

TEACHERS OF MOTHER-TONGUE EDUCATION IN ACTION

Teachers designing concept-context-enriched education in an action-
research setting

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Abstract. In this paper we report on the first year of a two year action-research project in the Netherlands. Fourteen teachers of mother-tongue education worked together to design concept-context-enriched education. Three teachers of higher vocational education with knowledge of action research facilitated the project and an academic researcher from the university (first author of this paper) researched the implementation of this action-research project as the teachers were experiencing it. This paper reports on the knowledge the teachers developed, the materials they produced, and the mother-tongue (or L1 concepts and contexts) they applied during the first ten months of the project. With this paper we wish to contribute to the knowledge on how in-service action-research projects develop and elaborate on what lessons may be learned from the first year of an action-research project in which teachers design concept-context enriched education.

Keywords: In-service teacher training, collaborative action research, concept-context-enriched mother-tongue education

Chinese

[Translation Shek Kam Tse]

“行动”中的母语教师

——教师在行动研究语境下设计“概念-语境强化教育”

这份报告针对荷兰一项为期两年的行动研究计划，展现了第一年的实行成果。十四位母语教师共同进行了“内容-

语境强化教育”。这项计划，由三位熟悉行动研究的高级技术教育导师协调。一位大学的研究者（

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此文的第一作者) 则对教师们在实践这项行动研究计划时的体验, 进行研究。这份报告描述了教师所发展的知识、产出的教材, 以及他们在计划首十个月中运用的第一语言概念与语境。我们希望这份报告, 能够为在职行动研究的发展有所贡献, 并且提出一些能供借鉴的经验参考。

Dutch

[Translation Tanja Janssen]

TITEL. Moedertaaldocenten in actie

SAMENVATTING. In deze bijdrage doen wij verslag van het eerste jaar van een tweejarig actie-onderzoek in Nederland. Veertien docenten Nederlands werkten samen bij het ontwerpen van begrippen- en contextrijk onderwijs. Drie docenten uit het hoger beroepsonderwijs met kennis van actie-onderzoek ondersteunden het project en een wetenschappelijk onderzoeker van de universiteit (de eerste auteur van deze bijdrage) onderzocht de implementatie van dit actie-onderzoeksproject en de ervaringen van de docenten. In dit artikel rapporteren we over de kennis die de docenten ontwikkelden, de materialen die zij maakten en de moedertaal- (of L1-)begrippen en contexten die zij toepasten gedurende de eerste tien maanden van het project. We willen hiermee een bijdrage leveren aan de kennis over hoe zulke actie-onderzoeken worden uitgevoerd en ingaan op welke lessen geleerd zijn in het eerste jaar van het project, waarin docenten begrippen- en contextrijk onderwijs ontwerpen.

TREFWOORDEN: lerarenopleiding, samenwerkend actie-onderzoek, begrippen- en contextrijk moedertaalonderwijs

Finnish

[Translation Katri Sarmavuori]

TITTELI: Äidinkielen opetuksen opettajat toiminnassa.

Opettajien toteuttama käsite-konteksti-rikasteinen opetus toimintatutkimusasetelmaa käyttäen

ABSTRAKTI: Tässä artikkelissa kerromme kahden vuoden toimintatutkimushankkeen ensimmäisestä vuodesta Alankomaissa. Neljätoista äidinkielen opettajaa työskenteli yhdessä käyttäen käsite-konteksti-rikasteista kasvatusta. Kolme toimintatutkimusta tuntevaa korkeamman ammatillisen kasvatuksen opettajaa avusti hanketta ja yliopiston akateeminen tutkija (tämän esityksen ensimmäinen tekijä) tutki tämän toimintatutkimuksen toteuttamista, kun opettajat olivat siinä mukana. Tämä paperi kertoo tiedosta, jota opettajat kehittivät, heidän tuottamistaan materiaaleista ja äidinkielestä (tai kielen L1 käsitteistä ja sisällöistä), joita he sovelsivat hankkeen kymmenen ensimmäisen kuukauden aikana. Tällä paperilla toivomme lisäävämmä tietoa siitä, kuinka täydennyskoulutuksen toimintatutkimushankkeet kehittyvät, ja selvitämme, mitä opitaan toimintatutkimushankkeesta, jossa opettajat käyttävät käsite-konteksti-rikasteista kasvatusta.

AVAINSANAT: opettajien täydennyskoulutus, kollaboratiivinen toimintatutkimus, käsite-konteksti-rikasteinen äidinkielen opetus

French

[Translation Laurence Pasa]

TITRE : Les enseignants de langue maternelle en action – L'élaboration d'un enseignement riche en concepts et contextes lors d'une recherche-action

RÉSUMÉ : Cette contribution porte sur la première année d'un projet de recherche-action de deux années mené aux Pays-Bas. Quatorze enseignants de langue maternelle ont participé à l'élaboration d'un enseignement riche en concepts et en contextes. Trois enseignants formateurs ayant une bonne connaissance de la recherche-action ont facilité le projet et un chercheur de l'université (le premier auteur de cet article) a observé son implantation auprès des enseignants qui l'ont expérimenté. Cette étude examine le développement des connaissances des enseignants, le matériel qu'ils ont produit et la langue maternelle (ou les concepts de L1 et les contextes) qu'ils ont mobilisés pendant les dix premiers mois du projet. Nous souhaitons ainsi contribuer à la connaissance du développement des projets de recherche-action dans la formation et offrir une vision des premiers résultats.

MOTS-CLÉS : enseignement de la langue maternelle riche en concepts et en contextes, formation d'enseignant, recherche-action collaborative

Greek

[Translation by Panatoya Papoulia Tzelepi]

Τίτλος: Δάσκαλοι της μητρικής γλώσσας εν δράσει

Δάσκαλοι σχεδιάζουν εκπαίδευση εμπλουτισμένη με..ιδέες και περικείμενο.

