

Rethinking modern language education in the Netherlands: The CEFR as a compass for national targets¹

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*The Netherlands has been engaged in an ongoing debate about the need for curriculum reform. In 2021, the Dutch Ministry of Education commissioned the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) to review national learning objectives, focusing on three key educational domains: qualification, socialization, and subjectification (Biesta 2020). One of the main challenges for modern language education lies in integrating the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) into the national learning targets while ensuring alignment with broader curriculum principles. A preliminary study (Fasoglio and Tammenga 2021) explored several scenarios based on quality criteria such as equity, horizontal and vertical alignment, and curricular coherence. A subsequent case study involving language teachers applied the methodology outlined in *Aligning Language Education with the CEFR* (British Council et al. 2022) to identify attainable proficiency levels for upper secondary education. As the process moves beyond the design phase, maintaining curriculum quality remains a key priority and depends on close collaboration among curriculum developers, school leaders, teachers, educational publishers, and test developers. Ensuring alignment between learning goals, pedagogy, and assessment is essential (Biggs and Tang 2011). Assessment, in particular, should promote coherence between the CEFR's vision of language learning and use and the goals of the national curriculum.*

Keywords: curriculum reform, CEFR, modern language education, curriculum alignment, assessment

1 Background and context

In the last few years, a lively debate has taken place in the Netherlands among scholars, policy makers, and educators about the coherence, purpose, and relevance of school subjects in secondary education in view of the needs of young people to be equipped for participation in today's society. Some of the current national educational targets defined for all streams of upper secondary education have not changed since 2006 despite major shifts in society and technology. This is also the case for modern languages.

To address this, the Dutch Ministry of Education commissioned the National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) in 2021 to lead a comprehensive educational reform. The aim of this reform was to ensure that education equips students not only for examinations and employment, but also for life in modern society shaped by diversity, increased mobility, and challenges such as technological development, globalization, and the enhancement of democracy.

1. Many thanks to my dear colleagues Loes Groen and Stéfanie Leunissen for their valuable feedback on the text of this article.

The Ministry's vision builds on educational theorist Gert Biesta's framework of three interconnected core educational purposes: qualification, socialization and subjectification (Biesta 2021, Biesta 2023). While qualification focuses on knowledge and skills for further education or the job market, socialization helps students find their place in society by engaging with democratic values and with different cultures. Subjectification encourages students to grow as individuals, to think critically, to act ethically, and to relate meaningfully to the world around them.

Biesta's approach signals a shift away from education that is primarily results-driven and is centred on measurable results. Instead, it emphasizes the complexity of teaching and learning and values education as a means to support and facilitate students' development by making learning meaningful. This view is based on principles of equity and inclusion: every student, regardless of background, ability or ambition, should have the opportunity to grow intellectually, socially and personally.

Building on Biesta's ideas, updating the national educational targets is not just about new content; it is about rethinking the very purpose of education itself. In a world marked by cultural diversity and rapid changes, schools should reflect the plural linguistic and cultural identities of their students and ensure that the curriculum supports both academic and professional achievement and social justice.

2 Pre-analysis: identifying the context and needs of modern language education

Modern foreign language curricula were, like other subjects in the Dutch curriculum, to be renewed based on Biesta's framework, mentioned in the previous paragraph. Language teachers face difficulties in secondary education regarding contents of the curriculum and of national exams, restrictions on lesson time, and lack of appeal of language subjects. Indeed, language curricula are in need of a boost.

Our first activity consisted of a contextual analysis to assess the needs for modern foreign language curriculum reform in our country (Fasoglio and Tammenga 2021). We initially reviewed relevant written sources: research findings, literature and other (online) publications. We also explored a few comparable contexts in which curriculum reform was taking place or had just been completed (specifically Finland, Ireland and New Zealand). Afterwards, we consulted a number of subject experts, representatives of the national teachers' association, teacher trainers, test experts and researchers. Consultations first took place via written feedback on draft texts, followed by in-depth interviews in focus groups. In our analysis we mapped out relevant and current developments in educational policy, linguistic research, language educational practice, and society in order to lay a solid foundation for the pillars of our reform, and we described a few promising practices. We concluded our analysis with a few recommendations to face the challenges of a substantial renewal of modern language curricula. Most important was the need for an integrated approach to communicative language skills and the inclusion of new subject-specific content in goals, assessment and implementation of the curriculum. Specifically, we mentioned aspects of digital literacy and cultural awareness; knowledge about and reflection on language; alignment with goals, audience, medium and sociocultural context of communication; creative language use; insights in literary texts and other fictional texts such as movies, graphic novels and narrative games. In addition, we affirmed the need to investigate how aspects of plurilingualism and language awareness should take a prominent place in national objectives. In this regard, the *Companion Volume to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR/CV, Council of Europe [CoE] 2020) should provide a framework for aligning objectives, teaching, and assessment and would therefore need to be assigned a visible, official status in the new national targets. Full details of the contextual analysis can be found in Fasoglio and Tammenga (2021).

