

# The aware language learner: promoting reflection in an online Dutch course at intermediate level

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This article discusses how the development of a number of 'awarenesses' – awareness of language, awareness of the (language) learning process and awareness of culture, as well as the development of transferable skills is being promoted in an online Dutch course at intermediate level, *Lagelands 2*. It links the importance of awareness and reflection to two bodies of research, Naiman et al.'s *The Good Language Learner* and Ramsden et al.'s deep v. surface approaches to learning, before giving some examples from the course. Finally, the aforementioned is linked to Personal Development Planning.

## Introduction

One of the main characteristics of a good language learner as identified by Naiman et al. 1996 is that they show an awareness of the language learning process. Equally, they focus both on form and communication, which could be described as awareness of language. Research into deep and surface learning shows amongst other things that learners who take a deep approach relate previous knowledge to new knowledge (Ramsden 2003: 47). In the context of language learning this would take the form of making a link with the mother tongue or any other language the learner knows, as well as with other cultural knowledge. These kinds of awareness are important in a society with an increasing emphasis on continued or lifelong learning, as also demonstrated by the introduction of Personal Development Planning (PDP) into Higher Education – a good language learner is a good learner. However, they do not come naturally to all language learners, and hence ways of promoting them within the context of a language course have to be devised.

This article will show how the 'awarenesses' described above can be promoted in a language course at intermediate level, using examples from a newly developed online Dutch course (working title: *Lagelands 2*). Before going on to do so, the course itself will briefly be described.

## Lagelands 2

*Lagelands 2* is the follow-up to the online beginners' course *Lagelands* developed at the University of Hull. This course is also online, using WebCT (UCL's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) of choice), and is intended to be combined with face-to-face contact. It is being developed with financial support from the *Nederlandse Taalunie* (Dutch Language Union), a government treaty for the promotion of Dutch language and culture.

A pilot version consisting of two themes was developed at the University of Hull in 2002, using Merlin, the University's in-house VLE. The themes were trialled with a group of second-year students, and received a largely positive evaluation. Further development of the course commenced in 2004, and it is due to be completed by the end of 2006. Given the phasing out of Dutch Studies at the University of Hull, this further development is done for UCL using WebCT, as part of the *Virtual Dutch Department* project (for more information, see the website – under 'related links' below).

The structure of the course, as well as a first indication of its contents, was developed on the basis of student and tutor input into the initial conceptualisation phase (see Van

Rossum 2004 for a more detailed report on the conceptualisation of the course). The course is structured as follows:

- There are ten themes, divided over two 'blocks' (the difference between these is the level of difficulty).
- Each theme has three written texts, two spoken texts and a literary text as input. Each of these texts is generally accompanied by a comprehension exercise and two vocabulary exercises.
- In addition to this, there are a number of more general exercises which accompany the theme (six – eight), practising the various skills (often in an integrated manner).
- Each theme also has a grammar section, tackling one or more sections from the *Advanced Learners Grammar of Dutch*, which was developed alongside the pilot of *Lagelands 2*. There are also exercises accompanying these sections.
- The course also has a Resource Centre containing more 'general' documents, for example documents about summarising texts, constructing an argument and debating skills.

In the development of the course we took particular care to include exercises which should stimulate an active approach to language learning, and we tried to make the content as relevant to the learner as we could. These decisions were very much based on our teaching experience, but also on our knowledge of certain bodies of research, which will briefly be discussed below:

### Theory

In the introduction, we already briefly touched on Naiman et al.'s seminal study into the characteristics of a good language learner (1978, republished in 1996). These can be summarised as follows:

- Concern for form
- Concern for communication
- An active task approach
- Awareness of the learning process
- Capacity to use strategies flexibly in accordance with task requirements

If we look at these characteristics in terms of reflection, the first characteristic that stands out is of course '**awareness of the learning process**'. A 'capacity to use strategies flexibly' and an 'active task approach' could also be included under this heading, in that these characteristics show an awareness of 'what works' in terms of learning.

