Designing a task based curriculum
for intensive language training

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Abstract. In this paper, I will report on the progress made in designing a curriculum for intensive language training, in which one-on-one instruction is combined with online exercises and drills to achieve an optimal blend of expertise and technology enhanced language learning. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has become a crucial tool for assessing language skills as well as for developing courses for students. Working with a very heterogeneous target group and teaching seven different languages in a five-day full immersion setting, it is crucial to continuously focus on the language tasks they need to perform in their target language. A task-based approach, in which language tasks are matched with their corresponding level according to the CEFR and categorized for industry specific domains, was designed and implemented for the development of new course materials. The focus is on combining receptive and productive language skills in realistic contexts, made available in an online learning environment as well as through authentic materials with assignments to promote a thorough understanding and the use of advanced language skills.

Keywords: CEFR, blended learning, task-based language learning, curriculum design.

1.   Introduction

This paper discusses the steps taken in the last five years towards designing a task-based curriculum for communicative language learning and teaching in a blended environment. It is taking the best from both worlds: experienced native speaker teachers and technology that provides an environment in which students can boost
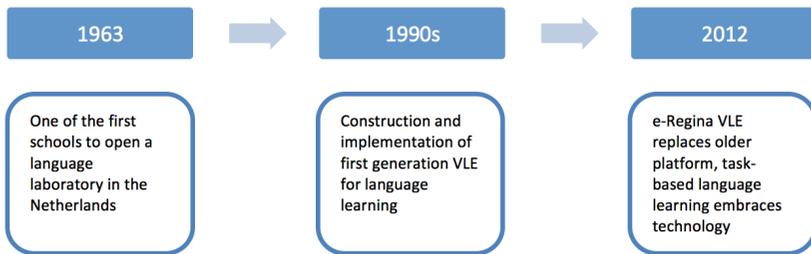
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their language proficiency through authentic and relevant content and effective drills and exercises.

2.   Institutional setting

2.1.   History

Figure 1. Three crucial years in the history of the institute

1963	1990s	2012
One of the first schools to open a language laboratory in the Netherlands	Construction and implementation of first generation VLE for language learning	e-Regina VLE replaces older platform, task-based language learning embraces technology

After opening the language laboratory in 1963, it did not take long to understand the importance of technology in language teaching. While the school primarily focused on missionaries and development workers travelling to distant parts of the world, the quality and results achieved in the Regina Coeli language laboratory quickly reached others, such as ambassadors, politicians and highly educated professionals (http://www.reginacoeli.com/about-us/the-nuns-of-vught.html).

Figure 2. The first language lab in Vught (1963)[2]

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2. This picture is from the archives of Regina Coeli. Reproduced with kind permission from the board of directors
   (Harm-Jan Bouwknegt, Managing Director, and Esther van Berkel, Director of Studies).

2.2.   View on language teaching

Students range from true beginners to near native speakers, and come from various parts of the world to boost their proficiency for their target language. Much of the original view on language teaching is still applied:

- students are individually taught by native speakers of the target language;
- all training programs are tailored to the specific needs of the student;
- teaching sessions alternate with study and practice in the language laboratory;
- all teaching occurs in an immersion setting, with a very limited use of support languages;
- form and correctness are as important as fluency;
- grammar in use and context, vocabulary and communication focus on language tasks the student needs to perform.

The old tape recorders, microphones and headsets were replaced by a virtual learning environments (VLE) in the 1990's, hosting learning materials for input and practice after every individual teaching session on the institute's network. By 2012, this VLE had seen a number of updates and was finally upgraded to e-Regina, incorporating audio, video and various new question and drill types.

In 2001, the language institute implemented CEFR for assessment and teaching. This framework is also used for the creation of 'integrated assignments', combining receptive and productive skills using authentic materials such as television programs, blogs and articles from newspapers and magazines.

3.   CEFR, levels, tasks and domains

Designing realistic language tasks for our VLE is a challenging task, since the target we work with is heterogeneous, as can be seen in Figure 3. Furthermore, there are differences between target groups for languages taught at the institute: while the departments teaching English, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian mainly work with Dutch students, the students in Dutch language courses come from other countries. The Dutch department also works with very varying levels of proficiency, ranging from true beginners (0 - A1.1) to educative native (C1.1) and native speakers attending courses to hone specific skills such as academic or professional writing.

Other departments offer the same type of training, but to a more narrow range: most Dutch students studying a foreign language tend to be somewhat proficient

in their target language. Also, whereas students studying Dutch plan to live and work in the Netherlands, most of their Dutch counterparts studying other languages tend to only need the target language in very specific situations, such as weekly international meetings or negotiations.

