

Gathering evidence through rich assessment forms: A programmatic language portfolio to capture students' dynamic language learning roadmap

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Abstract This article examines current curriculum reforms in the Netherlands and recommends a programmatic language portfolio (PLP) based on the renewed attainment targets. It presents language as dynamic, social, and identity-related, and promotes rich, authentic tasks that integrate communication, cultural awareness, and language awareness. Programmatic assessment collects multiple data points across tasks instead of relying on single tests, while central exams serve as an external validation. Successful implementation depends on teacher training, guidance, and adequate resources.

Keywords complex dynamic systems, assessment, Programmatic Language Portfolio, language curriculum

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1 Context: Reforming the Dutch language curriculum

In recent years, a lively debate has emerged in the Netherlands among scholars, policy-makers, and educators about the coherence, purpose, and societal relevance of school subjects in secondary education (Fasoglio & Tammenga, 2021; Meesterschapsteam MVT, 2022; Meesterschapsteam Nederlands, 2018, 2021; Knopp et al., 2026). Central to this dynamic interplay between stakeholders is the question of how education can best prepare young people for active participation in an increasingly complex, multilingual, and digital society. This discussion also applies to foreign languages, Dutch, and Frisian.

Between 2022 and 2024, the debate culminated in a comprehensive curriculum reform. Committees composed of teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum experts were engaged in developing new core objectives and attainment targets for each educational track and each subject. Throughout the process, advisory groups representing several stakeholders provided feedback on prototypes. Following the completion of the design

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phase, schools were involved in evaluating the new targets during a full school year: can the new targets be translated into learning trajectories and into central and school-based assessment programmes? Are they likely to lead to the intended learning outcomes for students? And which conditions are needed to ensure successful, sustainable implementation?

2 Vision: The power of language

The new national targets for language education are grounded in a strong belief in the transformative power of language. Being aware of how language works, understanding the cultural dimensions of language use, and being able to communicate effectively are core competences in contemporary society. This becomes particularly relevant when education is viewed not only in terms of qualification and measurable outcomes, but also in terms of its broader societal and personal purposes (Michel et al., 2025 pp. 96-97).

Educational philosopher Gert Biesta (2020) argues that education serves more than a qualifying purpose. In addition to acquiring knowledge and skills for further education and employment, students should be supported in positioning themselves within cultures, traditions, and practices, and in engaging with what they encounter in the world. Language education can play a crucial role in achieving these broader educational aims. It equips students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to become proficient, creative, autonomous, language-aware, and culturally aware communicators in both real life and online multilingual and multicultural communities of practice.

As Levine (2020, among many others) argued, L2 learning and teaching is not just about achieving communication goals; it is also about dynamically shaping one's identity. (Atkinson et al., 2025, p. 59)

3 Operationalization: Rich language tasks

The vision on language learning and use as outlined above is based on the assumption that language users need language in order to act in the world: to perform tasks, solve problems, exchange ideas, and achieve goals – often in collaboration with others – in diverse contexts, and thereby to participate in society as active and informed citizens. In doing so, they learn to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire and to reflect on cultural aspects that shape communication. This calls for a holistic and integrated approach to language teaching (Piccardo & North, 2019). Placing language learning and use in a social perspective aligns closely with the rationale of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 30), which provides a solid framework for constructing modern language curricula. Language subjects do not only focus on language skills. They also address subject-specific content

that relates to language as a social phenomenon and as an integral part of identity.¹ This includes language variation, the effects of language contact, and the emotional, social, literary and political dimensions of language use (James & Garrett, 1992; Van den Broek et al., 2022). Further, language is key in any context of teaching and learning, as all communication and knowledge construction entails language use. This expands to other school subjects, as well as to citizenship, digital literacy or other broader curricular goals.

To embed high-quality, meaningful language use in and beyond language programmes, rich language tasks should form their backbone: meaning-focused, open-ended activities in which learners use language at their own level, collaborate with peers, negotiate meaning, employ strategies, develop creativity and make decisions.