It is also not too difficult to see how a concern for form combined with a concern for communication could be seen as an '**awareness of language**'. In our view, a concern of communication is closely related to an awareness of language in use, and an important part of this is an '**awareness of culture**'.

Naiman et al.'s study is exclusively related to language learning, but its results show some striking similarities to the findings of a body of research into general approaches to learning. The main distinction made here is between so-called deep and surface approaches to learning. Ramsden (2003) provides a useful summary of this research, and also contains a table comparing the two aforementioned approaches to learning (reproduced below).

<b>Deep approach</b>	<b>Surface approach</b>
Intention to understand	Intention only to complete task requirements
Student maintains structure of task	Student distorts structure of task
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Focus on what is ‘signified’ (author’s argument, concepts applicable to solving the problem)</li> <li>▪ Relate previous knowledge to new knowledge</li> <li>▪ Relate knowledge from different courses</li> <li>▪ Relate theoretical ideas to everyday experience</li> <li>▪ Relate and distinguish evidence and argument</li> <li>▪ Organise and structure content into a coherent whole</li> <li>▪ Internal emphasis: ‘A window through which aspects of reality become visible, and more intelligible’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Focus on ‘the signs’ (words and sentences of the text, the formula needed to solve the problem)</li> <li>▪ Focus on unrelated parts of the task</li> <li>▪ Memorise information for assessments</li> <li>▪ Associate facts and concepts unreflectively</li> <li>▪ Fail to distinguish principles from examples</li> <li>▪ Treat the task as an external imposition</li> <li>▪ External emphasis: demands of assessments, knowledge cut off from everyday reality</li> </ul>

**(Table 4.1, Ramsden 2003: 47)**

The key similarity between the two bodies of research is the ‘active task approach’, which is explicitly mentioned in Naiman et al., and which is clearly suggested by practically all the points mentioned under a deep approach to learning. To be able to take such an active task approach – to relate previous knowledge to new knowledge, for example – of course also requires an awareness of the learning process. Relating new knowledge to previous knowledge within the context of languages does not just apply to language itself, but also to cultural knowledge. Perhaps less obviously, the combined concern for form and communication does show some similarity to ‘focus on what is ‘signified’ – it implies looking for meaning and intention.

The similarities between the findings of these two bodies of research suggest that a good language learner is a good learner and vice versa (the sort of transferability of skills which is vital to lifelong learning and PDP). However, these characteristics and abilities (and hence awarenesses) do not come naturally to everyone. Even having particular skills in your mother tongue (e.g. compensatory and communicative strategies) does not necessarily mean that they are transferred automatically to the target language. They therefore need to be promoted.

We will now look at some examples of exercises in *Lagelands 2* designed to promote the aspects outlined at the start of this section:

- Awareness of language
- Awareness of (language) learning
- Awareness of culture

### **Awareness of language**

In line with Naiman et al. this should not just be interpreted as an awareness of language as a system, but also as an awareness of language in use. In Lagelands 2, we try to promote this by including in each theme a number of vocabulary exercises where the students have to derive the meaning of some of the words in the text from the context and/or morphological and syntactical clues (see Appendix – Exercise 1).

Another example would be an exercise where the students have to watch two videos on roughly the same topic, and consider the effects that the different target groups at which these videos were aimed has had on the language, content and presentation of the texts (see Appendix – Exercise 2).

### **Awareness of the (language) learning process**

There are a number of tasks which try to raise this awareness explicitly. One example (Appendix – Exercise 3) is an exercise about the learner's writing process, consisting of three parts. First, the students have to compare their own writing process to that of a children's author (the subject of a video they watched earlier). They then compare their writing process to that of other students in a group discussion, and finally, they write a summary of this discussion. Another exercise (Appendix – Exercise 4) asks them to discuss their vocabulary learning processes.

