

**(Adapted text)**

## **Trilingual Primary Education in Friesland**

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This chapter deals with recent developments in trilingual primary education in Friesland province, The Netherlands. The first section gives some insight into the present day language relationships in the province. This serves as a backdrop to the trilingual project discussed further below. Section 2 goes into the position of Frisian in primary education in Friesland. Thereafter, section 3 is concerned with the position of English in primary education in The Netherlands and in Friesland. The next section (4) deals with a newly established project on trilingual primary education in Friesland. Section 5 winds up the chapter. This final section contains some concluding remarks.

### **1. Background and Sociodemographic Situation**

Friesland is officially recognised as the only bilingual province in The Netherlands. The province has well over 600,000 inhabitants, which comes to approximately four per cent of the total national population. Survey research has shown that 94 per cent of the provincial population can understand Frisian and 74 per cent claim to be able to speak the minority language (Gorter & Jonkman, 1995:8). As far as literacy is concerned, 65 per cent can read Frisian and only 17 per cent can write in the language. A comparison of the figures cited on language proficiency (from 1994) with earlier research findings (dated 1980) made clear that the language relationships in the province have been remarkably stable since the early Eighties (Gorter & Jonkman, 1995:8).

As said, a very high percentage of the total population can understand Frisian. Moreover, no less than 85 per cent of the Dutch-speaking inhabitants can understand the minority language (Gorter & Jonkman 1995:12). This has to do with the fact that Frisian and Dutch are typologically related varieties. Both are Germanic languages. Frisian and English are related too; they belong to the branch of Coastal Germanic languages. By contrast, Dutch and German are Continental Germanic varieties. In (historical) linguistics, Frisian has been considered the language most closely linked to English.

A considerable part of the population of Friesland province uses Frisian on a daily basis. It has been found that a small majority of the inhabitants (55%) has Frisian as mother tongue, whereas 54 per cent speak Frisian at home (Gorter & Jonkman, 1995:11/16). These figures show that the minority language only just tops the dominant language in the numerical respect. In the light of primary education, it is particularly of interest to look at the current language relationship among members of the youngest generation. In this respect, it has been assessed that 53 per cent of the children in Friesland have Frisian as mother tongue and 39 per cent of youth have Dutch as first language (Gorter & Jonkman, 1995:17). The remaining percentage of the children (7%) speak a local dialect as first language. Furthermore, it should be noted that not many people living in Friesland

have a foreign language as mother tongue. In this respect, it has been estimated that only some two per cent of the provincial population have a foreign language as first language (Gorter & Jonkman 1995:11).

Yet, English occupies a certain position in a number of formal domains of Dutch (and Frisian) society. That is to say that the foreign language functions vividly within 'modern' domains such as media and business. For example, there is extensive exposure to English in the mass media. De Bot (1994) remarks that 40 to 60 per cent of the television programmes in The Netherlands are English language (all subtitled in Dutch). Moreover, English is increasingly used in commercial advertising. In this respect, Gerritsen (1996) mentions that almost a fifth of the pages in Dutch newspapers and magazines contained English language product advertisements. Gerritsen concludes that fully English-language product advertisements are fairly well established in The Netherlands. The tendency towards internationalisation has been seen as a threat to the position of Dutch in the European context (De Bot, 1994). Growing internationalisation undoubtedly strengthens the role of English as a lingua franca in Europe and perhaps it can even marginalise the Dutch language internationally in the long run. However, this does not directly affect the position of Dutch within the own language area, for there are no signs that English intrudes in the informal core domain of the family. In this sense, it remains a 'foreign' language indeed.

## **2. Frisian in Primary Education**

Since 1980 Frisian has legally been an obligatory language for primary schooling in Friesland. Core objectives were specified for the teaching of Frisian in 1993 and these have been revised in 1998 (Staatsblad, 1998). The core objectives function as a guideline; they prescribe for schools in general terms what to bring about. The school curriculum should be designed in accordance with the core objectives. The core objectives set for the teaching of Frisian in Friesland are identical to those for the teaching of the Dutch language in The Netherlands. This means that full competence in Frisian and Dutch (i.e. understanding, speaking, reading and writing ability) is aimed at all pupils in the province, whether they speak Frisian or Dutch at home. In reaching the core objectives, the schools can employ a new language course called 'De Fryske Taalrotonde' (The Frisian Roundabout), which has been developed by GCO *Fryslân*, the centre for educational advice. The course has been used by over 300 (out of some 500) primary schools in the province since its introduction in 1994. The starting point of the Frisian language course is the communicative use of the target language in a variety of meaningful contexts.

