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CONVEYING MEANING: ORAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF THE LESLLA LEARNER

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Introduction

Learning a second language and becoming literate for the first time is an exceptional challenge for learners who have never been to school. They are constantly trying to understand and be understood. In other words, they have to grasp the meaning of new words and interpret the meaning of pictures or gestures, while also trying to convey meaning. New ways of processing and conveying information are involved. These need to be learned in combination with learning to speak and read in the new language. In addition to learning to function in a new social environment, these learners who are attending classes for L2 literacy also have to adapt to learning in a school situation. Various characteristics influence their learning development. Next to personal characteristics such as age and length of residence, other characteristics are basic to the group as a whole and are of particular importance in a formal learning situation such as a classroom. Of these basic characteristics being non-literate in the first language is the foremost reason that these learners must be seen as a separate group in adult education. Written material cannot be used as a support in the learning process. Even if the basic decoding skills have been mastered, the skills to put them to use are insufficiently developed. Because these learners have had

virtually no schooling experience, the lack of learning skills normally developed during the early years of schooling along with the learning to read and write, can seriously hamper the learning process in a formal school setting.

Apart from these impeding factors non-literate learners are also confronted with yet another difficulty – that of receiving instruction through the target language. Giving instructions for exercises and explaining vocabulary and grammar can be misconstrued or not comprehended at all. Outside the classroom, given the opportunity, the learner can experience the target language in use and, if she applies herself[1], can practice using it. It is known that hearing and experiencing the target language outside the classroom definitely can have positive effects on the learning process (Condelli et al. 2003). On the other hand, using the target language as the medium of instruction in the classroom can avert learning if the learner is regularly confused and messages are misunderstood. A final characteristic common to the literacy classroom is that of mixed cognitive abilities. All types of learners compose a language class: those that learn quickly as well as those that need more support in their learning process. Still classroom composition between regular DSL (Dutch as a second language) classes and literacy classes differ greatly. In regular DSL classes the learners are placed according to their cognitive abilities as seen by previous schooling experience or according to the results of an intake test. For the literacy classes this is not possible, resulting in pronounced differences in classroom composition in terms of general learning abilities. This forms a complex problem for the teacher which is too often neglected.

With the intent of getting a better understanding of these learners' spoken language development in a classroom situation, a study was undertaken in six adult DSL literacy

1 The learner is referred to with 'she' or 'her', because women are in the majority, but the comments also apply to male learners.

classes.[2] The classroom processes were observed and the learners were pre- and post-assessed. This paper will report on the differences in gains made on the assessments and will look at learner characteristics to try to account for the differences that have emerged.

The study

Data collection

The data for this longitudinal study were collected at centers of adult education in the Netherlands. A varied range of literacy classes were selected on the basis of an extensive survey of the literacy programs. These classes differed in factors such as site, geographical location, available educational facilities, and learner population. Of the initial 68 learners, 41 were both pre- and post-assessed. The discussion in this paper concerns only these 41 assessed learners. In order to get an insight in classroom processes six different DSL literacy classes were observed during the practice of the oral skills. Each class was observed eight times, once a month in the period from November 2006 to October 2007. The recordings of the classroom sessions were transcribed and analyzed. In addition, in order to get a better insight into the oral L2 development of the learners, a pre- and post-assessment was applied. Both assessments were audio-recorded and later transcribed orthographically and analyzed. Learner characteristics were collected from school records, communication with the teachers, and information retrieved from the opening interview during the pre- and post-assessments.

Participants and classes

The characteristics of these participants are summarized in Table 1. Class 4 had on average the youngest learners, 27.8 years old, who had lived the least numbers of years in the Nether-

2 Earlier Leslla publications have reported on this same study from different angles: feedback (Strube, 2008), classroom interaction (Strube, 2009), and telling picture stories (Strube, 2010; Strube, van de Craats & van Hout, 2010).

lands before starting DSL schooling, an average of three years. Classes 5 and 6 had the oldest learners with a respective mean age of 45.9 and 43.7 years and a length of residence (LOR) of 15.1 and 14.8 years respectively. All the learners in Classes 5 and 6 were from Morocco, while those in the other four classes were from various countries, next to a few from Morocco, also included those from Afghanistan, Turkey, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Burundi, Iraq, Kosovo, and China. In all the classes at least 50% had had no education in their country of origin and were non-literate in the L1. Previous DSL schooling experience was in all the classes very fragmented, except Class 3. All the learners in Class 3 had participated in an introductory DSL program of 600 hours. For the other schools the data reported in the school records for DSL schooling background was often incomplete or lacking. No levels of achievement had been noted.