Περίληψη: Σ' αυτό το άρθρο παρουσιάζουμε τον πρώτο χρόνο από ένα διετές σχέδιο έρευνας-δράσης στην Ολλανδία. Δεκατέσσερις δάσκαλοι της μητρικής γλώσσας δούλεψαν μαζί για να σχεδιάσουν εκπαίδευση εμπλουτισμένη με «ιδέες-περικείμενο». Τρεις δάσκαλοι ανώτερης επαγγελματικής εκπαίδευσης με γνώση της έρευνας-δράσης τους διευκόλυναν και ενός ακαδημαϊκός ερευνητής από το Πανεπιστήμιο (ο πρώτος συγγραφέας αυτού του άρθρου) ερευνήσε την υλοποίηση αυτής της έρευνας-δράσης όπως την βίωσαν οι δάσκαλοι. Αυτό το άρθρο παρουσιάζει τη γνώση που ανέπτυξαν οι δάσκαλοι, τα υλικά που παρήγαγαν και την μητρική γλώσσα (ή αντιλήψεις και περικείμενο της Γλώσσας 1) που εφάρμοσαν στους πρώτους δέκα μήνες της εργασίας. Με αυτό το άρθρο επιθυμούμε να συνεισφέρουμε στη γνώση του πώς αναπτύσσονται προγράμματα έρευνας- δράσης σε ενδοϋπηρεσιακή εκπαίδευση και να δείξουμε τι μαθήματα μπορούν να εξαχθούν από τον πρώτο χρόνο έρευνας-δράσης στην οποία οι δάσκαλοι σχεδιάζουν εκπαίδευση εμπλουτισμένη με αντιλήψεις-ιδέες και περικείμενο.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Ενδοϋπηρεσιακή εκπαίδευση δασκάλων, συνεργατική έρευνα-δράση, εκπαίδευση μητρικής γλώσσας εμπλουτισμένη με ιδέες-αντιλήψεις και περικείμενο

Italian

[Translation Manuela Delfino, Francesco Caviglia]

TITOLO : Docenti di L1 in azione. La progettazione di didattica arricchita dalla conoscenza del contesto e dei concetti da parte di insegnanti in un contesto di ricerca-azione

SINTESI: In questo articolo rendiamo conto del primo dei due anni di un progetto di ricerca-azione condotto nei Paesi Bassi. Quattordici docenti di L1 hanno lavorato insieme per progettare una didattica arricchita dalla conoscenza del contesto e dei concetti ("concept-context-enriched education"). Tre docenti di formazione professionale superiore con competenze di ricerca-azione hanno agito come facilitatori del progetto e un ricercatore dell'università (primo autore di questo contributo) ha indagato le modalità di implementazione di questo progetto via via che i docenti ne facevano esperienza. Questo articolo riporta le conoscenze sviluppate dai docenti, i materiali da loro prodotti, e i concetti e i contesti di L1 che hanno applicato nei primi dieci mesi del progetto. Con questo articolo desideriamo contribuire alla conoscenza del modo in cui si sviluppano progetti di ricerca-azione come formazione in servizio e a render conto di quali lezioni si possono apprendere durante il primo anno di un progetto di ricerca in cui gli insegnanti progettano una didattica arricchita dalla conoscenza del contesto e dei concetti.

PAROLE CHIAVE: formazione dei docenti in servizio, ricerca-azione collaborativa, didattica della L1 arricchita dalla conoscenza del contesto e dei concetti.

Polish

[Translation Elżbieta Awramiuk]

TYTUŁ: Wychowawcy nauczycieli języka ojczystego w działaniu. Nauczycielskie projektowanie nauczania pojęciowo-kontekstowego

STRESZCZENIE: W niniejszym artykule prezentujemy wyniki pierwszego roku realizacji dwuletniego projektu prowadzonego w Holandii. Czternastu nauczycieli języka ojczystego pracowało razem, aby zaprojektować nauczanie pojęciowo-kontekstowe. W projekt zaangażowanych było trzech nauczycieli wyższej szkoły zawodowej posiadających wiedzę na temat badań nad działaniem, a badacz akademicki z uniwersytetu (pierwszy spośród autorów niniejszego tekstu) zbierał materiały podczas jego realizacji. Artykuł przedstawia raport na temat wiedzy, jaką uzyskali nauczyciele, materiałów, które stworzyli, oraz języka ojczystego (lub związanych z nim pojęć i kontekstów), który stosowali przez dziesięć pierwszych miesięcy projektu. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest chęć przyczynienia się do wzrostu wiedzy na temat rozwijania projektów badawczych dotyczących działania i szczegółowe omówienie wniosków, jakie wypływają z pierwszego roku realizacji projektu badawczego, na którym nauczyciele projektują nauczanie pojęciowo-kontekstowe.

SŁOWA-KLUCZE: kształcenie wychowawców nauczycieli, badania wspólnego działania, nauczanie pojęciowo-kontekstowe języka ojczystego

Portuguese

[Translation Paulo Feytor Pinto]

TÍTULO : Professores de Língua Materna em Acção. Professores projectam um ensino contextualizado e conceptualmente rico, num processo de investigação-acção.

RESUMO : Neste artigo damos conta do desenvolvimento, nos Países Baixos, do primeiro de dois anos de um projecto de investigação-acção. Catorze professores de língua materna trabalharam juntos na concepção de um ensino contextualizado e conceptualmente rico. Três professores de formação inicial no ensino superior com conhecimentos em investigação-acção acompanharam o projecto e uma investigadora universitária (primeira autora deste texto) analisou a implementação deste projecto de investigação-acção enquanto ele se desenvolvia. Este artigo dá conta dos conhecimentos adquiridos pelos professores, dos materiais produzidos e dos conceitos e contextos de ensino da língua materna (L1) a que recorreram durante os primeiros dez meses do projecto. Com este artigo pretendemos contribuir para o conhecimento acerca do desenvolvimento de projectos de formação contínua baseados na investigação-acção, reflectindo acerca das lições a retirar deste primeiro ano do projecto em que professores conceberam um ensino contextualizado e conceptualmente rico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: formação contínua de professores, investigação-acção colaborativa, ensino da língua materna contextualizado e conceptualmente rico.

