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## **Experiences with a Language Portfolio -with special focus on Moroccan children in the Netherlands-**

RIAN AARTS & PETER BROEDER  
TILBURG UNIVERSITY

*Today we worked with the Language Portfolio in our class. Hans, our teacher, said that this week we should collect as many words as possible in different languages. A Moroccan family lives in my street. I got a newspaper in Arabic from them. I exchanged 'language pieces' with some friends. My father is also infected by my collecting mania; he brought a small booklet for me from his work. It was a manual for a computer. Do you know how many languages?*

*Well, the computer manual has 9 different languages! If you read the little book, you know immediately what is French, German, and English. For the other languages I have to know what the country signs mean before I know what the language is. Maybe, I will study a language at college later. It would be great if I could speak a language that my father and mother cannot understand. Then I could tell jokes with them without them noticing.*

(Sanne, 11 years).

## 1. Introduction

A large number of different languages are spoken in Europe, and also in the Netherlands. For years, the degree of language proficiency of pupils in primary education was established by a mark on their school report cards, which implied their language proficiency in Dutch. However, because of increasing mobility in Europe, old language borders are disappearing and new language borders are arising. Pupils often speak languages other than their mother tongue at home or in the street, or they live in border regions where, in addition to Dutch, German is spoken. Language learning does not only occur at school. Therefore, it is important to have a good insight into the way in which people learn languages, within a European context. Moreover, it is important to know what levels of language skills are achieved when people learn languages in formal as well as in informal contexts.

In order to cope with the European language (learning) situation, the project *Language Learning for European Citizenship* was carried out between 1989 and 1997 under the auspices of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg (see, for example, Council of Europe 1996, 2001; Coste et al., 1998; Christ, 1999). In this project, two instruments were developed:

- *A Common European Framework of Reference* covering six language proficiency levels. This language scale can be used to compare language skills and certificates. For example, a pupil who studied French in high school can, when applying for an apprenticeship in France, give a potential employer a good idea of what such a diploma in French means.
- *A European Language Portfolio*: a collective document that not only covers a series of formal certificates but that also documents other language experiences, such as growing up in a multilingual home situation.

The first part of this article is a description of the two instruments that have been proposed by the Council of Europe. The second part of this article goes into the Language Portfolio for primary schools in the Netherlands. A description is given of the Language Portfolio that has been validated and approved recently by the Council of Europe. Findings are presented for a school population that worked in the school years 2000/2001 and 2001/2002 with the Language Portfolio. Finally some findings for a sample of Moroccan pupils are presented.

## **2. Language learning in Europe**

### **2.1 A European language scale**

An important aspect of the Common European Framework is the elaboration of a European scale for language proficiency (Council of Europe, 1996, 2001; Trim, 1997). This language scale is based on the following aspects of language proficiency:

- Understanding: listening
- Understanding: reading
- Speaking: spoken interaction
- Speaking: spoken production
- Writing

For each aspect of language proficiency, the language user's level is divided into the following six levels:

- Level A1: basic user (breakthrough)
- Level A2: basic user (way stage)
- Level B1: independent user (threshold)
- Level B2: independent user (vantage)
- Level C1: proficient user (effective proficiency)
- Level C2: proficient user (mastery)

The Framework formulates so-called general descriptors of these language proficiency levels for each of the five language proficiency aspects. For example, the general descriptor for language understanding proficiency of *basic breakthrough*, or level A1, is formulated as follows:

*I can understand familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family, and my immediate concrete surroundings, when people speak slowly and clearly.*

Following is an example of the general descriptor used for the language reading proficiency of a *proficient mastery* language user, or level C2:

*I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles, and literary works*

With the aid of general descriptors such as these, anyone, the teacher, the curriculum developer, but also the employer, the personnel officer, or the policy maker can easily obtain information on an individual's language proficiency. In terms of European and international affairs, this assessment of language proficiency level may have great relevance.