Table 1: Learner characteristics in the six literacy classrooms; LOR = Length of residence, DSL = Dutch as a second language.

Class	N	Mean age	Country of origin	Mean LOR (in years)	No L1 schooling	L1 non-literate	Previous DSL schooling
1	7	39.00	Various	8.10	71.43%	57.14%	42.86%
2	8	36.60	Various	10.10	62.50%	66.67%	74.00%
3	5	36.40	Various	3.20	80.00%	60.00%	100%
4	6	27.80	Various	3.00	50.00%	66.67%	50.00%
5	9	45.90	Morocco	15.10	77.78%	88.89%	44.44%
6	6	43.70	Morocco	14.80	100%	100%	100%

From the survey also surfaced three basic types of organization of the oral and literacy skills in terms of the time allotted to each skill. These types were subsequently labelled Type 1, Type 2, and Type 3. Table 2 gives an overview of the organization type for each class as well as the weekly schedule. Classes 1 and 2 were Type 1 classes. In Type 1 the oral and the literacy skills were regarded as two different learning processes. Each

skill was taught in a separate class and the learners were placed in each class according to their specific skill level. This meant, for example, that a learner could be placed in a level 1 class for the oral skills and in a level 2 class for the literacy skills. Class 1 met in total nine hours per week and Class 2 twelve hours. Each class spent an equal amount of time on each skill. Classes 3 and 4 were Type 2 classes. The two skills were also separately practiced, but formed one class. The learners were placed in the class according to their level in one of the skills. This usually resulted in mixed level groups for the other skill. Class 3 had ten hours per week, spending an equal amount of time on the oral and literacy skills. Class 4 spent twice as much time per week on the literacy skills (5.50 hours) than on the oral skills (2.75 hours), totaling to 8.25 hours per week. Classes 5 and 6 were Type 3 classes. The time spent on literacy and oral skills were not set in advance. The teacher determined the amount of time and on which skill would be focused. This could vary from zero to 100% of classroom time. Class 5 met twice a week for a total of five hours and Class 6 met four times a week totaling to eleven hours. All the selected classes were at the beginning of their oral skills development.

Table 2: Organization type and weekly schedule for the six literacy classes.

		Scheduled lesson organization per week					
		Frequency per week		Lesson duration in hours		Total hours per week	
Class	Type	Oral skills	Literacy skills	Oral skills	Literacy skills	Oral skills	Literacy skills
1	1	3	3	1.50	1.50	4.50	4.50
2	1	4	4	1.50	1.50	6.00	6.00
3	2	4	4	1.25	1.25	5.00	5.00
4	2	1	2	2.75	2.75	2.75	5.50
5	3	2		2.50		5.00	
6	3	4		2.75		11.00	

Table 3 presents an overall summary of classroom hours for the oral and the literacy skills during the 30-week observation period. As the table shows four classes had separate oral skills and literacy skills classes – each class focusing on a specific skill. This does not mean that the learner only practiced and received feedback on her oral skills during oral skills classes. In both classes the instruction was in the L2 with constant oral L2 input and output. Most certainly the teacher gave feedback on the students L2 during both class sessions. For the other two classes, these skills were not strictly separated. As Table 3 shows, there is great variation between the classes in the total number of classroom hours. Class 2 had the most hours during this period, 360 hours. Class 5 had the least number of hours, 150 hours. Class 4 stands out in that it had only 82.50 classroom hours for the oral skills, but twice as much for the literacy skills, totaling to 247.50 hours. The rate of attendance was generally high, 80% or higher, except for Classes 2 and 3 with 66% and 75% respectively. The calculated mean number of classroom hours attended does not vary greatly, between 211.41 and 265.39 hours. Only Class 5, which had the least number of scheduled hours to start with, had in spite of the high rate of attendance, a very low mean number of attended classroom hours, 123.00.

Table 3: Classroom time during the 30-week observation period for the oral and literacy skills practice for the six literacy classes (in hours).

