6 How 15-year-olds learn English in the Netherlands

In June 2023, the OECD visited three schools in the Netherlands to interview students, English language teachers and school leaders about how 15-year-olds learn English. This chapter presents the key findings from these visits and wider evidence. First, it gives an overview of the Dutch context, including people's exposure to different languages and the key characteristics of the education system. It then explores how students in the Netherlands experience English outside school and their attitudes towards mastering English. Next, the chapter describes approaches to teaching and learning English in schools and the ways in which students with different needs are supported. Finally, the chapter considers the resources available in Dutch schools to support English language learning and how these resources, including digital technologies, are used.

A snapshot of learning English as a 15-year-old in the Netherlands

- **English inhabits the everyday life of many 15-year-olds in the Netherlands**, and they recognise its value particularly for economic and educational purposes. There is some wider discussion however, as to the effect the prevalence of English is having on the learning of Dutch and other foreign languages.

- **Schools and teachers in the Netherlands have a lot of curricula and pedagogical freedom**. With regards to English, this can cause challenges, such as a wide range of proficiency in the first years of secondary education. However, it also offers opportunities for greater differentiation and creativity in the classroom, and for more personalised programmes.

- **All students in the Netherlands take a national examination in English at the end of upper secondary education**. This means the final years of English instruction are somewhat oriented to examination preparation, including a focus on reading skills.

- **Despite high proficiency levels, many students would like more opportunities to develop their speaking skills**. School leaders and teachers also wish to provide more real-life speaking opportunities, including with native English speakers through international exchanges. This mirrors a broader emphasis on internationalisation in education in the Netherlands, supported by a dedicated organisation, Nuffic.

- **Teaching is not always the first career choice of English teachers in the Netherlands**. However, they are generally satisfied with their job. They particularly enjoy interacting with young people and the opportunities for creativity that teaching English offers.

Learning languages in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is a multilingual and multicultural country

The official language of the Netherlands is Dutch, spoken by most of the 17.5 million inhabitants. There are also three official regional languages: Frisian (north), Lower Saxon (north-east) and Limburgish (south-east). Meanwhile, according to self-reports, 5% of the adult population typically speaks a dialect and 8% a foreign language, most commonly Turkish, English and Moroccan/Berber. In total, for around one in four people living in the Netherlands, Dutch is not the main language of communication at home (Statistics Netherlands, 2022[1]).

In 2021, 14% of the population was foreign-born and nearly 12% of those born in the Netherlands had a foreign-born parent (OECD, 2022[2]). Most foreign nationals were born in the Republic of Türkiye (8%), Suriname (7%) or Morocco (7%) (Statistics Netherlands, 2023[3]). This means classrooms are linguistically diverse: in in the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018, one in four Dutch lower secondary teachers reported working in schools where over 10% of students are non-native speakers of Dutch, compared to an OECD average of one in five (OECD, 2019[4]). Nevertheless, immigrants tend to be geographically concentrated in cities (Statistics Netherlands, 2022[5]).

English skills are widespread in the Netherlands and, for young people at least, are increasingly essential for cultural or societal engagement and identity construction (Edwards, 2016[6]). People in the Netherlands have high English proficiency in international comparison; over 90% claim to master English well enough to have a conversation (European Commission, 2012[7]; Education First, 2022[8]). English is in high demand in the domestic labour market: in 2021, one in three online job vacancies implicitly or explicitly required English (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[9]). As a result of extensive use and widespread

proficiency, some suggest that English should no longer be considered a foreign language in the Netherlands (Edwards, 2016[6])

Tourism also exposes people in the Netherlands to English. In 2019, there were around 23 million overnight international departures from the Netherlands and close to 20 million international visitors to the country. (OECD, 2022[10]). In addition, international students accounted for 14% of domestic tertiary enrolments in 2021, the total number having tripled since 2005 (OECD, 2023[11]; Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022[12]). In 2019, 70% of Bachelor's level courses were taught partially or fully in English (Michel et al., 2021[13]).

Popular culture is another source of English exposure. English language programmes or films are rarely dubbed in the Netherlands and increasingly may not even be subtitled. Similarly, in Dutch written media, quotations and passages in English can be included without translation (Edwards, 2016[6]). Internet users are also likely to encounter English language material regularly: estimates indicate that 1.7% of known websites produce content in Dutch compared to 53% for English so (Web Technology Surveys, 2023[14]).

English is a core subject with a compulsory examination for upper secondary graduates

Schools in the Netherlands have considerable autonomy. Around one-third of school students attend public schools run by the government; two-thirds attend publicly funded, privately run schools. Parents have the right to choose a school for their child. As such, schools compete for students and seek to distinguish themselves by adopting a specific pedagogical philosophy (e.g. Dalton, Agora, Montessori) or religious philosophy (particularly in primary education), by focusing on a specialism (e.g. sports, music, international orientation) and/or by offering bilingual education (Box 6.1).

Box 6.1. Bilingual education in the Netherlands

Bilingual education in the Netherlands is often identified as a success story for learning subject content in a foreign language (Mearns and Graaff, 2018[15]). There are currently around 150 schools, mostly secondary, offering bilingual programmes, which are nearly all Dutch-English (Michel et al., 2021[13]).

