A dynamic, usage-based approach to teaching L2 Dutch

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Language teaching follows trends in theory of second language development (SLD). In recent years, a dynamic, usage-based (DUB) approach to SLD has gotten theoretical foothold. With DUB principles in mind, a teaching program was developed for teaching Dutch as a second language (L2), where authentic input stood central. The program was based on a popular Dutch movie and has been applied in a foreign language context, working with advanced, German learners of L2 Dutch at the University of Münster (Germany). In an exploratory study, we examined what effect the program had on students´ motivation and general language proficiency. Results indicate that students appreciated the method in several ways (learning, motivation) and that they showed a significant increase in language proficiency. The aim of this report is to provide supported ideas for engaging and effective L2 teaching.

Keywords: Dynamic Systems Theory, usage-based linguistics, L2 teaching, language proficiency, motivation, authentic input

1. Introduction

In recent years several publications in the field of second language development (SLD) have appeared, where authors plead for taking a dynamic, usage-based approach (DUB) to second language development (Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Langacker, 2008; Robinson & Ellis, 2008; Verspoor, De Bot, & Lowie, 2011). A dynamic, usage-based approach is a blend of Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) as applied to language development in the field of applied linguistics and usage-based (UB) theory in theoretical linguistics, mainly as proposed by Langacker (2000). An important difference between traditional and DUB views on language learning is that in a DUB approach, language learning is seen not as a static, but as a highly complex, dynamic process. Also, a DUB approach stresses comprehension as a

prerequisite for learning. The insights gained in the field of SLD have pedagogical implications for L2 teaching, as has been pointed out by Hong and Verspoor (2013). They developed a L2 teaching program based on DUB principles for teaching L2 English to beginning learners in Vietnam; and showed the DUB program had positive effects in increasing language proficiency and potential to increase motivation. Their L2 teaching DUB principles are much in line with several ideas that have previously been put forward in the context of communicative language teaching (e.g. Krashen, 1996). In a nutshell, a L2 DUB program:

1. pays attention to the initial learner conditions (the learner´s state at the start of teaching), enhances internal (motivation) and optimizes external (the teaching program) resources
2. puts exposure to the target language and its form-meaning pairs central. Language is presented in a sociocultural and meaningful context. Hong and Verspoor (2013) presented this authentic input in the form of scenes from a popular English movie (see their article for several good reasons to choose for a movie instead of other video material)
3. accommodates learning of word(group)meanings, as DUB theory indicates that words are probably the most meaningful elements of language. In interaction with the students, the teacher explains language ('scaffolding'; Vygotsky, 1987) until students can comprehend it without assistance
4. offers frequent (repeated) contact with the target language. Iteration of form-meaning pairs plays an important role in classes. However, Hong and Verspoor (2013) point out that only exposing students to the L2 may not be enough to accommodate L2 development. Also, VanPatten and Cadierno (1993) found that the more linguistic forms are noticed, the better the chance to establish form-meaning connections. Therefore, the DUB method as well:
5. directs students´ attention to form-meaning pairs at all the different levels of language subsystems (e.g. spoken, written etc.).

For a more detailed discussion of DUB principles and their application to L2 teaching I refer to Hong and Verspoor (2013). Their positive findings inspired the current, exploratory study that investigated whether teaching L2 Dutch to advanced language learners following DUB principles had similar beneficial effects. This study investigates the effect of a series of L2 Dutch lessons based on DUB principles in terms of increasing a) motivation and b) language proficiency, for advanced, German learners of Dutch.[1] By addressing these topics, I hope to provide further

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1. I investigated these questions by basing my study on a number of elements in the study of Hong and Verspoor (2013). I take the same DUB principles and a popular movie with authentic language as a starting point (see Hong & Verspoor, 2013, p. 10, for reasons to choose a movie, instead of

supported ideas for engaging and effective ways of L2 teaching. Due to limited space, in the following, I will only discuss the most basic elements of the current study.

2.   Method

This study was conducted with 19 German learners of L2 Dutch. The main goal of the DUB classes was to expose them to the target language in a meaningful context, in the form of a popular Dutch movie. Movie fragments of two till three minutes were shown repeatedly, following a number of steps, where the teacher explained the language until students understood every single utterance.

2.1 Students and teacher

The 19 participating students (15 females) studied Dutch at the University of Münster (Germany), in the second semester of the academic year 2012–2013. Most of these learners had B1 proficiency, in terms of the Common European Framework. Students received teaching in two groups, but followed the exact same program and will be treated as one single group in the following. The teacher was the author of this article, also creator of the L2 Dutch DUB-method.

2.2 DUB sessions

We offered students ten two-hour sessions with the DUB-method, spread over the course of twelve weeks. In addition, students participated in the pre- (before session 1) and posttest (after session 10) and prepared homework each week. The students completed the course with a test for a grade. The DUB classes were based on the popular Dutch movie *Alles is liefde* (Lürsen, 2007; 117 minutes). This movie was chosen with the expectation that students would find it entertaining and because it contains a rich amount of authentic input in the form of daily conversations as well as display of Dutch culture.