... rather than “teaching” languages, the teacher’s task is to create optimal conditions for learning to develop. These conditions should allow individual learners to build on their own learning experiences and encourage them to use language freely in a safe environment. (Lowie, 2026, this issue, p. 5, reprint of Atkinson et al., 2025)

4 Curriculum alignment: Towards rich forms of assessment

For educational programmes to be effective and sustainable, their key elements must be consistent and mutually reinforcing. As Biggs (1996) argues in his theory of constructive alignment, learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment should all be based on the same vision and point in the same direction. Strong alignment improves learning and supports valid and meaningful assessment.

This raises important questions for language education. Which forms of assessment align with the vision described above? How can learning outcomes resulting from rich language tasks be connected to valid assessment practices? How can assessment show that students have attained the targets in the new programmes, and how can assessment include the whole learning process in the interpretation of the outcomes?

For teaching, the most important implication is that the individual nature of language development should be considered in language pedagogy. (Lowie, 2026, p. 6)

5 Gathering information on student learning progress: Programmatic assessment

The questions outlined above naturally lead to a programmatic assessment approach. This approach takes a holistic view of testing, placing student development at its heart (Van der Vleuten et al., 2015). It encourages students to take risks, learn from them, and develop their skills through feedback provided by instructors, peers, or through self-assessment, helping to guide and shape the learning process (Sluijsmans & Kneyber,

2016; Van de Wijdeven et al., 2024). The development-driven principles of programmatic assessment strongly tie in with the vision of the new attainment targets outlined above. The comprehensive approach of programmatic assessment provides ample room to support student progress across the three domains of the new attainment targets – communication, cultural awareness, and language awareness- in the context of rich and meaningful tasks (SLO, 2026). This promotes constructive alignment of learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment.

With programmatic assessment, pass–fail decisions are based on evidence collected across a coherent set of multiple assessment moments – so-called data points – rather than a single test. Feedback and reflection helps students to progress on the learning curve (Baartman et al., 2020; Sluismans & Kneyber, 2016; Van der Vleuten et al., 2015). By considering all assessment information holistically, programmatic assessment differs from formative assessment that results in a summative test (Black & Wiliam, 2018). Nevertheless, there are important similarities: both approaches rely heavily on feedback and aim to inform and guide learning (Peeters, 2024).

... longitudinal case studies are most suitable to explore the principles and mechanisms of the developmental process. (Lowie, 2026, p. 5)

6 Towards rich assessment forms: Central Exams versus School-Based Exams

Very practically, for the Dutch context programmatic assessment would mean that all school-based assessment could be set up programmatically, whereas the Dutch Central Exams (CE) would remain a national summative benchmark. The CE could in this system be used not only as a decision-maker but also as a validation instrument: an external check alongside the rich profile of the student. It would provide comparability with national standards and cohorts, but it should not undermine the programmatic assessment by it being treated as the dominant final arbiter.

The new attainment targets for languages, including foreign languages as well as Dutch and Frisian, are divided into mastery, experiential, and hybrid goals across the domains of communication, language, and culture.² These goals are assigned to assessment in the Dutch Central Exams (only mastery goals) and/or school-based exams (a mix of mastery, experiential, and hybrid goals). The new attainment standards encourage the integration of language content and skills and make it possible to tailor the design of learning activities and assessment to the school context. The school itself can determine which forms of assessment should be included into the school assessment plan, thus leaving enough room to implement programmatic assessment (SLO, 2026).

This approach towards a programmatic language assessment system, even in a multilingual setting, ties in with ideas on language as a complex dynamic system (Larsen-Freeman & Todeva, 2022).

... a personal portfolio, demonstrating the learner's evolving communicative competencies, would be a fairer representation of the learner's proficiency than a language test at one moment in time. (Lowie, 2026, p. 6)

The idea of a language portfolio is not a new one and there are even examples of "institutionalised" language portfolios, such as the European Language Portfolio (Council of Europe, n.d.), the Portfolio Based Language Assessment (PBLA) in Canada (Nagy & Stewart, 2009) or the Finnish Language Profile (<https://www.oph.fi/en/language-profile>).