Spanish

[Translation Ingrid Márquez]

TÍTULO : Maestros de Educación en lengua materna en acción. La educación basada en conceptos-contextos enriquecidos, diseñada por maestros en un ambiente de investigación activa

RESUMEN: En este ensayo, reportamos sobre el primer año de un proyecto de investigación activa de dos años que tomó lugar en los Países Bajos. Catorce maestros de educación en lengua materna trabajaron juntos para diseñar un sistema de educación basada en conceptos-contextos enriquecidos. Tres profesores de la educación vocacional superior, experimentados en la investigación activa, asesoraron durante el proyecto, y un investigador académico de la universidad (autor principal del ensayo) tomó como tema de estudio la implementación del proyecto de investigación activa mientras los maestros trabajaban en él. Este ensayo reporta sobre el conocimiento que los maestros desarrollaron, la materia que produjeron y la lengua materna (o L1, conceptos y contenidos) que aplicaron durante los primeros diez meses del proyecto. Esperamos que este estudio contribuya al conocimiento de cómo los proyectos de investigación activa actuales desarrollan y expanden las lecciones que se puedan sacar durante el primer año de un proyecto de investigación activa en el cual los maestros diseñan un programa de educación basada en conceptos-contextos enriquecidos.

PALABRAS CLAVES entrenamiento de maestros activos, investigación activa en colaboración, educación en lengua materna basada en conceptos-contextos enriquecidos.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the past decade the Dutch school system has undergone drastic changes. The innovations in upper secondary education consisted of two components: the ‘Tweede fase’ (‘Second Phase’) which brought about changes in the curriculum, and the ‘Studiehuis’ (‘Study House’), which advised schools to use a new didactic approach and focus more on self-regulation of learners; that is, requiring students to gradually take control of their own learning process. Teachers, therefore, had to change their approach towards learners if they were to become responsible for their own learning process. Becoming “a guide of the learning process while remaining an expert in his or her specific school subject” (Oolbekkink-Marchand, 2006, p.10) demanded flexibility to adapt and develop their teacher knowledge and pedagogical strategies.

This new approach in secondary education met with many problems. Both teachers and students complained about the workload and lack of intellectual challenge in the curriculum. To address the problems, the Royal Netherlands

Academy of Arts and Sciences issued a report (RNAAS, 2003, p.8) suggesting two ways to improve the Second Phase: 1. concept-context-enriched education (we will explain this term in more detail on page 3 and 5-7), and 2. the teacher as curricular designer.

In the project *Language concepts in context* these ideas focused specifically on mother-tongue education to be developed and shaped by teachers of secondary mother-tongue education. Since action research provides a setting for teachers to research, improve and evaluate their own practice in dialogue with other teachers, it became the tool selected for teachers to design concept-context-enriched mother-tongue education. Change in teacher practices first requires developing the ability to research those practices in order to critically re-assess whether the developed material and selected strategies truly ensure students learn the required subject matter.

The study we are conducting aims at describing the ongoing process of fourteen teachers of mother-tongue education doing action research – designing concept-context-enriched education. A PhD project was initiated to determine what knowledge about concept-context-enriched education teachers develop while engaging in action research. To this end, fourteen teachers designed concept-context-enriched materials in three groups from February 2006 until July 2007. The products of this design process, the reports of the meetings and the process reports of the teachers will provide the data from which the knowledge development of these teachers will, eventually, be discerned. Currently, the project is in its second year. Even though the designing and developing process continues, some preliminary results have emerged.

This paper reports on the process of the teachers ten months into the project - the knowledge developed, the materials produced, and the mother-tongue or L1 concepts and contexts applied. The paper addresses one major research question: How does this research project develop and what lessons may be learned from the first year of an action-research project in which teachers design concept-context enriched education? To provide a framework for the discussion of the preliminary results, we first describe several elements and aspects of concept-context-enriched mother-tongue education.

2 BACKGROUND

In their 2003 Report, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (in Dutch KNAW) claimed that an improvement of upper secondary education in the Netherlands in general was required. RNAAS claims that to put the Netherlands in a leading position in Europe in knowledge and innovation, talented students should be challenged to excel. Secondary education offers a “final and important opportunity to motivate students toward academic education and research” (RNAAS, 2003, p.8).

Students in the 21st century must learn to cope with an ever-changing world. Preparing them requires core concepts of school subjects that reflect the changing contexts by making use of updated and authentic resources in relationship to current events. Some evidence supports the claim that context-based approaches motivate

pupils in their lessons (Bennett, Hogarth, & Lubben, 2003; Bennett & Holman, 2002; Osborne & Collins, 2001). Ferrari and Mahalingham (1998) suggest that students are motivated when they value what they learn and when their educational activity consists of personally meaningful tasks. Furthermore, Brand and Reimer's research (2007) suggests that unmotivated, negative student attitudes impair transfer effects and learning. Motivation therefore, is an important factor in the learning process. Pilling, Holman et. al (2001) claim that at the same time as "broadening the coverage of content, context-based curricula are perceived as developing a wider range of skills due to the wider range of teaching and learning activities employed" (p.136).

