Title:

J'**AIM**e parler français
Effectiveness of target language use in VWO 4, 5 and 6

Summary

To learn a foreign language, a teaching approach with a great deal of meaningful target language use (TLU) has been claimed to be much more effective than a structure-based approach with a great deal of grammar explanations. In the Netherlands, however, structure-based approaches are most common, probably because there is a lack of empirical evidence that TLU is more effective. This study compares the effectiveness of two kinds of teaching approaches, one with the traditional emphasis on grammar and one in which the target language is spoken exclusively, an approach inspired by the Accelerated Integrated Method, called AIM-extended (AIMe).

Lekensamenvatting van het onderzoek

In dit onderzoek wordt de effectiviteit van een vernieuwende methodiek voor het leren van de Franse taal in de bovenbouw van het VWO onderzocht. Centraal kenmerk van deze methode is het doeltaal-voertaal principe. Het niveau van taalvaardigheid van groepen leerlingen met deze nieuwe methode en een bestaande methode wordt vergeleken.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, the position of the French language in Dutch secondary schools has grown weaker. Fewer students opt for French after the first three compulsory years. Moreover, schools have reduced the amount of instruction time. The fear is that French might disappear entirely from Dutch schools if this trend continues. However, at some schools, relatively more students opt for French. Those schools have introduced the so-called accelerative integrative method (AIM), which many students indicate they enjoy (West & Verspoor, forthcoming).

AIM (Maxwell, 2001) is a foreign language teaching method that focuses on meaningful use and repetition without explicit grammar instruction. Key to the method are Target Language Use (TLU), the use of gestures to enhance multimodal learning, peer support and interaction, an inductive approach to grammar and variety, using drama, music, dance and creative writing. This method is quite the opposite of structure-based methods used in the Netherlands, which are characterized by an explicit focus on grammar, frequent use of L1 (mother tongue), use of translation, learning vocabulary with translation equivalents and an emphasis on written language.

In the first two years of secondary school AIM has already proven to be more effective than structure-based methods (Rousse-Malpat & Verspoor, 2012). AIM children are more fluent in both oral and writing skills, and after two years they are just as accurate in correct grammar use as children in a grammar-based instructional setting. However, the empirical AIM research to date has focused on younger children in the first years of secondary school as that is the target audience of the AIM method.

For the higher classes, there are no AIM materials readily available, but several schools have continued teaching with AIM inspired materials that include authentic materials and consistent TLU, which we will call AIM-extended (AIMe). The purpose of the current study is to investigate whether AIMe is more effective than existing programs, not only in receptive skills such as listening and reading, but especially in productive skills such as speaking and writing, which are usually neglected in upper years of VWO.

Research Question

Is an AIMe approach to French as a foreign language more effective than a structure-based approach in the upper classes of Dutch secondary school?

Sub questions

1. How do AIMe-students score on oral proficiency as compared to non-AIMe-students?

2. How do AIMe-students score on written proficiency as compared to non-AIMe-students?

3. How do AIMe-students score on reading and listening skills as compared to non-AIMe-students?

Previous research

Most language teaching in secondary schools can be characterized as explicit and grammar-based. Lightbown & Spada (2013, p. 154) state that, "although communicative language teaching has come to dominate in some environments, the structure-based approaches (….), especially grammar translation, remain widespread". On the other end of the spectrum are implicit and usage-based approaches to second language acquisition. "Implicit learning is acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes place naturally, simply and without conscious operations. Explicit learning is a more conscious operation where the individual makes and tests hypotheses in a search for structure…………." (Ellis, 2015). For instance, learning the mother tongue is an implicit process until a child is sent to school and receives instruction on grammatical issues. In a usage-based approach, exposure to and experience with the target language are seen as the major tenets in second language development. Learners should be exposed to meaningful input in authentic events: "language is learned through meaningful use, rather than being innate" (Langacker, 2009, p. 628).

Implicit learning processes in classroom situations necessitate TLU because students have to be maximally exposed to the target language in order to learn the language. As Ellis (2002) puts it: "Frequency of usage (…..) determines acquisition". Target language use provides exposure to and experience with the language and facilitates implicit processing of language. One such implicit method of second language instruction is AIM.

