them in close contact with other cultures. Many schools have incorporated the Cambridge Global Perspectives course into the curriculum, to give depth and weight to the international aspect of TTO.

When asked about this international aspect of their school years, TTO students themselves mention three specific advantages. Firstly, there is an academic advantage. While their proficiency in English clearly provides smoother access to further education in other countries, it is also a plus for those choosing to study in the Netherlands, where a lot of the teaching material is in English and an increasing number of courses at the bachelors and masters level are taught in English.

Secondly, the students mention a personal advantage. Specific activities such as giving presentations and debating – that form a greater part of the curriculum in TTO than in non-TTO classes – provide them with skills very much needed in their further studies. Having had plenty of practice at school gives them self-confidence both in Dutch and English, particularly during presentations. The fact that TTO students face daily challenges and are encouraged to have a critical outlook also contributes to the mentality needed on many university courses.

Finally, there is a social advantage. There is a considerable amount of social interaction in bilingual education – as a result, TTO students say that they find it easier than their peers to make personal contacts. Not only are they used to switching from one language to another, they also see bilingual education as an eye-opener. The contacts they make with various teachers and students from other countries contribute to their personal development and provide them with a more global outlook.

Although it is apparent that internationalisation is becoming profoundly ingrained in TTO at many levels and that it has numerous advantages for students, some schools starting out with TTO do need help integrating it into the curriculum. **European and International Orientation (EIO)** is an explicit criterion of the TTO Standard (see below). The Standard stipulates the results students are expected to achieve with regard to EIO in both the lower and upper forms.

To help schools implement EIO into their curriculum, the Network of Dutch Bilingual Schools works jointly with a group of schools known as the European Elos Network. Elos is a Europe-wide project that aims to promote European and international dimensions in education. In the Netherlands this network is made up of 36 schools – not all of them TTO schools – that have considerable experience in integrating EIO into the curriculum. The Elos network in the Netherlands is also coordinated by the European Platform.

One of the things that the Elos network has done is to develop indicators for the 'Europe Competence' of pupils aged 12-19, also known as the **Common Framework for Europe Competence (CFEC)**.

The structure of the framework follows that of the better-known Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, see below). It states six levels of achievement in four different domains. In brief, these domains relate to the students' knowledge, skills and attitude with regard to specific structures and institutions in Europe; collaboration

with peers from other countries; and communication in an international setting. Students in an EIO programme therefore not only improve their knowledge but also engage in specific activities.

Schools can use the CFEC – with support from the European Platform and Elos schools – to ensure that the integration of EIO into the curriculum meets the criteria of the TTO Standard. Other tools are currently being developed to help provide schools with ideas for projects, for lesson plans and much more.



5 Quality assurance

The Dutch schools involved in bilingual education have worked hard to achieve excellence and are proud of the results. Such high standards have meant that – from the very beginning – standardisation has been a key issue and it is now embodied in what is known as the **Standard for Bilingual Education**. It is endorsed by all members of the Network of Dutch Bilingual Schools and defines the basic requirements for schools that offer a bilingual stream. The Standard was drawn up by the schools together with researchers, teacher training institutes and the European Platform, thereby putting the power of decision in the hands of the schools themselves; and it is this aspect that ensures that meeting the criteria of the Standard is feasible.

The Standard applies to all schools in the Network, whatever their stage of development – from a school starting out, all the way up to a school that has generated several batches of TTO school leavers. The Standard stipulates several requirements for TTO schools, including the following: a significant proportion of the instruction, from the first year until the final exams, must be in English; EIO must form part of the curriculum; schools should ideally employ native speakers; materials used in the lessons should be of high quality; and the teaching should incorporate CLIL methodology. The Standard also stipulates that language proficiency in Dutch may not be negatively influenced.



As far as the language proficiency in English is concerned, by the end of the first three years at a TTO school students are expected to meet the requirements of the B2 level of the **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)**. The CEFR describes what a learner of a language should have achieved at each level with regard to reading, listening, speaking and writing. There are six levels, ranging from a beginner at A1 to a proficient user at the C2 level. Such proficiency can be assessed by means of the Cambridge International Checkpoint exam, or the Cambridge First Certificate of English, for example.

Other requirements of the Standard relate to the teachers – not only is their language proficiency also expected to be at the CEFR B2 level or higher, the Standard's 'Competency profile for TTO teachers' outlines what is expected of TTO teachers, as well as of their lessons and teaching resources. It also makes recommendations for student assessment and didactic approach.

TTO schools are subject to quality control at different stages of development. During the first stages this means that an aspiring TTO school is expected to document its policy on bilingual education and internationalisation, to join the Network and participate in Network meetings, all with the assistance of both the Network and the European Platform. Once this information-gathering phase is complete and the first TTO class has started, schools then undergo a number of inspections, from both



peers and the European Platform. These inspections make use of an assessment framework that provides schools with an overview of what is expected of them.

The TTO department's progress is assessed during an advisory inspection in the second year of TTO teaching. A second inspection takes place two years later. If the school demonstrates that it has met the requirements of the Standard, it is awarded the 'Junior TTO School' certificate. Such certification from the European Platform is a seal of approval that proves to the outside world that the school is a true bilingual school. While some schools go no further than the 'Junior' level, most others work towards acquiring the 'Senior TTO School' certificate, requiring inspection in the school's seventh year of teaching bilingual education.