The European scale for language proficiency also consists of specific descriptors that provide detailed information and insight into the specific skill. Some examples of specific descriptors for the language understanding proficiency of the *basic breakthrough* language user, or level A1, are the following:

*I can understand simple directions for how to get from X to Y, on foot or by public transport.*

*I can understand numbers, prices, and times.*

More detailed information on general and specific descriptors can be found in the studies of North & Schneider (1998) and North (1999). The Common European Framework provides a measurement instrument that makes it possible to compare language proficiencies of individuals/groups from the different member states of the European Union. But its objectives go further than that. The Common European Framework indicates how a language is acquired, taught, and learnt. Ensuring that the language user is using the language consciously and developing efficiency in reflecting on his use of the language are two other important objectives. The Common European Framework is meant to be a transparent, flexible, and open instrument directed towards different forms of language use and language learning in formal or informal contexts (Trim, 1999). The Framework provides a basis for the acknowledgement of language qualifications that are used in the different European countries. Moreover, the implementation of the Framework implies the acknowledgement of the potential of the informal language knowledge of those Europeans who grow up in multilingual home situations.

## **2.2 A Language Portfolio in Europe**

The second instrument developed by the Council of Europe is the European Language Portfolio (see Schneider & Lenz, 2001; Little & Perclová 2001). During 1998-2000 in more than 15 European countries Language Portfolios with country-specific characteristics were developed. Yearly, Schärer (1998, 1999, and 2000) provided concise information on the studies, experiences, and progress of each European country that participated in this research.

The Language Portfolio is a personal tool to evoke processes and outcomes of language learning and language planning. *The Principles and Guidelines* approved by the Council of Europe (2001) recommend that three parts be identified in the Language Portfolio:

- *Language Passport*: in this part, the language user documents his own language background, other languages that have been learnt at school or outside school, and an overview of official diplomas, such as exam documents, language courses, and certificates;
- *Language Biography*: this part consists of statements on language use, through which the language user can reflect on his proficiency in a specific language. The list of statements is related to the Common European Framework;
- *Language File*: this part is a combination of documents consisting of, for example, certified documents showing reports and studies the language user produced during the probation; the studies he made during a student exchange program, if attended; and documents concerning a particular language used during his studies for projects and presentations he has participated in.

The Language Portfolio can be useful during different stages of the language learner's career. During formal education, when being transferred to another school, the student's Language Portfolio is very important. Through it, the new school management is informed about the kinds of courses the student has followed regarding languages and what level of language proficiency he obtained. An interesting aspect of the Language Portfolio is that it not only gives information about what the language user has learnt at school, but also documents the kind of activities he has engaged in outside school and what he has learnt there. The student's communications with parents and relatives during holidays and the fact that he speaks, for example, Arabic to his mother

and father can be considered as well. Later on, when it is time for the student to leave school and start working, this Language Portfolio can be used as a separate document along with official certificates. In addition, it is also possible to submit a Language Portfolio when applying for a job. For example, some specific knowledge of Spanish can be useful for truck or international road transport drivers in their jobs.

### **3. Developing a Language Portfolio in the Netherlands**

For some years, the Netherlands have been gaining experience in the use of a Dutch version of a Language Portfolio in education. Alkema et al. (2000) and Toks (1998) give an overview of a number of pilot projects that have been carried out in the framework of the European Language Portfolio Project of the Council of Europe. The Dutch project was carried out under the auspices of the National Bureau of Modern Foreign Languages in collaboration with the European Platform for Dutch Education. The objectives of these projects were:

- to stimulate public support for the Language Portfolio within the framework of the Dutch education system concerning languages;
- to establish an appropriate format of a Language Portfolio;
- to investigate the effect of the use of the Language Portfolio on teachers and students.

The portfolio project focuses on different target groups. Pupils in primary education as well as secondary and vocational education were taken into consideration when the use of the Language Portfolio was being examined. Each project was directed at a specific group of language users. For instance, primary schools in the Dutch-German border areas were involved. These schools have basic German and French classes for their pupils. A project on learning English was also set up, in which the correlation between the English that the students learnt during their primary education, outside the school, and during their secondary education, was considered.

