

The Ubiquity of English Proficiency in the Netherlands: A Model for Global EFL Learning

オランダにおける英語力：グローバル EFL 学習のモデル

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Abstract

2023 marked the fifth straight year that the Netherlands has placed number one in the English Proficiency Index (EPI), which ranks the competency of English use in 113 non-English speaking countries based on the test scores of 2.2 million adults in those countries. The global average EPI score is 493, and the Netherlands had a score of 647 in 2023. This paper outlines the reasons why the Dutch have such a solid command of English with the objective of highlighting the elements of their education system, cultural attitudes, and individual habits that have allowed them to achieve such a high level of competence. Understanding these factors can be of great benefit to both teachers and students of English as a foreign language, as several of the techniques and attitudes are ones that can be easily emulated.

Keywords: English proficiency, the Netherlands, EFL, EPI ranking

要旨

非英語圏 113カ国の成人 220万人のテストスコアをもとに英語使用能力をランク付けした英語能力指数（EPI）で、2023年はオランダが5年連続で1位となった。2023年の世界平均 EPI スコアは 493 点で、オランダは 647 点であった（600 点以上は非常に高い習熟度を示す）。本稿では、オランダ人がこれほどまでに英語を使いこなす理由を概説し、それを可能にした教育システム、文化的態度、個人の習慣の要素を明らかにすることを目的とする。これらの要素を理解することは、外国語としての英語を教える教師にとっても、英語を学ぶ学生にとっても、非常に有益である。

Introduction

Since 2011, the language education company EF has been publishing its annual English Proficiency Index (EPI) ranking for non-native English-speaking countries. The methodology used to compile the index encompasses a wide range of participants, drawing on data from online tests to evaluate grammar, vocabulary, speaking fluency, reading, and listening skills. The significance of the EPI lies not just in its role as an educational tool but in its reflection of a country's ability to participate in the global economy and international culture, where English serves as a key lingua franca. As seen in the table below, in 2023, the Netherlands was in the number one position with an EPI score of 647. This was the fifth consecutive year that the Netherlands was at the top of the EPI ranking. According to EF (2023), a person with an EPI score of more than 600 has a very high level of proficiency in English and is able to:

- Use nuanced and appropriate language in social situations
- Read advanced texts with ease
- Negotiate a contract with a native English speaker

Table 1. Top EPT countries 30 in 2023 (EF)

| | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. The Netherlands (647) | 11. Croatia (603) | 21. Lithuania (567) |
| 2. Singapore (631) | 12. Greece (602) | 22. Luxembourg (575) |
| 3. Austria (616) | 13. Poland (598) | 23. Estonia (570) |
| 4. Denmark (615) | 14. Finland (597) | 24. Serbia (569) |
| 5. Norway (614) | 15. Romania (596) | 25. Malaysia (568) |
| 6. Sweden (609) | 16. Bulgaria (589) | 26. Czech Republic (565) |
| 7. Belgium (608) | 17. Hungary (588) | 27. Nigeria (562) |
| 8. Portugal (607) | 18. Slovakia (587) | 28. Argentina (560) |
| 9. South Africa (605) | 19. Kenya (584) | 29. Hong Kong (558) |
| 10. Germany (604) | 20. Philippines (578) | 30. Switzerland (563) |

Proficiency level: ● very high ○ high

Another impressive finding elucidated in the 2023 results was that it is not only a new generation of young people who are using English in nuanced ways but also adults who have increased their ability to communicate in English. Examining the degree to which the Dutch

population has mastered their command of English as well as their attitudes towards using English is particularly valuable for understanding the dynamics of English as a global language in a non-native context. The geographical proximity of the Netherlands to the United Kingdom is similar to that of other European countries such as France and Germany, yet the capability of the Dutch to use English exceeds that of the people in those countries. While there is still debate as to whether the Dutch have embraced their relationship to the English language (Gerritsen et al., 2000), the way that they have incorporated English into their education system, as well as other sociolinguistic factors, should be seen as a paradigm for other countries to aspire to.

