The curious case of Early English
Teacher beliefs about English in primary Education in the Netherlands

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Abstract; in this study, 41 teachers, advisors and directors working in primary education took a questionnaire on early English in primary education in the Netherlands. They were asked about their beliefs on language learning in general, early English, the current situation as compared to the ideal situation for teaching English, and possible problems and pitfalls they encountered. The results suggest that teachers hold positive beliefs about starting early with English in primary school, and that there is lots of enthusiasm among teachers. The results also show a certain amount of discontinuity when it comes to teaching English. This discontinuity can be found both between different groups within the same schools, between different primary schools, and between primary and secondary school. The reason therefore is twofold: schools lack time and money, and there is a general lack of guidance on English in primary education; guidance from government for schools, and from schools for teachers.

Chapter 1. Introduction

In 2009 a project was started on the effectiveness of mobile English learning (MEL). Three Dutch primary schools were selected to participate and assigned to different conditions. First there was the control group: the teacher was told to dedicate three weeks of regular English lessons to a project on zoo-animals, using the material the researchers had designed. In the second group the teacher received several smartphones equipped with games and tools to acquire the vocabulary linked to zoo-animals, and was asked to use them in the classroom as often as possible. The third group also received the smartphones, with the instruction of using them in class, and on a fieldtrip to the zoo.
The researchers’ expectations were clear; the control group would have the lowest score on the posttest, the third group the highest. Surprisingly, this was not the case. Unfortunately for the researchers, the three teachers had reacted rather differently to the instructions they received.

The first teacher, responsible for the control group, was very enthusiastic about the project. She loved the material that was designed for the group, came up with some extra assignments herself, and spent more time on English than she normally did. As a result, the scores her group received on the posttest, were higher than was to be expected.

The second teacher, responsible for the second group, was less enthusiastic about the project. She was struggling to finish other projects with her group, and didn’t quite enjoy the prospect of having this ‘odd little phone’ in her classroom. The smartphones remained practically untouched during the three weeks the project lasted, and as a result, the scores her group received on the posttest were lower than expected.

Even though the third teacher followed the researchers’ instructions correctly, the attitude of the first two teachers made the results of the project difficult to interpret.

However unfortunate for the project mentioned above, this does make a very good example of the importance of teacher attitude. Apparently, the way a teacher feels about a project or a set of classroom-materials makes a considerable difference in the way he the project is taught, and the way the materials are used. These ‘feelings’ of a teacher towards a course or project, are usually referred to as teacher-attitude, or teacher-beliefs, two concepts that are rather difficult to define, and, unfortunately, difficult to investigate.

This paper takes a closer look at the attitudes and beliefs of Dutch primary school teachers towards English in the classroom. I’ll give a short overview of research on the definitions of teacher attitude, before answering the main research questions:
What is the attitude of primary school teachers towards Early English in the Netherlands?

Is there a difference in attitude between VVTO- teachers (English starting in grade 1) and Eibo-teachers (English starting in grade 7)?
Chapter 2. Background

§ 1. The concept of beliefs

In research on teacher beliefs the exact definition of the concept is all but clear. There is an impressive amount of definitions, all trying to capture the essence of beliefs. As Pajares (1992) put it so eloquently:

“Beliefs travel in disguise and often under alias - attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertories of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few that can be found in the literature.” (Pajares, 1992: 309)

In the 1980’s, interest in teacher beliefs started. In the early years of research on this subject, the focus was on the so called process-product research. Since teachers’ actual thought-processes were not observable, research focused on teachers’ actions instead: “centering on teachers’ actions and their observable effects, traditional research on teaching examined how teacher behavior influences student achievement” (Fang, 1996: 48) This line of research usually sought to investigate a unidirectional and linear relationship between the teachers’ actions and the effects observed in the classroom.

In the 90’s, together with the growing interest in cognitive psychology, the focus shifted from teacher behaviour towards teachers’ thinking (Fang 1996: 48) In the first two decades or so of research on teacher beliefs, the results of different projects were often inconsistent. Many studies (Wing 1989, Mangano & Allen 1986) reported consistency between a teacher’s beliefs and his or her classroom practice, while others (Readence et al. 1991, Duffy & Anderson 1984) reported a behaviour that was rather inconsistent with the
teacher’s beliefs. This is referred to by Fang as the ‘inconsistency paradigm.’

Also, many different definitions and names were used to describe the concept of definitions, which led to a certain amount of confusion in the field. The title of Pajares’ paper: “Teachers' Beliefs and Educational Research: Cleaning up a Messy Construct”, tells us that much. There are still a number of concepts that are widely used to describe teacher beliefs, and some of them require further elaboration, e.g. the distinction between knowledge and belief, the distinction between attitude and belief, the function of beliefs, and finally, the changeability of beliefs.

Beliefs and knowledge

Pajares already mentioned that to try and distinguish between beliefs and knowledge is a ‘daunting undertaking’ (1996: 309) The two are often mentioned as subsystems of one another. Like in Fang’s definition: “Theories and beliefs is an important part of teachers’ general knowledge through which they perceive, process and act upon in the classroom” (1992: 49 emphasis added) and Eilam & Poyas who talk about looking “through the lens of their prior knowledge, including their preconceptions and beliefs” (2009, 88).

Some researchers see the two concepts as equal, to be investigated simultaneously, like in the study on “teachers’ beliefs and knowledge about language learning and teaching” by Mattheoudakis (2007: 1274)

There are, of course, distinctions to be made between beliefs on one hand, and knowledge on the other. As Nespor (1987) suggests, beliefs may have stronger affective and evaluative components than knowledge. He also mentioned that affect or feelings normally operate independently of the cognition associated with knowledge. In the words of Pajares, “knowledge of a certain domain differs from feelings about a domain” (1996: 309) If this is
true, than the distinction would be as follows: beliefs are based on feelings, evaluations and judgment, whereas knowledge is based only on objective facts. There is obviously more to it. Pajares commented:

“What may be missing from these conceptualizations is the element that cognitive knowledge, however envisioned, must also have its own affective and evaluative component. The conception of knowledge as somehow purer than belief and closer to the truth or falsity of a thing requires a mechanistic outlook not easily digested. What truth, what knowledge, can exist in the absence of judgment or evaluation? But, sifting cognition from affect, and vice versa, seems destined to this sort of fence straddling.”