In the DUB classes, movie fragments of two till three minutes were repeatedly shown, with three or four fragments per class. We discussed each fragment, with aid of written text presented with Powerpoint. Discussion took approximately fifteen minutes, dependent on the amount of and difficulties in the language.

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other video material). However, in comparison with Hong and Verspoor's method I incorporate less repetition in the course, as I am working with advanced and not beginning learners. Class assignments, for example, were less aimed at repetition, but aimed at free language production.

The language of instruction was Dutch. There were five to six steps, wherein the teacher guided the learning process:

Table 1. Steps DUB-lesson

Step
1 Students watch the fragment without subtitles and instruction, to get a general impression on what is happening in the scene (first contact). The start knowledge is the previous movie scene that is fresh in memory. At the start of every new class, we recapped the scenes we saw in the previous session.
2 The teacher checks whether students have understood the main events by asking two general questions. When students did not understand everything, there is opportunity to ask questions and discuss the scene.
3 Students watch the scene again (second contact), but are asked to pay attention to what the characters are actually saying by means of two questions on specific language use or specific events. For example, the teacher asks 'What does Character1 say, when Character2 has hit him?' or 'What do we get to know about the marriage of Character1 and 2?' These questions are asked, so that students have a reason to listen to the input once more.
4 The text in the fragment is projected on PowerPoint-sheets (third contact) and the teacher or students read the text out loud (fourth contact). No more than three or four lines are shown per sheet, to ensure full attention on the language. The aim is to process the language in a different form (written), in a lower tempo, and imitate and practice intonation. When necessary, the teacher explains what characters mean with their utterances. Unknown words or word groups are highlighted and discussed with help of descriptions, synonyms or visuals on the sheet.
5 If students indicate they want to watch the scene again, we watch the scene once more (fifth contact). However, in practice, students mostly indicated they understood all after step four, and therefore we moved on to the next fragment or to step six.
6 For a change of pace there is an activity after one or two fragments are shown. For example, students role-play a scene, or put cut out pieces of a dialogue in the right order. Aim of these activities was to repeat the language in an implicit, playful manner. In the course of the semester, activities got more challenging. For example, in the last sessions, students were assigned to write their own dialogues and storylines, based on screenshots from the next fragment to be seen.

The teacher gave constructive feedback to spoken and written utterances of students, made positive remarks and compliments to motivate students. After each session, the PowerPoint presentations were uploaded on the Elearning system, so that students were able to review them as homework.

2.3 Instruments and analysis

First, we measured language proficiency scores on two exercises based on assignments in the *Staatsexamens Nederlands als tweede taal (programma 2*; 2001–2002

and 2003–2004); a (written) fill in the blanks assignment and a writing assignment. Second, we measured motivation scores by means of students´ reactions to 24 statements about motivation and willingness to communicate, derived from a questionnaire on these topics used in a large-scale study of Verspoor, De Bot and Xu (2013). Also, students filled in a course evaluation at the end of the DUB program.[2] Both the language proficiency and motivation tests were administered online.

The language proficiency exercises in pre- and posttest phase were assessed following the prescriptions of the *Staatsexamens*. The researcher as well as an independent examiner appointed scores; the scores were analyzed by statistically comparing scores in pre- and posttest phase. The motivation questionnaire was analyzed by statistically comparing average ranking of statements in pre- and posttest phase. The course evaluation was analyzed qualitatively: similar utterances were taken together to determine general tendencies in the data.

3.   Results

3.1   Language proficiency

Language proficiency, as measured by students´ scores on the fill in the blanks and writing assignment, was higher after following the DUB-course (Figure 1, 2; Table 2). A Wilcoxon test and Paired samples T-test showed that differences between pre- and posttest scores are significant, with $z = -3.13$, $p < 0.01$; and $t(16) = -4.88$, $p = .00$. A Cronbach analysis comparing assessment of the researcher and the independent examiner showed that the reliability of the assessments was high, with $\alpha = 0.993$ on the pretest, $\alpha = 0.986$ on the posttest.

Table 2. Average scores and standard deviations on fill in the blanks- and writing assignment, based on assignments in *Staatsexamens Nederlands als tweede taal*, in pre- and posttest phase

Phase	Number	Fill in the blanks assignment		Writing assignment	
		Mean	**St.dev.**	**Mean**	**St.dev.**
pretest	16	17.75	3.30	9.03	3.96
posttest	16	20.78	3.43	12.81	2.10