Bilingual programmes follow a similar curriculum to standard ones but with an important share of instruction delivered in English and with higher expected language proficiency. In secondary education, programmes are typically for students in pre-university education (VWO) but those for the pre-professional track (HAVO) and pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) are growing in number. In VWO and HAVO, at least 50% of the curriculum is taught in English; in VMBO, the minimum share is 30%. Students take the national examinations at the end of upper secondary education; therefore, at this level, fewer lessons are taught in English (estimated to be around 25% in VWO) (Michel et al., 2021[13]). In bilingual VWO, many upper secondary students also follow the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (Mearns and Graaff, 2018[15]).

Bilingual education has also been expanding to primary schools. In 2014, a pilot project started with 17 bilingual programmes at primary level, where 30-50% of the curriculum is taught in English. Evaluative research suggests that the English proficiency of students in these programmes is consistently higher than that of students who follow standard primary school programmes, both those with the regular starting age for English (age 10) and those with earlier onset (Jenniskens et al., 2020[16]).

Despite the relative success of bilingual education in the Netherlands, there are some ongoing challenges, all of which were echoed by case study participants. It can be difficult to staff bilingual programmes as teachers of subjects using English as the language of instruction must have advanced-intermediate English with a proven commitment to improving to advanced. They must also

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undertake training in applying a content and language integrated learning approach. In addition, schools are strongly encouraged to have at least one native English speaker teaching bilingual programmes.

There are also equity concerns. Typically, schools apply selective criteria for bilingual education and charge additional fees; these can be relatively high as they may include foreign exchanges and trips. Although most schools support parents who cannot afford the school fees this can present a barrier to less advantaged families. In 2023, the Netherlands made parental contributions voluntary in all schools, regardless of the family's economic situation. While this removes potential equity concerns, it may also make additional activities such as school trips and international exchanges financially unviable.

Sources: Jenniskens, T. et al. (2020[16]); Mearns, T. and R. Graaff (2018[15]); Michel et al. (2021[13]).

Education in the Netherlands is compulsory from ages 5-16, or until students have reached a qualification up to age 18. At age 12, students are tracked into different programmes according to academic ability based on the teacher's recommendation and national test scores. These are within four main tracks: 1) a typically five-year practical track (Pro); 2) a four-year, pre-vocational track (VMBO); 3) a five-year, pre-professional track (HAVO); and 4) a six-year, pre-university track (VWO). Most schools in the Netherlands offer a combination of tracks so that students can transfer between them within the school, as appropriate.

All students must learn a foreign language during primary education in the Netherlands. This is typically English. Most often, foreign language instruction starts in the last years of primary school, but around 15% of schools start earlier, including some from pre-primary level (Michel et al., 2021[13]). Students must learn two foreign languages from ages 12-17 but duration varies by track and is typically shorter than in other European countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023[17]). There is no minimum prescribed number of teaching hours for any subject in the Netherlands (Eurydice, 2021[18]).

Since the 1990s, English has been considered a core subject in the Netherlands, alongside mathematics and Dutch. Therefore, to graduate from upper secondary education, students in the Netherlands must pass a national examination in English which accounts for half of their final grade; the other half is assessed through school examinations. This is not the case for the second foreign language which has a compulsory examination for students in VWO, only. In English, students in VMBO are expected to reach B1 or A2 level on the Common European Framework Reference, depending on the specific programme and skill area. Students in HAVO are expected to reach B2 level in reading and B1 in other skill areas; VWO students are expected to reach C1 in reading and B2 elsewhere (Michel et al., 2021[13]).

The national standardised examination in English for upper secondary students covers reading comprehension only. This examination accounts for 50% of the students' final result; the remaining 50% comes from school-based examination of listening and speaking. As such, the final years of schooling tend to be oriented towards reading (Fasglio et al., 2015[19]). Although there are no other mandatory standardised assessments of English proficiency in the Netherlands, the Central Institute for Test Development offers an optional standardised assessment at the end of primary school that focuses on receptive skills (reading and listening) at A1 to A2 levels. Every six years, the government arranges a system-level evaluation of English proficiency at the end of primary education.

The case study visit to the Netherlands

In June 2023, the OECD Secretariat visited three schools in the Netherlands selected for their diverse characteristics. The schools are different sizes, serve different types of communities and have different pedagogical models (Table 6.1). However, they were not selected to be representative: the case study findings should, therefore, be interpreted as illustrating the experiences of some students and teachers in the Netherlands as opposed to being generalised nationally.

Table 6.1. Key characteristics of the case study schools in the Netherlands

		School A	School B	School C
Location		Rural	Urban	Urban
Education level		Lower secondary, upper secondary	Lower secondary, upper secondary	Lower secondary
School type		General and vocational; Agora[1] and bilingual programmes	General and vocational; Dalton school[2]	General and vocational; Global citizen school[3]
Student cohort	In whole school	1 331	485	1 290
	In modal grade for 15-year-olds		67	262
	% of socio-economically disadvantaged		12-24% (by track)	36%
Teacher cohort	In whole school		55	136
	Teaching English		6	12
Interviewees		School principal Four English teachers Nine 15-year-olds	School principal Three English teachers Six 15-year-olds	School principal Two English teachers Four 15-year-olds

1. The Agora pathway offers students a fully self-directed learning programme.
2. Dalton schools follow an education philosophy that aims to enable students to work at their own pace and receive individualised support.
3. Global citizen schools aim to educate students to become global citizens who are well prepared for international and intercultural society.
Source: Based on information reported to the OECD by schools.