But that is by no means the end of the quality assurance process. Even the pioneering schools must work hard to continue to meet the requirements of the Standard. While they naturally play a greater role in helping and assessing their peers through the Network and in adapting the Standard as bilingual education develops and prospers, the more experienced schools also undergo periodical re-inspection by peers.

6 Teacher training

For bilingual education to be successful, it is fundamental that its teachers be well trained. While not all Dutch teachers are very proficient in English, all are fortunate to be in a country where they are exposed to a lot of English, which makes it perhaps easier for Dutch teachers to polish their language skills to teach at bilingual schools in English.

The training of secondary school teachers at Dutch further education institutions is basically provided at two levels: firstly, there are Bachelor's programmes at the institutes of higher professional education that train teachers to teach the first three years of HAVO/VWO and the full four years of VMBO; and secondly, there are Master's programmes at the universities, for students already in possession of a degree in a school subject, that train teachers to teach the upper forms of HAVO and VWO as well as the lower forms.

While such programmes are taught nearly exclusively in Dutch, some institutes that provide teacher training at the bachelor level are starting to develop programmes that help to prepare teachers for bilingual education – in the form of a CLIL minor for example. Similarly, a number of Master's programmes currently prepare their students for the Cambridge International Certificate for Teachers in Bilingual Education. Part of the curriculum in such programmes is focused on CLIL, and students conduct their teaching practice at a TTO school or at a school abroad. While the European Platform is working to standardise TTO teacher training programmes, this is still in its early stages. The most important aspects of such programmes are the teaching of language didactics within the international CLIL context and provision of specific training in CLIL theory and bilingual education.

For teachers already working at TTO schools there are several options for in-service training in CLIL methodology. Teachers can follow standard CLIL workshops or receive training specific to the needs of the school – all in line with the TTO teacher profile that is required by the TTO Standard. CLIL training is also available in the Netherlands for teachers from other countries, and more and more visitors from abroad are making use of this possibility.

While all of the above is mainly relevant to subject teachers who teach their subject through English, a further aspect of teacher training that is gaining increasing attention is extra training for English teachers. Alongside the regular HAVO or VWO exam for English, which most students score very well on, students in the upper forms also work towards the International Baccalaureate (IB) exam for English. Teaching this internationally recognised IB programme requires quite a bit more from English teachers than the regular English programme in the upper forms. The IB students must do a lot more essay writing, for example. To help English teachers in the upper forms of TTO prepare their students for the IB exam, the European Platform organises certified workshops in IB English. The workshops are much appreciated by the teachers who also make use of this networking opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences.

7 Research

With the number of schools in bilingual education in the Netherlands increasing year by year, it is important to keep track of how bilingual students fare both during their education and after they leave school. It is also important to know how teachers in bilingual education can be effectively trained and what the effects of such training are, for example. Such knowledge requires well-considered research and analysis by language experts.

EUROPEAN PLATFORM PROFESSOR

Rick de Graaff has recently been appointed Professor of Bilingual Education at Utrecht University, where he teaches modern language pedagogy but also conducts research into the didactics and the impact of bilingual education. Such research is of particular importance to fend off some critics of bilingual education who say that it hinders the development of the students' Dutch language skills.

A study conducted by the University of Groningen in 2010 demonstrated that the level of English of children attending T-VWO is considerably higher than that of their VWO peers, even after correction for academic level. Not only this, but the English they use

is more authentic and natural-sounding thanks to the greater use of language 'chunks' (groups of words that form grammatical units). Such research is continuing at Utrecht University under the supervision of Professor de Graaff (see box), but with a focus now on the language development – and the success of the TTO programme – in a T-VMBO setting, where the TTO critics' voices ring somewhat louder.

While the research described above has demonstrated the effectiveness of CLIL in bilingual education, at least for VWO students, it is important to note that CLIL is not exclusive to bilingual education. CLIL can be beneficial to many different learning environments and to learning in any subject. The role of teachers is vital in this respect. The fact that teachers take this role seriously has been demonstrated by preliminary findings from another study conducted at Utrecht University where, during teacher observations, CLIL subject teachers were seen to apply good foreign language pedagogy practice in their classes, both explicitly and implicitly. The fact that they are teaching their subject through a foreign language and that their students need support in both understanding and producing language appears to create a natural environment for language learning – and therefore also for language teaching and the support of language development.



8 Getting in touch with the European Platform

You are welcome to get in touch with the European Platform. We are open to various forms of cooperation and can provide tailored services for individual cases. We can provide support in the following ways:

- We can arrange **workshops and presentations** at conferences and symposiums. The teachers and school leaders in our network are more than willing to share their practice with colleagues abroad. The European Platform can liaise with you to establish the appropriate input for your event.
- We can **connect** CLIL and teacher training professionals with schools and institutes for higher education to share their expertise and help you build professional relationships. In the Netherlands a number of teacher training programmes catering especially for CLIL schools have been developed; their approaches to curriculum building may be starting points for institutions aiming to incorporate CLIL provision.
- We can provide input at a **systemic** level regarding curriculum development, international assessment, standardisation and evaluation.
- We can help to **develop** networks. The Dutch bilingual schools' network did not come into existence overnight, and we have learnt something about building school networks along the way. We are happy to share our insights online or in person.
- We can arrange **school visits** to one or more of the 120+ schools in the network. Through a school visit you can see bilingual education in action and have the opportunity to talk to school leaders, teachers and students.

We are committed to supporting excellence in education in any way we can and are happy to find the mode of collaboration that works best for you.



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