This paper investigates the underlying factors contributing to the high level of English proficiency in the Netherlands. The factors have been divided into those related to: historical context, education, and social acceptance. Gaining an insight into myriad of ways the Dutch have managed excel at English how can provide invaluable insight for teachers and students of English as a second language to reach their goals.

Historical background

The Dutch have a centuries-old tradition of international trade, and their sailors explored the far corners of the globe decades before many of their counterparts in other European countries had. While the Netherlands had exposure to foreign languages and cultures even in the Middle Ages, it wasn't until the end of the 18th century that the population started to take an interest in learning foreign languages (Wilhelm, 2018). When foreign languages eventually became a compulsory component of school curricula in the late 19th century, it was initially French and German that were taught. In the middle of the 20th century, English established itself as the prominent foreign language taught in the Netherlands and in 1986, it became a mandatory subject for the last two years of primary education.

The geographic location of the Netherlands and its role as a hub for international trade necessitate proficiency in English. The economic benefits of engaging with global markets have made English an essential skill for the Dutch workforce, further incentivizing English learning. This economic motivation aligns with the educational and cultural emphasis on English, creating a comprehensive environment conducive to language acquisition.

English in the Dutch education system

Compared to most other European countries, the degree to which the Dutch government dictates the content of the curriculum and standards to measure the attainment of academic goals is limited. Students are given a great degree of freedom within the bounds of the compulsory curriculum to choose subjects that they have an aptitude for, and then take these subjects as part of their final exams when they graduate high school. The limited role of the government also extends to the pedagogical framework, the selection of textbooks, and the number of required hours, with schools being granted freedom to determine all of them independently.

English classes in the Netherlands begin when students are ten years old and typically last for eight years. While they are in primary school, almost all students take 150 minutes of English classes per week, and by the time they finish, have received 50 hours of English instruction. In 1993, English became one of the three compulsory subjects that high school students must take in order to graduate, alongside Dutch and Mathematics.

The Dutch educational philosophy is founded on a pragmatic approach and prioritizes the practical application of English over rote memorization or grammatical perfection. The emphasis is on effective communication, equipping students with the skills to use English in real-world situations. This functional approach resonates with learners, making the learning process more relevant and engaging. The focus on communication is evident in the teaching methods employed, with language teachers often utilizing task-based learning, pair work, and group projects to encourage active participation and practice in meaningful contexts. By collaborating and using English to achieve specific goals, students develop fluency and confidence in their use of both spoken and written language.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

The Dutch education system also supports bilingual education programs and English-medium instruction for a variety of subjects, further enhancing English proficiency across academic disciplines. Such practices not only improve language skills but also prepare students for participation in the global academic community and workforce. The bilingual education system in the Netherlands, characterized by its dynamic evolution, reflects a commitment to linguistic diversity and educational innovation. Notably, the Dutch government recognizing the increasing necessity for multilingual competence in a globalizing world, initiated policies supporting bilingual education in the early 1980s. Central to this development was the

implementation of ‘Tweetalig Onderwijs’ (TTO), which translates to 'bilingual education' in Dutch. This initiative primarily aimed at integrating English into the Dutch secondary education system, offers a curriculum where subjects are taught both in Dutch and English. Research by Coyle (2007) underscores the policy’s intent to not only bolster English proficiency among students but also to deepen their understanding of intercultural dynamics, a response to the growing interconnectedness of European nations. Consequently, this bilingual approach has been instrumental in aligning the Dutch education system with broader European linguistic and educational objectives.

Bilingual secondary education grew gradually at first but experienced a boom in the 2000s, growing from 26 registered schools in 2000 to 115 in 2010 (Koster & van Putten, 2014). By 2018, that number had grown to 132 registered schools, with 115 of them having been given official accreditation as bilingual secondary learning institutions (Nuffic, 2018). Furthermore, according to Nuffic, the Netherlands has “the largest number of English-taught programs in Continental Europe. About 2,000 programs are taught entirely in English.”