The remainder of this chapter presents the findings of the case study based on interviews with school leaders, English teachers and 15-year-old students in the three case study schools; student activity logs; short surveys administered to the interview participants; and lesson observations. In addition, the analysis is informed by a country background report and an interview with Nuffic, the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education. For further information on the methodology, see Chapter 1.

How do 15-year-olds in the Netherlands experience English outside school?

Students in the Netherlands see English as useful and use it widely outside school

The 15-year-olds participating in the case study engage with English outside school in various ways. In activity logs completed by eight of the students, the most common activities were watching videos, gaming, listening to music and engaging with social media. Students also watch English language series and films, read books, and listen to podcasts. A school leader explained that students generally conduct research on line in English as there is more and better-quality content in English on line. In the short student questionnaires, half reported always using English when using digital technologies.

> *In the media a lot of things are in English, videos on YouTube, etc. At first, I did not understand all the videos, but now I understand them better. I also play video games in English. (Student, School C)*
>
> *They start getting this exposure [to English] at primary age. The moment they get the phone, the [English] world opens up. (Teacher, School B)*

Beyond digital environments, some students reported occasionally speaking English at home with their parents. For two this had started as a "secret" language between parents and is now something the whole family partakes in. A teacher suggested that having parents that speak English (as a first or additional language) plays an important role in exposure to English outside school. Many of the students also sometimes use English with friends, including Dutch-speaking ones, and two reported occasionally having internal dialogues in English instead of Dutch.

> *[We use English] when we are with friends and we are making jokes. You only understand the context in English. It's a funnier language than Dutch. (Student, School C)*

Nevertheless, exposure to English outside school in the Netherlands is not universal. For one teacher, students that speak a language other than Dutch or English at home are sometimes less exposed to English outside school as they seek to engage with popular culture in their first language. In addition, it is likely that students living in one of the main urban centres are more exposed to English than those living in rural areas; one interviewee explained that in the big cities, it would be quite possible to need to interact with a non-Dutch-speaking staff member in a café or restaurant in English.

> *The area we live in contributes to [the high exposure to English outside school]. I also taught in the east of the country where exposure to English seemed less… they were more exposed to German. (Teacher, School C)*

A difference in the frequency of exposure was also observed in the activity logs: the number of hours that students reported using English during their day ranged from 4 to 14. Some students suggested that the frequency of English use outside school is related to proficiency: those with higher English language proficiency engage with the language more frequently and more intensely.

All the interviewees see English as essential for life in the Netherlands and beyond. Most emphasised its importance for higher education and employment, with many students expressing a desire to travel, study and live abroad. According to one school leader, students and parents are aware of the utilitarian advantages of English but less concerned by the intercultural value of learning another language. This is also seen in the fact that students are less likely to value learning other foreign languages.

> *Students are aware of what English could mean to them. A lot of higher studies in university and vocational pathways are in the English language. (School leader, School C)*
>
> *English is highly valued because… it is vital for the stability of the country. (Teacher, School A)*

Interviewees see both benefits and drawbacks to high exposure to English outside school

Several of the participating teachers and school leaders agreed that English exposure outside school can enhance learners' foreign language proficiency. Specifically, they suggested that it helps students gain fluency, become more comfortable with the language and see the value of learning it, which motivates them.

> *It really helps. They are more comfortable, they like the language the more they use it. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *I actually think English improved during COVID…This is something we see all over the Netherlands, we think it's the influence of Netflix and consuming English language media. (School leader, School C)*

However, teachers and students had different views about which activities have most value.

> *There are two groups [of students] who are really strong with English: the boys that do online gaming and the girls with fan accounts or those who read for fun. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *I think videos such as YouTube [are most useful] because you can hear and read at the same time. In films people speak more and you can make the connection [between speaking and the subtitles] more easily than in games. (Student, School C)*

Nevertheless, when discussing out-of-school exposure, some teachers also identified challenges. This might be due to students being unable to connect the two learning contexts. One teacher explained that they teach and use British English in the classroom whereas students are mostly exposed to North American English outside school. Another emphasised the difference between the formal register of English in the classroom and the informal register that predominates outside school. Students sometimes

adopt words, expressions or uses of English that they may fail to contextualise accurately. In two schools, teachers pointed to students using common expressions such as "gonna" instead of "going to" in writing without realising it is grammatically incorrect. In one of the lesson observations, some students used slang and inappropriate language in exchanges with their peers or the whole class.

> *I have issues as we have a problem of how we teach. We give them a foundation, but they are so exposed to English so much outside of school, and there is no connection. (Teacher, School B)*

Beyond this, there is also a perceived gap between the goals and content of English learning in school and those outside school. In their explanations, several students felt that studying English at school is just about studying grammar whereas outside school they can communicate and interact in the language. Some teachers acknowledged this feeling among students, explaining that it can demotivate them: one highlighted that despite having a high level of fluency in English, some students – even native English speakers – become self-conscious in the classroom, where the emphasis is on accuracy.

> *I use [English] on line, I learn it on line, I watch movies, series, have conversations with friends in English on Instagram, etc. The grammar I learn at school. (Student, School C)*
>
> *It's hard because the things they learn from movies, social media, etc. are different from what we teach them about grammar, vocabulary, etc. [Even] some…native speakers have very bad grades. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *On the streets, there is no self-consciousness with the English language. In class, it's a bit different because we provide building blocks and sometimes they struggle. (Teacher, School B)*

In addition, some students may feel demotivated when learning English at school as they think they already learn enough English outside school. As a teacher explained, this (false) confidence is not always helpful.