Current figures are not available, but an Inspectorate survey conducted in the late Eighties (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 1989) revealed the following picture of the position of Frisian in primary education. Ten per cent of the schools had an exemption from the obligation to teach Frisian. These schools are located in non-Frisian areas of the province. The schools which taught Frisian generally did so for one lesson per week, in every grade. The lessons are mostly given by the regular class teacher. Frisian was also

used as medium of instruction to teach other school subjects, but a fifth part of the schools did not do so. In most cases, Frisian was used as vehicle of instruction for 10 to 30 per cent of teaching time; note that monolingual Frisian-medium (immersion) schools do not exist. Research has shown that Frisian-speaking school children generally appreciate the use of Frisian as medium of instruction, whereas Dutch children mostly disapprove of it (Ytsma, 1995:128). Importantly, it has also been shown that many Dutch parents overtly deprecate the use of Frisian as a vehicle of instruction in primary education (Ytsma, 1995:136). While there is (some) discussion about the use of Frisian in the classroom every now and then, the use of Dutch is seen as self-evident.

The Inspectorate survey also showed that pupils' motivation for the Frisian lessons was not always favourable. One third of the schools indicated that their pupils were poorly motivated for Frisian schooling, one third of the schools reported a neutral motivation among the children and the last third estimated that their pupils were strongly motivated for the Frisian lessons (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 1989:29). The new Frisian language course possibly has improved students' motivation somewhat, since a recent evaluation indicated that most children appreciated 'De Taalrotonde' (Le Rütte, 1998).

In the study 'Taalpeiling yn Friesland' (Language assessment in Friesland) conducted in the early Nineties it turned out that the results of Frisian primary schooling were disappointing (De Jong & Riemersma, 1994). The authors concluded that there was a gap between the core objectives set for Frisian on the one hand and the research results relative to the command of Frisian among the eldest primary school children tested on the other. In particular, speaking ability turned out to be low among Dutch children and writing ability was poor among Dutch and Frisian children. Moreover, the results of a decoding test on reading ability were below par among both groups of children. In view of the very modest place of Frisian within the school curriculum - both as school subject and as medium of instruction - these unfavourable research findings should not come as a surprise. Importantly, however, the 'Taalpeiling' revealed positive outcomes as to the command of Dutch at the end of primary education (grade 8). In general, the performance of Frisian and Dutch primary school children in Friesland was equal to that of the children attending schools in the whole of The Netherlands (De Jong & Riemersma, 1994:226). In other words, it was proven once again that bilingual schooling had no detrimental effects on Dutch language proficiency. As to the results on reading comprehension, the Frisian schools even outperformed those in all of The Netherlands.

### **3. English in Primary Education**

English became legally obligatory in primary education in The Netherlands in 1986. No single school is exempted from the obligation to teach the foreign language. Core objectives were set for English teaching at primary level in 1993. A revision of these objectives has taken place in 1998 (Staatsblad, 1998). In essence, the objectives come down to plain communicative abilities in the domains of understanding, speaking and reading (for further discussion see §4.1). English is usually taught as a school subject in

grades 7 and 8 only, i.e. from age 10 or 11 onwards. Nationwide research conducted in 1991 pointed out that merely five per cent of the primary schools started with Primary English in grade 6 (Vinjé, 1993:34). Unlike Frisian, the first foreign language at school is not used to teach other school subjects. In other words, content-based instruction does not occur (or only rarely occurs). The English lessons are given by the regular class teacher in nearly all cases (88%; Vinjé, 1993:34). Time expenditure for foreign language teaching is limited. In grade 8, the mean teaching time amounted to 47 minutes per week, whereby most primary schools taught English for one or two lessons per week (Vinjé, 1993:34). The primary schools use various commercial language courses. A majority of 61 per cent of the schools used a communicative course, 7 per cent made use of a grammar-based course, and 32 per cent of the schools employed a mixed, communicative/grammar-based course (Vinjé, 1993:11). During the English lessons most attention is paid to listening and speaking ability and to vocabulary development. The above-mentioned figures about the position of English in primary education apply to primary education in the whole of The Netherlands, but there is no reason to assume that the situation in the Frisian schools differs substantially. The fact that the latter schools have to teach Frisian as an additional subject presumably does not have consequences for the teaching of English.