(1992: 310)

It seems that beliefs form an important part of knowledge, and vice versa, with beliefs being more affected by feelings, and knowledge being more objective in nature. These are not separate systems in themselves, but more or less mutually dependent. As for influencing teacher behaviour, teachers are likely to depend on knowledge in classroom planning. However, when they are under pressure and forced to act on intuition, like in the classroom, teachers’ actions will more likely depend on their beliefs as also mentioned by Pajares (1992)

Beliefs and attitudes

Like beliefs and knowledge, the difference between beliefs and attitudes is complicated. There are different ways to distinguish between these two concepts. First of all, there are researchers describing attitudes as a subconstruct of beliefs, like Liao (2007, 47) who mentioned “ Teachers’ belief systems, including their attitudes, values, expectations, theories, and assumptions about teaching and learning.” (emphasis added), and Pajares (1992), who sees both attitudes and values as substructures of beliefs.
According to some, it is the other way round, belief being a subconstruct of attitude. An example of this theory is the description of attitude by Souza Barros & Elia, who describe attitude as being a combination of knowledge, feeling (i.e. beliefs) and action (1998: 3).

And finally, attitudes can be seen as a separate concept that stands beside beliefs and expectations as it were, together influencing teacher behaviour (Kolstad & Hughes, 1994).

Combining all these different explanation of attitude, it seems that, once again, making a clear distinction between these two concepts is rather difficult. In social psychology, attitude is defined as a “subjective or mental preparation for action”, or “the individual's prevailing tendency to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object” (Souza Barros & Elia, 1998: 2).

From this point of view, a way to distinguish attitude from beliefs is the ‘action’ component, that seems to be more prominent in attitudes than in beliefs, which are often claimed to be subconscious.

The function of beliefs
Beliefs, as stated by Fang (1996: 50) can take many forms, ranging from a teacher’s expectations of a student’s performance to theories about early language learning. Whatever form beliefs may take, researchers generally agree that they can affect teaching and learning and vice versa. Teachers rely on their beliefs as ‘a guide to personal thought and action’ (Harvey 1986: 660). In other words, beliefs are seen as a framework upon which a teacher’s actions are based.

However, even though beliefs affect teacher behaviour, a teacher’s behaviour is not always consistent with his or her set of beliefs, the ‘inconsistency paradigm’ that was mentioned earlier. This is because the execution of beliefs is often constrained by context, be it the context of the classroom or the school policy. A teacher may believe that children should be taught English at least daily, but when time is short, decisions have to be made that
may be inconsistent with their beliefs. And a teacher may feel that testing vocabulary is unnecessary, when the school policy states the students are to take a test every semester, the decision to take the test is not based on the teacher’s personal belief that testing is not necessary.

Another possible reason for the inconsistency between belief and practice may be found in the methodology of the research itself. Most research is done using questionnaires, placing teachers in different categories. As suggested by Fang, forcing teachers to choose from certain belief-categories that researchers have come up with, does not give real insight into teachers’ beliefs. Like Pajares put it: “Individual items fall prey to "it depends" thinking, and responses fail to provide either accurate or useful inferences of behavior.” (1992: 327) In other words, the research doesn’t take the context-dependency of beliefs and practices in account. When a teacher has to operate in the context of a classroom, his or her actions are likely to differ from the beliefs stated in the questionnaire.

A third reason for the inconsistency Fang referred to, is one of the more common pitfalls of introspective questionnaires that Dornyei (2010) also warned for in his volume on questionnaire design: the danger of participants giving socially desirable answers that do not reflect their actual opinion, and are therefore inconsistent with their actual practice.

Besides being a framework upon which to base one’s actions, beliefs are also said to work as a filter through which teachers see, interpret and respond to new information and experiences, or, as Kagan described it “personal beliefs function as the filter and foundation of new knowledge” (1992: 75)
Changing beliefs

Whereas Nespor, back in 1987, suggested that beliefs are basically unchangeable and rather undynamical, more recent studies claim that they are indeed dynamic and subject to change (Muijs & Reynolds, 2001, Mansfield & Volet, 2010). This seems a logical assumption, since beliefs are said to be context-dependent. Context is subject to change and dynamical, and therefore, expecting beliefs to be of a dynamical nature seems no more than logical.

However, beliefs tend to be rather resistant. Since they function as a filter through which new information and evidence is seen, it is rather easy to turn new information conflicting with their beliefs into support. Even after proven wrong, people tend to hold on to their beliefs. This is what Pajares described as the self-fulfilling prophecy: beliefs influence perceptions that influence behaviour that are consistent with, and that reinforce, the original beliefs.

Despite beliefs being resistant to change, they can change and develop. Especially when the belief-system is not yet fully fledged (Mansfield & Volet, 2010). Since future teachers that yet have to go through teacher training generally don’t have a very firm set of beliefs yet, pre-service training can really shape a teacher’s belief system. One of the factors strong enough to initiate a change of beliefs is emotion, as mentioned in Mansfield & Volet: “Recent research investigating the role of emotion in teaching suggests that emotion may play a critical role in changing teachers’ beliefs” (2010, 1405) Since beliefs are strongly linked to affect, this seems a logical claim, though further research is necessary.

Emotion is not the only factor that can influence a teacher’s belief system. As research by Bustos Flores on bilingual teachers’ beliefs suggests:

“Beliefs are not static; rather, beliefs are dynamic and relative. While personal experiences may initially influence bilingual education teachers' beliefs, these beliefs
are reaffirmed, modified, or changed with increased knowledge via teacher preparation
or professional experiences.” (Bustos Flores, 2010: 292)

And finally, in Pajares’ review on teacher beliefs, it is suggested that success is also a strong
attractor for a change of beliefs.

Beliefs in this research.
For this research, beliefs are defined as a mixture of knowledge and affect, based on prior
knowledge and experience, functioning as both the filter and the foundation of new
knowledge and experience, dynamical, and subject to change.

Investigating beliefs is often seen as rather difficult or even precarious. Or to put it
more eloquently:

As a global construct, belief does not lend itself easily to empirical investigation.
Many see it so steeped in mystery that it can never be clearly defined or made a useful
subject of research. For these reasons, it is often seen as the more proper concern of
philosophy or, in its more spiritual aspects, religion. (Pajares 1992: 308)

Then again, those concepts that are difficult to define, are often the most interesting ones, the
ones that are most linked to real life. In the words of physicist Hendrik Anthony Kamers:

“In the world of human thought generally (…) the most fruitful concepts are those to
which it is impossible to attach a well-defined meaning.” (Dresen, 1987: 53)

As can be seen in the example given in the introduction of this paper, the beliefs a teacher
holds can affect the way he or she teaches a certain subject. Pajares already claimed that
beliefs “can determine the energy that teachers will expend on an activity and how they will
expend it.” (1992: 310)
This study focuses on teacher beliefs about English in primary education. Therefore, after this summary of the background of teacher beliefs, this paper continues with a summary of Early English in primary education.