There are also exercises which try to raise awareness of the learning process in a slightly more indirect way. One example of this (Appendix – Exercise 5) are exercises where students are asked to give peer feedback on their fellow students' presentations (a feedback sheet with a number of criteria is provided). It is hoped that by critically evaluating other students' presentations, students will also critically evaluate their own, and in doing so will highlight areas for improvement.

Another way in which we try to increase this specific awareness is by trying to stimulate 'good learning habits' – the course includes a vocabulary notebook, which is incorporated into a number of vocabulary exercises.

### **Awareness of culture**

Here, a distinction can be made between 'high' culture and intercultural communicative competence. Although the former is certainly present in the course (as mentioned above, each theme includes a literary text), within the context of raising awareness of culture, we are really talking about the latter. The course includes a number of exercises which ask students to compare aspects of Dutch and/or Flemish culture to their own culture, and not just to compare but evaluate them. One such exercise is included in the Appendix (Exercise 6).

### **The development of 'other' skills**

The course also includes a number of exercises where 'other' skills, such as research skills, referencing and summarising, are practised through the medium of the foreign language (see Appendix – Exercises 7 and 8). The important thing here is that the fact that these skills are being practised is made explicit to the students and that they are provided with support in the form of the general documents in the Resource Centre. These documents are not just accessible via the Resource Centre, but are linked in to the relevant exercises to ensure that the student makes the link as well. That this does at least occasionally happen, and that such knowledge and skills are indeed 'transferred' to other subject areas, is borne out by this quote taken from an initial evaluation of the course:

The one [i.e. document in the Resource Centre] about writing a summary was helpful. It helped me to structure my summary not just in Dutch but also in English and German.

### **How does this relate to PDP?**

If you look at a definition of PDP, such as this one taken from the University of Hull's PDP guidelines for Modern Languages:

Personal Development Planning (PDP) is a structured process in which you

- reflect on your learning experiences and your performance and/or achievement
- develop personal, academic and work related skills
- plan your own learning and career development

(adapted from the Dearing Report 1997)

you will see that this is in fact very reminiscent of the skills and abilities that a good language learner is said to have, as well as of a deep approach to learning (see 'Theory' above). In other words, becoming a more aware or reflective learner, by engaging in activities which are aimed at developing the various 'awarenesses' discussed above, means that the learner is effectively already involved in PDP.

In fact, it is this 'embeddedness' of (aspects of) PDP within the language curriculum which is key, and as can be seen from the exercises discussed above, this need not be all that difficult. Moreover, a closer look at these exercises should (hopefully) evoke a feeling of *déjà vu* – many language teachers will have encountered and used similar ones before.

It could be argued that PDP is therefore really not all that new, it just sounds 'alien'. All that is required to introduce an element of PDP into the language curriculum, is perhaps paying more conscious attention to the development of certain skills which are generally already being developed anyway.

### **Bibliography**

- Naiman, N., Frohlich, M., Stern, D., and Todesco, A. (1996) *The good language learner*. Canada: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Ramsden, P. (2003), *Learning to teach in Higher Education* (second edition). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Van Rossum, M. (2004), 'Conceptualisering en evaluatie: de ontwikkeling van Lagelands 1 en 2'. In Gelderblom, A.J., Ter Haar, C., Janssens, G., Kristel, M. and J. Pekelder (eds), *Neerlandistiek de grenzen voorbij*. Woubrugge: Internationale Vereniging voor Neerlandistiek: 445 – 460.

### **Related links**

*Advanced Learners Grammar of Dutch*: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dutch/grammatica2/index.html>

*Virtual Dutch Department*: [www.ucl.ac.uk/dutch/virtualdutch](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dutch/virtualdutch)

## Appendix

***Please note: all exercises are translated from the Dutch.***

Exercise 1: Vocabulary exercise 'Extra belasting op patatje met' (1) [*Additional tax on chips*]

Exercise 2: Speaking and writing – A comparison of the videos

Exercise 3: Reflection & writing – The writing process

Exercise 4: Speaking – How do you learn vocabulary?