The foreign language lessons are quite popular among the primary school children. Interestingly, the eldest children in The Netherlands (grade 8, age 12) pointed to English as their favourite school subject (Vinjé, 1993:91). This is in line with earlier research findings obtained in Friesland, which showed that 84 per cent of the primary schools in the province indicated that their students were highly motivated in regard to English lessons (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 1989:29). The same study put forward, however, that not all primary schools in Friesland saw English as an essential part of the curriculum. In fact, 58 per cent of the schools indicated that English was important to them, whereas 42 per cent did not evaluate English as a significant language at primary level (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 1989:28). It is likely that the latter schools were of the opinion that the teaching of English is really the domain of secondary schooling. This points to a general problem relative to the teaching of English at primary level: the connection between Primary English and English taught at secondary level. It has been noted that secondary schools find it hard to cope with the huge spread of the knowledge level of (aspects of) English among their first grade students (Edelenbos & Hettinga, 1993).

The national study mentioned above has evaluated the results of Primary English in The Netherlands. Edelenbos (1993:110) summarised the outcomes as follows. He stated that reading ability is moderate, understanding spoken English is good, the children manage on average to get by in quite a few plain speech situations and vocabulary development scores pretty high. On the whole, the conclusion seems to be that the results of Primary English in The Netherlands are not unsatisfactory. However, in all likelihood the rather favourable command of English among the eldest school primary children tested cannot be solely attributed to the factor of schooling. The functioning of English in the wider

society (see §1) undoubtedly plays a significant role as well. In this respect, it is interesting to note that 45 per cent of the children examined in the nationwide study into Primary English are of the opinion that they learn English mainly at school. Furthermore, 33 per cent think that they learn the language at school as much as outside school, and the remaining part (23%) feel that learning English chiefly takes place by listening to the radio and watching television (Vinjé, 1993:94).

#### **4. Trilingual Primary Education in Friesland**

As has been outlined above, elementary schools in Friesland have been confronted for over a decade with three compulsory school languages: Frisian, Dutch and English. An advantage is that the regional, national language and foreign language are three related varieties, which may facilitate positive linguistic transfer (see §4.2). On the other hand, interrelated varieties can involve linguistic interference (i.e. negative transfer). Furthermore, it has been mentioned that the foreign language not only has a place within the setting of the school, but that the language clearly functions within society as well. All in all, we are of the opinion that the context in Friesland is such that an innovative project on truly trilingual primary education is feasible. By trilingual schooling we mean that the three languages concerned are not only taught as school subject, but also used as medium of instruction. The new trilingual project is an initiative of the Fryske Akademy and the Frisian department of the provincial centre for educational advice (GCO *Fryslân*). The task of the Fryske Akademy is to follow up on the project with scientific research. The Fryske Akademy conducts a longitudinal study principally on children's language proficiency (L1, L2 and L3) and their sociopsychological disposition towards the three languages (i.e. attitudes and motivation). The responsibility of GCO *Fryslân* is to develop learning materials (Frisian/English) and to counsel the schools partaking. The development of additional learning materials is needed as parts of world studies will be in Frisian (all grades) and English (upper grades). In the 1997/98 school year five experimental primary schools started to work (first bilingually Frisian/Dutch, see §4.2) with the model in grade 1 and in 1998/99 two more schools were added to the project. In the years to come, the trilingual model is gradually introduced in the successive classrooms of the schools taking part. This means that English is now taught as subject in the seven project schools, and will be systematically used as medium of instruction only after a couple of years. Before that, English will be used prudently as medium of instruction in pilot settings (see §4.2). At the end of each school year the children are tested in Frisian and Dutch (and ultimately also in English) in order to gauge progress. The schools participating are small and located in villages in the Frisian countryside. It is hoped that the number of schools increases in the near future and that the project has an emanating effect on other schools. In the sections below we shall go into the educational objectives of the project (§4.1) and elaborate on its working method and didactic principles (§4.2).

