10 *Training teachers: Task-based as well?*

Kris Van den Branden

The role of the teacher in task-based language education has been described in a number of publications (e.g. Prabhu, 1987; Samuda, 2001; Willis, 1996; see also Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume). In these articles, the teacher is presented as a guide, a counsellor and a coach who tries to motivate his students to perform tasks, gives them clear instructions and supports the students' task performance, both at the cognitive and affective level, in such a way that they further develop their language proficiency. Rather than providing all the course content, delivering elaborate and explicit monologues on the structure of the language or the meaning of isolated words, the teacher tries to act as a true interactional partner, negotiating meaning and content with the students, eliciting and encouraging their output, focusing on form when appropriate and offering them a rich, relevant and communicative input.

Appealing as these ideas may look on paper, there is very little research available on how experienced teachers and student teachers perceive this particular role, on whether they are able and willing to put it into practice and on whether this particular role clashes with other roles teachers have in mind or take up in their classrooms. In this respect, the question can also be raised whether teachers or student teachers can actually be trained to teach 'the task-based' way? How, for instance, do experienced language teachers, who have been using a grammar-based, form-focussed syllabus for years react to in-service training in task-based language education or to task-based syllabuses? Do experienced teachers, who are introduced to new task-based syllabuses, adapt their classroom practices, or do they prefer to adapt the new syllabus? What should inservice and preservice training look like in order to be successful, and what, ultimately, can be called 'success' in this respect?

These are some of the main questions that are addressed in this chapter. The tentative answers that I will provide will mainly be based on a number of Flemish empirical research studies that accompanied the introduction of task-based language teaching on a nationwide level in Flanders. A state-subsidized support programme,

including inservice training and the introduction of task-based syllabuses, was offered to Flemish language teachers in primary, secondary and adult education in an effort to raise the quality of language education of Dutch as a first and second language (see also Chapter 1 in this volume). The results of the empirical studies accompanying this support programme deepen our insight in the potential and the limitations of teacher training, particularly with regard to the implementation of task-based language teaching.

1 Teacher cognition and teacher actions

At a general level, language teachers' principal aim is to create powerful language learning environments for all their students. With this aim in mind, teachers try to take appropriate actions in the classroom. As Figure 1 shows, what teachers do in the classroom should have a positive effect on what their learners do; and the interplay of teacher and student interaction should result in language learning.

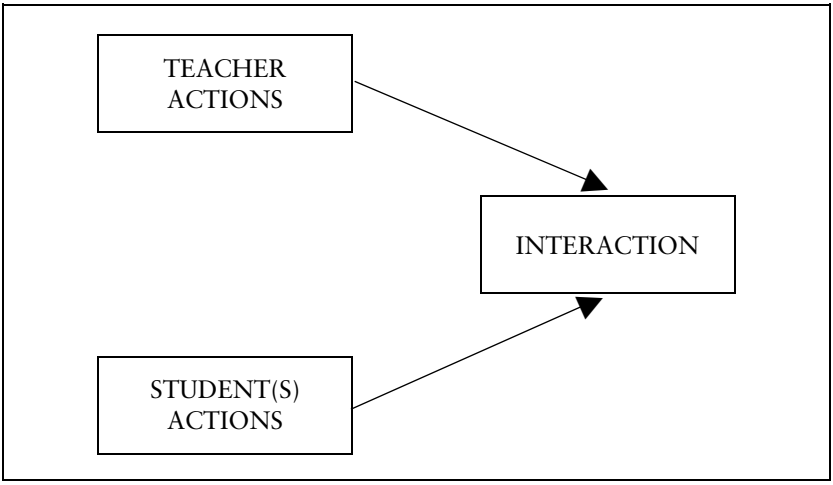

Figure 1 Teachers' and students' actions resulting in classroom interaction

Though Figure 1 may have face validity for teachers and learners, it is simplistic in a number of ways. What teachers do in the classroom cannot simply be described in behavioural terms (e.g. 'Teacher A shuts the window and asks the class a question'), but is the result of continuous and intense mental activity. On a second-to-second basis, teachers have to assess what is going on in their

classroom and take decisions on the actions they will take. In the instance above, before shutting the window, Teacher A has probably had to choose between shutting out the noise that was coming in through the window and allowing the cool air to enter the classroom on this balmy summer day. At the same time (while shutting the window), the teacher is wondering whether the introductory phase of the lesson is not taking too long and is looking for a question that nicely sums up the pre-task discussion in order to get on with the activity. Simultaneously, she is keeping an eye on two students who are not paying attention anymore and whom she knows may become quite disruptive for the other students when they get bored.