§ 2. Early English

In Europe

From 1990 onwards many European countries have begun to introduce foreign language in primary education (Edelenbos & Vinjé 2000: 161) Starting early with foreign language learning is one of the suggestions of the European Council after the 2002 meeting in Barcelona (Goorhuis Brouwer & De Bot, 2010: 290) The council argued that all children should be taught at least two foreign languages from an early age. In nearly every country in Europe at least one foreign language is now required in primary education. Usually, schools opt for English as the foreign language of choice.

In the Netherlands

Currently, the majority of Dutch primary schools starts teaching English in grade 7, to children around age 10/11 years old. The lessons continue in grade 8, the final year in primary school. They spend about 60 hours per year on teaching English, which comes down to one hour a week. This type of English education is called EIBO (English in primary education) Currently, no policy is implemented to measure the level of English children have obtained by the end of primary education.

Although most schools don’t start teaching English until grade 7, more and more schools choose for an early start. The European Platform (Dutch governmental organization promoting internationalization in educational settings) lists all schools that provide a VVTO program. Their overview shows a rather spectacular growth in the number of schools offering
a early start in a foreign language; from 10 in 1998, 35 in 2003, 167 in 2008, and no less than 502 in 2011 (source: [http://www.europeesplatform.nl](http://www.europeesplatform.nl)) The majority of these schools offers English at an early stage, but also German, French and Spanish are frequently mentioned. The European Platform serves as an information centre, offering training and advice, and even financial support concerning the implementation of VVTO.

The most recent publication by the SLO (National expertise-centre for curriculum development) in July 2011, gives an adequate overview of the situation of English in primary education in the Netherlands. They report a lot of variation in the moment schools choose to start teaching English, and while the majority of the schools start in grade 7, there is a steady growth of schools that start earlier. The amount of time spent on English varies from 15 minutes up to 60 minutes a week. They claim that the variety that is found “is because no formal starting-age has been determined. In this respect the Netherlands differ from other European countries, where a starting-moment has been determined, and where students start earlier (starting age 6/7) and on average spent twice as much time learning a second language”. (Thijs et al. 2011: 19)

De Bot, Divis and Philipsen (Trouw, 2009) also claim that the Netherlands are slow to follow the European Council guidelines in comparison with the rest of Europe. They argue that schools are willing to implement the so called VVTO (early foreign language education) programs, but that the government doesn’t cooperate and doesn’t give guidance in this process.

This is partially true, since there are guidelines for English in primary education, but they are rather vague. English became a obligatory subject after the Primary Education Act, in 1986. However, this act does not specify the starting age for English (Edelenbos & Vinje 2000). Nor does it give a clear level that pupils are to reach before leaving primary school at age 12. The act does give several core goals (kerndoenlen) by which schools are bound. These
goals have been renewed in 1998, and more recently, in 2004. These goals globally specify what skills pupils are to obtain in the fields of reading, writing, listening and speaking. These core goals, however, are often perceived as being rather unspecific: the organization for teachers of English at the Pre-service training, the Vedocep, called these goals “so vague you can meet them in about two hours of English teaching” (source: http://www.vedoceplevendetalen.nl). Therefore, schools are left rather free in the choices they make concerning teaching English.

The rise of VVTO in the Netherlands has led to heated arguments, both in politics and in public debate. The primary concern of those opposed to an early start in English, is the L1 and the threat posed to it by English: political parties argue that an early start in English will have a negative effect on the L1 development of pupils, and point to the right of children to be taught in Dutch at all times, a right that they claim is being denied by implementing VVTO programs. This concern is not unique to the Dutch situation: research by Pena Diaz and Porto Requejo on teacher beliefs on a bilingual school in Spain, shows that no less than 70% of the teachers involved is “concerned about the influence that this early acquisition of a second language will have on their L1” (Pena Diaz & Porto Requejo, 2008: 159) even though the teachers are generally positive about bilingualism and the positive effects it is said to have on general cognitive development: 80% stated that “bilingualism improves cognitive development” (Pena Diaz & Porto Requejo, 2008: 159). Even though research has found no consistent proof of a negative impact of early L2 acquisition on L1 development (Goorhuis Brouwer & De Bot, 2010, also see Nikolov, 2010 for a short but recent overview) the belief that an L2 threatens an L1 is rather resistant.

Another concern often voiced against VVTO is the problems it is said to pose for those pupils with an L1 other than Dutch (e.g. Turkish, Spanish, Frisian) and children with
lower general languages skills. Appel (2003) suggests that these children will fall behind in their Dutch development even further, and will fall behind in English as well when they are forced to take up English as a third language in primary school. Time spent on English should be spent on teaching these children the Dutch language (Appel, 2003: 1). Although recent investigation provides some evidence against this (Goorhuis Brouwer & De Bot, 2010) the debate is far from over yet.

Finally, there is the more general public concern, also voiced by Appel, that the growth of English in the Netherlands is actually threatening Dutch language and culture. An early start in foreign language education, which usually equals an early start in English, is seen as a part of that threat, and therefore unwanted. Even though De Bot (2002) mentioned empirical data showing that this fear is not widely spread, it is a topic that keeps coming up in discussions, both in public and in political debate.

Politicians responsible for the development of education in the Netherlands, are eagerly awaiting the results of pilots and research regarding English in primary education. Universities and expertise-centers are urged to deliver their results as quickly as possible, while politicians are pushed to make plans based on research that has not yet been finished.

There are several concerns among politicians and teachers when it comes to the policy on English in primary education. One of the main problems is the level pupils are to reach. As mentioned before, the core goals are rather vague, and English is not tested at the end of primary school. There is no real transition from primary to secondary education when it comes to English (Thijs et al. 2011) Students practically start from the beginning again when they start secondary school, and this is perceived as de-motivating for both teachers and pupils (source: Parliamentary debate on primary education, June 23 2011). It is often suggested (Thijs et al. 2011, parliamentary debate) to include English in the often used CITO-
test at the end of primary school. Policymakers are positive towards this idea, but prefer to wait for data on the effect of such an end test.