##### **4.1. Objectives**

Primary schools in Friesland can take the official core objectives set for Frisian, Dutch and English as point of departure for a trilingual programme. As said, regarding Frisian and Dutch the core objectives imply full (oral and written) language competence. As to foreign language teaching, the targets imply that the objectives are understanding, speaking and reading, albeit at a humble level. Note that writing in English is excluded in the core objectives. The approach for Primary English in The Netherlands has been specified as follows:

"The purpose of offering the English language in the primary school is, on the one hand, to make the pupils familiar with a foreign language at an early age. On the other hand, attention is being paid to the function of English as an important international language. Pupils recognise English as a source of loan words in Dutch. They form the basis for speaking and reading the English language, starting from everyday situations. Therefore, pupils should make a start with the acquisition of a vocabulary, obtain an understanding of sentence structure and be able to find out the meaning of words" (SLO, 1998).

More specifically, the present attainment targets for Primary English in The Netherlands are as follows:

- The pupils should be able to understand simple conversations about everyday situations.
- The pupils should be able to understand enough English words to understand spoken messages about personal information, food and drink, the living environment and time.
- The pupils should be able to talk to each other about everyday situations; their pronunciation should be understandable.
- The pupils understand the main issues of a simple written text.
- The pupils can use a dictionary to find out the meaning of words.

In sum, the educational objectives of the trilingual project entail full Frisian/Dutch bilingualism and biliteracy, whereas the five attainment targets listed above serve as the ultimate goal for English language teaching. Note that the targets as to English are identical to those for all primary schools in The Netherlands, but the project schools want to reach these goals in an optimal fashion. The next section gives an account of the way in which the Frisian trilingual project attempts to realise the objectives set for the three languages at issue.

#### **4.2. Didactic and pedagogical aspects of trilingual education**

The newly established Frisian multilingual project is based on three theoretical principles mentioned by Cummins (1987) in relation to successful bilingual schooling. These principles are (a) additive bilingualism, (b) linguistic interdependence and (c) interactive pedagogy. The principle of additive bilingualism says that learning another (second)

language is not at the expense of the first language. Translated to our trilingual project this means that the minority language must be substantially enforced at school, not only by systematically teaching it as school subject, but also by regularly and consciously using it as medium of instruction. The principle of linguistic interdependence implies that language proficiency in one language can be transferred to proficiency in another language. Transfer of language proficiency easily occurs between interrelated varieties as Frisian, Dutch and English. Besides, transfer is more likely to occur for 'deeper' aspects of language proficiency such as for instance reading comprehension. In our project we shall make use of the principle of transfer in the sense that, for example, reading comprehension is not separately taught two (or three) times, but as one underlying ability which can be practised in more than one language. In that sense a trilingual primary school in Friesland actually is not a school that teaches three languages. It is, in fact, a 'language school'. The principle of interactive pedagogy means that language learning takes place on the basis of meaningful communication. For this reason we pay a great deal of attention to the conscious and separate use of Frisian, Dutch and English as media of instruction in the classroom (see below).

Furthermore, the Frisian project broadly follows the concept of Two Way Bilingual Education (cf. Baker, 1996:186 ff.). Lindholm (cited in Baker, 1996:187) mentions four characteristics of a Two Way Bilingual programme: (1) a minority language is used for at least 50 per cent of instruction, (2) in each period of instruction, only one language is used, (3) majority and minority speakers are present in preferably balanced numbers and (4) both type of speakers are integrated in all lessons.

As regards the use of the three languages as vehicle of instruction (points 1 and 2) the model applied in our project is such that Frisian will be used as medium of instruction for at least 50 per cent in grades 1 to 6. The remaining part of teaching time is in Dutch in these grades and the two languages are deliberately separated. In the first year of the project (1997/98) the separation between the two languages has been realised in the lower grades mostly by a division of time: one week Frisian as medium of instruction and the next week Dutch. In the case of a shared job, the vehicle of instruction could be coupled to the person, one teacher consistently using Frisian, the other Dutch. In the upper grades (7 and 8) English is going to be used for 20 per cent of teaching time. In practice, this means that English is used two days per week during the afternoon. The subjects weekly to be taught in L3 are English (twice), world studies and creative arts. To prepare the children for the use of English as medium of instruction, the children in grade 6 will get English lessons oriented towards vocabulary development in the areas of world studies and creative arts.

