The Delft method

Language course starts at the deep end

One of the more unexpected innovations to come out of Delft is an unconventional method for teaching a second language. Developed 25 years ago by the applied linguistics section, the ‘Delft method’ has proved highly effective, provided, that is, the students do their homework. “You learn a language by talking. The more the better. Just let them talk, never mind the rough edges.”

Henk Makkink
With the introduction of the bachelor/master system in 2002 Delft University of Technology switched to English for its master courses. The bachelor courses are still given in Dutch, although the Aerospace Engineering faculty has been experimenting with English-language courses for junior students. Now that the number of foreign students is increasing, even the lecturers have to pass their English tests. Curiously enough, language courses once formed a standard part of the Delft curriculum. A century and a half ago, the compulsory curriculum of the precursor of Delft University of Technology, the Royal Engineering Academy (1842–1864), included several languages such as French, German, and English. This may well have had something to do with the varying levels of mediocrity of the students’ previous training. Malay and Javanese were compulsory for students who after graduation went to work in the Dutch East Indies as engineers, as most of the trainees were, or to work in the East-India civil service.

However, when the Royal Academy was transformed into the Polytechnic School in 1864, the language courses were ditched together with the rest of the East India civil service curriculum. The teaching of language skills was relegated to secondary school level, while the Polytechnic focussed all attention on technical and scientific training. Even so, in due course, it became a well-known fact that language skills were not an engineer’s forte. The lack of expressive skills and inadequate reporting abilities were a thorn in the side of many professors. In 1902 J. Kraus, the director of the Polytechnic School, attempted to have language reintroduced into the curriculum: “The training should not be limited to material aspects. I should like to include not only applied mathematics and physics, but also philosophy, history, and the Dutch language in our list of subjects.” Although the board of governors allowed a few cultural subjects to be added, languages failed to establish a foothold.

Language committee
The irritation about the lack of language skills of the engineers from Delft peaked after the Second World War. The Polytechnic School, which in the interim had become Delft Technical Academy, eagerly picked up the educational thread and began to prepare students for the real-world in a new society. The Technical Academy, accepting its responsibility, in 1955 established a language committee. In 1958 the Dutch linguist J.A. Veering was appointed academic supervisor and took on the daily running of the language committee. In practice, the committee partially functioned as an editing board, removing errors from students’ (and staff’s) reports and providing translation help for foreign-language articles. In addition language courses were given to help students planning to go abroad for internships or for exchange programs at foreign universities. Professor Dr J. Terlingen of the Catholic University in Nijmegen was prepared to help the Delft academic community on Fridays, teaching Spanish. After the launch of Sputnik in 1957 Drs. B.G. Karpiak was appointed to provide Russian translations and to set up a course in Russian. Professor Vittorio Gozzer of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura handled the Italian side of things, and Mr. S. Lainé of the Maison Descartes in Amsterdam came to give French conversation lessons. For English, the Technical Academy had engaged J.K. Michon, who also taught English at Haarlem Polytechnic, and for a number of years the Technical Academy even provided lessons in Swedish, given by D.R.B. ten Cate-Silfwerbrand.

The language committee also supervised the Dutch language skills courses, ‘Speaking in public’ and ‘Oral and written reporting and presentation’. For this purpose, Veering even wrote a highly successful textbook, ‘Spelenderwijs Zuiver Nederlands’ (Correct Dutch Made Easy). “We

Malay and Javanese were compulsory for students who after graduation went out to the Dutch East Indies as engineers or to work in East-India civil service

should not be limited to material aspects. I should like to include not only applied mathematics and physics, but also philosophy, history, and the Dutch language in our list of subjects.” Although the board of governors allowed a few cultural subjects to be added, languages failed to establish a foothold.

Dr H.J.A. Duparc, professor of theoretical and applied mathematics and mechanics at the department of general sciences (1956-1984). He was involved in recruiting the first foreign language teachers in the late 1950s. Photo taken in 1965.
have Veering to thank for the fact that language courses at the Technical Academy reached the level that their successors can now build upon,” said mathematician and language purist Professor Dr H.J.A. Duparc, one of the people involved in attracting the first batch of foreign language teachers.

China

It wasn’t until the early 1980s that the really innovative work started, with the introduction of the ‘Delft method’ for teaching a second language. The seeds of the teaching method were sown in 1979, when a group of students arrived from China to continue their studies at Delft Technical Academy. At the time there was no suitable course to teach them Dutch in a short time span, so they had to make do with existing teaching materials, albeit augmented by some local teaching knowledge. Gradually, the applied linguistics section led by Professor Dr A.G. Sciarone managed to develop a six-month course that was to enable foreign student applicants to master the Dutch language to a level sufficient for attending lectures and expressing themselves adequately in Dutch.