Several studies have been conducted on AIM and are still being conducted. Rousse-Malpat, Verspoor and Visser (2012) and Jans, & Rousse-Malpat (2010) found that AIM was highly effective, as evidenced by results on oral and written tasks in the first and second grade of secondary school. At this moment, Rousse-Malpat is conducting longitudinal work into the development of oral and written proficiency of French in several Dutch schools that use the AIM-method as compared to schools that use a structure-based method and the preliminary results are convincing.

But all research so far has been done in the first three grades of Dutch secondary schools. The obvious reason is that the AIM-method only has content for the first three years. Most schools – after this period - continue with a structure-based type of instruction. The main reason may be that there simply is no "ready to use" AIM content for the upper years of secondary education and teachers would have to spend a lot of time designing lesson materials themselves. Another reason might be that teachers and schoolboards fear that a TLU method is less effective than a structure-based method in preparing for the central exam.

In the lower three grades the AIM method has proven to be more effective than structure-based methods in productive skills: speaking and writing. For the upper three years, there are no empirical studies on the effectiveness of an AIM-inspired TLU approach. What we need to determine the effectiveness of the AIM-inspired TLU approach after six years of L2 instruction is an empirical study which takes into account proficiency in all four skills, not only the receptive skills (reading and listening), which are usually measured with national standardized tests, but especially the productive skills (speaking and writing) which are usually neglected in the Dutch VWO curriculum.

Measuring effectiveness

When we compare teaching methods, we would like to determine which one is more effective. Effectiveness is generally measured in terms of the proficiency obtained by the students. Proficiency, in turn, is usually measured by means of both receptive and productive skills. Within the language classroom, receptive skills are reading and listening, traditionally measured with objective (multiple choice) tests, which are easily accessible and used. In the Netherlands, the CITO (Dutch national testing agency) designs and validates tests that are compulsory for all schools (Reading skills as tested in the Central Exam) or recommended but taken by almost all schools (Listening skills as tested in the School Exam). Therefore, measuring the effectiveness of AIMe in terms of reading and listening skills is relatively easy, and because these are the skills officially tested in our curriculum, most teachers focus on teaching for these exams.

However, foreign language proficiency is so much more than reading and listening. A proficient learner should be able to converse and interact freely with other speakers of that language. Therefore, it is even more interesting to measure effectiveness in terms of free oral and written production as well. These productive skills are not usually tested officially in the Dutch curriculum as there are no readymade tests available for them and teachers often ignore practicing these skills.

Methodology

In a cross-sectional design, the effectiveness of two teaching approaches, a structure-based and an AIMe approach, are compared at the end of the school program (in year 6 of secondary school) in all four French language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing. 56 students followed a structure-based approach in all six years and took their final exams in 2015 and 2016 (these data have already been collected). 80 students followed the AIM-program in the first three years and continue with the AIMe approach in the final three years and will do their exams in 2017, 2018 and 2019 (these data are in the process of being collected). The study will be conducted in an ecologically valid L2 instruction setting and all students have been and will be taught by the same teacher, eliminating the possible variability due to a different teacher.

The AIMe classes currently taught (with final exams in 2017, 2018 and 2019) consist of two kinds of students: (1) a group of 80 students who have had AIM in the first three years of high school and now continue with AIMe, and (2) a group of 78 students who have come from a number of different schools and who had a structure-based program in the first three years and AIMe in the last three years. In a longitudinal study, the development of these two sub-groups (in the same intact classes) are also traced over the course of three years to see to what extent they may be different, and if and when they show similar results. Over the three-year period their writing, reading and listening skills will be tested at regular intervals. Listening and writing skills are tested every six months. Reading comprehension is tested every four months.

To allow for an optimal comparison across cohorts, students will be tested using the exact same tests on reading, writing, listening and speaking in both designs. For reading and listening standardized CITO tests and the results of the central exam are used. For speaking a reliable, videotaped test has already been developed and validated. For writing the instrument is currently being developed.

Each of the sub-studies focuses on one or two of the sub-skills.

Sub-study 1: Comparing oral proficiency

At the end of the six years, each cohort of students (final exams in 2015-2019) will be tested on oral proficiency to compare effectiveness of the structure-based and AIMe approaches. An Independent Samples T Test will be used to compare the different groups.