A second problem about English in secondary education concerns the teachers. One of the points of improvement according to the minister of education is the level of English of primary school teachers (parliamentary debate: 33) Ideally, Aarts (2006) argues, an early start should include lessons from a native speaker in the first two years, to ensure a natural pronunciation of the language. After a year or two, she suggests, ‘regular’ teachers can take over the lessons. However, as the popularity of VVTO increases, there is a lack of teachers who are qualified to teach a foreign language to children of such young age (De Bot, Divis & Philipsen, 2009). Practically, the ideal situation of a native-speaker as a teacher, cannot be implemented. It is no surprise, therefore, that Thijs et al. found that English is mostly taught by regular teachers rather than a native speaker, or a non-native speaker specialized in teaching English. According to their study, teachers are generally positive towards English, but lack a solid background in English education: “More than half of them has not received extra schooling in English in their pre-service training. The teachers who did receive extra schooling are only moderately positive about this” (Thijs et al. 2011: 20) It seems there is reason to be concerned then. As Edelenbos & Vinje argue:

“Substantial improvement of initial and in-service teacher training is also necessary to raise the quality of foreign language teaching in primary schools. Additionally, only through high quality initial teacher training and substantial in-service training will teachers gain the self-confidence to extend their linguistic horizons.” (2000: 160)
Edelenbos and Vinje also argue for an assessment of the teachers, their English language proficiency and English language teaching skills, and last but not least, their self-confidence in foreign language teaching. They argue that these factors “might emerge as the crucial factors that could influence the improvement of pupils’ performances.” (2000: 160)

This is where the two topics of this thesis, early English and teacher beliefs, meet: what do the teachers believe about the early introduction of a foreign language? How do they perceive themselves as FL-teachers? Earlier research on teacher beliefs, its impact on teacher behavior and on learning outcome (e.g. Liao 2007, Orafi & Borg 2009, Bustos Flores 2010, Mansfield & Volet 2009) has shown an interesting, complex and dynamic picture. This paper tries to answer the questions posed above, following suggestions like the one by Nikolov (2010: 286) who noted: “The emerging picture is complex and it underpins the claim that early language learning and teaching must be researched in the specific educational contexts where they are implemented,” which is exactly what this study set out to do.
Chapter 3. Methodology

§ 1. Participants

This study involved several teachers, advisors and directors working at different primary schools. In total, 40 teachers from 19 different schools participated in this research, twenty of which worked at a VVTO school, and twenty at an EIBO school. The majority of the participants was female; only 7 men participated in the research.

§ 2. Materials

To gather data on teacher beliefs, an online questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was first piloted by four primary school teachers, and adapted to their suggestions before the start of the research.

The questionnaire consisted of 34 items, both multiple choice and open-ended questions, and took fifteen to twenty minutes to complete. It treated five more or less separate categories: 1) background information on the teacher and the school, 2) beliefs on language learning in general, 3) beliefs on VVTO, 4) experiences with VVTO, and 5) recommendations and suggestions for VVTO.

The questionnaire was based on earlier interviews with two different primary school teachers, one teaching on an EIBO school, the other on a VVTO school. Some of the questions for category 2, beliefs on language learning in general, were taken from the commonly used tool by Horwitz: the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1985). Most multiple choice items could be answered on a 5-point Likert scale. The only exception was the rating of the teachers’ own English language proficiency. This was originally a 5-point scale as well, but several pilot-readers suggested using a 10-point scale instead for this part of the questionnaire.
Besides the 41 participants that filled out the questionnaire, two teachers participated in a semi-structured interview of about 60 minutes. In the interview, more specific questions were asked about the decision to implement VVTO, collaboration with other schools, the transition from primary to secondary school, and the participants’ experiences with VVTO or EIBO.

§3. Procedures
To find participants, 60 different primary schools were selected through the country; 30 VVTO schools, and 30 EIBO schools. The schools were randomly selected by inserting a list with all primary schools into an internet based random generator. By means of a personal email, the schools’ principals were asked to recommend the research to their teachers, and to forward the link to an internet-based questionnaire. After two weeks, a second email was sent, asking those that hadn’t yet reacted to the first round, if they’d still like to participate in the research. One month after the original request, a phone call was made to ensure that earlier correspondence had actually reached the school, and to ask for participation in the research once again.

When the number of participants was still alarmingly low after several weeks, more local schools were approached and encouraged to participate in the research, and spread the questionnaire among friends and colleagues. After two months, 41 questionnaires had been completed, 20 by EIBO teachers, 21 by VVTO teachers.

Participants filling out the questionnaire were asked if they wanted to take part in a longer interview. They could leave their email address if they were interested. All interviews took place at the school where the participant worked, and were recorded on a laptop using Audacity.
The questionnaires were processed in excel and later in SPSS. Transcripts were made of all interviews, highlighting the most relevant paragraphs.
Chapter 4. Results

§1. Situation in the school

The first category in the questionnaire concerned the situation in the participant’s school: in which grade was English introduced, how many hours a week, and by whom.

Fifteen participants worked at schools starting in grade 1, three at schools starting in grade 5, two starting in grade 6, and twenty participants worked at a school starting in grade 7.

The data showed that several participants working at the same school indicated a different starting-age for English. Two teachers claimed that their school taught English only in grade 8, whereas their colleagues confirmed that it was indeed grade 7. At one school, all teachers claimed English lessons didn’t start before grade 7, except for the teacher of grade 1 who told that it started in grade 1. She explained that she used the school’s ‘extra hour’ to teach her group some English. Also, within the same school, different methods were used to teach English. There seems to be little continuity in English language learning within the school, as well as little awareness among teachers about the school’s policy and their colleagues’ approach to English.

Average time spent on teaching English was just over an hour a week: 69 minutes. At the VVTO schools the amount of time ranged from 30 minutes to 3 hours on a weekly basis, with an average of 67 minutes. On the EIBO schools it ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours a week, with an average of 71 minutes.

On two VVTO schools and three EIBO schools, Frisian was taught as a second language as well, starting usually in grade 1, and once in grade 5. Spanish was also frequently mentioned as being included in the schools’ program: four schools taught Spanish, starting in different grades, namely 1, 5, 6 and 7. No schools taught more than two foreign languages.
As to the teaching of English, most schools leave it to a class’ regular teacher (also see figure one.) At the EIBO schools involved in this research, all English teaching was done by those ‘group-teachers’ as they are called in the Dutch educational system. At the VVTO-schools, nine out of 20 participants indicated their school had a special teacher responsible for the English lessons. This was usually a Dutch teacher (seven out of nine times) and only two participants mentioned their school having a native speaker of English to take care of the English program.

The children in class were mostly Dutch L1 speakers. Only 5 participants taught classes where more than 50% of the children had a different L1, namely the local language Frisian. Ten teachers reported teaching to groups where less than 50% had a different L1, eight times these were mainly immigrant children, and two times it meant a local language or dialect. The majority of the participants, 21 teachers, taught classes with hardly any children of a minority language.