One project in Holland was specifically carried out in multilingual classes in primary schools. This project has to its aim to acquire more information on the form and function of the Language Portfolio used by teachers and students in multilingual classes. It was put into practice by Babylon, Centre for Studies

of the Multicultural Society at Tilburg University. In this project two phases can be distinguished:

- Phase 1: Piloting and implementation (1998/1999 and 1999/2000)
- Phase 2: Dissemination and validation (2000/2001 and 2001/2002)

### **3.1 Piloting and implementation (1998/1999 and 1999/2000)**

For two years (1998/1999 and 1999/2000), 524 primary school pupils, grades 7 and 8, aged between 10 and 12 years, in two cities, Tilburg and Maastricht, worked with a Language Portfolio. On the basis of the experiences of these pupils and their teachers, the pilot version of the Language Portfolio was improved. One finding of the piloting was that the pupils generally evaluated working with the Language Portfolio positively. The multilingual pupils in particular had a positive attitude towards it. Through the Language Portfolio, these pupils can profile themselves in a positive way because their language knowledge is considered an asset rather than a source of problems as it was viewed earlier. Working with the Language Portfolio allows teachers to increasingly improve their understanding of the multilingual and multicultural classroom. Broeder (2000) underlines the importance of the pedagogical function and the importance of embedding the use of the Language Portfolio in the school curriculum. A detailed description of the first phase in developing a Language Portfolio for primary education is presented by Broeder (2001a, 2001b).

### **3.2 Dissemination and validation (2000/2001 and 2001/2002)**

There were two aims in the second phase in the developing process of the Language Portfolio. The first aim was to validate the Language Portfolio according to standardized criteria specified by a national Dutch committee and an international European committee. The second aim was to disseminate the Language Portfolio in Dutch primary education on a larger scale.

## 4. The Language Portfolio for primary education

### 4.1 Contents of the Language Portfolio

#### *Introduction for the pupil*

The first page of the Language Portfolio is titled *This Language Portfolio belongs to ....* Here, the pupil can fill in personal information, such as name, address, date of birth, and place of birth. The pupil can also paste in a picture or make a drawing of him/herself. Next, there is a general introduction, followed by a table of contents. The Language Portfolio consists of three parts: the Language Passport, the Language Biography, and the File with language tasks.

#### *The Language Passport*

In the Language Passport, a summary of the language skills of the pupil is given. It consists of an overview of the learning experiences the pupil has (had) with other languages and cultures. The Language Passport starts with an explanation for the pupil titled *How to work with the Language Passport?* The Language Passport consists of three pages, with the following headings:

- *What have I learnt?*
- *What does my teacher say?*
- *My experiences with languages*

The pupil can fill in the *What have I learnt?* page after having completed the forms in the Language Biography, which is the second part of the Language Portfolio. By filling in the results of the self-evaluation, the portfolio user gets an overview of the language proficiency.

The *What does my teacher say?* page is filled in by the teacher/teachers. The goal is to get an overview of the pupil's level of proficiency in the languages that he learnt at school.

On the page *My experiences with languages*, the pupil can write down where and when he came in contact with different languages and cultures.

#### *The Language Biography*

In the Language Biography, the pupil can register the measure in which he knows languages. Also, the pupil can report what more languages he would like to learn and how he would like to learn it. In this way, the pupil can plan the

further development of his language knowledge, and monitor its progress. This concerns all the language knowledge of the pupil, relating to both languages taught at school and languages learnt outside the school context. The Language Biography starts with an explanation to the pupils, which is entitled *How to work with the Language Biography*. The Language Biography consists of three sets of sheets: language sheets, forms, and a planning sheet. The language sheets bear the following titles:

- *Which languages do I speak with whom?*
- *Learning languages*

The *Which languages do I speak with whom?* sheet focuses on the languages the pupil speaks. The pupil can fill in which language or languages the pupil speaks with father, mother, brothers and sisters, grandparents, and best friends. If a dialect is spoken at home, this can also be filled in.

The *Learning languages* sheet is concerned with the languages the pupil has learnt. The pupil can fill in the languages he knows and where he learnt these languages. Once again, this concerns all the language knowledge of the pupil, regarding the languages taught at school and languages learnt outside the school context, within the family, on holidays, in the street and so forth.

Next there are five forms, entitled:

- *Listening*
- *Reading*
- *Spoken interaction*
- *Spoken production*
- *Writing*

These forms can be filled in for different languages at different points in time. On the forms, there are three statements for each proficiency level (A1 through B2). These statements are based on the *European Framework of Reference*. Each statement is followed by a short explanation. The pupil has to read the statement and the explanation, after which he can fill in what applies to him. The choices are *I cannot do that at all*, *I can do that a little bit*, *I can do that very well*. When a pupil has filled in that he cannot do that at all, or a little bit, the pupil may mark the last column, *I want to learn*, indicating that he would like to learn this specific skill. If a pupil indicates for three statements that he

can do it very well, he has mastered this level and he can fill in the next level. If the pupil has indicated at the statements of a level that he cannot do that at all, or just a little bit, he has not yet mastered this level. In this way, pupils can fill in the five forms. After having filled in the forms, the results can be recorded on the *What have I learnt?* page in the Language Passport.