> *[At school] I haven't learned anything I didn't know [already]. (Student, School A)*
>
> *[English] is a subject where they say "Oh we can do that"… When it comes to preparing for exams, they'll start with other subjects and if they have time left they'll do English. And that's ok because their grades are ok, but in class it can be harder. [Teacher, School C]*

Teachers described efforts to make English classes more relevant to students' experiences outside school. For example, one teacher reported striving to provide real-life examples in class; another focuses on skills and activities that students will use outside lessons, such as writing emails or conducting an interview.

The prevalence of English is seen by some as a threat to Dutch and other languages

There are concerns in the Netherlands about declining standards in young people's literacy. In the final examinations at the end of upper secondary education, one-fifth of students in HAVO and VWO programmes do not reach the minimum expected grades in Dutch (Inspectorate of Education, 2023[20]). Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicate a downward trend in Dutch reading skills among 15-year-old students over both the long term and in the most recent cycle (OECD, 2023[21]). Similar trends can be seen in younger students' performance (Grade 4) (Mullis et al., 2023[22]).

The spread of English is sometimes perceived as contributing to these declining standards and there is active public debate about the dominance of English in Dutch society (Van Gulik et al., 2019[23]; Edwards, 2020[24]). In recent years, this has included controversy around the growing role of English as a language of instruction in Dutch higher education. The government plans to limit this phenomenon (Government of the Netherlands, 2023[25]). Some of these tensions are also felt in schools.

> *I write a weekly article for the school journal and sometimes I'll use an English phrase; some staff will then make a point of saying "Dutch is very important". (School leader, School C)*

> *Language education in general at the moment is a challenge – today it is very difficult to teach a language because even the Dutch language nowadays is not as good as it used to be. So that then makes it difficult to learn other languages. (School leader, School B)*

The prevalence of English in the Netherlands is not only perceived as a threat to Dutch but also to the teaching of other modern foreign languages. This was reflected in the case study interviews where school leaders, teachers and students pointed to students' lack of motivation to learn French and German. English teachers explained that their colleagues teaching French and German envy the number of teaching hours allocated to English and the good results that students attain in the subject.

> *We do see that our students do very well in English... This is because students enjoy it, they progress quickly and so they keep enjoying it in comparison to French or German, where they progress more slowly and get demotivated. (School leader, School C)*

Nevertheless, there is no evidence of a relationship between the diverging trends in students' proficiency in Dutch and in English and none of the case study participants drew this connection. Indeed, results from bilingual schools in the Netherlands suggest that English instruction does not affect students' knowledge of Dutch (Nuffic, 2016[26]; Freije, 2015[27]).

How do 15-year-olds in the Netherlands experience English in schools and classrooms?

Different starting ages for English mean varying abilities in lower secondary classrooms

As Dutch schools have autonomy regarding the starting age for English instruction, participating students reported starting English at different ages. In one school, ages ranged from 5 to 12. Teachers in two schools reported that this leads to very mixed-ability classes, which can be challenging.

> *[The biggest challenge is] the difference in proficiency levels, as some students start [English] in kindergarten while others start in Year 7 or 8 and don't even do much in those years. (Teacher, School B)*

Participants had mixed opinions as to whether this initial difference persists beyond the first years of secondary school. Some educators described it as a persistent challenge; others explained that students catch up rapidly. Students who had started English later than their peers did not report feeling behind. Nevertheless, a teacher highlighted that the heterogeneity of students' previous experiences of learning English at the start of lower secondary may lead to disengagement among high-performing students.

> *The kids who start [learning English] early have not always been taught well. This means that the level of English you get in first grade here is very varied. And then the book starts from the beginning again. So those who are competent, have had lots of exposure outside school, they're bored. Then those that have not been taught much are intimidated [and] find it hard, etc… (Teacher, School C)*

Schools in the Netherlands try to individualise approaches to teaching English

Beyond the initial challenge experienced at the start of secondary education, students' different English language proficiency was not seen as a major obstacle, particularly in comparison to other countries in this report (see Chapter 8). This may be due in part to the range of approaches to adapting English language teaching and programme content to different learners' needs, as observed during the case study visit (Figure 6.1).

Although there is no ability grouping for English in the Netherlands, wider ability grouping takes place with the sorting of students into different tracks from lower secondary education. English instruction in each

track is adapted: students are expected to reach different proficiencies, instruction hours vary and learning content is tailored to their needs.

In VMBO we keep the textbooks to maintain the structure – those kids need it, but we do of course try and supplement that with other resources to make sure it is lively. (Teacher, School A)

In the more vocational courses you can practice how to do an interview, a letter of application, etc. It's very practical. (Teacher, School B)

By offering multiple tracks, each of the case study schools can provide students with the opportunity to move in and out of different paths if needed, or, as in one school, to study English in a different path. School A has an Agora pathway available to students through which they are encouraged to choose their own learning objectives based on their abilities and interests. The school leader explained that students in this pathway pursue project-based learning which may include aspects of English, or not. There are no formal English lessons for these students until they are ready to prepare for their upper secondary diploma.