2. Data of three students were taken out of the data set, since two dropped out of the course, and one did not fill in the posttest. Analyses have thus been carried out with data of 16 participants.
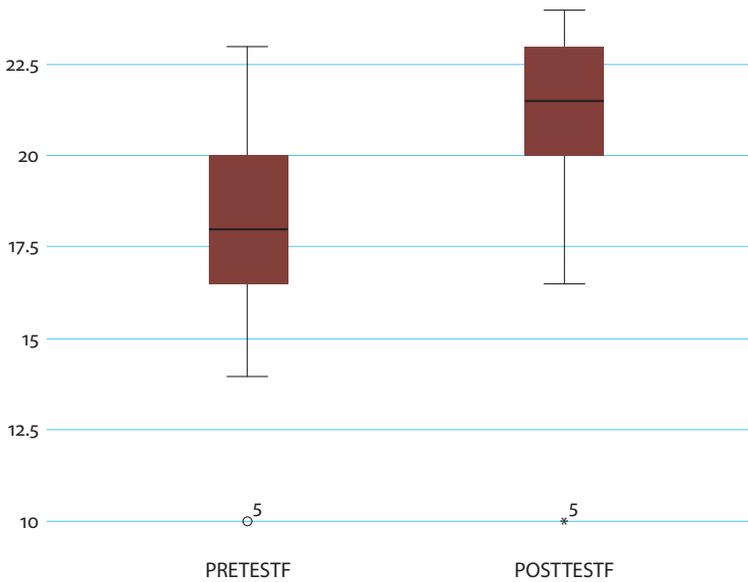
Figure 1. Pre- en posttest scores on fill in the blanks assignment, based on assignment in *Staatsexamens Nederlands als tweede taal*
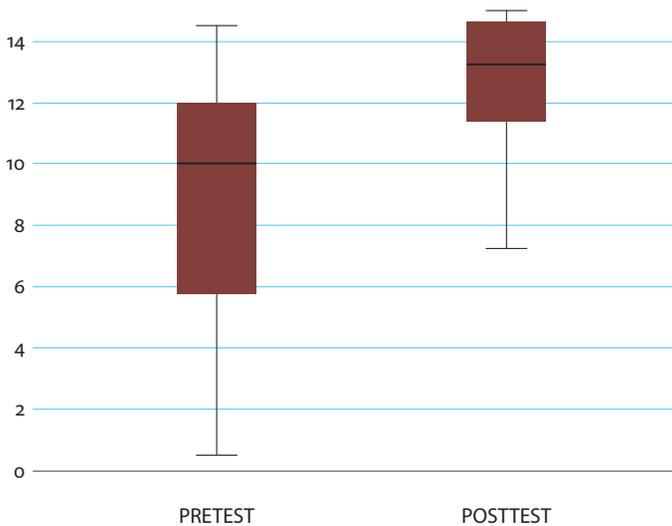
Figure 2. Pre- en posttest scores on writing assignment, based on assignment in *Staatsexamens Nederlands als tweede taal*

3.2 Motivation

The average rankings of the motivation statements in the pretest showed that students were quite motivated already when they started the course. Differences in

pre- and posttest were small. A Wilcoxon signed rank test showed that differences were not significant, with $z = -0.28$, $p > .05$. Table 3 presents a schematic overview of the most frequent (spontaneous) student reactions to the most important evaluation questions.

Table 3. Schematic overview of number and content of student reactions to questions 1A, 1B, 3A and 4 of the course evaluation; translated from Dutch into English

Number	Course evaluation question	Number	Reactions
1A	What do you think you have learned in the *Alles is liefde* classes?	9	new words and constructions
		8	typical Dutch expressions
		7	better understanding of everyday, spoken Dutch language
		5	better listening skills
		4	knowledge of Dutch culture / better speaking skills
		2	better pronunciation
1B	From what did you learn most?	8	discussing the meaning of words, chunks and expressions
		7	watching and listening to the (language in the) movie fragments
		6	discussing the movie fragments
3A	What did you like about the *Alles is liefde* classes?	15	that the classes were based on a movie
		15	the movie *Alles is liefde* is well chosen
4	What suggestions do you have to improve / further develop the course?	4	do more presentations
		4	more speaking exercises
		2	more homework

4. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this exploratory study was to generate supported ideas for engaging and effective ways of L2 teaching. However, any of the found effects cannot be ascribed to the DUB-method with uttermost certainty. It would be needed to replicate this study with an experimental setup with a control group (also controlling for L2 teacher and out of class input), preferably extending language proficiency measures to the areas of listening and speaking. That said, the results suggest that, next to the beginners in the study of Hong and Verspoor (2013), an adapted L2 teaching program based on DUB principles, is also beneficial for advanced language learners, both in terms of developing language proficiency and motivating leaners to attend to authentic language.

From a L2 teacher perspective, the DUB method has one great advantage: it relieves the teacher of being the single source of input (Hong & Verspoor, 2013). It is a great challenge for L2 teachers to provide their students with adequate amounts of authentic and interesting input, especially when there are no other fluent L2 speakers with whom to interact. A movie is able to supply for far more authentic input in a classroom, than a single teacher will ever be able to supply. From the perspective of a modern L2 learner, an L2 teaching program based on a movie can provide for a deepened understanding of target language and culture, as realistic as is possible in a classroom.

Acknowledgements

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