Finally there is the planning sheet *Getting better*. On this sheet the pupil can write down how he wants to get better in the specific language. Some examples of ways to learn more in a language are mentioned, but the pupil can also come up with other ways to expand his knowledge of languages. If, at a later time, the pupil fills in the forms again, the planning sheet can be updated also.

#### *File*

In the File, pieces of evidence of the pupil's knowledge of languages can be collected. The pupil can insert examples of his own work in one or more languages here. The pupil can collect documents related to languages learnt outside school, documents that are related to the languages taught at school, and language tasks (examples of language tasks are given at the internet: [www.taalportfolio.com](http://www.taalportfolio.com)).

## **4.2 Characteristics of the Language Portfolio**

In the construction of the Language Portfolio for primary education, a number of linguistic and didactic considerations played a role. These considerations influenced the characteristics of the Language Portfolio.

#### *The upper grades*

The Language Portfolio can be used in the upper grades of primary education. When working with the Language Portfolio, pupils have to reflect on their own language knowledge and their own learning of a language. They are also expected to formulate the goals and plans of their own language learning processes. This can be expected from pupils in the upper grades of primary education, pupils of nine years and older, but not from younger pupils.

#### *Descriptors and language levels*

Not all descriptors of the *Common European Framework of Reference* have been included in the Language Portfolio for primary education. Pupils of this age group might well be discouraged if they have to read and decide on about ten descriptors for each level in order to assess their language abilities.

Moreover, a number of descriptors of the *European Framework* are not relevant or recognizable for pupils of this age. For these reasons, we have decided to include in the Language Portfolio for primary education only three descriptors – relevant to this age group - for each level of competence. It was also decided to include only levels A and B from the *Common European Framework of Reference*. Level C is rarely reached by pupils in primary education.

#### *Self-assessment*

Because the Language Portfolio is a document made by and belonging to the students themselves, self-assessment by the students plays a prominent role in the Language Portfolio for primary education. The teacher also assesses the language proficiency of the pupil in the Language Portfolio, but this assessment plays a less prominent role.

#### *Languages taught at school - languages spoken at home*

No distinction is made between languages that are taught at school and languages that are not. In the Language Portfolio, the languages that are learnt inside school or outside school are treated in the same manner and thus are appreciated equally.

#### *Instructive language tasks*

It was decided to include some examples of instructive language tasks in the Portfolio. Teachers and students can find more language tasks on the internet, where they can choose from the tasks on offer. Thus, the Language Portfolio remains a specific document for each pupil, with only those parts and tasks that are important for the pupil himself.

#### *Relation to the Language Portfolio for secondary education*

We tried to relate the Language Portfolio for primary education as much as possible to the Portfolio for secondary education (see Meijer & Gille, 2002). Both Portfolios consist of the same parts, contain the same levels, and require the same working method. However, because the Portfolio is adapted to the age range of the pupils, there are also differences between the two Portfolios. First of all, not all of the descriptors of the *European Framework of Reference* are incorporated in the Portfolio for primary education. Furthermore, the descriptions of the situations, i.e. the explanation of the descriptors are different across the two Portfolios, because these situations are attuned to the specific age group. In spite of these differences between the two Portfolios, there is a

clear main common line. Therefore, at the passage to secondary school, the Portfolio of the pupil in primary education is comparable with, and can be translated into, the one for secondary education.

## 5. Evaluation of the Language Portfolio for primary education

### 5.1 Evaluation by students

In the school year 2000/2001 719 pupils participated in the project and in the school year 2001/2002 519 pupils. The pupils were in grades 6 to 8, i.e., the last three years of the primary school, and their ages were 10 to 12 years. Table 1 gives an overview of the research population per school year.