In a review article on teacher cognition in language teaching, Borg (2003: 81) aptly describes teachers as 'active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs.' What language teachers do in the classroom is inspired by what they know, believe and think. They do not act on blind impulse, nor do they continuously leave on the automatic pilot (Blanton & Moorman, 1987; Fang, 1996). On the contrary, research shows that language teachers base their classroom actions on the ideas they have about very many different aspects of their profession. These include ideas about education in general and language education in particular, about the school context in which they have to operate, about their students, about the curriculum, about language learning, and so on. The literature on teacher cognition offers many taxonomies, using a range of terminologies, in which this wide variety of convictions, thoughts and beliefs are separated into different categories (Johnson, 1995; Lortie, 1975; Nunan, 1996; Pajares, 1992; Shulman, 1987). However, while providing a basic insight into the complexity of the cognition teachers rely on, these taxonomies do not reflect what actually goes on in teachers' heads. For teachers, distinctions between learner characteristics, contextual variables and cognition related to education are blurry at best, and components of their knowledge, beliefs, opinions and intuitions are inextricably intertwined (Grossman *et al.*, 1989; Verloop *et al.*, 2001; Woods, 1996).

The relationship between teacher cognition and teacher action is not unilateral, but interactive. Teacher cognition not only feeds and inspires actions in the classroom, but actions taken in the classroom also feed their perceptions: each will influence the other as the teacher works from day to day (Breen *et al.*, 2001; Fang, 1996). Moreover, teachers' actions and perceptions not only influence each other, they are also influenced by, and have an influence on, the