Exercise 5: Comprehension & presentation – Life in the Golden Age

Exercise 6: Speaking – Intercultural communication

Exercise 7: Writing – The VOC and the East India Company: a comparison

Exercise 8: Writing – mobile phone and internet use among young people: a study

**Exercise 1: Vocabulary exercise 'Extra belasting op patatje met' (1) [Additional tax on chips]**

In the text there are a number of words in italics. Read the paragraphs in which you find these words again, and then complete the exercise below. Send your answers to your tutor, via the Mailbox.

1. Een vers *gefrituurd* patatje... (paragraph 1) [*freshly fried chips*]
  - a) From which verb is this adjective derived?
  - b) What does this word mean?
  
2. In paragraph 1 you also come across the expression *snelle happen*. [*quick snacks, fast food*]
  - a) Which other word with the same meaning can you find in the vicinity of this expression?
  - b) How would you translate this expression?
  
3. In the second paragraph you find the word *overgewicht*. [*being overweight*]
  - a) Of which two parts does this word consist?
  - b) To which other word in this paragraph is this word compared?
  - c) Which of the two is worse in terms of health consequences?
  - d) **Bonus question:** From which verb is the second part of the word derived? You may use your dictionary.
  
4. In the penultimate paragraph you find the word *juistheid*. [*correctness*]
  - a) Of which two parts does this word consist?
  - b) What type of word is it (e.g. adjective, verb)? How do you know?
  - c) Can you think of another word with the same meaning?

## **Exercise 2: Speaking and writing – A comparison of the videos**

**Aims and objectives:** comparison, analysis of the effect of the target audience of a text on the contents, language and presentation of that text

Do this exercise in groups of three. The first part of the exercise you'll do in class, the second part is done online.

The topic of the two videos with this theme is pretty much the same: internet safety for children. However, the target audience of the two programmes from which the excerpts have been taken is clearly different. The *Jeugdjournaal* [news programme for children, comparable to *Newsround*] is aimed at children in the final years of primary school, *Netwerk* [current affairs programme] is aimed at adults. In this exercise you are going to analyse how the target audience has affected the contents, language use and presentation of the topic.

### **Part 1**

Make you sure that you have watched the videos again before class. In class you are going to look at the differences and similarities between the two videos. You will each concentrate on one aspect of the video.

One of you will look at the contents of the texts. What are the main differences between the videos? In how far are these differences determined by the fact that the excerpts are aimed at a different audience, do you think? Use the transcript of the video to conduct this analysis.

The second student looks at the language use in the texts. Are there differences which can be attributed to the target audience, for example, the vocabulary used, the length and complexity of the sentences? Use the transcript and the vocabulary lists of each video for your analysis.

Finally, the third student looks at the presentation of the texts. Are there aspects of the presentation which indicate that they are aimed a different audiences? Think for example of the tone the presenter uses when addressing the audience, the use of certain camera techniques, etc. If your classroom has a computer, you may want to look at the videos again.

When you have completed your individual analyses, discuss your findings with the group. Make a note of the most important differences, and of clear examples of these differences. You will need these notes for the second part of the exercise.

### **Part 2**

On the basis of your notes, write a piece in which you discuss the effect of the target audience on the contents, language and presentation of the videos. Also use examples to illustrate the differences and similarities which you found. Your piece must be about 250 – 300 words in length. Send your piece to the tutor, via the Mailbox.

**Please note:** The three of you together will be writing one piece. It's handy if each student writes that part of the text which deals with the aspect they looked at.

**Exercise 3: Reflection & writing – The writing process**

- Aims & objectives:**
- Reflection: greater insight into one’s own writing process
  - Writing: making comparisons

In the video of *het Klokhuis*, the author Mieke van Hoofthof talks about how she goes about writing a book. In doing so, she makes a distinction between what she does *before* she starts writing and what she does *during* the writing process. *After* having written the text, she will no doubt read it through again to see whether she is happy with the result, and if need be make some changes or corrections. However, nothing is said about this in the video.