In Agora, there's not really any specific support system, as everything is personalised already – the…programme is designed differently for every child. (School leader, School A)

Figure 6.1. Individualisation strategies that support English language learning in the Netherlands
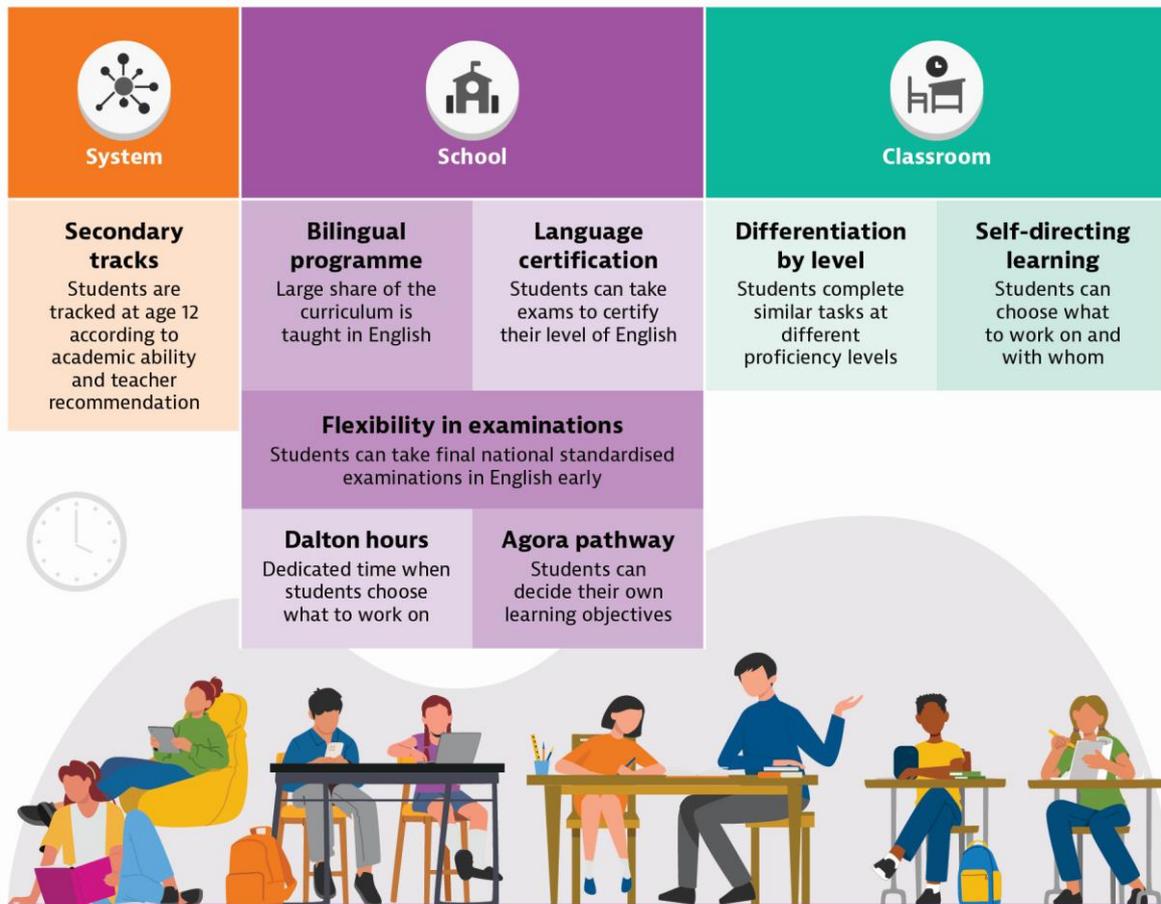
Note: The strategies included in the figure are not exhaustive; they refer only to those observed or reported during the case study visit.
Source: Based on case study research conducted in three schools in the Netherlands.

In addition to Agora, School A – like a growing number of schools in the Netherlands – offers bilingual programmes for VWO, HAVO and VMBO (Box 6.1). Students with a high proficiency in English or with strong motivation to improve can join these programmes. Those in VWO participating in these programmes complete the International Baccalaureate for English; those in HAVO and VMBO complete Anglia language certification examinations.

Also, typically for high-performing students though not exclusively, all three schools offered extra-curricular classes to prepare students for language certification. The classes are voluntary and open to students in different grades; families must cover the cost of the examination. A school leader explained that schools increasingly offer these classes as they attract parents and students to the school. The schools also offered flexibility in the national examination for English: high-performing students can take their examination early or sit the examination designed for students in a different pathway and at a higher level. These measures are not exclusive to English but are more common for this subject.

> *In the Cambridge class [for language certification] we learn a different kind of English. Not necessarily focused on grammar, but on the exam and use of English. We choose it because we want to go abroad and we can prove we speak English. (Student, School B)*
>
> *About 60 students are doing their final exam early (18-20%). That's fewer than previously – at one point the criteria was just being good at English, now we want them to have stronger performance across the board. (School leader, School C)*

For low-performing students in English, the schools also offered various supports. School B is a Dalton school following an education philosophy that aims to enable students to work at their own pace and receive individualised support. It has a timetabled weekly "Dalton hour" for self-directed learning; English support is offered in this time. Meanwhile, School A offers two extra classes a week for English where students can voluntarily seek teacher support. All three schools have peer mentoring programmes for low-performing students, although in one school a teacher emphasised that this is rarely used for English.