3 Setting up the renewal process of modern language national targets

The renewal process covered all nine language subjects that have national attainment targets in Dutch secondary education: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. As curriculum experts, we developed new examination programmes in close collaboration with language teachers and teacher trainers. We established a curriculum renewal committee consisting of sixteen modern language teachers working in pre-vocational, senior general and pre-university education, and eight language teacher trainers. As curriculum experts, we were responsible for the substantive steering and for ensuring content quality and consistency. The committee started its work in June 2022 and completed it in June 2024. Over this period, we worked in twelve two-day sessions supplemented by meetings in smaller groups, sometimes involving external experts in specific topics such as intercultural competence, digital literacy, and language awareness. Throughout the process, an advisory group provided feedback on draft texts. The advisory group included representatives from the association of foreign language teachers, faculties of humanities, the modern language teacher training network, civil society organizations, and educational publishers. Additionally, two consultations were held with secondary school students and feedback was gathered from Cito, the Dutch institute for test development. Educational researchers from the SLO Advice & Research Department developed an instrument to systematically monitor the consistency of our work in relation to general principles and quality criteria during the design and development phases.

4 Design framework: capturing the core of language learning and teaching

Together with the curriculum reform committee, we formulated a mission statement for the specific area of modern language learning based on Biesta's framework and our preliminary analysis. Both reinforced our beliefs that being aware of how language works, being aware of the cultural implications of language use, and being able to communicate in multilingual contexts belong to the core competences in modern society. Based on these beliefs, we outlined the relevance of modern language teaching and learning in compulsory education, and how it contributes to qualification, socialization and subjectification. We defined its purpose as equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to become *proficient, language-aware and culturally aware communicators* in both digital and non-digital multilingual and multicultural contexts. Education in modern languages fosters self-confidence, autonomy, reflection, and creativity in communication. Through exploring, broadening and deploying their plurilingual repertoire in learning and communicating, students expand their horizons, discover their own talents, preferences and opportunities, and develop a deeper understanding of language and culture. They learn to critically engage with diverse media and sources in other languages, enabling them to communicate effectively and appropriately. Education in modern languages empowers students to continue developing their plurilingual repertoire autonomously, both in and beyond the classroom. This will enhance their opportunities in further education and career pathways. By acquiring knowledge and skills in other languages and cultures, students become aware of their own plurilingual and pluricultural identities and potential and learn to approach differing cultural perspectives with openness.

The mission statement, as mentioned above, is built on three pillars. First of all, language users need language in order to perform all kinds of tasks and to achieve various goals—often collaboratively—in diverse contexts, and thereby to participate in society as active citizens. In doing so, they learn to use their entire language repertoire effectively, and to consciously relate to cultural aspects that can influence communication. This requires a holistic and integrated approach to language teaching (Piccardo and North 2019). Placing language learning and use in a social perspective reflects the rationale behind the CEFR (CoE 2020: 30) which makes the CEFR perfectly suitable as a framework for designing and constructing new national targets.

The second pillar is that language subjects encompass not only language skills but also have subject-specific contents that are linked to language as a social phenomenon and as part of identity (e.g., Michel

2024). Think of knowledge and awareness of language structures, similarities and differences among languages and language varieties; of various effects of language contact; of the emotional, social, and even political dimensions of language use (James and Garrett 1991; van den Broek et al. 2022).

Finally, the third pillar is that language and culture are deeply intertwined (e.g., Byrnes 2010). Linguistic expressions are not just a tool for communication but are also carriers of culture.

In line with the above, we developed a framework for the new national educational targets consisting of three domains: A: Communication, B: Language awareness, and C: Cultural awareness. This construction is visualized in Figure 1