The population of the schools which are currently participating in the project is Frisian-speaking for the greater part, so this is not entirely in accord with the third feature of a Two Way Bilingual programme, which departs from balanced numbers of majority and minority speakers. On the other hand, the Frisian and Dutch children are indeed integrated in the lessons, as Frisian and Dutch-speaking children all are in the same class (pt. 4).

A point of concern to us is teachers' own English language proficiency. As said, the point of departure for language teaching in the project is that language learning takes place by language use. This holds that good language learning requires proper language use. In other words, the teachers must provide the pupils a correct language model, also when using English as medium of instruction. The teachers in the project are (almost) all Frisian/Dutch bilinguals and those who teach English in the upper grades have a fair knowledge of the language. Yet, their English probably is not fluent and accurate enough to effectively use the language in teaching other school subjects. Therefore, a specially designed preparatory English course was organised in 1998/99 to further improve oral language ability and to give insight into foreign language didactics according to immersion principles. As part of the English course, some teachers will - as a pilot - prudently try out the use of English as medium of instruction in their own classes. This way we get insight into the (in)possibilities of the functional use of English as medium of instruction, which can be helpful when the project schools actually arrive at the stage of trilingual schooling in the 2003/2004 school year.

As mentioned earlier, we decided to teach English via delayed immersion. In doing so, we pass over Lenneberg's well-known critical period hypothesis, which implies that one should just start (second) language learning at a very early age (Lenneberg, 1967). However, we believe that this notion has not been convincingly supported by empirical evidence. Holmstrand (1982:64) concluded on the basis of an extensive review of the research available that 'it is clear that the empirical findings ... unequivocally imply that the theory of the early optimal age for language learning lacks foundation'. We tend to agree with Singleton (1989) that not much can be said with certainty about the role of language in (second) language acquisition.

Delayed immersion has several advantages to us. First, paying attention to English in higher grades fits in the Dutch education system, where the first foreign language at school is normally taught in the upper grades. Second, one makes use of the high motivation among the (older) students. Older school children are increasingly confronted with English. Therefore, they become strongly motivated to learn the language as they grow older; it takes on a true instrumental value for them. This motivates them to learn the third language, and it is widely assumed that motivation is an important factor regarding (second) language learning (cf. Gardner, 1985). Third, one can make use of the knowledge of English the children already have acquired spontaneously outside school. Fourth, the students have had time to become bilingual before being confronted with the third language. Recall that being bilingual may well have a positive effect on third language learning (cf. Cenoz & Valencia, 1994). Besides, postponing English may prevent linguistic confusion among children who are in the process of becoming bilingual. Note that the potential for linguistic interference increases with the number of languages learned, in particular among related varieties. The risk of linguistic confusion has also been mentioned in the Basque Country. Cenoz and Lindsay (1994) noted that when English was introduced at age eight level in the Basque Country in 1993, it was hypothesised that the introduction of the third language at that age may confuse the children linguistically, especially since they are learning to read and write in the second

language (Basque or Castilian) at precisely this age. Fifth, at the final stage of elementary schooling it must be possible to functionally use English as medium of instruction to teach other school subjects. This immersion approach lessens the pressure on other parts of the curriculum, for English is not an extra subject taking up teaching time.

The Frisian project entails a model of 'successive trilingualism' as it were. Successive trilingualism means that the school languages (minority, dominant and foreign language) are more or less stacked. We began with a bilingual system in the lower grades and this will be extended to the middle grades. The minority and majority language get equal attention at these stages, both as school subject and as medium of instruction. This way, minority children build on their own language, and majority students are partly immersed in the minority language. Finally, the foreign language will be added in the last two grades. In the higher grades, the foreign language can be used as medium of instruction in keeping with principles of immersion education. Broadly speaking, our system runs from a bilingual to a trilingual teaching approach. Seen from another angle, the focus shifts from the teaching in and of the regional and national language (L1/L2) to the teaching in and of the international language (L3).