> *We don't have a remedial teaching programme for English – only the Dalton hours give them extra time to seek support... Our students are also very helpful with each other so students from the higher grades are pre-disposed to helping those from the lower grades. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *When we had more financial space (during COVID), we were able to hire students from university that could help them or …children who are really good in English can help the others for a small fee…The students really know what [their peers] need to learn. (School leader, School A)*

At classroom level, English teachers reported adopting multiple strategies to differentiate learning according to students' needs; this was also seen in lesson observations. Strategies include adapting the seating arrangements, designing lessons in which students choose the tasks they complete, offering learning activities at different language proficiency levels and providing individualised formative feedback. In one lesson, the teacher explicitly directed students to online grammar exercises aligned to their level of proficiency. In another, students were able to choose which teacher to learn with: one offering structured grammar instruction or another offering project-based learning.

> *In my class I have tables in the middle with people who are struggling and the students who are ok surrounding the tables, and I focus on the ones who need it. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *I divide students into groups: ones who need help, those who don't necessarily and those who are independent. You can do it with grammar, reading a book… it doesn't work for all classes. (Teacher, School B)*

Two system-level factors may support these efforts to individualise teaching and learning in the Netherlands. First, schools and teachers have considerable autonomy when it comes to school policies, curriculum and instruction. In TALIS 2018, 91% of school leaders in lower secondary education in the Netherlands reported that teachers have significant responsibility when choosing learning materials and determining course content. Meanwhile, 96% reported having significant responsibility themselves for

deciding which courses to offer (OECD, 2020[28]). Second, the high level of school choice means that schools are in direct competition for students. As such, they seek to differentiate themselves by offering different programmes or pedagogical approaches perceived as having a competitive advantage.

Nevertheless, interviewees reported ongoing challenges when adapting to the needs of different students. Several noted that it is difficult to provide adequate support, particularly in large classes and because needs change every year, demanding more time for lesson preparation. Teachers also explained that some learners prefer traditional whole-class instruction to more individualised approaches. This was evident in lesson observations: some students were very engaged by open-ended tasks working either independently or in groups. However, a few were reluctant to engage in any of the material on offer.

> *It's harder with larger classes, I have a class with 31 students, the group is noisy, the dynamic changes and the struggling students suffer. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *Part of the class really liked the [project], particularly the girls. Others just wanted structure. But that provided some more space for those who already had a higher level to do the more creative exercises. But I don't always have time to do that – if I had more time … I'd try and do more of it. (Teacher, School C)*

Many case study participants also noted that, despite efforts, high-performing students of English are not sufficiently stimulated. For some, this was a wider issue: support across subjects is oriented towards low-performing students. Others highlighted the challenges of structural adaptations for high-performing students. For example, bilingual programmes can be difficult to provide, as they are more expensive to run and harder to staff (Box 6.1). Moreover, while advancing the final examination helps motivate high-performing students, the results are only valid for two years, which limits the level of flexibility schools have. Some students felt that, even when learning is differentiated, they are still not sufficiently challenged.

> *I think in general in the Netherlands we have trouble stimulating the… more proficient, because we focus on the other end. And that's important, but maybe there's more we can do. (Teacher, School C)*

English teaching in Dutch schools is seen as prioritising reading and grammar

The case study and broader research indicate that not all language skills are practiced to the same extent in English lessons in the Netherlands. Many of the teachers acknowledged a focus on linguistic knowledge. Teachers from two schools explained that grammar and vocabulary dominate in lower secondary education as they are the necessary foundations of more creative, project-based approaches in later years. According to the literature, relatively little time is given to English exposure and interaction in lessons in the Netherlands, especially in the first three years of lower secondary school, where explaining grammatical rules, often in Dutch, dominates (West and Verspoor, 2016[29]). Several teachers noted a desire to include a greater variety of skills and pedagogical approaches in their lessons for all ages.

> *For me there could always be less attention on grammar…and more time for projects. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *[Learning grammar] is too abstract for [students in the first years of secondary school] but you do have to start somewhere and you do have to teach them the basic [building] blocks. (Teacher, School C)*

In addition, one teacher emphasised that the last years of upper secondary education focus on exam preparation leaving less room for projects. The national standardised examination exclusively assesses students' reading comprehension through short English texts with multiple-choice questions formulated in Dutch. Even though teachers assess other communicative skills, the central examination has a washback effect and students often do a lot of reading comprehension in their final years of school (Fasglio et al., 2015[19]). The emphasis on the final examination can also promote a misconception that reading is both harder and more important than other skills (Westhoff, 2012[30]).

> *Maybe speaking is more in younger years, then I'm more worried about the exams, their reading in university, etc. and we need to prepare them for that. (Teacher, School B)*

We focus more on reading in VMBO as writing is less of a priority. We do have some different types of writing but not as extensive as HAVO. Their final exam is all reading so we focus on reading skills more. Speaking is also important as that motivates them – they want to travel, etc. (Teacher, School A)

In the interviews, some students reported wishing to speak more English in class and this was repeatedly identified by teachers and students as the least practiced of the four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing). One student claimed that they only practice speaking in the preparation classes for language certification. Several teachers agreed on the importance of practicing speaking but some noted challenges. For example, one explained that speaking activities take time and students are sometimes shy or reserved. Another noted that, because they speak English outside school and can communicate well, speaking is less important in lessons. Indeed, students' speaking proficiency in the final year of schooling in the Netherlands reaches or exceeds target attainment levels in all educational pathways whereas in writing, in particular, an important share does not reach target proficiency (Fasoglio and Tuin, 2018[31]; Fasglio et al., 2015[19]). Nevertheless, some participating students identified speaking as being the most difficult skill.