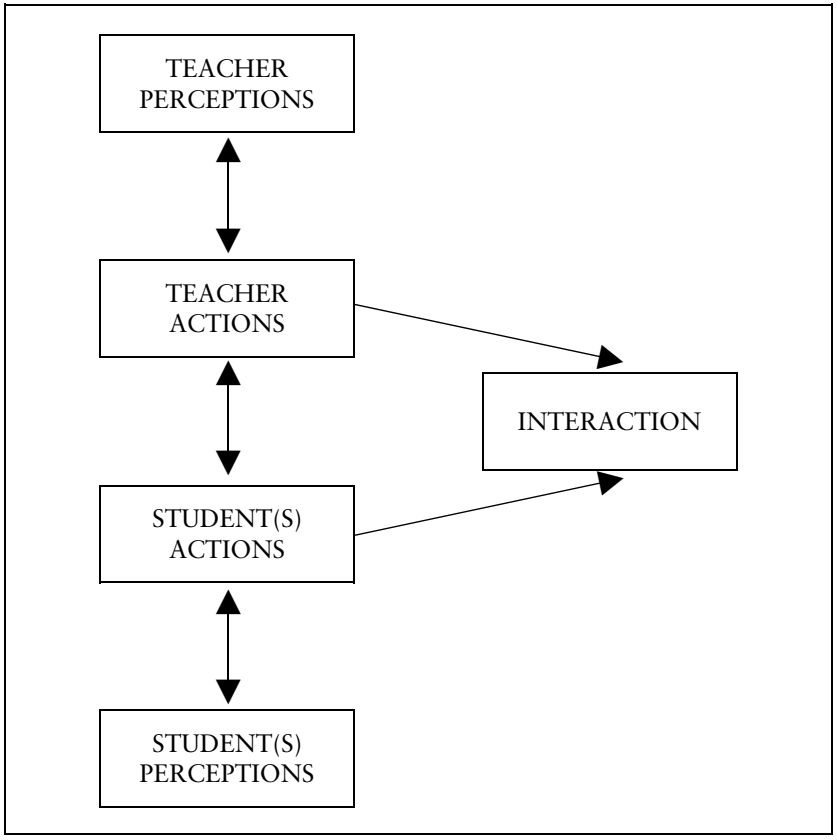

Figure 2 Actions, perceptions and interaction in the classroom

students' perceptions and actions. Interaction in the classroom, then, can be characterized as a complex interplay between the actions of the different actors involved. These actions are inspired by, and in turn inspire, the same actors' perceptions (Brophy & Good, 1986).

Recent empirical research has shown that what teachers do in the classroom is not always consistent with what they believe should be, or can be, done (Fang, 1996; Basturkmen *et al.*, 2004). A number of factors have been suggested to explain the inconsistencies between the way teachers perceive things and the way they act:

a *Contextual constraints*. Contextual variables may act as constraints on teacher actions, as they may prevent teachers from acting in the way they believe they should. Time limits, lack of appropriate teaching aids, the external 'pressure' of the curri-

culum, official school policy and the presence of too many students in the same class are just a few examples of such contextual constraints. The result may be practices or actions that teachers themselves are not completely satisfied with, because they fail to live up to their expectations, hopes and convictions.

b *Conflicting beliefs*. Since a teacher's actions are informed by a range of beliefs about teaching and education, it is inevitable that some of these beliefs are sometimes contradictory. In taking decisions with regard to actions in the classroom, teachers will sometimes have to make compromises, strike a workable balance or take actions that are consistent with some beliefs, yet inconsistent with others. For instance, even if teachers may theoretically support the notion that language learners learn to speak by speaking, and group work allows many learners opportunities to speak, these beliefs may clash with teachers' convictions that classes should be orderly and that noise is not conducive to learning. In this respect, Lampert (1985: 190) calls the teacher 'a dilemma manager, a broker of contradictory interests who builds a working identity that is constructively ambiguous'.

c *Conflicts between beliefs and skills*. Teachers may be convinced, on a theoretical level, of particular pedagogical approaches but lack the skills to put them into practice. For instance, teachers may acknowledge the benefit of allowing learners the initiative to solve problems for themselves, but lack the interactional skill to support learners in such a way that does not take all initiative out of the learner's hands.

Research into the exact relationship between teacher cognition and teacher actions aims to yield deeper insights into what 'drives' teachers to act in a particular way in the classroom. Obviously, this kind of research is highly relevant for teacher training. In general, teacher training (whether it be the pre-service training of students or the inservice training of experienced teachers) aims to influence teacher practice in an effort to allow teachers to develop their professional competence and/or raise the quality of education they provide. Training programmes that fail to tune into what 'drives' teacher actions will probably stand a smaller chance of success than programmes that take into account the many variables that have an impact on the decisions that teachers make and the resulting actions they take (Richards, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). In this respect, a number of empirical studies suggest that the impact of preservice and inservice training often is quite limited. Many teachers appear to be resistant to external intrusion: to take professional

decisions they primarily rely on their own experiences in the classroom, either as a learner or as a teacher (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Lortie, 1975; Richards, 1998). Thus, it is not so much the educational training enjoyed by the teachers or the academic wisdom they are offered in inservice training or in educational journals, but what they have done and do in the classroom itself, and the meaning that they attach to these experiences, that constitute the backbone of what they think and believe about education. However, the research on the impact of teacher training allows no firm conclusions on whether it is training as such that fails to have an impact on teacher cognition and teacher practice, or whether the training programmes lacked specific features which meant that they failed to constitute powerful learning environments for the teachers involved.

In the next sections, I will review a number of empirical studies that have specifically tried to study the impact of training programmes on teacher cognition and teacher actions, qualitatively exploring which features were essential in this respect. Most of the studies I will discuss involved inservice training programmes aiming to introduce teachers to the rationale and practice of task-based language teaching.