	2000/2001	2001/2002
N cities	4	5
N schools	10	11
N classes	27	22
N grade 6	3	1
N grade 7	12	10
N grade 8	13	11
N total	719	511

**Table 1** Research population in school year 2000/2001 (n=719) and in school year 2001/2002 (n=511).

In the evaluation process quantitative and qualitative methods were used in data acquisition. Question lists were given to the pupils in order to obtain an outline of their situations at school and at home. In addition, they were given short questionnaires for their own appreciation of the Language Portfolio. The qualitative data consisted of multiple case studies, semi-structured in-depth-interviews with the teachers, the logbooks teachers kept themselves, and the observations made in the classrooms. The evaluation results of the overall student population in the school years 2000/2001 and 2001/2002 are summarized in Table 2.

How do you like the language portfolio?	2000/2001		2001/2002	
It is nice to work with the language portfolio	429/565	76%	235/371	63%
It is easy to work with the language portfolio	440/514	86%	262/298	88%
It is important for me to work with the language portfolio	210/400	53%	110/276	40%
The portfolio indicates what I can do well in a language	399/473	84%	240/282	85%
I learn a lot by working with the language portfolio	379/477	80%	180/275	66%
I want to work with my language portfolio often	317/471	67%	175/302	58%
I like having a language portfolio a lot	433/544	80%	236/331	71%

**Table 2** Pupils' assessment of working with the language portfolio in school year 2000/2001 (n=719) and in school year 2001/2002 (n=511)

As can be seen from Table 2, the majority of the pupil population assessed the Language Portfolio positively. Most pupils stated that they liked working with it (76% and 66%) and that they found it easy to work with the Language Portfolio (86% and 88%). 53% in 2000/2001 but only 40% in 2001/2002 affirmed the importance of the Language Portfolio for them. A relatively large number of pupils thought that the Portfolio could show their skills in a language (84% and 85%). According to 80% and 66% of the pupils, the Language Portfolio taught them a wide variety of things. 80% and 71% of the pupils liked having a Language Portfolio. The number of pupils who wanted to work often on the Language Portfolio constituted 80% of the total number in school year 2000/2001 and 71% of the total number in school year 2001/2002.

## **5.2 Evaluation by the Moroccan students**

Among the research population a sub sample was of Moroccan origin: 27 pupils in school year 2000/2001 and 28 pupils in school year 2001/2002. The country of birth for these Moroccan pupils and their parents is given in Table 3.

Birth country	2000/2001			2001/2002		
	Pupil	Mother	Father	Pupil	Mother	Father
Netherlands	21	3	1	26	-	4
Morocco	6	22	26	2	28	23
Spain	-	2	-	-	-	1
Total	27	27	27	28	28	28

**Table 3** Country of birth of the pupils of Moroccan origin and their parents.

The evaluation results of the Moroccan pupils in the school years 2000/2001 and 2001/2002 are summarized in Table 4.

How do you like the language portfolio?	2000/2001		2001/2002	
It is nice to work with the language portfolio	19/20	95%	15/21	71%
It is easy to work with the language portfolio	16/17	94%	8/11	73%
It is important for me to work with the language portfolio	15/19	79%	8/13	62%
The portfolio indicates what I can do well in a language	17/17	100%	16/17	94%
I learn a lot by working with the language portfolio	14/15	93%	10/13	77%
I want to work with my language portfolio often	17/20	85%	10/15	67%
I like having a language portfolio a lot	17/17	100%	15/17	88%

**Table 4** Pupils' assessment of working with the language portfolio; the pupils of Moroccan origin

Table 4 reveals some interesting differences between the Moroccan pupils and the other pupils in the research population. The pupils of Moroccan origin like working with their Language Portfolio relatively more: 71% and 95% of the Moroccan pupils versus 63%, 76% of the total population. Moreover, the percentage of the pupils who find it important to work with their Portfolio is 73% and 94% among Moroccan pupils and only 40% and 53% among the total population. In addition, relatively more Moroccan pupils report that they learnt a lot from working with their Language Portfolio: 77% and 93% versus 66%

and 80%. Similarly, there are relatively more Moroccan pupils who want to work more often with their Language Portfolio: 67% and 85% versus 58% and 67%.

In a research project Harrane (2003) showed that the self-assessment that pupils make in their Language Portfolio is related to the assessment teachers make and to the results of language tests. This finding provides proof for the reliability of self-assessment. Pupils of this age group, 10 to 12 years, appear to be able to give an accurate evaluation of their own language skills.

