

SUMMARY

Definition of the problem

The Netherlands is an open society that looks beyond its own borders,, whether in business, politics, science or other sectors. The same is true of much of the country's population. The Netherlands is also a country of immigrants, with more than 2.5 million inhabitants having grown up speaking a second language in addition to Dutch. In other words, there is much more diversity in the Netherlands today than fifty or even thirty years ago, and this trend is set to continue in the decades ahead. Oddly enough, the education sector and many other segments of society have grown less rather than more interested in languages and multilingualism in recent decades.

The report *Languages for the Netherlands* examines what this paradox means for the position of languages in various sectors of society and in Dutch education. The report also explores the consequences for the Dutch language as a means of communication. Closely related is the question of how to bridge the gap between different cultures. To achieve social cohesion in a multilingual and multicultural society, we must have a knowledge of its main languages and cultures. The question then is: what knowledge is essential for health care or law enforcement professionals, for example, and what should all inhabitants of the Netherlands know? It is a question that urgently requires an answer, especially at a time when, influenced by the forces of globalisation and migration, people often communicate in multiple languages, both in their work and in their everyday social environment. The languages that newcomers bring to and use in the Netherlands are also an enrichment. They can generate added value for our knowledge economy, but only if we make good use of the linguistic expertise in our midst. The study that underpins this report considered the consequences of increased multilingualism for communication between people and between people and institutions, the implications of multilingualism for education in the Netherlands, and the changes necessary in that regard. It considered various sectors of Dutch society in which language plays an important role, i.e. health care, law enforcement and the courts; international relations; cultural cohesion; trade and the economy.

The study further examined the impact of the multilingual society on the education sector as a whole. The Netherlands aims to play an influential role in the global economy and in worldwide politics and diplomacy. A broad knowledge of languages is indispensable in that context – a point highlighted by Brexit, for example. The balance between European languages can shift and the necessity of knowing a specific language may suddenly change. This requires a well-educated population and an educational system that offers enough scope for language, fluency and intercultural competences. The Committee believes that government, academia, cultural institutions and the private sector do not express that aim sufficiently in their language choices and policy. They should display more language awareness and pay closer attention to interculturality than they do at present.

‘If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head.
If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.’
Nelson Mandela

Main findings

The study reveals, first of all, that there is a need throughout the education sector for more robust and differentiated basic training in Dutch. More and more inhabitants of the Netherlands come from a language background other than Dutch. The level of education within this group is also very diverse. They require effective and varied schooling in Dutch, so that as many people as possible have a good command of the language.

Second, government must pay closer attention to communicating in clear and comprehensible Dutch with the inhabitants of our increasingly diverse society, especially with those who have poor Dutch language skills.

Thirdly, we can make much better use, both within and outside the borders of the Netherlands, of the enormous knowledge of Dutch people who speak English, German, Arabic, Turkish, Spanish, Chinese and many other languages. It is important that we enhance and mobilise their skills.

Fourth, the policy concerning continuous learning pathways in education should make more allowance for multilingualism and do more to differentiate between levels of competence. At the moment, each type of school offers language training in its own way, without any coordination between the different methods used. Language lessons in vocational education and training should be attuned to the relevant professional profiles; this can be achieved by identifying the language skills and level of competence that a particular profession requires. This will allow the Netherlands to capitalise more effectively on changes in the demographic composition of its

population, in the international balance of power, and in economic relations.

Fifth and last, the Committee sees the need for a more active, more outward-looking language sector at the universities and beyond. The sector lacks an expertise centre that can match the supply of knowledge to the demand.

Recommendations

The Committee concludes that there is an urgent need for an integrated national language policy that can anticipate and respond to society's demand for language expertise. The findings outlined above can provide the basis of such a policy.

Government, but also many institutions and businesses, still lack the necessary vision and policy in this regard, even though multilingualism can be a source of innovation and improve international contacts. Following in the footsteps of its neighbouring countries, the Netherlands should formulate a national language policy. The objectives of that policy should be as follows:

- All inhabitants of the Netherlands should be able to read and write a common language, i.e. Dutch, and in any event have a basic level of oral language proficiency and listening comprehension.
- All inhabitants of the Netherlands should have enough knowledge of relevant languages and cultures to be able to function effectively in their professional lives and in their economic, cultural and societal context.
- The Netherlands should look beyond English, because a multilingual population that is familiar with other cultures is ready to face the challenges of the modern world and because close contacts with other language regions can help drive innovation.

The various humanities faculties should collaborate in Literature and Humanities Consultation Board (*Disciplineoverleg Letteren en Geesteswetenschappen*) and appoint a shared knowledge broker. That may well be a task for the National Platform for Languages. A broker of this kind will allow the universities to contribute their knowledge of various languages and software in support of less familiar languages to relevant occupational groups, such as the professionals working in the health care sector, intelligence agencies, law enforcement, and migration services. A platform of this kind could also act as a certification body for interpreters and other language professionals. It would be advisable to set up an independent, national expertise centre for Dutch that can ensure the quality of education in the Dutch language.