University programs are increasingly being taught using more English throughout the Netherlands, with some courses being taught entirely in English.

Table 2: Languages used to teach BA and MA level courses at universities in the Netherlands

| | Dutch | English | Mix of Dutch/English |
|-----------------|-------|---------|----------------------|
| BA | 29% | 55% | 15% |
| BA in Languages | 62% | 16% | 22% |
| MA | 14% | 76% | 10% |
| MA in Languages | 13% | 61% | 26% |

Source: Association of Universities in the Netherlands (2019)

Table 2 shows the degree to which English instruction has permeated Dutch tertiary education instruction. It is difficult to speculate as to whether these large percentages of courses taught in English are for purely academic reasons or if there is a monetary incentive for universities choosing to offer the bulk of their courses in English. In 2005, there were only 33,000 international students in the Netherlands, but in the 2021/22 academic year, that number

had risen to 115,000 (Nuffic, 2023). In the 2022/23 academic year, there were 122,287 international students at Dutch tertiary institutions making up 15 percent of the student population in the country. In the 2022 academic year, 40% of all first-year students in Dutch universities were from other countries.

The efficacy of the Dutch bilingual education system is largely contingent upon the quality of teacher training and curriculum design. Effective bilingual education requires teachers who are proficient in both languages and skilled in pedagogical strategies that facilitate bilingual learning. The Dutch approach emphasizes comprehensive teacher training programs that focus on bilingual teaching methods and intercultural competence (Nuffic, 2013). This is complemented by a curriculum that balances language acquisition with subject matter learning, ensuring that students gain content knowledge while improving their language skills. What is perhaps most impressive about the bilingual education system is that it has been found to increase overall student motivation, which a study by Mearns et al. (2017) highlighted in stating, “learners in the bilingual stream displayed in most respects more motivation than their mainstream counterparts” (p. 734).

In the contemporary landscape, the Dutch bilingual education system stands as a paragon of effective language immersion strategies. A significant body of research, including a study by Verspoor and de Bot (2015), indicates the substantial benefits of this system, particularly in fostering high levels of English proficiency among Dutch students. This proficiency is not limited to linguistic skills but extends to cultural and intercultural competencies, essential in today's globalized world. The TTO program, now extended to include primary education, has evolved to incorporate other languages, such as German and French, though English remains predominant. However, challenges remain, notably in ensuring equal access and quality across regions. The system's success, as argued by Jaspers (2018), hinges on the continuous professional development of educators and the sustained support from educational institutions and policymakers. This suggests that the ongoing efficacy of bilingual education in the Netherlands is as much a product of systemic support as it is of pedagogical innovation.

Social acceptance

Dutch society holds a positive attitude towards multilingualism and sees the practical utility of English as a global lingua franca. This societal endorsement encourages individuals to learn and use English in daily life, viewing language skills as a valuable asset for personal and professional development. The cultural openness to English is further evidenced by the

frequent use of English in business, higher education, and international relations, all of which reinforce its importance. It could be said that this overall attitude towards the use of English in the Netherlands is one of the key reasons why it stands at the top place in the EPI rankings. While most countries around the world are pragmatic about the infusion of English into their cultural fabric, there are some that see it as a threat to their national identity. Gunnarsson (2001) outlines the scope of this encroachment in the realm of science in Sweden by stating, “English constitutes a threat to the continued existence of a scientific register in Swedish” (Gunnarsson, 2001: 311-3).

Another factor that contributes to the near-universal English skills in the Dutch population is the amount which they read. In the period between 2018 and 2023, the number of English-language children’s books sold in the Netherlands increased by 153% (Dessing, 2023). The number is also remarkably high for books targeted to adults, with 20% of all books sold in 2022 being in a language other than Dutch, and the vast majority of these printed in English. In 2023, the Dutch purchased 43 million books, and this was the highest figure since 2012. What is even more impressive is that the total number of books written in Dutch actually decreased, meaning that people are reading more books in other languages, primarily English.