§2. Language learning in general

c. The results are shown in figure 2, below. There were no significant differences between the teachers of EIBO and those of VVTO schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average score</th>
<th>EIBO N=20</th>
<th>VVTO N=21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Everyone can learn a foreign language</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>4.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Learning a language is different form learning other subjects in school</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>English is a difficult language to learn</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Children have more difficulties learning a language than adults</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Some children have a higher aptitude for learning foreign languages</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Girls are better at foreign language</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
learning than boys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The Dutch think it is very important to speak English</th>
<th>4,16</th>
<th>4,28</th>
<th>4,05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Multilingual children are more intelligent than monolingual children</td>
<td>2,55</td>
<td>2,5</td>
<td>2,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>It is confusing to learn a foreign language if one already speaks two languages</td>
<td>2,03</td>
<td>2,06</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Children who are good at math or science will not do well on language learning</td>
<td>2,68</td>
<td>2,89</td>
<td>2,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Dutch are good at learning foreign languages</td>
<td>3,42</td>
<td>3,5</td>
<td>3,35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Learning a foreign language is easier when one cannot yet read</td>
<td>3,08</td>
<td>3,18</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>When learning English, vocabulary acquisition is most important</td>
<td>3,82</td>
<td>3,83</td>
<td>3,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>One should only speak in a foreign language when one can say it correctly</td>
<td>1,24</td>
<td>1,28</td>
<td>1,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>When learning English, being able to communicate is most important</td>
<td>4,16</td>
<td>3,94</td>
<td>4,35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>If students are not corrected as beginners, mistakes are difficult to correct later on</td>
<td>3,45</td>
<td>3,78</td>
<td>3,15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>When learning English, correct pronunciation is most important</td>
<td>2,13</td>
<td>2,78</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>When learning a foreign language, it is necessary to learn about the culture that comes with the language</td>
<td>3,03</td>
<td>2,94</td>
<td>3,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>When learning English, grammar acquisition is most important</td>
<td>2,68</td>
<td>2,61</td>
<td>2,75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another question for language learning in general was ‘how long would it take for a child to speak a language fluently when it is taught one hour daily?’ The answers one could choose from were as follows: 1-2 years, 3-5 years, 6-10 years, and ‘one cannot learn a language in just one hour a day’. The same question was asked regarding adults. Figure 1 shows the answers provided by EIBO teachers and VVTO teachers. The main difference seems to be the success expected form children: VVTO teachers more often expect children to master the language in two years than EIBO teachers. The expectations for adults are more or less the same for both EIBO and VVTO teachers.
Figure 1: how long would it take to become fluent

§ 3. Early English in the Netherlands

In total, 23 items were presented on a 5-point Likert scale, once again ranging from 1, completely disagree, to 5, completely agree, on beliefs about an early start in English, internationalization in Dutch education, the position of English in the Netherlands and the impact of VVTO on L1 development. The results are shown in table 2, below. Only one item, question 20, showed a significant difference between the two groups of teachers. When asked whether VVTO would have a positive impact on the development of Dutch in immigrant children, VVTO teachers were on average slightly more positive (M = 3.11, SE = 0.17) than
EIBO teachers, who tended to disagree more often (M = 2.33, SE = 0.21), the difference, albeit a small one, was significant (t(34) = 2.79; p < 0.05)

The answers of the VVTO teachers tended to be slightly more positive than those of the EIBO teachers. In 19 out of 23 questions their answers they responded more positively, although there were no significant differences to be found apart from question 20. In figure 3 below, the tendency can be seen; the higher the score, the more positive the belief. All negatively-worded items were reversed in order to obtain this picture.

Table 2: Teacher beliefs on Early English in the Netherlands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average score</th>
<th>EIBO</th>
<th>VVTO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>One can never start too early learning a foreign language</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>An early start in English gives children an advantage in the long run.</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Early English in primary education is not necessary: children are sufficiently exposed to English in the media</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Early English should be compulsory in primary school</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Besides English, primary schools should also offer other languages</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Early English in primary education is not necessary; the Dutch are already doing well enough in English</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Early English in primary education only has benefits</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Early English in primary education is really necessary, the Netherlands need to keep up on an international level</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Instead of English, primary schools should offer other languages</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Early English in primary education is not useful: by the time children leave secondary education the advantage they</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
had is already lost

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Early English in primary education goes at the expense of the Dutch language development of Dutch L1 children</th>
<th>2.14</th>
<th>2.41</th>
<th>1.89</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Early English in primary education goes at the expense of the Dutch language development of immigrant children (other L1)</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Early English in primary education goes at the expense of the Dutch language development of dialect L1 children</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Time spent on English would be better spent on other subjects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Learning English in primary education stimulates Dutch language development of Dutch L1 children</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Learning English in primary education stimulates Dutch language development of dialect L1-children</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>English is too dominant in the Netherlands</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Learning English in primary education stimulates Dutch language development of immigrant children (other L1)</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Children with an L1 that is not Dutch shouldn't participate in the Early English program</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>An early start in English has a positive effect on the development of children in general</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Learning English in primary education stimulates Dutch language development of immigrant children (other L1)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>4.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>The internationalization of schools and universities is a good thing</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Dutch is being threatened by English</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One of the questions about English in the Netherlands was on sources of information. Where did the participants get their information on language acquisition? They were asked to list their most important source of information first, and then select the other sources they used in a separate question. Participants teaching at VVTO schools relied mostly on the experiences they had with their class, whereas EIBO teachers relied mostly on formal training and extra courses. Another difference is that VVTO teachers more often turn to the internet for information on language acquisition, and seem to rely more on scientific articles and knowledge from colleagues than EIBO teachers do.

Table 3: Sources of information on language acquisition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>VVTO</th>
<th>EIBO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Education / extra courses or training</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Magazines at school</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Colleagues</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Scientific articles</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Experience with students at school</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Experience out of school</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Newspaper articles</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Internet</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 TV/radio</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

§ 4. Experiences

Out of the 41 teachers involved in the study, sixteen taught English themselves. When asked about the method and materials involved, the answers were rather diverse. Three teachers mentioned using ‘Hello World’, two reported using ‘Real English’. Besides that, all schools and teachers use different methods to teach their class English, ranging from the more specific materials ‘Teaching English in the Primary Classroom’ to making one’s own classroom materials. About 75% of the teachers frequently add material to the method that is available. This includes copying materials from other methods like Early Bird and Anglia, materials offered by ‘School-television’, listening to English music, watching videos and reading texts
from the internet and singing English songs. Teachers working in the same school used different methods.

Six teachers had received specific training to help them teach English to younger learners, all of them employed at a VVTO school. None of the EIBO teachers received this kind of training. The teachers that participated in a course to teach English, all took more than one course.

There was a significant effect of being offered a course on the level of satisfaction about the school’s guidance (F(2, 13) = 20.27, p < 0.001). When asked to grade the level of extra schooling and guidance from the school on a 1-5 scale, the participants that received the extra training were more content (M = 4.5, SE = 0.34) than the teachers who had not received extra training, both in VVTO schools (M = 2.8, SE = 0.2) and in EIBO schools (M = 2.2, SE = 0.2). The teachers in VVTO schools that didn’t receive training tended more towards ‘neutral’, whereas the teachers in EIBO school tended to go for ‘insufficient’. This difference, however, was not significant.

