

Bilingual Primary Education – Here to Stay!



The pilot Bilingual Primary Education (BPE)

In 2011, a group of parents from The Hague entered talks with EarlyBird and the Europees Platform (now called Nuffic) about establishing a bilingual primary school. This resulted in a plan being submitted to the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. After a preliminary study into the successes of bilingual primary education abroad, the selection rounds for the BPE pilot started in 2013. Over the following two years, 19 schools started bilingual primary education; in these schools, 30-50% of the lesson time is conducted in English. A steering committee was established to coordinate the network and collaborate with researchers, curriculum developers and publishers.

The first cohort of 800 students started in 2014 and has since left primary school. These students, from twelve different schools, were followed throughout their careers by scientific research (FoTo). The results of the assessments of students in group 8 (the final year of primary school) will be published this year. This officially marks the end of the BPE pilot and 10 years of intensive cooperation between schools, the steering committee and external partners. In this magazine we share what we have learned and what it has meant for the schools, teachers and of course the students and parents. The cheerful character of the magazine is reflective of the dynamics and atmosphere at the schools and in the network. BPE has been an inspirational pilot. This document is an English summary of the magazine.

Share our similarities, celebrate our differences

There are major differences between the pilot schools. This was a deliberate tenet from the start of the pilot. Not only the educational concepts, but also the degree of experience with teaching in English differed. In addition to schools with an International Primary (where everything is conducted in English,) schools where English was taught from group 1 (ages 4-5) onwards and schools that until then only taught English from group 7 (ages 10-11) onwards also joined. The students' experience with English also varied: some students do not speak English or Dutch at home, some are native English speakers, some had no prior experience with the English language.



In the pilot, each school was given the space and time to develop its own kind of BPE, aligned with their pedagogical views, experience of their own team and their school's demographics. In this way, schools could take into account the (language) skills of their teachers, determine for themselves how to aim for 30-50% teaching time in English and how they expanded the programme to higher groups. For the schools, this meant that everything had to be conceived from scratch. Consider curriculum development, progress monitoring, choice of materials, information for parents, etc. The schools indicated that all the work they put in made a positive impact across the school.

Three schools made the well-considered choice to leave the pilot early. This is also characteristic of a pilot: the programme can be demanding for a team and organisational problems can arise within the school. There are currently 16 schools with more than 4,500 pupils following a BPE programme.

Teachers going the extra mile

Each school has a BPE coordinator who is responsible for the curriculum at their own school and acts as a linking pin between the national network and the teachers of their school. Knowledge is further expanded through, for example, national study days and school visits.

In the end, it all happens in the classrooms. It is up to the teachers to shape and implement programmes of study and lesson plans in terms of content and (language) pedagogy. That requires a lot of skill and the willingness to go the extra mile, among other things through refresher courses at home and abroad, mutual school visits and a lot of customization.



When the students go to secondary school, this requires extra effort from the teacher. How can a secondary school take into account the better command of English and the confidence of the BPE students? The percentage of BPE schools is still low, but the demand for more differentiated English will increase. Consultation with secondary schools on the continuous programme of study for English started a few years ago and the first partnerships are emerging.

Happy children and happy parents

Pupils and parents of a number of BPE schools were interviewed for the magazine. Students are excited about the challenge of learning English and learning in English. They talk passionately about their projects, their English presentations and especially how English has become a normal part of their school life. During a school day, part of the daily circle time

takes place in English, a maths problem is explained in two languages and the day ends with an English song. It's no longer remarkable to the students.

Parents praise the attention to internationalisation in the many projects. They express great satisfaction with the level of their children's language skills and the ease with which they speak English outside school, for example when they befriend foreign children on holiday.

A pilot such as BPE is challenging for the school. The confidence parents have in the school and the programme is very important. A number of schools have grown considerably since they started offering BPE. The added value of the programme and the enjoyment of the students could well be logical explanations for that growth.



Co-creation of the curriculum

SLO—the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development—have been involved in the pilot since the preparatory years. Together with Nuffic and the schools, they have worked on the programme of study for the English language. There was intensive cooperation between the schools and SLO about questions such as: What should the pupils learn? What is the best way for them to learn? How do we develop the language skills? How do we move from listening and speaking to reading and writing? SLO proposals were tested, discussed and adjusted in a cyclical process. The learning path was completed in 2022.

Among the higher groups, a discussion about spelling arose during the pilot. It's difficult to give explicit attention to spelling within the work on course content, such as History, for example. You want students to learn English implicitly and at the same time learn to write in

English as correctly as possible. To support teachers on this issue, the handbook Spelling in het tpo was developed.

SLO has contributed further products to the pilot, among others, an observation list for the first four years. In the first groups the development of English is limited to listening, speaking and early reading. It can be helpful for the teacher to have an instrument to keep track of the progress. In addition, SLO has developed a global citizenship guide. Education at the BPE schools is strongly project-based and many projects have an international orientation. In addition, there is plenty of room for independent use of language in bilingual education. This balanced approach supports students to become articulate citizens of the world.



FoTo – long-term research into the effects

A consortium of researchers from Radboud University Nijmegen, Maastricht University and Utrecht University followed the development of the students and teachers during the pilot. This FoTo study conducted four assessments between 2015 and 2022. In the first year, a baseline assessment took place in group 1, followed by further testing in groups 3, 5 and 8. The results of BPE pupils were compared with those of pupils from two control groups: schools where up to 15% of lesson time was conducted in English from group 1 onwards and schools where English was taught from group 7 onwards. A total of 32 schools, divided over the three types of education, were involved in the FoTo study.

It was essential for the pilot that BPE students show a development in Dutch and mathematics comparable to that of the control group. The research has shown that this is the case. For English, there are significantly higher scores on all assessments.

FoTo is a long-term and extensive study. A total of 927 students from groups 1 to 8 were followed. The assessments in group 8 required 2 to 2.5 hours per student. The research also focused on the teacher and school. Dozens of lesson observations and questionnaires for teachers provided insight into their language skills and pedagogy. The differences between the schools were also mapped out to determine the influence of, among other things, the percentage of English teaching time on the results. Conversations with parents and board members of the schools provided further insight into relevant factors for the results of the students. The results of the final assessment in 2022 will be reported in the course of 2023. Based on these final results, advice will be provided to the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, FoTo's client.

BPE and the future

What is the future of BPE in the Netherlands? At the time of this magazine's publication it is not yet clear whether bilingual primary education will be legally permitted. Based partly on the experiences of the pilot and the results of the FoTo study, the Minister will formulate a proposal to the House of Representatives.

The pilot can already be called a success because pupils, parents and teachers report bilingual education as a positive experience. It fits in well with the international orientation of Dutch society. With the arrival of international students, from refugees to expats, there is a growing demand for education that responds to this internationalisation. Our wish is for BPE to be accessible to all students, provided that the conditions are met to guarantee quality. As pilot schools and steering committee, we look forward to the future of internationally oriented, bilingual primary education.