The current teaching materials for mother-tongue education do not offer sufficient help in achieving context-enriched education. Teachers generally follow the curriculum guides but these guides do not provide the teachers with "dynamic" contexts for students to learn how to apply the acquired knowledge and skills in these contexts. This has everything to do with the nature of the medium to be behind on current affairs. Curriculum guides often come in the form of books and these take a long time to be written and published. Evidently, not all teachers of mother-tongue education want to simply follow the study materials. However, because of pressure due to student group size, time and workload, many teachers of mother-tongue education find themselves sticking to the materials. The absence of relevant contexts in the study materials in which the practical benefit, cultural enrichment and intellectual challenge all have their place means that the subject is not always stimulating and at times even boring for students and teachers.

We first consider core concepts and core skills of the mother-tongue curriculum and elaborate on what context can entail for our curriculum further on in this paper. Second, we explore concept-context-enriched education and its forms and goals in the literature.

2.1 Core concepts and core skills

In search of what concept-context-enriched mother-tongue education can contain we first focus on the core concepts and core skills of the mother-tongue education curriculum. What concepts and skills should students acquire in the course of their secondary education? The final requirements formulated by the Ministry of Education may serve as a starting point: what students should know and be able to do once they have finished their secondary education. However, these requirements are formulated in a rather general way – for example "the candidate [student] should be able to give an overview of the main literary movements in history and place the read literature in the correct historical perspective"¹. Precisely what students should know about the literary movements, and what is seen as a correct historical perspective remains unstated. Several committees established lists of core concepts

¹http://www.eindexamen.nl/9336000/1/j9vvgodkvkzp4d4/vhaqm0cv7vys/f=/syl_ned-havovwo2006.pdf collected 21st of February 2007.

and core skills; for example, the committee for renewal of the exam requirements (CVEN, 1991) and the advice of the Subject Development Group for mother-tongue education (1995). Still, every expert and teacher needs to interpret and implement these final requirements using the core concepts as they understand them. Teachers can do this individually or in cooperation with other teachers and experts (Van de Ven, 2007). Table 1 summarizes some examples of the core concepts and core skills of verbal language proficiency. The concepts can be offered to the students using different sources. Moreover, students must acquire knowledge about these skills and concepts to perform the requisite student tasks.

Table 1. Core concepts and core skills

<i>Core concepts</i>	<i>Core skills</i>
Recitation	Assembling a folder with information
Type of text (argumentative, considerative or expository text)	Correct use of words and correct formulation of sentences
Debate	Searching, processing and distributing information
Discussion	Asking questions

2.2 Context

The RNAAS report makes clear that the contexts vary for different subjects, students and teaching methods (RNAAS, 2003). This complicates the effort to define concept-context-enriched education since the results are often abstract definitions of the term “context”. Stocklmayer and Gilbert (2002) provide one definition: “situations are transformed into contexts in which meaning is created – in which learning can take place – by personal mental activity as experiences take place” (p.145). A relevant context depends specifically on the situation, existing knowledge, and personal experience. The understanding and definition of the term can differ between groups and even between individuals. For this paper, we use Figure 1 as a model of context since it derives from literature on context and context-enriched education (Bennett & Holman, 2002; Eijkelhof & Van der Veen, 1989; Koens, Ten Cate, & Custers, 2003) and shows a model of context seen from the student’s perspective – with every ring representing part of the individual’s context. The language or personal context is the closest to the student; he or she uses language in the every part of his daily life (dreams, thoughts, etc.); it is part of his or her identity. Linked to this is the language used in the student’s world – talking to friends and parents, and reading a magazine or a book. We call this the functional

context. Here, language is a tool to communicate. The functional context is connected to the social context, where language is used to understand society and communicate in it. The context most distant from the student is the academic context. In this context academic language is being used. For students to participate in this context, they must have knowledge and be able to use this knowledge to communicate in the academic context.

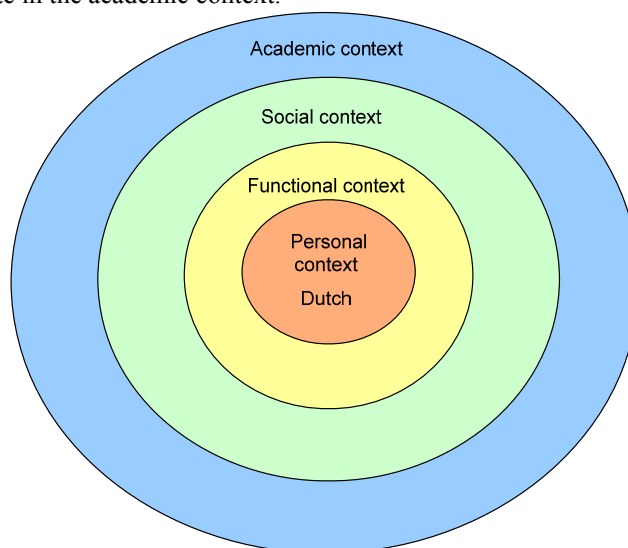


Figure 1 A model of context²

2.3 Concept-context-enriched education

The concept-context approach aims to teach students to handle core concepts in different contexts. Every Dutch student must learn L1 concepts (for example ‘argumentative text’) and skills (for example ‘the writing of an argumentative text’) and be able to effectively communicate this acquired knowledge. The contexts will – as much as possible – correspond with student interests, be socially or academically challenging, invite students to expand their interests, knowledge and utilize their abilities. To make use of constantly changing contexts, teachers should regularly design and revise materials for lessons.

RNAAS derives its concept of context-enriched education from John Dewey (1999) who wrote about the merits of learning in authentic contexts. He believed that students learn and develop when given the freedom to experiment and develop their knowledge in a meaningful context (see for example Fottland, 2004) about Dewey). Many educational researchers address the merits of education in context

² See article in Dutch journal focused on teachers of MTE (Platteel, Hulshof, & Driel, 2006)

such as Eijkelhof and Van der Veen (1989) and Goedhart, Kaper et.al (2001) in science education, Roodhardt (1991) in mathematics and Koens (2005) in medical science.