When asked how they had prepared themselves for teaching English, the majority of the teachers mentioned the guidelines found in the materials, re-reading material from previous courses, and trying to read and speak English as often as possible. Participants suggested a special website or training for those teachers who wanted to improve their English language proficiency or teaching skills.

The participants were asked to rate their own proficiency in English on speaking, listening, writing and reading. They also had to indicate if their proficiency was sufficient for teaching English. In general the participants were rather confident about their proficiency, as can be seen in figure 2 below. On a 1-5 scale, teachers rate their own English as more than sufficient to teach English in primary school (M = 4.4, SD = 0.78)
§5. The ideal situation

Participants were asked to indicate what they thought was the best grade to start teaching English, who should teach it, and for how many hours a week. In the case of the VVTO teachers, when asked in what grade English lessons should start the answer was mostly grade 1. Only two teachers, both teaching at a school where English started in grade 5, suggested another starting grade. Within the other group teachers were not so unanimous. The results are visible in figure 3 below.
When asked who should be responsible for teaching English, the VVTO teachers kept relatively close to the situation in their schools. Seventeen out of twenty participants chose the type of teacher that taught English at their school. Only three of the VVTO participants opted for a native-speaker English teacher as opposed to the situation at their school (1 regular teacher, 2 non-native English teacher) The situation was different in the group of EIBO teachers. Only seven out of twenty opted for having the regular teacher responsible for English, whereas this was the case in all of the EIBO schools involved in this study.

The most popular choice was having a non-native English teacher. A native-speaker was preferred by only three of the participants in this group. The results can be seen in figure 4 below.

As to how much time should be spent on English, answers ranged from a weekly 30 minutes to ‘not too much, it should stay fun’, to as much as five hours, with an overall average of just under 90 minutes, 20 minutes more than the 70 that is currently available for English at these schools.
§6 Critique and suggestions

Several respondents, both in the interviews and in the questionnaire, came up with suggestions to improve English teaching in primary education, and highlighted some of the problems they had encountered. Suggestions that were given included having an interactive website for teachers, with tips and ideas for lessons to make it easier for regular teachers to teach English, and starting a course or training for teachers that wanted to improve in or start teaching English.

Time and money were mentioned as problems. One of the participants commented that having a native speaker to teach English would be ideal, but practically (both financially and planning-wise) it was not feasible. Several teachers, both in VVTO and EIBO schools argued that ‘English in primary education is fine, but we shouldn’t overdo it, then we won’t have enough time to spend on other subjects that really should be taken care of’ and ‘Several children, and not just minority children, in our school struggle with the L1. An extra language in primary school is fun and useful, but I think we’d better spend our time on Dutch language acquisition.’

One of the participants, working at a VVTO-school, also explained that the main reason for not introducing English before grade 5 came down to planning and priorities. The school involved is a bilingual school where children are taught both in Dutch and Frisian. The children at the school were linguistically speaking not the strongest students, and when the school had to make choices about the teaching of English, teachers in the first four grades feared that adding another language ‘to the porridge of languages’ wouldn’t work. Too little time would remain for more basic subjects: ‘That means you’ll have to take that time away from another area, and we can’t do that.’

The school’s priorities are determined by ‘the force-field that is formed by primary schools, secondary schools and the educational inspection’, and those priorities are the basic
skills: language learning and calculating. A foreign language is simply not a priority, as it is not tested at the end of secondary school, and not seen as an important issue by the educational inspection, whereas Dutch language proficiency and math are. English is usually not tested, and not always graded on a 1-10 scale as are other subjects like math and geography. “If we fill out a pupil’s report, we focus more on math and language. Under ‘English’ we write, ‘participates well in class’. We don’t really let them take any tests. Teaching English from grade 5 or earlier was referred to as being a bonus. One of the participants in the interview described it as follows

“At this moment, offering bilingual or trilingual education is primarily a matter of PR, then there’s a rather large gap, and then it might even be very beneficial for the children. As far as I’m concerned that has not been proven yet. If it really were that good for the children, more schools would switch to that type of education.”

Learning an extra language is seen as a bonus by several participants. They emphasize that it should ‘stay fun’ and shouldn’t take too much time away from the ‘real’ subjects. As a consequence, there are schools who offer English or another foreign language (usually Spanish) to a select group of pupils that can cope with more lessons and information than the rest of the class. These groups are often referred to as ‘plus-classes’ or ‘top-classes’. Investing in a language program for these children enables the school to spend enough time on the required basic subjects to prevent the weaker students from falling behind in those subjects, while still having the opportunity to offer a foreign language to those who ‘can handle it’. Also, children from a plus-class often continue towards a bilingual secondary school. These schools do have strict criteria for prospective pupils. The participants that were interviewed
mentioned that those criteria serve as a guideline, and a goal as to what level of proficiency should be reached for the plus-class pupils at the end of primary school.

If the core goals of English would be clearer, one of the teachers states, the status of English would change. “If the inspection says ‘we want to judge schools on the final level of English proficiency’, we’ll have to live up to it. At the moment, they don’t, their priorities are in other subjects, and for us it’s hard enough to meet those expectations.”

The transition to secondary education is often mentioned as a problem when it comes to English. Several teachers mentioned that ‘children have to start all over again’, when they leave primary school. One teacher commented ‘we had a meeting with all the schools in the area, and it turned out that we were all doing different things with English. One of us only sang songs with the kids, one of us started in grade one and had all kinds of fancy materials; others were just doing ‘finish the sentence below’ exercises. There can be no continuity from primary to secondary school as long as this doesn’t change.”

Also the way English is taught at primary school differs considerably from the way it is often taught in secondary education. “Word knowledge is not really a problem, but when it comes to grammar lots of children get stuck, it really is a different way of teaching the language and that causes problems.”

Finally, secondary schools don’t normally demand to see a final grade in English, with the exception of bilingual secondary schools. “If you want to change the way we handle English in primary school, you’d have to start that change there,” one of the participants stated in an interview. “When secondary education wants to have a clear picture of the level of English at the moment the pupils make the transition to secondary school, things will change, and schools will catch up with the developments in English language teaching.”
Chapter 5. Discussion

§1. English in primary education

English is usually started in grade 1 at VVTO-schools, and grade 7 at EIBO schools. Having the regular teacher teach the English lessons is by far most common, followed by a non-native English teacher, and a native English teacher. Schools spent a little more than an hour, about 70 minutes, on English a weekly basis.