	During 30-week observation period				
Class	Total oral skills	Total literacy skills	Total classroom time	Rate of attendance	Attended classroom hours
1	135.00	135.00	270.00	0.86	232.20
2	180.00	180.00	360.00	0.66	238.72
3	150.00	150.00	300.00	0.75	225.60
4	82.50	165.00	247.50	0.85	211.41
5	150.00		150.00	0.82	123.00
6	330.00		330.00	0.80	265.39

Pre- and post-assessments

All the learners were pre- and post-assessed individually. The post-assessment, administered eight months after the pre-assessment, was a repetition of the pre-assessment. After a short interview to set the learner at ease, the actual assessment was started. The whole procedure was recorded and later analyzed. The purpose of the assessments was to get a better insight into the development of spoken language proficiency of the non-literate learner.

The assessments focused on vocabulary, verbal morpho-syntax, and aspects of relevance and coherence in discourse. In all, eleven variables were analyzed. The assessments were based on tasks using pictures as a stimulus for the extraction of language. Since the learner herself determined how she would respond, it was assumed that the responses were examples of semi-spontaneous language production within a preset context, the pictures. The tasks comprised three groups of pictures: 40 pictures of single objects, 14 pictures of episodes, and three picture stories each containing a sequence of four pictures. All the pictures depicted familiar objects, actions or episodes, each requiring its own vocabulary to tap as much language as possible. The episodes in each picture or picture story were increasingly more detailed making it possible for the learner to produce more complex utterances. Next to unraveling the role of the characters in the pictures, the learner also had to describe the pictured event by making the best use of his limited linguistic knowledge.

Analysis

The assessments were analyzed on two levels: meaning and form. An analysis of the form would give an impression of the learner's ability to manipulate certain linguistic elements during his DSL acquisition process. An analysis of meaning would show how the learner uses his knowledge of the DSL to convey meaning. To accomplish these aims, the

analysis of the assessments focused on three components basic to language learning: vocabulary, morphosyntax, and discourse.

Vocabulary was analyzed on two points: knowledge of specific words and word count. Knowledge of specific words would give an indication of vocabulary growth in number of words learned. These words were preselected and presented in the form of pictures and tested on productive and receptive knowledge. For the productive task the learner named the object on a preselected picture. For the receptive task the learner selected the picture of the named object. Word count was applied to the responses given in the picture description tasks and was measured in tokens and types. The tokens pointed to the quantity of words in speech, whereas the number of types reflected word diversity. The unit of analysis for the vocabulary was the word. The given response was then either right or wrong. The unit of analysis for word count was the entire response given for the description of the picture episodes and the telling of the picture stories.

The analysis of the morphosyntax gave an impression of the learner's ability to manipulate certain linguistic elements during his DSL acquisition process. The unit of analysis for the morphosyntax was the utterance. An utterance was defined as a stream of speech having at least one of three features: less than one intonation contour, bounded by pauses, or forming a single semantic unit (Beheydt, 1988; Crookes, 1990). Because the length of a response for each described picture in the episodes and the picture stories varied from learner to learner, only one utterance in a response for each picture was chosen as the unit of analysis. This was the utterance that was deemed to be the most advantageous for the learner. Such an utterance usually contained a verb or had the most constituents. In this manner, all the learners – those with short responses and those with lengthy responses – could be compared on

a relatively equal basis. All the utterances in which a verb was present were analyzed on the position of that verb in relation to a compliment or modifier. The position of the verb was marked correct, incorrect, or inconclusive when no complement or modifier was present. In total 26 utterances were analyzed for each learner.

The analysis of the morphosyntax focused on two features: the ability to combine words into units (syntax) and the ability to apply inflection to verbs (morphology). The analysis of the syntax was restricted to four features: the number of constituents, verb presence, verb position, and agent presence. In learning a second language it is necessary to know how words can be grouped. Correct formation of word groups, the constituents, aids communication and understanding, thus, an essential skill for second language learners. The number of constituents in an utterance may denote utterance complexity. The more constituents there are, the greater the complexity of the utterance could be. Correspondingly, a more complex utterance usually involves the use of a verb. In the tasks the learners were indirectly stimulated to use verbs in their descriptions of the pictures. All the pictures depicting episodes focused on an action. To describe these pictures adequately, the use of a verb was essential.