## **6. Conclusion**

The Language Portfolio is a document belonging to the pupil and it should also be introduced as such. Working with a Language Portfolio is not limited to a specific lesson or method, but can be done at any time in the classroom. As regards content, however, working with the Language Portfolio is connected with the language lessons, and, more specifically, with the field of language awareness.

The Language Portfolio is meant for pupils in the upper grades of primary education. When working with a Language Portfolio, students have to reflect on their skills in a specific language and they have to formulate their own goals and plans. This can be expected from pupils of 9 years old and older, but this cannot be expected from younger pupils. The Language Portfolio can fulfil a function at the end of primary education in the passage to secondary education. The Language Portfolio can be used several times during the school career of the student. Within a school year, a minimum of two periods working with the Language Portfolio is recommended: at the beginning and at the end of the school year. It is also possible to use the Language Portfolio in between. In particular, completion of the file and working with the language tasks can be done several times during the school year. In a Language Portfolio, the language user is able to report and document his own knowledge of a language and thus to develop language learning strategies at a conscious level. A Language Portfolio is a different perspective on language learning in a context that is both formal and informal.

In the development of the Language Portfolio, two views of languages and language learning form the base. The essence of these views is that *all languages count* and *languages can be learnt at any place*. The

starting-point is that a language is learnt by using it in settings that are meaningful; this view is in agreement with the communicative method in language education. Pupils are able to report in their Language Portfolios what they have learnt at school, but also which language activities they have undertaken outside the classroom and what they have learnt from these. Such activities may include, for example, their contacts with family or friends in foreign countries and the speaking of a language at home which differs from the language, spoken at school. A Language Portfolio shows the official languages that are taught at school and also the languages that are learnt in other settings, e.g., at home, in the street, and on holidays. All language skills a pupil has acquired are documented in the Language Portfolio and are valued equally.

A Language Portfolio can fulfill three functions: as an instrument of evaluation, an instrument of documentation, and an instrument of planning. In a Language Portfolio, students can determine, document, and plan the development of their own language skills. First, the Language Portfolio is an instrument to determine the level of language proficiency. Because this is done using European language levels, the student's language proficiency is comparable with that of other students, also with those from outside the Netherlands. The second function of the Language Portfolio is that of filing materials that are illustrative of the language proficiency of the pupil. Finally, the Language Portfolio is a document for planning. With the Language Portfolio, pupils are able to guide their own language learning processes by indicating what they want to learn and how they want to learn it.

The Language Portfolio can be used at different stages in the school career of the pupil. The Portfolio can be of importance for the next level of education, by showing what the pupil has already acquired in the area of languages. The Portfolio can also play a role in the transition from primary education to secondary education. At a later age, at the transition from education to the labor market, the Language Portfolio can serve as evidence of the pupil's language proficiency, beside the regular diplomas. The Language Portfolio is a document that belongs to the pupil and is expanded and completed over time. Working with a Language Portfolio is a process that guides language learning. By working with the Language Portfolio, the pupil guides his own learning process and collects evidence illustrating the language skills.

It appears that, in Europe, more languages will be learnt and spoken than expected. School is not the only place where languages are learnt. By using a Language Portfolio for those pupils for whom more than one language is used at home, the richness of their language knowledge is acknowledged. Practical experiences in the Netherlands with a Dutch version of the European Language Portfolio in primary schools has been the focus of this contribution. Since 1998 the construction process of the Language Portfolio for primary education progressed positively. Obviously, language tasks should be developed in order to facilitate language learning and to enhance the pedagogic methods and techniques that could help the Language Portfolio to have a better functionality in training programs. Currently, many studies are being conducted on the Language Portfolio, and in the future teachers and pupils will have the opportunity to participate in Portfolio projects as much as possible. For example, Aarts & Broeder (2003, 2004) have developed a Language Portfolio for primary school teachers. Furthermore, recent developments, e.g. the steady growth of computer infrastructure in classrooms and the availability of new language learning possibilities in digital environments, which were not available in the past, as well as electronic versions of the Language Portfolio (Brust 2003) will have a profound effect on the projects (see [www.taalportfolio.com](http://www.taalportfolio.com) and [www.taalportfolio.nl](http://www.taalportfolio.nl)).

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