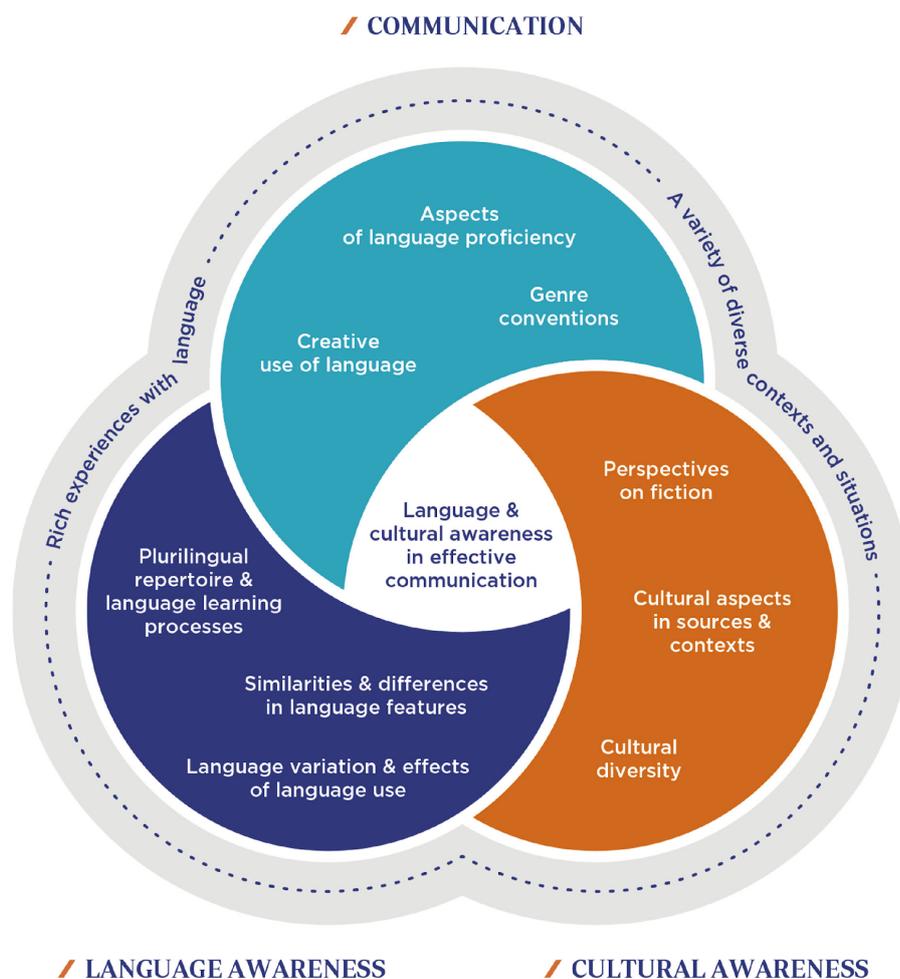


Figure 1. Visualization of the content of the new national educational targets in three domains, and their interconnections (Fasoglio et al. 2025)

This diagram shows three overlapping circles for the domains A (light blue), B (dark blue), and C (orange). Each circle summarizes the main contents of the domain. Their overlap in the middle emphasizes that all three domains are essential for effective communication. This involves considering others' perspectives, being aware of cultural aspects and taking them into account, and being aware of one's own language proficiency, usage and impact. Rich, varied and meaningful experiences with the target language in different contexts are vital for building these competencies.

5 Embedding the CEFR

Modern language attainment targets in Dutch secondary education have been linked to the CEFR since 2007. The link to CEFR levels was not originally based on empirical data about what students actually achieve, but on a comparison between national requirements up to 2007 and the descriptions of the CEFR levels. Between 2013 and 2017, Cito carried out an international standard setting for receptive skills. Cito and SLO (in collaboration with Cambridge Assessment for English speaking skills) researched the CEFR attained level for English, French and German writing and speaking skills for some of the educational strands. A summary of these research results and the link to the research reports can be found on the Dutch CEFR portal (SLO 2024; see webpage <https://www.slo.nl/thema/vakspecifieke-thema/mvt/erk/leraar-vo/niveaus-vo/bereikte-niveaus/>).

A few fundamental discrepancies still persist. Whereas proficiency targets are related to CEFR levels, those levels are not laid down in law. The national school-leaving reading test, accounting for 50% of the final grade, is not based on the CEFR. School boards are responsible for the quality of the school-based tests accounting for the remaining 50%. Diversity among schools regarding the implementation of the CEFR is huge. Guidelines for school-based exams provide guidance for aligning tests to the CEFR; however, they are not legally binding. Language teachers have long been asking for more clarity to help them gain insight into the proficiency level of their students, their progression, and their learning pathways. The renewal of the national educational targets offered opportunities to address these issues.

Two main questions had to be answered during the renewal process. Firstly, how to embed the CEFR in the national targets in such a way that it removes the discrepancies previously mentioned and provides increased guidance to teachers, students, test developers and educational material developers, within the generally prescribed structure for all national attainment targets? Secondly, which CEFR levels for the different languages, language skills and pathways are challenging and at the same time achievable for the different language subjects and educational pathways?