The analysis of the morphology centered on verb inflection. Determining verb inflection for the morphological analysis was not always without ambiguity. This particularly applies to the Dutch infinitive form of the verb. The infinitive is formed by adding the suffix *-en* to the root verb, as in, for example, *drink+en* (drink+INF). This form is identical to the finite, inflected form for the plural. Consequently, *drinken* could also refer to 'you, we or they drink'. Thus, the Dutch infinitive is a non-finite, inflected verb. In order to avoid random interpretation, certain criteria had to be created. All verbs of this form were initially marked as non-finite due to the fact that these learners were at

the beginning of their learning process. Such an approach concurs with research on developmental stages in L2 acquisition (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Klein & Perdue, 1992; Vainikka & Young-Scholten, 2005, 2007). The verb was only marked as finite if the pictures distinctly showed plurality. Nevertheless, knowing if the learner had applied inflection correctly can still be disputable. This meant that for the picture descriptions, utterances containing a verb with a *-en* suffix were often open to more than one interpretation. In such instances, the determining factor in deciding if inflection had been correctly applied was the utterance along with the respective picture. In those cases where an agent is expressed as a plural, the picture must also confirm this.

Discourse was analyzed in terms of relevance and coherence. Criteria of relevance concerned the learner's ability to produce responses that have a direct bearing on a particular picture and the words of the learner can be easily comprehended. Being able to produce descriptions that are relevant and appropriate for a picture reflects the learner's capability to use language in certain contexts. Criteria of coherence concerned the learner's ability to connect a series of pictures into a coherent story. Being able to produce a series of connected responses shows the learner's ability to produce a logically linked text. Relevance and coherence have already been discussed in a previous LESLLA publication (Strube, van de Craats, & van Hout, 2010) and will, therefore, not be discussed further in this paper.

Results

The assessment results

In the analysis eleven variables were examined in the areas of vocabulary, morphosyntax, and discourse. These eleven are: specific vocabulary, word count in tokens and types, constituents, verb presence, verb position, agent presence, verb inflection, relevance in the picture description tasks,

relevance in the picture story tasks, and finally coherence in the picture story tasks. In order to identify more clearly patterns of similarity and difference resulting from the assessments, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was applied.

By applying Principal Component Analysis the underlying structure or dimensions of the correlations between all the proficiency assessments, the eleven variables, were revealed. Both for the pre- and post-assessment three factors emerged. After rotation (Varimax), the first factor represents lexical competence having high loadings for vocabulary knowledge of specific words and word count in number of tokens and types. The two relevance variables had high loadings as well, but they also had loadings on the other two dimensions and were consequently excluded. The second factor contains in both assessments three variables: constituents, verb present, and picture story coherence. These were subsumed under the heading syntagmatic competence. The third factor is morphosyntactic competence, as stipulated by the three relevant variables verb position, agent present and verb inflection. The three competences, which surfaced from PCA, concur, in general, with those assumed basic to language development: vocabulary, morphosyntax, and factors relating to discourse. These competences reflect the skills around which language acquisition seem to be centered.

In order to investigate the development over time and the differences between classes, z-scores for the three underlying competences were calculated. This was done by computing the z-scores of the three most relevant variables for each competence, taking into account both assessments. The z-scores for the three most relevant variables were summed and transformed into new z-scores. These final z-scores give an indication of the initial state of the participants and classes at the pre-assessment. The difference between the pre- and post-assessment gives the gain scores, indicating the progress made by participants and classes. From the gain scores it can

be discerned whether a class had improved, stayed constant, or even regressed during a certain amount of time. Table 4 gives the z-scores for the pre- and post-assessments and the gains within each competence by class.

Table 4: Z-scores for the pre- and post-assessments with the relative gain score within each competence by class.

Class	Lexical competence			Syntagmatic competence			Morphosyntactic competence		
	z-score		Gain	z-score		Gain	z-score		Gain
	Pre	Post		Pre	Post		Pre	Post	
1	-0.68	-0.17	0.51	-0.70	0.22	0.92	-0.05	0.23	0.28
2	0.13	0.35	0.22	0.24	0.36	0.12	0.12	0.07	-0.05
3	-0.69	0.26	0.95	-0.52	0.10	0.62	-0.43	-0.29	0.14
4	-0.12	0.64	0.76	0.04	0.90	0.86	-0.05	1.37	1.42
5	-0.76	-0.44	0.32	-0.87	-.065	0.22	-1.00	-0.27	0.73
6	0.87	1.13	0.26	0.44	1.00	0.56	0.12	0.61	0.49
Mean gain			0.50			0.55			0.50

As the z-scores in Table 4 indicate, Class 5 had for all three competences negative scores in both assessments, while the other classes had generally positive scores. However, the situation changes when looking at the gain scores. The least amount of gain for all three competences is made by Class 2. Class 1 made the most gain for syntagmatic competence, 0.92, while Class 3 made the most gain for lexical competence, 0.95. Class 4 made remarkable gain for morphosyntactic competence, 1.42.