To be able to compare oral proficiency, a valid and reliable oral proficiency test has been developed (Gombert et al., 2016). The test has been patterned after a test developed and validated by the Centre for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in Washington: The Student Oral Proficiency Assessment (SOPA), based on the Proficiency Guidelines of the ACTFL (American equivalent of the CEFR) which uses a rating scale with 4 dimensions and 9 levels (Thompson et al, 2002). Because this test was designed specifically for children in elementary school foreign language programs, the content of the test was adapted to contain topics to be more in line with the interests of students 17-18 year old Dutch students in French at the end of high school. The test was tried out in a pilot study and analysed to be sure raters were consistent. The test was further validated by comparing scores with classroom grades and objective scores. The test proved to be ecologically valid and reliable.

Sub-study 2: Comparing writing proficiency

At the end of the six years, each cohort of students (final exams in 2015-2019) will be tested on writing proficiency to compare effectiveness of the structure-based and AIMe approaches. An Independent Samples T Test will be used to compare the different groups.

Because the current AIMe classes consist of students who did and did not have AIM in the first three years, the development of these students are also traced in a longitudinal study. The purpose is to see if, when, and how the non-AIM students catch up with the AIM students. The students are asked to write on an assigned topic twice a year in years 4, 5 and 6. For each test, Paired-Samples T Test will be performed to compare the results of these two sub-groups.

All writing samples will be rated by a group of trained experts by means of holistic scores using a detailed rubric (cf. Bartning & Schlyter, 2004), complemented by automated analyses on complexity scores such as text length, sentence length and Guiraud (Granfeldt & Ågren, 2014). The holistic score takes all text characteristics at all levels into account (lexicon, morphology, syntax, formulaic sequences) (cf. Verspoor et al, 2012). A Cronbach's Alpha will be computed to determine the reliability of the scores.

Once holistic scores have been determined for a sub-set of the data, the holistic scores will be correlated (Pearson correlation coefficient) with a quantitative, automated analysis on various linguistic subsystems such as length of T-unit, number of dependent clauses, to explore possible predictors that can be used to score the writing samples objectively so that holistic scores may be complemented.

Sub study 3: Comparing scores on reading and listening.

At the end of the six years, each cohort of students (final exams in 2015-2019) will be tested on reading and listening to compare effectiveness of the structure-based and AIMe approaches. Scores of all groups will be compared with the national average. An Independent Samples T Test will be used to compare the different groups.

Because the current AIMe classes consist of students who did and did not have AIM in the first three years, the development of these students are also traced in a longitudinal study. The purpose is to see if, when, and how the non-AIM students catch up with the AIM students. The students are asked to take objective multiple choice tests on both reading (every four months) and listening (every six months) in years 4, 5 and 6. For each test, Paired-Samples T Test will be performed to compare the results of these two groups.

Measuring reading and listening skills is relatively easy because of the existence and availability of valid and objective tests from CITO (The Dutch national testing agency).

Schedule

year	Activity	sub-study
Already completed	Validation study of the Oral Proficiency Test for French (OPTF) Already started: data collection (work done from 2015 until present).	
2017-2018	Data collection oral/writing proficiency and reading/listening skills Reading background literature Developing and validating a semi-automated writing proficiency test.	1/2/3 2
2018-2019	Data collection oral/writing proficiency and reading/listening skills Reading background literature Writing second paper on an efficient, reliable and valid writing proficiency test	1/2/3 2
2019-2020	Data collection oral/writing proficiency and reading/listening skills Reading background literature Writing third paper on the effectiveness of AIM in speaking and writing	1/2/3 1/2
2020-2021	Reading background literature Writing fourth paper on the effectiveness of AIM in reading and listening	 3
2021-2022	Reading background literature Writing introduction and conclusion of the dissertation	

Scientific innovation and research context

Scientifically, this project is unique in that it traces learners over the course of a number of years and therefore can test the effectiveness of instructional approaches more reliably than any short term intervention study can.

For society at large, this study will be useful. It may show indeed that a strong target language use approach to teaching French is more effective than the structure-based approaches used currently in the Netherlands, thereby giving the teaching of French a new impetus. French is the language spoken by one of the main countries in the European Union, and it is important that a number of our future graduates can actually speak the language and understand its culture.

Both the new materials developed for the AIMe approach and the speaking and writing tests developed in the project will be made available to interested teachers on a website.

Results of the research for me / education in general

As a dedicated teacher in both a structure-based approach and AIMe approach, I have a strong impression that the AIMe students perform better, but I would like to have this intuition confirmed with solid evidence. If indeed the AIMe approach is more effective and enables students to converse easily in French with French nationals, I would like to inspire other teachers to use this approach. I will also make the AIMe and assessment materials available on a website.

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