5.1 Ways of embedding

In order to answer the first question, we conducted a preliminary study (Fasoglio et al. 2022) to determine the best way to formalize the CEFR in national targets for secondary education. First, we assessed the needs of the educational sector with regard to the implementation of the CEFR. Based on the aspects that were put forward, we described various scenarios for embedding the CEFR in national targets. The scenarios corresponded to different variables such as: status of the proficiency levels (either advisory or mandatory); ways of differentiating between educational streams; bandwidth (either A, B, C or A1, A2 etc.); implicit or explicit form of processing level descriptions (either adopt the *Can Do* descriptors verbatim or incorporate level indicators in the targets); language or skill level (either one overall CEFR level for a foreign language or specified per skill); level of specificity (what scales and indicators were suitable). We assessed and weighed the scenarios in relation to three curriculum-related quality criteria: equality of opportunity (all students should have the same chance to develop their potential, regardless of their background or other personal circumstances), internal consistency, and horizontal and vertical alignment. We also looked at quality criteria and conditions such as expected usability and expected effectiveness: which of the scenarios would best enable these criteria to be met? Our analysis led to the recommendation that attainment targets should be formulated based on the CEFR global descriptors and that they should be accompanied by explicit CEFR level indications to be included in the preamble. These should be specified for each individual language, language skill and educational stream. Level indicators within the *Can Do* descriptors of the CEFR needed to be identified and included in the formulation of the attainment targets (see Table 1 for an example).

Table 1. Draft attainment target for written production and interaction, English senior general education (CEFR B1 level)

<p>Attainment target 8</p> <p>The student writes in English, targeted to purpose, audience, context, and medium.</p> <p>This involves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• exchanging information, experiences, feelings, and thoughts in written informal and formal online and offline interaction about familiar topics;• producing straightforward informative and narrative texts with the use of digital tools where applicable;• using appropriate register and conventions;• adjusting language to sociocultural conventions and the perspective of the communication partner;• using varied language structures and expressions.
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5.2 CEFR: what are challenging and attainable levels?

The second question we needed to answer was, which CEFR levels for the different languages, language skills and educational streams are challenging enough and at the same time achievable by the end of upper secondary education? In order to make well-founded statements, the curriculum renewal committee collected available information from previous research on the levels attained by students nationwide at the end of upper secondary education. However, only the CEFR levels achieved for English, German, and French—and only for a limited number of language skills and educational streams—had been previously studied. In 2023, further research was conducted in the form of a case study amongst language teachers to determine which CEFR levels are considered both challenging and achievable for upper secondary education (Groen and Trimbos 2023). The methodology of the case study was drawn from *Aligning Language Education with the CEFR* (British Council et al. 2022). The handbook is based on the CEFR/CV and focuses not only on assessment, but also on policy, curriculum and teaching materials, which made it a good fit for our exploration. The fact that the handbook is designed for people who are engaged with the CEFR in a practical way also made it suitable for the purpose of the case study.

The handbook introduces the steps required to align language curricula to the CEFR: familiarization, specification, standardization, standard setting and validation, and offers tools and materials that you can use to document the various steps. Due to time constraints and in view of the specific aims of the case study, the procedure described in the handbook was slightly adapted with respect to the following aspects:

- a. For English, French and German, the focus was on familiarization, specification, standardization and standard setting. The focus for the other languages was on familiarization.
- b. For all languages, an extra joint session was added for discussion and alignment of estimated levels stemming from the procedure applied in the previous rounds.
- c. For all languages, an extra joint session was added to discuss preconditions for implementation.
- d. For English, French, German and Spanish, an extra session was added with language institutes to evaluate the outcomes of the case study (triangulation).

Criteria for teachers to participate in the case study included: being qualified for teaching one of the languages involved in the curriculum renewal; being familiar with the CEFR; teaching in exam classes while participating in the case study; using their own classroom materials during the group sessions. Approximately twenty sessions were organized:

- For English, French and German separately: introductory sessions and whole-day sessions, distinguishing between the different educational streams, plus two additional short online meetings for the pre-vocational stream due to insufficient time on the day of the sessions.
- For Spanish: a homework assignment followed by an online session in which teachers assessed the conclusions reached for French and compared them with their own teaching practice.
- For Arabic, Chinese, Italian, Russian and Turkish: a homework assignment followed by a half-day session.

More information about collected data and findings can be found in Groen and Trimbos (2023).