The graphs in Figure 1 illustrate the pre and post assessment scores for lexical, syntagmatic, and morphosyntactic competence for each class. In these graphs the differences in gain between the classes become more distinct. The most obvious result is the great variation at the point of the first measurement in time. For all three competences Class 5 is the lowest and Class 6 the highest. For the second

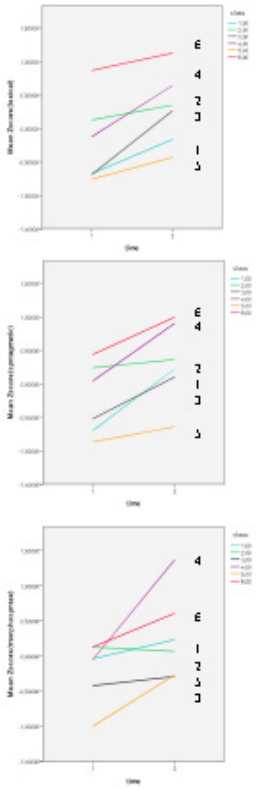

Figure 1: Pre and post assessment scores for lexical, syntagmatic, and morphosyntactic competence for each class.

measurement in time, Class 5 and 6 maintain their relative positions for the lexical and syntagmatic competences, but not for morphosyntactic competence. In that competence the relationships between the classes change. Class 4 has the steepest slope (gain) and surpasses all the other classes. Class 5 shows notable gain, and in the end just barely surpasses where Class 3 began.

Results learner characteristics

Many factors influence processes of language learning. In this paper a closer look is taken at learner characteristics to see if an explanation for learning differences can be found. Various learner characteristics were described above. Of these, seven, plus two personal characteristics, were selected as factors of possible influence on learning results. The nine variables are: work, care for children, age (at time of assessment), L1 literacy, L1 schooling, LOR, previous DSL schooling, classroom hours, and classroom hours attended. In addition, the age of entrance was also calculated from the age and LOR of each learner and added as a tenth variable. Subsequently, the Pearson product-moment correlations were run to determine the relationship between these variables and the three competences: lexical competence, syntagmatic competence, and morphosyntactic competence. The correlations reveal that only three factors have any significance: classroom hours, hours attended, and age of entrance. Table 5 presents the results of these correlations.

Classroom hours and hours attended have a positive correlation for all three competences, meaning that the more hours a classroom was scheduled, the higher the competence score. The same is true for the attended hours; the more hours a class was attended, the higher the competence score. These two effects are surprising, as they are found at the stage of the pre-test. We return to these effects in the conclusion.

The factor age of entrance is only significant for lexical competence and has a negative relationship. This means that the older the learner is at entrance, the lower the score for lexical competence. The reverse also applies: The younger the learner enters the country, the higher the lexical competence score. Figure 2 visualizes in a scatter gram the relationship for each learner between lexical competence and age of entrance, differentiating between recent and long term residents of the LOR. Even though the number of learners is small and the gains are limited, the results point to a valuable conclusion. It shows that all the higher achievers, those with a z-score greater than 1.00, had entered at a relatively young age, around 20 years old. While the low achievers, those with a z-score of less than -1.00 were older than 35 years at entrance. As the scatter graph in Figure 2 shows the two highest scores were obtained by long term residents who had entered the country at a relatively young age.

Table 5: Pearson product-moment correlations for the variables of classroom hours, attended hours, and age of entrance in relation to lexical competence, syntagmatic competence, and morphosyntactic competence at the pre-assessment.