Throughout the years much effort has been put into formulating the relevance of disciplinary subject matter for the students. Different terms have been developed to describe what we now call concept-context-enriched education; for example ‘authentic tasks’ (Evans, 1980), ‘normally functional’ (Ten Brinke, 1976) and ‘meaningful learning environments’ (Taskforce, 2003). Moreover, different goals of a concept-context-enriched or authentic environment have been formulated. The following four targets of context-enriched education are commonly shared (Bennett & Lubben, 2006; Brand et al., 2007): transfer, deeper understanding and processing of the learning materials, motivation, and connection to existing knowledge. These aspects are not only relevant for context-enriched education but for all kinds of education.

2.4 Transfer

The knowledge that students acquire in schools is often measured on tests and exams. However, this knowledge should apply in situations outside the school environment as well, albeit this is not often the case. Students have difficulty seeing the relevance of the learned information outside the classroom and little or no transfer of knowledge and skills results. Concept-context-enriched education aims to enhance the transfer of knowledge. Varying the surrounding characteristics may support the transfer of acquired knowledge to other learning tasks (Pieters & Verschaffel, 2003). Using the obtained knowledge in authentic situations provides a stepping stone to help the students achieve the next step: using the knowledge in the ‘real world’. In this way students are provided with a scaffold to utilize their knowledge in realistic situations.

2.5 Deeper understanding and processing of the learning material

The literature often assumes that students can be challenged to apply a concept in different contexts. Students will start the deep processing of the different elements of a concept (Ten Dam & Vermunt, 2003) by actively searching for coherence, trying to structure the information, thinking critically about the concept, processing the acquired information and gaining understanding. Therefore, gaining deeper understanding is intended as a by-product of concept-context-enriched education.

2.6 Motivation

Apart from cognitive abilities and conceptions about learning and knowledge, motivational aspects influence the way students perceive learning processes. The personal benefit of the material and the expectations and goals all influence the effort students are willing to put into the learning process (Ten Dam & Vermunt, 2003). It is clear to teachers and researchers that students find concepts directly

relevant to their daily lives more interesting and worth achieving. The motivational aspect, therefore, gets a great deal of attention in discussions about concept-context-enriched education.

2.7 *Connection to prior knowledge*

Students construct new knowledge by relating it to what they already know (Bransford & McCarrell, 1977). Existing knowledge enables connections to new knowledge. Concrete examples also aid in structuring newly acquired information (Ten Dam & Vermunt, 2003). The connection between the world of the students and education defines one form of context; the daily, functional life of the student. By connecting with concepts present in this context, the prior knowledge of the students will be more easily accessed. When the knowledge to be attained is not linked to existing knowledge, much more guidance and supervision is required.

2.8 *Teacher as designer – action research*

There are many ways for teachers to become involved in designing curriculum materials: individually (at home, for instance) or under the guidance of a researcher (design based research). Action research provides a way to actively help teachers design and revise their materials: “Action research is primarily concerned with change, being grounded in the idea that development and innovation are an essential part of professional practice” (Altrichter & et al., 1993). In action research teachers design and research existing curriculum, explore relevant aspects of their teaching practices, and reflect with a group of teachers on what is needed for specific subject matter, a student or a student group. After extensive exploration of the situation and their ideas, teachers formulate a plan to reach the goals and design materials that can assist in accomplishing them. During and after the use of the designed materials the teacher evaluates their effects by asking for student feedback and reflecting on it with a group of teachers. A facilitator, an expert on action research, helps the teacher follow the steps of the process by offering advice and guidance (Ponte, 2002b).

In the project *Language concepts in context* fourteen teachers engaged in action research to design concept-context-enriched education. The research project aimed to answer the question: ‘What knowledge about concept-context-enriched education do teachers develop while doing action research?’ In the first year of the project we focused on the development of the action research process and teachers’ knowledge of concept context enriched education. While drawing conclusions would be premature this early in the study, many interesting developments are emerging. The ongoing knowledge of concept-context-enriched education and the action research process reveals how this project evolves and what happens when teachers engage in action research. In this paper we describe several aspects of this process and try to associate them with elements and characteristics of concept-context-enriched education. We conclude by carefully formulating some lessons learned from the first year of an action-research project in which teachers design this specific kind of curriculum.

3 METHOD

To see how L1 teachers develop knowledge about (designing) concept-context-enriched education involved three groups of four to five experienced L1 teachers. Each teacher had at least three years of experience and volunteered to participate in the project for fifteen months starting in January 2006. We interviewed each participant prior to the onset of the project. We asked questions about the teachers' ideas of L1 education and especially concept-context-enriched education. We also asked about their experiences with and ideas about designing materials and action research.

Beginning in February 2006, all teachers participated monthly to design concept-context-enriched materials. We formed three groups (networks) with a facilitator who specialized in action research. As principal investigator, I was present at each meeting.

Ponte (2002a) notes that learning to do action research is a difficult and intensive process in which, to a large extent, a guiding facilitation determines the gains for the teachers. The teachers were trained to be each other's critical friends. They became familiar with action-research instruments such as asking critical questions, but refrained from giving advice or offering solutions to allow critical reflection on their ideas and preconceptions. In this way teachers were challenged to reflect on their situation.

In the next step teachers developed materials to start a research process aimed at significant change and improvement of student learning. I began as a participant observer, but soon found myself part of the project. The teachers and the facilitators included me in the process and by participating in the meetings I became a critical friend. I only collected data relating to how teachers engaged in action research, and became actively involved in their collaborative efforts to develop curriculum and theory about concept-context-enriched education.