6 Follow-up

The results of the case study provided useful indications of the CEFR levels that were estimated to be achievable at the end of upper secondary education. This information—though not representative of the entire target group—supplemented the data that the curriculum renewal committee had collected from previous research. During the development process, the committee discussed their findings with experts, teacher trainers and representatives of language teachers; they compared the outcomes of the discussions with their own experiences and placed them in the context of continuous learning pathways starting from lower secondary education. An overview of the CEFR levels established by the curriculum renewal committee per language, language skill and educational stream, as well as a justification per language was published at the end of the development process (Fasoglio et al. 2025; see also Table 2). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education adopted the recommendation from the exploratory study on the formalization of the CEFR in the new modern language attainment targets (Fasoglio et al. 2022).

Table 2. *Proposed minimum required CEFR levels for English and the end of upper secondary education in the Netherlands*

	Pre-vocational			Senior general	Pre-university
	Basic	Middle management	Combined/theoretical		
Oral and audio-visual comprehension	A2	B1	B1+	B2	C1
Reading comprehension	A2	A2	B1	B2	C1
Oral production	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1
Oral interaction	A1	A2	B1	B2	B2+
Written production and interaction	A2	A2	B1	B1	B2

The new educational targets and the established CEFR levels still need to be tested in schools prior to being formalized by the Ministry of Education and implemented. Starting in September 2025, a trial phase is being carried out by SLO, during which we engage in discussions at schools with language teachers, students and school leaders. With them, we discuss what information, guidance, examples and conditions are needed to shape the intent and the content of the draft educational targets in teaching and assessment. This will lead to the development of a variety of support materials for schools and their teachers. These materials are meant to inspire and are non-prescriptive. They aim to help schools align their programmes of teaching and assessment to the new educational targets.

7 Looking ahead: opportunities and challenges

The national educational targets for modern foreign languages have been renewed based on the idea that language subjects add value to students' development and are essential for their participation in today's multilingual, multicultural society. This idea has been explained in our mission statement. To make students aware of the added value of mastering multiple languages, new or updated content has been included in the attainment targets. The trial phase is a suitable moment to ask students and teachers whether that added value is recognized, and whether the new draft educational targets have succeeded in making it tangible.

CEFR-based attainment targets for modern languages allow schools room for customization and differentiation. Teachers can stimulate students to develop and capitalize on their entire language repertoire and their plurilingual competences in the light of what is important to them for their personal development and participation in society. The more clearly targets are defined, the easier it is to understand what customization is needed to ensure that all students reach those goals.

However, curriculum reform does not automatically lead to better education. Curriculum quality relies on the teacher's critical involvement and good interplay between curriculum developers, teachers, school leaders, testing developers, educational publishers and students. Curriculum making is a social practice (Priestley et al. 2021). It is a non-linear, dynamic process of interpretation, mediation, negotiation and translation across multiple layers of education: from international frameworks and guidelines (in our case, the CEFR) to national requirements, school policy and classroom activities. Curriculum making is, in other words, a fascinating but complex challenge. Formal curricula cannot just be uncritically adopted by teachers; they need to be translated to the school context in a consistent and context-specific way. Therefore, teachers and school leaders need to develop curriculum agency and an enquiring and reflective attitude. To achieve this, shared sense-making and critical engagement with the aims and values of the formal curriculum are essential initial steps. At the same time, sustainable school curriculum changes need a strong synergy between three closely interrelated areas: curriculum development, teacher professional development and school organization development (Priestley et al. 2021). This can only be achieved if schools shape a discursive environment that promotes professional development and cooperative thinking.

When it comes to the implementation of the CEFR, the procedures described in the alignment handbook (British Council et al. 2022), possibly adjusted as in Groen and Trimbos (2023), can show their effectiveness in facilitating deep sense-making among language teachers in developing shared curriculum agency. This includes reflection on how to achieve constructive alignment between goals, implementation at school, methodologies and assessment. Constructive alignment is, indeed, an essential condition to make high-quality and sustainable curricula possible, both at the intended and implemented level (Biggs and Tang 2011).

Additionally, further research and trialling is needed for high-stakes assessment that is valid and reliable, both central and school-based, to define suitable assessment constructs and rating systems, as the CEFR itself is not really designed for rating purposes. Intensive synergy between curriculum and test developers is crucial to set out assessment specifications, forms and methods that fit the intended

purpose of the new national targets, and at the same time meet feasibility conditions in their contexts of use such as procedures, resources, time, costs, etc. In line with the principles of the entire educational reform, assessment should synchronously stimulate an approach that prioritizes promoting and improving student learning and learning autonomy. This is another challenging journey, where the renewal of the national attainment targets serves merely as the starting point.

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9 Bibliography

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