		Lexical competence	Syntagmatic competence	Morphosyntactic competence
Classroom hours				
	Pearson correlation	.359*	.386*	.394*
	N	41	41	41
Attendance hours				
	Pearson correlation	.337*	.382*	.470**
	N	38	38	38
Age of entrance				
	Pearson correlation	-.567**	-.194	-.057
	N	41	41	41

*Significant (2-tailed) at p<.05; **Significant (2-tailed) at p<.01

We computed correlations between learner characteristics and the gain scores as well. No significant results were found. In addition we applied the technique of mixed models, in which the pre- and post-assessment were defined as the time variable. We found no new effects, even not when interactions were included.

Conclusion and discussion

Many SLA studies have investigated learner characteristics

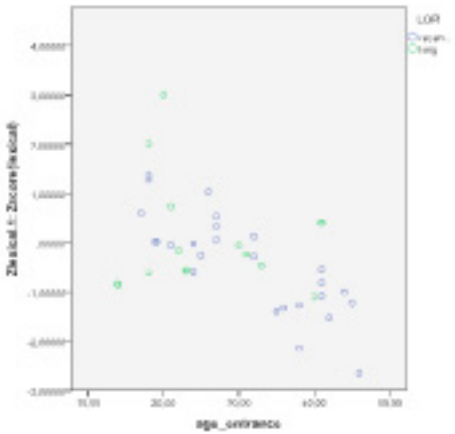

Figure 2: Scatter gram of age of entrance and lexical competence for recent and long term residents.

in connection to second language learning development, but only a few were concerned with that of the non-literate learner. The most extensive study in the United States was the "What works" study by Condelli, Wrigley, Yoon, Cronen, & Seburn (2003). Two other studies on the acquisition of literacy skills were carried out in the Netherlands (Kurvers & Stockmann, 2009; van de Craats & Kurvers, 2007). On the factor of age the Kurvers & Stockmann study showed that age had a significant negative correlation with reading and writing scores. The same was found in the Condelli study for reading: the older learners need more time, while the younger learners seem to learn in less time. In the van de Craats & Kurvers study age and LOR correlated negatively with vocabulary growth, but not significantly. It is interesting to note that this present study takes a different approach concerning the impact of age and LOR, i.e. along that of age of entrance (the age of the learner minus LOR). The age of entrance was correlated to the lexical competence, indicating that learning a new lexicon is easier the younger the learner begins, as a kind of head start that is not compensated by a

longer LOR. This is nicely illustrated by Figure 2 which shows that the correlation applies to both learners with a recent and a long LOR. No correlations were found between any age factor and/or LOR and the other two competences. This may partly be due to the low level of proficiency obtained by our learners. Progress goes slowly, particularly in the more structural domains of relationships between meaning and form elements.

The number of classroom hours was also examined in two of the above studies. In the Condelli study the weekly classroom hours correlated negatively with reading skills and were found to be significant. This was also the case in the Kurvers and Stockmann study for gain scores on reading competence. In other words, learners in classes with more scheduled hours showed less growth than those with fewer hours per week. We found no correlations for the gain scores, or with classroom hours or with attendance measures. Using mixed modeling did not result in any significant results implying that we did not find classroom or learner characteristics that would explain the size of progress between the pre- and post-assessment.

Surprisingly, we found significant correlations at the pre-assessment for all competences and classroom and attendance hours. This effect can be reduced to the relatively low competences of Class 5 that coincides with a comparatively low level of classroom and attendance hours. We have no explanation in terms of classroom hours of the learners in the past. What we can add is that Class 6, performing much better, had a comparable group of older Moroccan women. The crucial difference between Classes 5 and 6 seems to have been the motivation of the learners. Although both classes had a high rate of attendance (.82 and .80 respectively), only in Class 6 did several learners show a keen interest in increasing language ability for future employment. Those in Class 5 had not expressed such learning goals. On the other hand, literacy classes are characterized by great diversity.

This study has made one step towards understanding what happens in the second language classroom by looking at learner characteristics, but more steps still have to be taken. During a time span of approximately eight months there was moderate development in language learning, but the processes involved are still elusive. The factor of duration probably plays a role as well. More time over a longer period seems to be required to measure more major steps forward in learning Dutch. Another reason for not finding effects seems to be the relatively large variation between the learners in their characteristics, including some probably essential characteristics that we could not measure, for instance their language aptitude, (non-verbal) intelligence and motivation. The overall level of motivation was probably high in our study, given the attendance rates found. Definitely these and other more process-related characteristics still need to be investigated.

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