3.1 Data and Instruments

To determine how the research process developed in the first year, we draw from various data sources, including interviews, meetings (audio-taped), and written reflections. First, from the early teacher interviews, we derived the teachers' initial understanding of concept-context-enriched education. From the beginning of the research, teachers were talking and thinking about concept-context-enriched education and in doing so, developed their knowledge. The discussions in the meetings were taped and the academic researcher (first author) created field notes after the meetings. Participants received all field notes. A second data source consisted of the meeting tapes. The third source was the written input of the teachers and facilitators. The teachers agreed to make their written reflections about the project available to the researcher. Therefore, reports, sketches of the practice of these teachers, memos, plans, evaluations and emails all contributed to the data gathered during the process.

Analysis of the data included the reading and rereading of all the teacher reflections, field notes and interviews. Several themes emerged from the data. A key

finding pointed to the struggle of teachers, facilitators and academic researcher during the first year. Various aspects of this will be further explored and presented by drawing illustrative examples from the collected data.

4 PRELIMINARY RESULTS

4.1 *The process*

The project started in February 2006. The first year proved an interesting and often chaotic process of trying to find our way. Although each teacher started from a different point and developed in a specific way for some it was harder to identify precisely how they were affected by the project. Not every teacher fulfilled the requirements. Two teachers did not produce any plans and reports in the first year. They explained they had not written or developed any research memos or produced the responses because of time constraints and lack of guidance and clear answers. Hanna noted:

I have to admit, I was disappointed after the first meeting. I had hoped and expected to leave with a clear idea of concept and context, but it turned out it remained vague and unfortunately I also didn't get a clear assignment to work on.

Teachers who wrote about their practice and plans varied in the ways they developed materials. We hypothesize that it relates to the levels of experience and knowledge of the teachers. The role and responsibilities of the facilitators and the academic researcher might be of importance to this process. The facilitators reflected doubt as to how directive their facilitation should be and so gave the teachers a lot of responsibility for the progress of the action research. The teachers at times expressed that they felt lost and unsure about what to do. We assume a facilitator that guides teachers in the first action research steps can stimulate progress and reduce feelings of insecurity towards the action-research on the part of the teachers.

The process, learning the what and why of the steps, developing trust towards other participants, becoming critical practitioners through engagement - all this proved to be difficult. Although these teachers were familiar with the design process as became clear in the interviews, the structured and systemized process of action research took some getting used to. Sasha observed:

By writing stuff down I'm getting conscious of certain things. The difficult part for me is that in my work, I change things all the time and now I have to really think about it and write things down.

In explaining the steps, the facilitators tried to persuade the teachers to start small and reflect on the reasons behind their practice. We hoped this approach would make the teachers more aware of the possibilities of small improvements that would not take too much time. Some teachers were very enthusiastic about action research, following the research steps to extend their knowledge: asking the opinion of the students, checking their preconceptions, exploring, planning, evaluating, and generally trying to learn all they could from their experience of this cycle. Amy said:

I wasn't really surprised by the answers of the students but it did strengthen my ideas. I know this, and now I have conformation of this knowledge].

Some teachers, however, felt the action research was a straitjacket, prohibiting them from doing what they wanted to do.

Nina	I really try to take little steps, but I just can't do it -.
Alice (facilitator)	Yes, you are someone who is focused on the big picture.
Nina	And then I get more and more frustrated
Alice	Then you shouldn't do that.
Nina	Even though I really try, honestly!

It became clear that the facilitator played a very important role. One group had a facilitator who really took charge of the process. She offered the action research steps for the teachers and continuously clarified the terminology and importance of looking critically at the teachers' own preconceptions about their practice and students. While the other two facilitators also tried to do this, they were more comfortable in the 'critical friend' role. They asked questions and invited discussion to help the teachers achieve a clearer view of their practice. However, this sometimes got in the way of helping teachers to focus on the vital next steps for reevaluating and developing their practice. For example, one teacher asked her students' opinion on the lessons but skipped the step of analyzing the data collaboratively with her critical friends. Her focus on the students' reaction, that affirmed her prior beliefs about them, might have led her to miss students' reactions that challenged those beliefs. A directive facilitator could have helped further this teacher's development.

My presence at the meetings as principle investigator proved a complicating factor for the facilitators. With background knowledge of action research and commitment to the project, I was often tempted to step outside my role as critical friend to help facilitate the process. Remaining within the critical friend role would likely have kept the roles and responsibilities clearer for all. Kate comments:

It is important that you (the principle investigator) are aware of the role you play in the group. The teachers are focused very much on you, and that makes it harder for me to take up my role.

Fortunately, sometimes my presence helped guide the discussion and keep the focus of participants who enjoyed the opportunity to exchange school stories and experiences on the research project. Alice noted:

At this moment, I miss the academic researcher, because normally she would make a remark about concepts and contexts.

The academic research aspect also posed some problems. The project was designed as a process where little or no theory or 'answers' were provided by the principle investigator. The teachers at times were confused about the expectations. While willing to take steps and develop materials for the research project, they needed constant reassurance that the purpose of the project was their own development and knowledge growth. Diane commented:

I do write memos but I mostly do it for you, for your (Tamara's, i.e. first author) research. I don't get a lot out of it.

Participants often felt that they did not do enough for the project. Accustomed to designing big school projects and curriculum alterations, the little steps asked of them in the action research did not seem like progress. This, together with the lack of clarity and purpose, at times caused frustration. Paul wondered:

But can I still take part in the project? I realize that my contribution is minimal. Also this last and newest period, it proves to be hard for me to let go of the study materials. I did formulate some little assignments, parallel to the book but for your research, I can imagine, it isn't enough.

All the teachers decided to remain involved in the project for the second year. Unfortunately, two members ended their participation, one due to school problems and the other to difficulty finding a joint purpose. Twelve other group members felt inspired and challenged by the meetings and the process. In evaluations at the end of the first year, the participants indicated that they had found the exchange of knowledge, experiences and ideas very stimulating.