For the purpose of designing a school-based programmatic assessment system we propose a programmatic language portfolio (PLP) for modern languages in Dutch secondary education. This portfolio needs to be based on the new core objectives and attainment targets for language education.

7 Some examples

In terms of school-based assessment a wide array of assessment moments can be included in the PLP. Students can, for example, use the products and results of meaningful authentic tasks within a variety of appropriate genres (such as flyers, posters, blogs, films, travel guides, essays etc). to show what they can do in a language, and reflect on their next steps. Additionally, they can reflect on the languages and language varieties they come across in their daily life and make their linguistic repertoire visible, for instance in a personal language profile poster. Students can give presentations to show their insight into fiction in which they discuss the authenticity of characters and events or how they would have reacted in certain situations in the story. Or they can create a collage showcasing their multilingual experiences. A PLP also provides ample opportunity to address the development of higher order thinking skills such as critical thinking, synthesis and evaluation. Students can analyse how cultural characteristics influence communication in everyday life, education or in a professional context. Alternatively, they can evaluate the output of digital resources such as AI.

Another aspect that can be included in the PLP is reflection on one's own language development. To be able to do this, students should not only be taught how to reflect and what to reflect on, but also become aware of aspects through which their own language skills develop and how they can assess their own language skills (Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 27-45).

Next to reflecting on their own language development, students should be given tasks that make it possible to evaluate how languages and language skills stimulate and reinforce each other. For instance, invite them to analyse cross-language transfer within their own language repertoires, the interplay between skills, and how development of skills in one language may support or hinder the development in another language.

Some of the new attainment targets are linked to democratic citizenship and cultural diversity. These aspects stimulate recognition of other perspectives and a critical attitude towards stereotyping. Tasks could consist of prompts asking students to reflect on different identities they can take on when they use different languages in different communicative situations, or how they could discuss an issue they care about in a different language and/or with someone from a different cultural background.

Perspective taking through fiction could serve as a meaningful point of departure for exploring diverse cultural themes and stereotyping. Other tasks could include proof of interaction with speakers of other languages.

8 Conclusion: Looking ahead

We proposed a revised version of the language portfolio, which we called programmatic language portfolio (PLP), as a tool to enable constructive alignment between learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessment of the new examination programmes. It promotes student development into autonomous, culturally and linguistically aware communicators while also supporting the view of language as a dynamic system.

Developing knowledge and skills needed for critical engagement and the implementation of the curriculum does place high demands on those who play a crucial role in realizing good language education: the language teachers. Adequate support, guidance and resources are indispensable conditions to achieve successful and sustainable curriculum renewal. Conscious implementation implies understanding that students learn in different ways and recognizing these differences as a strength. Language teachers can create the right conditions for learning by encouraging meaningful interaction, using different ways of communicating, and providing the right level of support to help students succeed along their individual trajectories.

Seeing learning as an emergent process implies that teaching comes down to creating optimal conditions for learning to take place – conditions that invite meaningful interaction in different modalities and in which scaffolding is optimally promoted. (Atkinson et al., 2025, p. 58)

Personal note

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Notes

- 1 See also Bewuste Geletterdheid in Perspectief (Meesterschapsteam Nederlands, 2021) and Visie op de Toekomst van het Curriculum Moderne Vreemde Talen (Meesterschapsteam MVT, 2022) and Knopp et al. (2026), for current visions on powerful language curricula in the Netherlands.
- 2 An example of mastery goal is: “*The student demonstrates understanding of the content of auditory and audiovisual sources in the target language.*” An example of an experiential goal is: “*The student reflects on their own plurilingual repertoire and that of others.*” (SLO, 2026, our translation)

Author contributions

Daniela Fasoglio: conceptualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing; Rick de Graaff: conceptualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing; Loes Groen: conceptualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing; Hilde Hacquebord: conceptualization, translation to white paper in Dutch; Bregtje Seton: conceptualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

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Supporting information

None.

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