Spanish is rather popular as an extra language, or plus-language. Frisian is often mentioned as being a second language, before English. Surprisingly many trilingual schools, with Frisian as a second language and English as a third, participated in the research. This was probably caused by the methodology. When the selected schools, distributed evenly over the Netherlands, failed to respond to the questionnaire, local schools were approached, also via existing connections, mainly in the north of the Netherlands. Therefore, the number of schools were Frisian is taught as a second language is higher than it should be if this were a representative sample for Dutch primary schools.

VVTO teachers describe the ideal situation for English in primary school generally as starting in grade 1, taught for 90 minutes a week, preferably by the regular teacher. For teachers who are used to having a separate teacher for English, both native and nonnative, that teacher is preferred over the regular teacher.

EIBO teachers indicate the ideal starting age as lower than grade 7, the one that is common in EIBO. Grade 1 and 5 are most often mentioned as the ideal starting grades. This makes sense, since most VVTO schools start either in grade 1 or in grade 5, to prevent an overload of new skills when children learn how to read and write in grade 3. Regarding the teacher responsible for the English lessons, although this was currently the regular teacher in all EIBO schools, the majority of the EIBO participants opted for a separate teacher for
English. Having a non-native speaker of English as a teacher was the most popular option. On average, participants opted for 90 minutes of English a week, although one of them commented that it should be reduced somewhat in grade 3 and 4, due to the start of reading and writing.

Summarising, VVTO teachers describe an ideal situation that rather accurately fits the situation at their own school. EIBO teachers differ greatly from their own situation when they describe the ideal setting for English in primary education.

The data also showed that teachers are sometimes rather unaware of the situation on their own school. Teachers from the same school indicated different starting grades for not only English but also the school’s second language Frisian, or extra language Spanish. Two participants reported that within the same school, different methods for teaching English were used that differed extremely, starting with a full method with extra material in grade three, and continuing to materials designed by the teacher in grade 8. Since there is no real policy on the methods schools are to apply, or end-terms to take into account, this is not unexpected.

Between the schools there is hardly any continuity either. Schools are to determine their own goals for English as a foreign language, and within the school, teachers are free to determine their own course of action. Most teachers actively contribute to the method they use in class, by designing extra material, searching songs, videos, stories and exercises in other methods, television and on the internet. Enthusiasm is not a problem, it seems.

Teachers are generally happy to receive extra training and courses in order to improve their teaching skills in English. In VVTO schools it is more common to offer training than in EIBO schools. Teachers that received a formal training are significantly more content about the guidance offered by their schools. Several teachers commented on the importance of having a website or training especially for regular teachers that wanted to improve their English teaching skills, or English language proficiency.
In general, participants that taught English in primary school themselves, are rather confident about their own level of English. This is not the case for all participants though. One of the EIBO teachers admitted to lack the necessary skills in English to teach properly. She was responsible for grade 5, in a school where English lessons started in grade 7. She explained that whenever she had to take care of grade 7 or 8, she asked a colleague to take over the English lessons. If an EIBO school were to switch to VVTO, this should certainly be taken into account.

§2. Teacher Beliefs

The data showed that there are no surprising results for the beliefs on language learning in general. No outstanding differences between EIBO and VVTO teachers were found. In general, both groups agree that children learn a language easier than adults do, starting to learn a foreign language early on is a good thing, and that it wouldn’t be confusing to learn a third language along with a second. This implies a rather positive attitude towards early English in primary school.

In teaching English, teaching children to communicate is considered more important than pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary acquisition. The participants considered English not to be a difficult language to learn, but do think it is considered an important one.

General prejudices are not widely agreed upon. Teachers don’t just accept the claims that girls are better than boys at learning languages, students who do well at math will do worse on languages, and the idea that multilingual children are more intelligent than monolingual children.

The one prejudice that both groups do agree on is that children learn a language easier than adults. The only difference lay in the force of that belief: VVTO teachers have more trust in the ability of children to become fluent in a language rather quickly than EIBO teachers do.
VVTO teachers expects children to master a language much quicker than adults, the EIBO group does think there is a difference, but not in such an extreme way.

However, this is the only difference between the two groups that was very discernible. The two groups were more unanimous in their judgment of the other items they were presented. The fact that there is no overall difference in beliefs in general between the two groups of teachers can be explained by the fact that these beliefs are still rather unspecific.

Regarding the beliefs of teachers towards early English in primary education, the data shows the general attitude is rather positive, both in VVTO teachers and EIBO teachers.

The participants think that starting English early on does give children an advantage in the long run, even after completing secondary school. They also believe it stimulates children in their general development, and even the L1 development of Dutch children, to a certain extent.

However, they don’t think that starting early with English will also stimulate the Dutch language development of minority-language children. In general, teachers are a little more doubtful about the benefits of VVTO for minority language children. While the participants agree that an early start in English will not go at the expense of the L1 of Dutch children, there is slightly more concern about the Dutch language development of children that have a different L1, both dialect and immigrant languages. However, when asked if these children should not participate in the English program at all, or be placed in a separate group when it comes to English lesson, the answer was negative in both cases. Despite the concern about the Dutch language development of these pupils, teachers agree they should participate in the regular English program.
The internationalization in Dutch education is generally seen as a positive thing, Dutch is not perceived as being threatened by English, and participants do not think English is too dominant in the Netherlands.

In general, VVTO teachers tend to be slightly more positive in the beliefs they hold about early English in primary education and the position of English in the Netherlands. This was only significant for one of the questions, but the tendency is at least detectable in the other questions: on the majority of the items (19 out of 23) VVTO teachers gave a more positive rating than EIBO teachers.

Teachers in VVTO schools rely mostly on their experience at school and information on the internet when they form ideas and beliefs about language acquisition. Teachers in EIBO schools rely mostly on formal training.

This last group obviously cannot draw conclusions from experience as much as the VVTO teachers, since they simply have less experience to draw from; teaching English starts in grade 7, so many teachers don’t have the experience. If we would want to raise awareness on language acquisition, multilingualism and early language acquisition, teacher training seems to be a good starting point.

Few teachers turn to scientific articles to learn more about language acquisition. The articles indicated here are published in Dutch popular scientific magazines like ‘Onze Taal’, rather than the international scientific papers like ‘Language Learning’. This indicates a rather weak link between the research on one hand and the daily practice of teaching young learners on the other.
§3. Pitfalls and problems

Participants indicated that there are two main problems regarding an early start with English in primary school: a lack of time and money, and a general lack of guidance.