In this task you are first going to compare Mieke’s writing process to your own. After that, you compare your writing process to that of the other students.

- A. Complete the grid below. Briefly indicate what Mieke does *before* and *during* the writing process. Next, indicate what you do when you write an essay or a project. What do you do before you start the actual writing? How do you write your essay? And what do you do when you’ve completed the first draft of your essay? Please note: You don’t have to write in complete sentences in the grid.
- B. Next, compare your writing process to that of the other students. What are the similarities and differences between what you do before, during and after writing? Are there any similarities between your writing processes and Mieke’s? Are there things which Mieke or your fellow students do which you might want to try out when writing your next essay? Please note: If you do this part of the task in class, it will be done orally. If you do this task online, you will be using the ‘Writing process’ discussion forum.
- C. Send the completed grid and a short summary of the discussion between you and your fellow students (ca. 200 words) to your tutor via the Mailbox.

**The writing process**

	<b>Before writing</b>	<b>During writing</b>	<b>After writing</b>
<b>Mieke</b>			
<b>You</b>			

**Exercise 4: Speaking – How do you learn vocabulary?**

**Aims & Objectives:** Speaking: making comparisons, discussion  
Insight into one's own learning process

In the text 'Playing the piano helps with learning words', it is claimed that people who have musical talents are better at learning words.

Think about how you learn new words. Do you 'simply' learn them by heart for a test? Do you have a vocabulary notebook that you go over regularly? Do you perhaps make cards with the words you have to / want to learn on them?

Are you satisfied with this method? If not, how do you think you could improve your method?

Discuss your study methods with a fellow student, and also listen to how they learn words. Are there many differences? Report the 'results' to the group.

**Tip:** It may be useful to make a list of the various study methods that other students use. You could also have a look at the document *Tips – vocabulary* [[link in original document](#)] in the Resource Centre for ideas.

**Exercise 5: Comprehension & presentation – Life in the Golden Age**

*Online*

Watch the video and make notes so that you can give a short presentation (2 – 3 minutes) about one of the following topics:

- 1. Trade in the Golden Age**
- 2. The life of rich people in the Golden Age**
- 3. The life of poor people in the Golden Age**
- 4. Beggars in the Golden Age**

Also create a PowerPoint-presentation to support your presentation.

*In class*

All students give their presentation. Whilst listening to the presentations of the other students, you think of one content question regarding their presentation and make notes about what you think of their presentation. In order to help you do this, you can use [this form](#) [*link in the original task – see next page*]. After each presentation you first ask your content question. Then you give feedback to your fellow student. Try to be positive: What was good about the presentation? Where could the presentation be improved? *How* could the student do better next time?

## Feedback on presentation

**Name student:**

**Title presentation:**

### **Content**

- Were concepts clearly explained?
- Were there any 'gaps' in the content?

### **Structure**

- Was the structure clear?
- Did the presentation have a clear introduction and conclusion?

### **Language & presentation**

- Did you understand what was said?
- Did the presenter speak clearly?
- Did the presenter make good use of their notes (i.e. not too much)?
- Did the presenter make sufficient eye contact with the audience?

### **PowerPoint**

- Was the PowerPoint-presentation legible?
- Did the presentation contain the right amount of information?
- If the presentation contained animations or pictures: did they add anything to the presentation?

### **Exercise 6: Speaking – Intercultural communication**

Aims & Objectives: speaking: comparison; intercultural skills: insight into communication problems which are caused by cultural differences

#### **Preparation**

In the text 'How to get Fatma to come along on a school trip', you have seen a number of examples of communication problems which are caused by cultural differences.

In the theme 'Language' (Block 1) you may also have looked at the effect of cultural difference on communication, in that case with regard to the differences between the Dutch and the Flemish. In that theme, comparisons were also made between the Dutch, Flemish and British communication styles. This particular exercise also had an article with it, which you can read (again) here [*link to text in original exercise*]. Do this before the class. Then do the following exercise in class.