I would prefer to speak English in class the whole time rather than the teacher do it partially and [I would like to] speak English with other students. Peer pressure stops me, no one else does it. (Student, School B)

Speaking is the hardest because we don't focus on this in class. (Student, School C)

The new curriculum for modern foreign languages, which is currently under development, will pay more attention to productive skills (speaking and writing) and social interaction.

Schools would like to offer students more authentic opportunities to speak English

In all three schools there was a clear desire to increase opportunities for students to practice spoken English in real-life situations. This was expressed by students, teachers and school leaders. In each school, several students wanted to speak English in the case study interview, although it should be noted that most of these students reported themselves to be of average or above-average proficiency relative to their peers.

When asked to name three things that they would wish for to improve the teaching and learning of English in their school, all school leaders focused on providing international exchanges for their students. However, numerous barriers were also identified, including the extra workload it places on teachers and other school staff, the challenge of relationship-building, and the need for extra funding.

There's only one wish. I want there to be no barriers to sending students abroad… Nowadays, it's very expensive for a lot of families to participate in field trips. We have a bit of funding from the government but it's not sufficient. So it's a big challenge to keep an international programme going. It's important for them to see the world but going to locations outside Europe is just not possible for all children. (School leader, School B)

I wish all my students could experience going abroad and receiving students from other countries more. This would give them context, a better understanding of the world around them. (School leader, School C)

The Netherlands provides some support to schools for developing exchange programmes including from Nuffic (Box 6.2). School C is part of Nuffic's Global Citizen Network and recently appointed a teacher to lead the co-ordination of related activities. This came with a reduction in teaching hours as well as additional remuneration. The school leader noted that the school had invested in this position with a view to developing Erasmus+ and other student exchanges in the following school years.

Box 6.2. Nuffic: The Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education

Nuffic aims to strengthen the internationalisation of education in the Netherlands from primary to higher education, vocational and adult education. The key objective is to support learners of all ages in the Netherlands to acquire international competences, including foreign language learning. Nuffic is supported by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the European Commission. It promotes the use of English and other foreign languages as follows:

- **International student mobility**: Nuffic supports more than 32 000 students and staff per year to go on international exchanges with programmes such as the Orange Knowledge Programme, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the Erasmus, Erasmus+ and eTwinning programmes funded by the European Commission. A further 2 000 students are supported to study abroad through scholarships. Programmes cover those in secondary and tertiary education, and general and vocational programmes.

- **Bilingual schools**: Nuffic oversees bilingual education, accrediting bilingual schools, evaluating them every three years to determine whether they meet the required standards and providing information and support to schools offering or wanting to offer bilingual pathways.

- **Promoting and developing global competences:** Nuffic runs the Languages and Global Citizenship Network and the Global Citizen Network in primary, secondary and adult education. These programmes aim to enhance learners' international competences, including foreign language proficiency. Among secondary schools, the network currently has around 80 member institutions. Nuffic accredits the participating schools, supports them to implement related initiatives and fosters networking between member organisations.

- **Research, knowledge sharing and international knowledge partnerships**: Nuffic conducts research and organises knowledge-sharing sessions with different education sectors and stakeholders. It also has partnerships with relevant actors abroad providing support for various types of co-operation across countries.

Source: Nuffic (2023[32]).

What resources support English teaching and learning in Dutch schools?

Schools in the Netherlands are well-equipped with material resources

The case study schools were generally well-equipped with digital and other material resources and none of the interviewees identified challenges regarding their availability. During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were able to apply for additional funding to support remote and catch-up learning; each of the schools highlighted this as having been important in supporting low-performing students. More recently, the government has established a basic skills subsidy through which schools apply for extra funding to support students' Dutch, mathematics and English skills. Other earmarked funds are also available. One school leader explained that the challenge is not the availability of financial resources but rather that these funding streams are short term and are often allocated at inconvenient times in school planning cycles.

During the school visits, teachers and students noted regularly using digital resources in English lessons. This was also evident in the lesson observations: teachers had their own laptops, used interactive whiteboards and projectors to show videos or lesson activities, and prepared online quizzes. Teachers reported using both pedagogical and non-pedagogical material from a wide variety of online sources, such

as English language media, blogs, podcasts or films. In two lessons, students used either a set of school laptops or their own devices to access online exercises or digital material from the class textbook.

> *All students have a Chrome book here, so a lot of the writing they do is on that. I also use British Council resources, particularly for listening. Sometimes I Google random games. (I use) Kahoot quizzes. The book also has an online space. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *We use online websites and apps, and something using flip-cards instead of physical cards. We find these very useful and it's quicker. (Student, School B)*
>
> *In the later years, we work a lot with media, speech, videos… we look at lots [of different resources] all the time. So, if we don't bring the laptop to school, it is like forgetting your coursebook. (Student, School A)*

Nevertheless, there were differences between the schools. Teachers in School C felt that digital technologies are used less than in other schools due to a more traditional pedagogical culture. In contrast, the school leader in School A estimated that 10-20% of lesson time in all subjects is spent in digital environments. This school has a working group led by teachers who are particularly skilled with digital technologies to support other teachers and suggest initiatives. In School B, the use of digital technologies seemed to depend largely on the teacher's preference.