As we have seen, there is a lot of enthusiasm among teachers about starting early with English. Even teachers that work at EIBO schools think it would be better to start earlier, starting in grade 1 or 5. However, teachers also admit that English is useful and fun, but that there is simply not enough time in the schools’ curriculum. Even though they don’t believe that learning English will go at the expense of Dutch, when it comes to the daily practice of teaching, teachers see that this is exactly what happens: when a teacher spends more time on English, that time has to be taken away from another subject. As such, it is not the foreign language learning in itself that interferes with the L1, but rather the time spent on language learning, that indirectly affects the L1-acquisition.

This is what probably caused the inconsistency found in so many studies on teacher beliefs. Teachers may hold a belief, but find it impossible to act according to it due to practicalities and circumstances.

When it comes to the status of English in primary school, there is a lot of uncertainty. The ministry of education, culture and science (OCW) wants to stimulate the implementation of language courses in primary school, but up until now, little guidance has been given to schools and organizations involved. There are certain core goals for English in primary education, but they are generally perceived as being very vague, as indicated by Thijs et al. (2011) In general, the policy towards English it is not very clear.

Because of this, the educational inspection does not make English a priority. English is not included in the final test children take at the end of the 8th grade (CITO-test). The inspection focuses on the priorities, skills like language proficiency and math.
Schools are bound by the end-terms or core goals, and indicate that they have a hard
time as it is, trying to meet the standards that have been set by government and inspection. As
such, they really need to decide where to invest their time and money. Since English is not a
priority for the inspection, it is not treated as one in the schools. That is why English language
proficiency is not tested in primary school.

Because there is no final level of proficiency that pupils have to reach, there is no
standard method that is used as a guideline. Schools are given a lot of freedom in the way they
work on English, and therefore, teachers are often relatively free in the choices they make
concerning English lessons. If a teacher is enthusiastic and positive towards English, he or she
often adds extra material to the existing method used in class, in the form of videos, music or
stories. This being the case, the way a teacher feels about the language has quite an impact on
the way it is taught. Also, it causes in-continuity within a school, leading to a situation where
a teacher may not know what his or her colleagues do in English class, or whether they teach
English at all.

Another reason for schools not to see English as a priority is the lack of continuity in
the transition from primary to secondary school. This is similar to the case of the educational
inspection: because secondary schools don’t specify criteria for level of English, there is no
need for primary schools to work towards a certain level of proficiency. In the case of plus-
classes, with children that might want to apply for a bilingual school, there is a set level that
has to be reached. For these children, English is a priority, and it is taught as such. For
children that don’t intend to go to a bilingual school, it is not a priority, since they will more
likely start from scratch with English again in secondary school.

This general lack of end-terms, priorities and continuity causes some teachers to
describe English as a bonus-feature, almost to the point of being a clever way to attract more
pupils. This is not to say that this is true for all schools that offer an early start with English, but comments like this should not be put aside as incidental.

In general, the results from this study matched closely the ones presented by Thijs et al. (2011) in terms of teacher attitude and the situation of English in primary schools. Even though the sample in this study (N = 41) is rather small compared to the one of Thijs et al. (N > 500) the conclusions to be drawn about English in primary education and (to certain extent) teacher beliefs, do not differ greatly.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

- What is the attitude of primary school teachers towards Early English in the Netherlands?
- Is there a difference in attitude between VVTO- teachers (English starting in grade 1) and Eibo-teachers (English starting in grade 7)?

Referring back to the initial research questions we can say that there is no real difference in the beliefs of VVTO teachers on the one hand, and EIBO teachers on the other. VVTO teachers seem to be slightly more positive towards English in primary education and an early start with English, but no claims can be made about this since the sample is relatively small and the results are statistically not significant.

In general, teachers hold positive beliefs about early English in primary education, and the status of English in general. Fears often expressed in public opinion debates that Dutch is being threatened by English, and that learning English too early would go at the expense of L1 development, are clearly not supported by the teachers in this research.

However, teachers may hold positive beliefs about early English, they are also rather practical and realistic. They point towards several problems they encountered in implementing and teaching English in primary school, which basically are 1) time and money; schools are very busy as it is, and in the current situation there is often not enough time to spend on English, and 2) a lack of policy. The lack of policy causes a great degree of freedom in schools and teachers, which in itself leads to discontinuity in English teaching, both within schools, between schools, and between primary and secondary schools. In general, the connections between the policy-makers, researchers and teachers are not very strong. There is a policy about early English (see Van Toorenburg & Bodde-Alderlieste, 2003 and Herder & De Bot,
2007) but it seems it is not widely applied. Also, the research that is done doesn’t often find its way to the teachers. Overall awareness of the thoughts and actions of the other groups, would improve the status of early English in the Netherlands.

Changes would have to start at the level of policy making: new core goals would have to be described, with clearer requirements about the final level of language proficiency that is to be reached at the end of primary education, and the status of English in primary schools would have to be upgraded to the status of other subjects like geography and history, instead of English being the bonus-subject it seems to be these days. This would lead to more continuity within schools, and to a similar level of proficiency in different primary schools. As it is, plans are being made already. It seems policy-makers and researchers are already working together rather closely now: pilots about the implementation of VVTO are constantly being evaluated in overviews like the one by Thijs et al. (2011) and the implementation of English in the CITO-test is being considered.

Besides having clearer guidelines regarding the level of language proficiency to be reached, it is important to put more time and energy in training teachers to teach English to younger learners. There is a positive consensus at the moment, as it seems that teachers hold rather positive beliefs about early language acquisition. However, putting these beliefs into practice teachers encounter problems and uncertainties. Extra language proficiency training and guidance regarding teaching English to young learners, starting at the pre-service level, can help teachers overcome some of the problems. Also, schools could do with some extra guidance in their approach to language learning. The European Platform has a rather important role to play in this respect. Also, the way policy is translated into practice should be closely watched, to, as mentioned by Orafi & Borg (2009: 252) “support teachers in making the curriculum work within the contextual constraints they face”.
Regarding research on early language learning in general, the teachers’ perspective should not be forgotten. In the words of Nikolov: “research should go beyond a narrow focus on the L2 and integrate not only learners’ L1, but also teachers’ beliefs and motivation in order to reveal the complexity of processes.” (2010: 286) One could argue if teacher beliefs are suitable instrument for evaluation of language learning, curriculum development or policy implementation. I believe it can, and even must be used in such evaluations. Investigating teacher beliefs in their context can give real and essential insight in the daily practice of language teaching. Such insight is indispensible, since teacher beliefs can, as shown in the example at the start of this paper, affect the way they approach a project, or even a subject in general. Beliefs can be, as mentioned by Pajares (1992: 329) “the single most important construct in educational research.”
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Appendix A: Questionnaire on teacher beliefs about early English in primary education in the Netherlands.