Figure 3. Student profile for 2012, no data available on 2013[3]
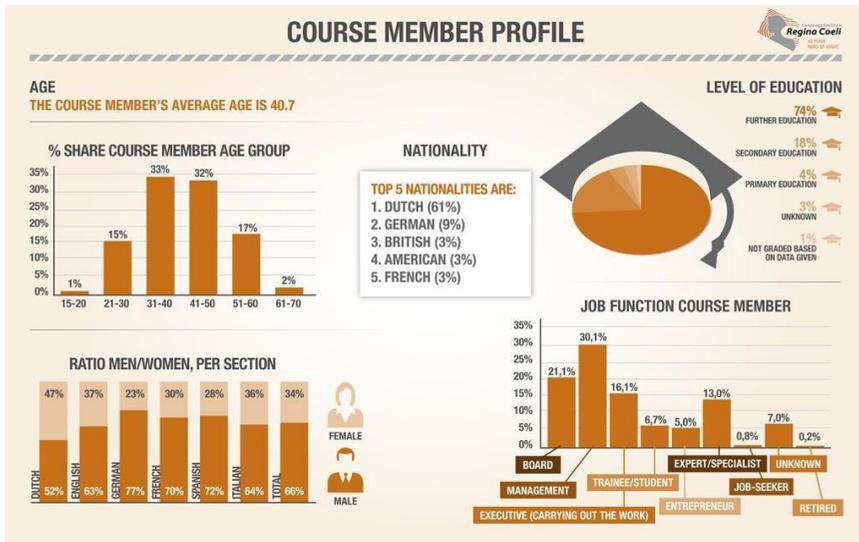
All of the elements described above were taken into account in designing a framework for curriculum and course material development. This approach to needs assessment (NA) is now used by all departments, and applied to their specific target groups:

- identify target group of students (nationality, mother tongue, age, and industry);
- identify domains of language (social, professional, role specific);
- describe language tasks based on CEFR levels for every domain;
- create instructional materials using or based on authentic materials.

All materials focus on a communicative approach to language learning in which the learner's need to communicate in specific situations is central. Assignments typically incorporate reading or listening/viewing tasks with processing tasks.

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3. http://annualreport.reginacoeli.com

Table 1. Key competences related to CEFR levels as part of curriculum development framework

CEFR level	0 – A2.2	B1.1 – B2.1	B2.2 – C1	
Key competence	describe	inform – instruct	motivate – argue	discuss – debate

Figure 4. Example of a domain used in teaching Dutch

Domain 1: Personal Identity

Basic user – Waystage
Direct need to communicate:
- Personal identity
- Health
- Wellbeing
- Housing

Threshold – Vantage
Personal and professional interaction:
- Communications
- Collecting information
- CV – Resume
- Personal / Professional development
- Codes of Conduct

Effective Proficiency – Mastery
Professional use of language:
- Human Resources
- Medicine
- Psychology
- ...

Tasks and assignments in the A-range of CEFR still focus on general topics of interest, such as personal living and employment situation, family, and hobbies. In the mid and high ranges of CEFR, we see a clear differentiation and specialization in learning needs and tasks; whereas the tasks and assignments in the social domain focus on situations anyone would need, the professional domains are more differentiated for industry, role and language tasks required.

4.   CALL in the context of an intensive language training

The learner-centered approach to language training can only be effective because of the way learning technology has been incorporated in the curriculum. The blend of personal, one-on-one training and online processing in our online learning environment is key to ensure the results our students aim to achieve. The expertise offered by native speaker language trainers combines well with adequate exposure to the new structures and vocabulary in a student's target language. It also provides ample examples and relevant contexts for the student to practice with.

An intensive, five-day individual training typically consists of up to four 1-hour one-on-one sessions with a teacher and an equal number of sessions in e-Regina, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Neuner, Krüger, and Grewer's (1981) ABCD-model
translated to a 5-day intensive training
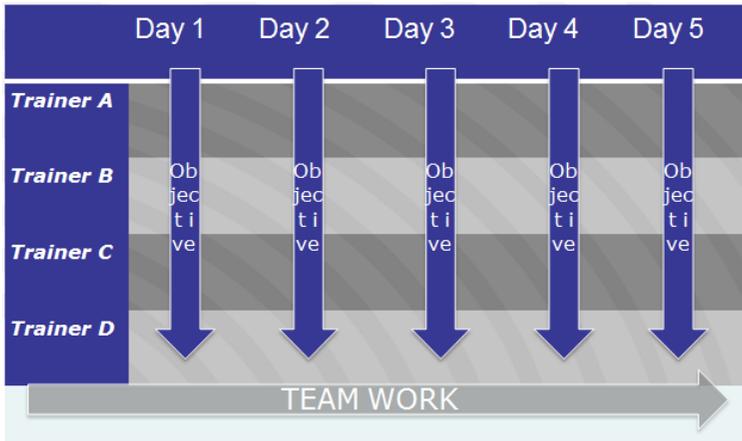
The time spent online in e-Regina is used to work on activities designed to optimize the learning effect, as key elements to be practiced are in series of exercises facilitating input, processing and active use in the target language, following the ABCD-model (Neuner, Krüger, & Grewer, 1981) in which new language elements are learned as follows:

- Input of new language elements through reading and/or listening.
- Guided processing through gap fill or matching exercises.
- Semi-guided processing through answering questions or finishing sentences.
- Conversation or discussion, role playing, and other more open exercises to be done with a teacher.

Stages A, B and C can be facilitated in a VLE, using a wide variety of activities, but stage D is best practiced with a teacher, since it requires direct and adequate feedback only a teacher can provide, although there are only a small number of activities that fall into this category.

5.   Conclusions

Task-based language teaching in a communicative setting has been at the centre of the way Language Institute Regina Coeli has designed and developed its curriculum for over 50 years. Rooted in a long tradition of focusing on a student's learning needs and objectives and supported by modern technology, this approach provides the kind of clear results in as short a time as possible.

Needs assessment on multiple levels has always been key to design and develop the language learning experience that is the Regina Coeli approach. By thoroughly understanding our students' learning needs, we are able to create relevant communicative situations and materials for them to work with.

Technology plays a substantial part in optimizing language learning: the e-Regina VLE as well as the extensive library of exercises and authentic materials create an environment that facilitates both teachers and students before, during and after their intensive, individual language training.

References

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