Teachers generally agreed that digital technologies were useful for English language teaching and learning, particularly for more individualised approaches, as they facilitate the preparation and administration of different activities for different students. Other identified benefits included student engagement and access to a variety of modern and appealing teaching resources, as well as exposure to global current affairs.

> *The digital textbook offers us authentic material that then we don't have to spend time looking for and they provide exercises with those which are also good for differentiation. (Teacher, School A)*

However, teachers also noted that there should be a balance between digital and non-digital approaches and that there are associated challenges. For example, according to teachers in School B, digital devices can be a source of distraction for students and complicate classroom management. Following the case study visit, the Netherlands announced a ban on the use of smartphones, tablets and smartwatches in schools from January 2024 (Government of the Netherlands, 2023[33]).

> *There should be a balance. I notice that if you do everything digitally it can be hard to get it to stick. Digitally, you swipe and swipe … A book helps you to focus. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *The challenge is when you allow them to use their laptop or phone they get distracted with other things. They need to learn what is appropriate, when. (Teacher, School C)*

In addition to digital resources, English teachers in each of the case study schools use textbooks. Again, teachers see advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, some see textbooks as a source of high quality pedagogical material, particularly for teaching grammar. They can also provide clarity and structure, which may benefit some students. In addition, the digital resources that come with the textbooks facilitate differentiation according to students' English proficiency and needs. On the other hand, some teachers and students claimed that the textbook material is not engaging and that it is easier to learn from presentations that teachers prepare themselves or project-based activities.

> *Textbooks are very useful for the basic learning of English like grammar. Once you've captured that, it's easier to take the Chrome book and explore the media. (Student, School A)*
>
> *There is lots of repetition within the textbook, which makes it all the same and very boring. (Student School B)*
>
> *I am not too much of a fan of those [textbooks] because they often overcomplicate the grammar in a way that is really not relevant for Dutch students….as a teacher it basically lists everything you have to do in a lesson, and it feels like you have zero creative freedom. (Teacher, School C)*

Some teachers also emphasised the importance of their own pedagogical creativity and freedom, for example, choosing English language books for students to study or preparing their own projects. However, they noted that this is time-intensive and therefore they are not able to be as creative as they wish.

> *If you are intimidated there are textbooks you can use, but in general, freedom makes the job much more interesting. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *We get a lot of freedom – if we decided to change things we'd be allowed to. But it takes time and we don't have that so we rely on the things we already have. (Teacher, School C)*

To combat the workload challenge, teachers in two schools emphasised the importance of collaboration. In School B, each English teacher takes the lead in preparing lessons for a certain grade, with input from colleagues. All materials are shared through a common online platform. In School C, teachers described sharing lesson materials for project-based work. However, the extent to which teachers collaborate may differ between schools. According to TALIS 2018, teacher collaboration varies widely across Dutch schools, with more than 20% of the variation lying at the school level (OECD, 2020[28]).

English teachers enjoy their work despite it often not being their initial career choice

During the interviews, all teachers reported being satisfied with their job identifying positive aspects such as working with students, developing emotional connections and being able to open up the world for students. This is despite many reporting not having wanted to be a teacher at the start of their studies. These responses align with data from TALIS 2018, where despite relatively high teacher satisfaction in the Netherlands, less than half reported that teaching was their first career choice (OECD, 2019[4]).

> *When I finished secondary school, I wanted to be a primary school teacher like my mother, but she said you're too smart for that. I went to study English at university and I was adamant I wouldn't be a teacher. I did an optional course where you could visit schools to try teaching. Then I did a PhD and the only thing I liked was the teaching. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *I hated languages, didn't want to be a teacher. I did a very difficult degree, then accidentally got two teacher degrees. Now, I love being a teacher even if I still don't really like languages. (Teacher, School B)*

The case study teachers generally felt that their initial teacher education had not fully prepared them for teaching but that no programme ever could. They followed a variety of paths into English teaching but nearly all agreed that they learnt most on the job. Several teachers felt that their initial training was not practical enough; however, a teacher who had followed the more practically oriented professional teacher education programme felt she would have benefitted from more subject-oriented input.

> *My one-year post-grad course was like a pressure cooker. Realistically, you only learn how to be a teacher once you do the teaching… I would have needed more than one year to do it well. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *I don't think…that you can be perfectly prepared for the teaching. Understanding how to do the job is more about experience. (Teacher, School C)*

As in many other countries, the Netherlands is currently facing teacher shortages. In PISA 2022, nearly three-quarters (72%) of 15-year-olds were in schools whose leaders reported that instruction is hindered by a shortage of teaching staff (OECD, 2023[34]). These shortages are more important in urban areas, where there is a higher diversity of students, and in certain subjects such as mathematics and foreign languages. Shortages in French currently represent 18% of total full-time employed teachers; however, the share is only 3% for English teachers (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2022[35]).

Among the case study schools, school leaders agreed that shortages are not currently felt for English, especially compared to other foreign languages, although one school leader noted that finding teachers willing to teach in the bilingual programme or finding native anglophone teachers is a challenge.

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