Another reason given for why the Dutch have such an in-depth understanding of English is that almost none of their English language movies or TV shows are dubbed into the local language, unlike in Germany, France, Spain, and Italy. Wilton & De Houwer (2011) explain that Dutch children (aged 11 and 12) who had been exposed to large amounts of subtitled TV had a larger lexical repertoire of English than the children who had not watched as much TV. It is not only the domain of the TV shows themselves that are weighted towards English, with Renkema, Vallen and Hoeken (2003) pointing out that in the late nineties, 15% of the commercials on Dutch TV were in English. Van Parijs (2011) outlines the profound scope of the linguistic immersion that video provides: “Language learning through the watching of subtitled films and other broadcasts is a powerful factor in this process, including through the incentives it creates to engage in more structured forms of learning and more active modes of interaction” (p.107).

The Dutch people recognize the immense value of English in today’s interconnected world. English is readily integrated into Dutch society, being used in business, media, advertising, and technology. This widespread acceptance creates a vibrant environment where English is not just a subject in school but an essential tool for daily life and career advancement. This embracing attitude fosters intrinsic motivation among learners, who see the direct benefits of

having a command of English. The desire to connect with the wider world and access international opportunities acts as a powerful driver for language acquisition.

Lessons for other countries

There is a broad scope of areas in which aspects of English learning in the Netherlands could be applied to countries in which English is taught as the primary foreign language. Implementing the use of English not only as a target language for isolated study but rather as a communicative vehicle for the teaching of other curricula (Content and Language Integrated Learning; CLIL) can significantly increase the depth to which students can grasp the nuances of English as Lasagabaster & Sierra (2009) explain, “a CLIL approach provides more intense exposure and more meaningful opportunities to use the target language” (p.13).

Teachers and students of English should take full advantage of the multisensory and interdisciplinary learning stimulus that video material provides. As Kasper (1999) states: “film provides a clear and comprehensive examination of inter-disciplinary issues, themes, and ideas, interpretation, inference, and synthesis of knowledge” (p. 125).

Another aspect of the way English is taught through other subjects (CLIL) that provides a model to emulate by other countries is the way in which teachers focus on exposure and synthesis as opposed to aiming for perfection in grammar. Vespoor et al. (2015) explain:

In the Dutch model, continuous insistence on accuracy is avoided, but CLIL teachers are to consider themselves also language teachers in that they scaffold for meaning and create opportunities in different teaching modes, including forms of cooperative learning to encourage meaningful interaction and output. (p. 7)

As was mentioned earlier, the teaching of English in the Netherlands is far more centered around practical use as opposed to having memorization and perfect accuracy as the goals. The success of the Dutch people in the EPI shows that the fear of not using English perfectly, which is so prevalent among EFL students (particularly in Asia), can be one of the biggest impediments to success in acquiring English skills.

Conclusion

The Netherlands can act as an exemplary model for how people in non-English speaking countries can improve their English proficiency. Many students of foreign languages are aware that immersion in the L2 is key to acquiring the skills to not only understand the language but

to produce it yourself, and the Dutch have shown that constant exposure to a foreign language in films, TV, and books is a key element in mastering that language.

The Dutch success story offers valuable lessons for other nations looking to improve their English proficiency. By implementing early exposure, prioritizing communication, investing in teacher training, and embracing English in daily life, governments and educational institutions in non-English speaking countries can create an environment conducive to language acquisition. However, it is crucial to adapt these strategies to local contexts and educational structures.

Several countries have begun to implement strategies similar to those used in the Netherlands, with promising results. For instance, Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Norway also emphasize early language learning, extensive use of subtitling, and the integration of English into higher education, contributing to their high levels of English proficiency. These examples demonstrate the adaptability and effectiveness of the Dutch model in diverse educational and cultural contexts.

Ultimately, improving English proficiency is not just about climbing a ranking. It is about empowering individuals to connect with the world, unlock opportunities, and participate in the global dialogue. By adopting the Dutch spirit of innovation and inclusivity, other nations can chart their own paths to English language mastery, enriching their societies and contributing to a more connected and multilingual world.

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