In a mid project evaluation the teachers formulated advice for beginning collaborative action research groups. The teachers agreed that communication was vital. Collaboration was also considered important: Not only talking to each other but also exchanging ideas and experiences. The facilitators were encouraged to use concrete examples to help teachers overcome feelings of uncertainty and understand that making mistakes was an integral part of the action-research cycle. As Wilma remarked:

Everything you learn, you learn by taking steps, even when they turn out not to be the right steps.

Early emphasis by the facilitators and academic researcher on 'starting with collecting data as soon as possible' and 'writing ideas and plans down' helped to stimulate the teachers' engagement. They also admitted that they had to live through the process to be able to appreciate and accept this advice.

4.2 *Concept-context-enriched education*

As might be expected from the literature on concept-context enriched education, many teachers were concerned with motivating the students for the subject language and literature. The data and discussions show that student motivation was their main reason to participate in the project and concern in designing lesson plans. Other possible targets of concept-context-enriched education, such as deeper understanding of concepts, better link to prior knowledge, and transfer, all connected with the goal of increasing student motivation. On the other hand, teachers were cautious about making the lessons *fun*: motivation and relevance for the students were considered the primary goals. For example, Wilma wondered:

What exactly is the idea behind concept-context-enriched education? It doesn't all need to be and become fun, right?

The RNAAS envisioned concept-context-enriched education as a form of education whereby teachers start from core concepts of the subject, next choose a context that links to the concept and offer this combination to the student. However, after only

ten months it was clear that the project teachers often did not – as the RNAAS proposed – start from one concept of mother-tongue education, find a context that they felt complemented the concept and offer this to the students. They focused more on learning goals that they formulated for the students such as, writing an argumentative text. Concepts important for learning how to write an argumentative text (for instance text types) were mentioned in the lessons but were not the starting point in the design process. While concepts like ‘debate’, ‘roles’, and ‘ambiguity’ may inform the lessons they use to help students acquire debating skills, they seldom make them explicit at research meetings.

Questions from critical friends about concepts sometimes seem to confuse the teachers instead of help them in the design process. Nevertheless, the teachers partake regularly in discussions about what is and is not an example of concept-context-enriched education and do try to make their ideas of concepts and learning targets explicit. The following exchange serves to illustrate:

Eve asked: “What in your plan is the context? Abby had to think about that and subsequently formulated several contexts: one being the daily context of the students, telling each other everyday stories. The context of myths and saga was a second one, or maybe it is a concept? The struggle with the boundaries between concepts and context became visible again (report of principle investigator).

In the course of the year the model proposed and developed by the principle investigator became a part of the teachers’ terminology as they discussed the concept-context aspects of their resources and materials. Abby remarked:

I find that lots of the time when people talk about context they really mean descending to the level of the students, to their world and experiences – just to get them involved. But I also really want to help them get to a higher level, to show them a link to the social, academic or cultural context).

Students and teachers use their first language – and language concepts – not only in the Language-One (L1) lessons but also in most if not all other school subjects. These teachers of mother-tongue education are aware that both the school and the school subject represent contexts in themselves through which students encounter learning tasks. Nevertheless, the subject of mother-tongue education differs from other school situations in this respect. Within the school subject mother-tongue education we can speak of a social, academic or functional context and these can be interlinked in specific tasks. For instance, the use of articles and internet sources for the task ‘debating’ can show students how a concept like ‘argumentation’ has practical relevance for their social environment. The use of academic articles - about language alteration for instance – can teach students to research the function of language. Students can also participate in society by using the concepts and skills they learned to write an article, search for information or aid research in order to develop their potential to contribute to society.

4.3 Products

The ideas exchanged about concept and context resulted in various concept-context enriched lesson materials. We use the model of context (figure 1) to discuss the

different products and forms of context discerned over the first stage of the project implementation. The model of context (figure 1) presents three circles of context, functional, social and academic, which can be related to products developed by the teachers. Among the forms, so far the academic context receives the least attention by the teachers in their work. Why this is, is still unclear although we hypothesize that an academic context is not only the most distant for the students – furthest from their daily interests – but also for the teachers themselves. The choice to base a lesson on an academic context might imply more complex and more time consuming work .

Every teacher has his or her favorite context(s). Some prefer the daily world of the students (functional context) and frequently link their material to situations and events of this kind. Alan expresses this view:

My interpretation of context is: on one side I have a student and on the other side I have my lesson material, you achieve context-enriched education when you seize the opportunity to establish a connection between the one and the other. Their context linked to a part of the lesson material.

Appendix A shows an example of a concept-context-enriched lesson focused primarily on the functional context of the students. The teacher has incorporated L1 concepts concerned with romantic poetry in the task.

Example A

Review of James Blunt – You're beautiful

The song *You're beautiful* by James Blunt was used to teach students about historic literature: by means of the Dutch writer Francois HaverSchmidt. The teacher first showed a videotape from the museum of historical literature about Francois HaverSchmidt and let the students hear his poem *Rika* about a man who sees a girl in a train. After the poem he played the song *You're beautiful* by James Blunt, also describing a short meeting of a man and girl in a train. He assigned the students to write a review (250 words) of James Blunts cd, comparing the song to the poem using elements from romantic poetry.

Other teachers focus on the social context. They acknowledge and aim to increase student interest in societal developments. Diane explains:

When I think about concept-context-enriched education I constantly return to current topics and events. I find it difficult to escape from that.

Further examples of concept-context-enriched lessons focused on the social context are shown below. In example B, the teacher feels a change in the physical context enhances the concept-context-enriched nature of a task. The physical and cultural context of the literary walk bridges the literary concepts and the social context. The teacher hopes that this will help students recognize them as relevant in their social surroundings.