#### **Exercise**

Do this exercise together with two other students. Use both your own experiences and the article to answer the following questions.

1. Think of at least three examples of possible communication problems between the Dutch and the British which are caused by cultural differences.
2. Think of at least three examples of possible communication problems between the Belgians and the British which are caused by cultural differences.

Choose one communication problem from the list which you generated above. Then do the following:

1. Prepare a short roleplay (ca. 2 – 3 minutes) in which you act out this communication problem.
2. Also prepare a short roleplay (ca. 2 – 3 minutes) in which you show how this communication problem can be prevented.

Next, present the roleplays to the class. First explain what the communication problem is that you are dealing with, and then perform your roleplays.

**Exercise 7: Writing – The VOC and the East India Company: a comparison**

Aims and Objectives: writing: describing, comparing  
research skills: finding information, quoting sources

As you heard in the video *Koopman in Azië (Trader in Asia)*, the Dutch VOC (East India Company) was founded in 1602. Nearly at the same time, the East India Company was formed in England. In this exercise you are going to compare these two trading companies. As the activities of these companies were wide-ranging, it is best to concentrate on only one of the aspects below in your comparison:

- Reasons for the foundation of the companies
- Area in which the companies traded
- Goods in which the companies traded
- Government of the companies
- Reasons for the end of the companies

For information about the VOC and the East India Company, please consult the following websites [*links in original document*], among others:

- The VOC Site
- The VOC-Knowledge centre
- Trading Places: The East India Company and Asia
- Wikipedia: British East India Company

However, the idea is not to just use these websites. Try and find at least two further sources of information, and also use these in the piece which are going to write on the basis of the information. At least one of these sources should be from the library, and not from the internet.

Once you have found sufficient information, write a piece of about 300 – 400 words in which you compare the two companies in the area you selected. What were the main similarities and differences?

Make sure your piece has a clear introduction and conclusion. Also include a bibliography of the sources you used. Not just in the bibliography, but also in the piece itself it should be clear which sources you used. If you include quotes in your piece, make sure you reference them carefully. Do the same for any other information which you include and which you found in a particular source.

Send your piece to your tutor, via the Mailbox.

**Exercise 8: Writing – mobile phone and internet use among young people: a study**

**Aims & Objectives:** building research skills  
writing: writing a research report (method, presentation and interpretation of results)

In this exercise you and a fellow student are going to carry out a small study into the use of mobile phones and the internet among your fellow students.

1. First decide what you want to research: the use of **mobile phones** or the use of the **Internet**.
2. Then decide what exactly you want to know about the use of mobile phones or the internet. For example:
  - How often do they use internet / mobile phones? (once a day, once a week)
  - How often do they text? (once a day, once a week)
  - How often do they call? (once a day, once a week)
  - Who do they call? (parents, friends)
  - What kind of websites do they visit? (chat rooms, sites related to their studies)
  - How often do they visit these sites?
  - Who pays for the mobile phone / internet use?

**Please note:** These are examples only. You can of course ask different questions, or formulate them slightly differently.

3. Decide whether you are going to incorporate your questions in a questionnaire or whether you are going to interview people.

If you are going to send out a questionnaire, it is useful to build in a deadline for sending back the questionnaire.

4. When the questionnaires have been returned, or when you have interviewed everyone, you can look at the results. In your research report you should not just *present* the results, you should also try and *interpret* them. Can you think of reasons to explain the results of your study? Do you have any proof for these explanations?
5. Finally, write a research report, in which you include the following information:
  - Introduction
  - Research method (what did you study, how did you study it, who were involved in the study?)
  - Presentation of the results
  - Interpretation of the results
  - Conclusion

Your research report should be about 500 words in length. You can of course simply divide the tasks, which means that you each should write about 250 words.

Make sure that the final text is coherent, both in terms of content and in terms of style.

**Tip:** See also the 'research structure' in the document 'Six basic structures of texts [*link in original document*].

Send your research report to your tutor, via the Mailbox.