In the Delft method the participants are thrown in at the deep end. From the very start they are expected to read Dutch, listen to Dutch, and speak Dutch. The structure of the language method is simple, clearly defined, effective, and highly text-oriented. The method focuses on reading and understanding texts, and training students to listen and hold a conversation. The lessons are conducted entirely in Dutch, with English as a backup language, or if even that doesn’t help, miming. During the lessons, the teacher provides

“It teaches students a foreign language the natural way, the way young children learn their own language”

Custom courses

The language institute of the Delft University of Technology also develops courses on demand for target groups outside its own walls. In 1996-1997, in collaboration with the Regional Enterprise for Professional Qualification (ROB), it developed a course on CD-ROM, “Dutch in the metal industry” for foreign-born students with a language deficiency. The courses focus on the acquisition of Dutch in both professional and general contexts, and works interactively, combining text, images, and sound. This makes the CD-ROM much more versatile than the cassette tape used in the language lab of yesteryear. For the healthcare services the Delft institute developed the textbook, “The language of healthcare.”
feedback about the students’ pronunciation. The text subjects are to do with the Netherlands, with things that are of interest to foreign visitors. The complete set of four courses takes six months on a full-day basis. Students with a Germanic mother language can suffice with an extra intensive two-month summer course. Linguistics Professor Sciarone, who has since retired, still has every belief in his brainchild. “It teaches students a foreign language the natural way, the way young children learn their own language,” he says, explaining the philosophy underlying the method. “Words and grammar are learnt through repeated reading and frequent listening to texts. The students are confronted with the full grammar right from the start instead of encountering gradually more difficult steps, and there is no learning by heart. Foreign student applicants starting the course find themselves unable to express themselves at all, which is a bit unnatural. In order to overcome this, they are forced to learn the most common words in a minimum of time. You learn a language by doing a lot of talking. So, let them talk, never mind the dodgy grammar.”

**Chinese for Dutch speakers**

It wasn’t long before the Delft method came under attack, ignoring as it did the conventional method of learning grammar, cramming lists of words, and doing endless word exercises. The educational establishment looked on the new method as an attack on existing methods. On the other hand, the Delft method does work, as can be seen from the fact that those that successfully complete the course manage to keep up pretty well with academic teaching. The average success rate of all the Dutch language courses for foreign students taking their first exam is seventy percent. Additional courses using the Delft method have been developed to teach English, French, Spanish, Italian, and Chinese to Dutch speakers. French, Spanish, and Italian are optional. Foreign participants in the Delft master course can now take Dutch as an optional subject, which is an option that is in high demand. The number of participants for the two optional Dutch courses for foreigners from within Delft University of Technology itself is about three hundred. The Delft method is continually being improved and updated. Grammar exercises have been all but dispensed with, and a major role has been given to the computer, which entered service as a language-teaching aid around 1990, mostly for

**Supplementary education**

When Delft Technical Academy was founded in 1905, the full range of supplementary education (mathematics, physics, law, economics) was combined in a separate department, general sciences. Around 1960 linguistics was added. Five years later the languages section was transferred to the newly-founded sub-department of philosophy and social sciences, thus ending the pioneering work of the Delft language committee, which up to then had looked after language matters. These days language education comes under the Institute for Technology and Communication of the Faculty of Technology, Policy, and Management. The Institute, with 25 lecturers, comprises six fields, communicative skills (oral and written presentation), didactics and education development (teacher training and coaching), Dutch for foreign speakers, foreign languages (English, French, Spanish, Italian, and Chinese), courses and workshops for doctoral students and researchers, and an English unit.

“Thanks to a test program on CD-ROM, there is more time for supervising free conversation”
taking tests. It greatly improved the efficiency of language education. In addition, software has been developed to enable students to take tests and do exercises without the help of the teacher.

Sciarone: “The sophisticated test program – which has been available on CD-ROM for the past ten years or so – tests all students on every aspect of the curriculum, and informs them about the learning results and the effect of their learning method. It shows them the mistakes they make, forces them to immediately repeat learning tasks that were insufficiently completed, informs the teacher about their progress, and provides the teacher with a basis for specific advice. It enables the teacher to find out which group of students – with Roman, Germanic, or non-Western backgrounds – profit most from extra help on a certain subject. It also leaves more time for supervising free conversation, which is the teacher’s real work.”

Even so the Delft method has never managed to occupy more than a niche position in the language education field. It is hardly used at all in further education. The method only works when student and teacher both believe in it, and if the students diligently do their homework. The latter is where things often go wrong. The reason why the Delft method never caught on in a wider field is also to do with teachers and teacher trainers refusing to abandon their traditional language methods.

Nevertheless the Delft method was adopted by a number of other organisations during the nineteen 1990s. Commercial language institutes were quick to embrace it, followed soon afterwards by other universities, regional training centres, and adult education. The method is also being used abroad, in particular at a number of universities.

With acknowledgments to Drs. P.J. Meijer and Professor Dr A.G. Sciarone.