Example B

Literary walk in the centre of the old Dutch city of Deventer

In the previous year students of the fifth class of pre-university education were offered a literary walk through Deventer. The initiative for the walk was taken by the department of Dutch language and literature and the department of Arts. The walk itself was fine but after that not much was done with the gathered materials. The department of mother-tongue education wished to enlarge the learning output of the students in the next year. In order to do that they combined the walk with a writing exercise. The students could choose from three different assignments:

- Write a letter to the committee for taste of the city of Deventer about plans for art on historic buildings, reflecting the historical destination of these buildings (including a whore house).
 - Write a letter to the newspaper the Stentor, reacting to an article about plans for a McDonalds in a historic building.
 - Write a letter of complaint to the municipality of Deventer on either one of these plans.
-

Example C

*Mark Rutte versus Rita Verdonk
Inspired by the Yummy Yummy case (Braaksma et.al., 2004)*

In Dutch politics the VVD (a Dutch liberal party) was in search of a new president. Students had to write an argumentative piece in favor of one of the candidates for the party magazine. In order to do that, they had to collect background information on the candidates from different sources (for example newspapers and the internet). The students wrote a piece in pairs, formulating why their candidate should win the election. The next lesson, the teacher divided the group in six smaller groups. The groups were asked to select three students in their group to be editors of the party magazine and two observers. The editors choose the most convincing article – using an assessment form designed by the teacher. The observers had to collect criteria and arguments used by the editors to choose a winner, these criteria were presented to the group at the end of that class. The combined arguments formed a list with improvements. Subsequently, the written pieces were revised by means of this list. The teacher assessed the improved versions and the writers who wrote the best piece for Verdonk had to debate the writers who wrote the best piece for Rutte. As in the real election for the Dutch liberal party, Mark Rutte was chosen new president for the party.

Example C also describes a project focused on the social context. Students were invited to direct their attention to Dutch politics and develop skills and knowledge about argumentation. The teacher hoped that media attention on the election of a new party president would provide a challenging context for the students. Although several students indicated their lack of interest in politics, the students' evaluation of the project was very positive. A number of students even declared to have taken an interest in the election.

We can also distinguish teachers who view themselves as primarily focused on the context of the school and the subject mother-tongue education. For example, the history of the literature or language itself is seen as a context. Hanna explains:

I would rather see context as something linguistic, being honest. In the third class of pre-university education I assign the making of a web quest, including linguistic subjects like language of the youth or street slang. The deeper knowledge of the subject is the context in my opinion, the context of language, more than the context of the social environment.

Several participants view the link between mother-tongue education and other school subjects as a promising form of context-context-enriched education. For these teachers the school context itself appears to be the primary one. Also, teachers relate how their personal contexts (memory, newspapers and own received education) provide a rather important source of concept-context planning. Abby relates:

My own ideas as a teacher proved to be a very important context. I wish to teach the students about telling stories and help them acquire skills to tell stories themselves.

5 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We would now like to briefly discuss the preliminary results and return to our question: ‘how does a project like this develop and what lessons may be learned from the first year of an action-research project in which teachers design concept-context enriched mother-tongue education?’.

According to the teachers who have been part of our collaborative action research project, action research takes time and effort. Roles and responsibilities need to be clarified and discussed. Action research can be a fruitful way of designing lesson materials (as revealed by the examples of designed materials) but it requires teachers to become researchers. This can mean, for example, collecting empirical data, analyzing the data in collaboration with others and following the implications. As such, it requires teachers to make a difficult transition from being comfortable in their practice to improving their practice.

Our preliminary results show that this is an interesting but difficult and time consuming process. The role of facilitation is an important one, which should not be taken lightly. It is possible a more explicit facilitator could have a more positive effect on the process than one who opts for the role of critical friend. By guiding and giving examples the facilitator can establish a secure and stimulating environment for teacher action. By taking action, designing materials and demonstrating their progress, teachers contribute to their own research and that of others. At the same time, although an academic researcher may assist the process – for example with knowledge on literature and research methods, critical questions and assistance where needed – caution is advised. In order to prevent facilitators from feeling confused about their responsibilities and role, the academic researcher must be very clear about his or her role. It might even be better for the action-research process for the academic researcher to stay in the role of (special) critical friend. In our project the academic researcher started off as a participant observer,

only asking questions that could help her to answer her own research question. Because the teachers asked for my opinion on concept-context enriched education and because, in the absence of the facilitators, I took up that role, I became more than a participant observer and struggled with my role and responsibilities. In the second year of the project the lessons learned from this struggle will help to maintain an open dialogue about the roles and the responsibilities of the different participants.

We observed that the teachers worked with the concepts and skills of concept-context-enriched education the RNAAS introduced, but did not speak of them explicitly. This suggests the terms of concept-context enriched education take on new meanings as the teachers implement them. Many teachers in our project are focussed on how concept-context enriched education can increase student motivation. The action-research setting plays an important role in providing teachers the opportunity to start a process of improvement from a concern in their daily practice. For these teachers, knowing what concept-context enriched education exactly entails is not a primary concern; student motivation on the other hand, is. Therefore, in the first year of the project the focus was on finding the different possibilities of the concept-context approach and not so much on explicating which concepts can be made visible in designed materials. We hope to see how this develops in the second year of the project.

The context model introduced to the teachers helps them formulate the concept-context-enriched aspects of their developed materials. On the other hand other forms of context emerged from the discussions. It is therefore vital that the teachers and the academic researcher maintain an open view of the different forms of context in the upcoming months of the project. Only then can a rigorous image of concept-context-enriched education be obtained.

Finally, the products that emerged from the project so far are varied and content specific. These teachers focus on offering their subject, mother-tongue education, in a way that is as interesting and motivating to their students as possible. This presents the teachers with challenges on a daily basis. The struggles that can be observed in the discussions and in the reports written by these teachers – for instance with the terms ‘concept’ and ‘context’ – reveal the growing knowledge of these teachers and we may hopefully see the development of this trend at the end of the project in the year 2009.

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