Perhaps an optimal trilingual model in Friesland would run from monolingual (minority language) teaching in the lower grades, via a bilingual scheme (minority and majority language) in the middle grades to a trilingual teaching approach (minority, majority and foreign language) in the upper grades. However, in our province there is no tradition of immersion schooling whatsoever and primary schools still shrink from the idea of immersion education. When we first tried to implement such a wholly successive model in the project schools, the school teams generally underlined the theoretical underpinnings of such a teaching system, but they feared that (Dutch and Frisian) parents would not be in favour of it.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

The Frisian case of trilingual primary schooling is relatively unique in the sense that the three target languages are all interrelated. This is distinct from other cases of trilingual primary schooling in Europe. In Catalonia and Finland one has to do with two related and one unrelated language, whereas the Basque multilingual primary schools are even faced with three unrelated languages. The Frisian linguistic constellation with interrelated varieties seems to be an advantage and a disadvantage at the same time. The relatedness between the varieties probably facilitates the occurrence of (positive) language transfer, but on the other hand it may perhaps easily lead to linguistic interferences (negative transfer).

We realise that our approach to trilingual primary schooling differs from other recent trilingual initiatives taken elsewhere in Europe. We decided not to opt for an early start of Primary English, as is the case in experimental programmes in Catalonia (Artigal, 1995), the Basque Country (Garagorri, Elorza & Lindsay, 1997) and Finland (Björklund & Suni,

this volume), where the teaching of L3 often starts at the beginning of primary schooling or already at Kindergarten level. We think we have good reasons for postponing L3 teaching (see §4.2). We fully realise that we thereby pass over the critical period hypothesis, which means that one should simply start language learning at an early age (Lenneberg, 1967), but we believe that this notion has not been unequivocally corroborated by empirical evidence. Anyway, future research can show to what extent our model of late immersion in the foreign language actually works. When it might appear that the results obtained relative to English fall short of expectations, this may lead to a more intensive English programme in the higher grades or to an earlier commencement of foreign language teaching. On the other hand, when the outcomes obtained turn out to be satisfactory, we have to face another problem touched upon above (see §3), namely the laborious connection between (intensified) Primary English and secondary schooling. We expect that the trilingual project gives the pupils a clear advantage in English language proficiency and the secondary schools have to cope with that. This is a tricky issue, all the more because the project schools turn out their eldest children to large number of different secondary schools in the province. It remains to be seen how we - or in fact the receiving secondary schools - can solve this question in the future.

In addition to differences, there are also similarities between the Frisian project and the other trilingual experiments in Europe mentioned above. In all cases, English is the third language at school, which once again underlines the power of this world language. More important is the common feature of all these multilingual experiments that a communicative approach is chosen to English language teaching, the basic idea being that language learning takes place by language use. In the Catalan and Basque experiments this is realised by meaningful social interaction in the target language. For instance, pupils and teachers collectively dramatise stories in English. In our case, the communicative approach is brought into practice through the functional use of the foreign language as medium of instruction, in keeping with the immersion principle.

Our contribution illustrates that trilingual primary education can offer a new and fascinating chance for various bilingual areas in Europe. Multilingual schooling at primary level in bilingual areas is a challenge to fulfil the widely held adage of 'unity in diversity', for this type of multilingual education pays attention to the region's own language, the state language and a foreign, international language. To put it differently, trilingual schooling can prepare the present-day generation of school children to function as tomorrow's European citizens. There clearly is no single, all embracing solution for trilingual primary schooling. At the most there are some general guiding principles - such as language learning by language use - which can be applicable in varied contexts. At any rate, in designing a suitable model for trilingual schooling, educational language planners have to take into account the following aspects: (a) the goals of language teaching, especially as far as the teaching of the foreign language is concerned, (b) the linguistic distance between the distinct language varieties to be taught and (c) the societal functioning of the minority language and the foreign language. Each of these aspects may

have consequences for the specific arrangement of a trilingual teaching model in a particular context. In short, Artigal (1995) seems to be right in arguing that there are 'multiway towards multilingualism'. That is not to say that each individual trilingual experiment has to find its own way, ignorant of insights and experiences gained elsewhere. The present volume is evidence of that.

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