2 Teach what you preach

An early study into the effectiveness of inservice training offered to Flemish language teachers (Peeters & Van den Branden, 1991, 1992) showed that many inservice trainers opted for the 'theoretical' path: teachers were informed about the rationale of a particular pedagogical approach and were then supposed to make the transfer from the theoretical knowledge acquired during the inservice training to concrete practice in the classroom by themselves.

This early study showed that, in order to stimulate teachers to acquire theoretical-professional knowledge, a combination of explicit teaching and demonstration was commonly used. Inservice trainers, most of whom were employed at universities and teacher training institutes, typically stood in front of their audience, presenting their personal views on (language) education. In many cases, the trainers illustrated their ideas with concrete examples from the few classrooms they were familiar with and demonstrated desired practice in the safe and controlled surroundings of the training institute. These programmes were mostly limited to one meeting of three hours and aimed primarily at convincing the participants of certain pedagogical ideas, or at the very least, opening their minds to them. This often gave rise to teachers exchanging practical hints with each other with

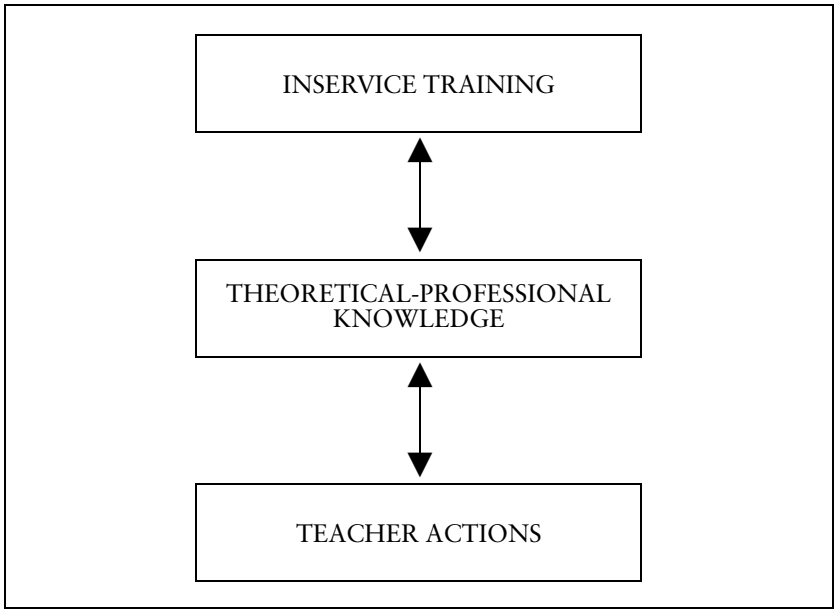

Figure 3 Inservice training influencing teacher perceptions and in turn, teacher actions

a view to implementing the new ideas in their classrooms, or to lively discussions where the perceptions of the teachers and inservice trainers clashed. Real training of target skills was seldom included in the programmes. This led to the strange paradox of inservice trainers adopting a theoretical approach in order to tell the participating teachers not to use a theoretical approach in their language classrooms.

There is ample research, including Flemish research (Eisendrath, 2001; Peeters *et al.*, 1996), illustrating that teachers and student teachers are not completely satisfied with this kind of training. Teachers often complain that the training they receive is far too theoretical. Since theoretical expositions are characterized by a relatively high degree of abstraction, inservice trainers often build up a reputation of talking about 'different', 'ideal' or 'virtual' schools. This may give rise to exclamations like 'Try that with my students!' or 'Have you ever been to a real school in the centre of Brussels?' The more heterogeneous the participating group of teachers becomes, the more outspoken and numerous these remarks tend to become, especially when many participants get the feeling that they are all lumped together in the same category.

This feeling is further enhanced when, alongside the use of a theory-driven methodology, topic selection is dominated by the inservice trainer, rather than by the participants. In their research into inservice training provided to Flemish teachers of Dutch, Peeters & Van den Branden (1992) found that topic selection tended to be determined, in the first place, by the preferences and the expertise of the inservice trainers themselves. Very few inservice training institutes conducted needs analyses or tried to tune in their selection of topics and methods to the specific needs of their audience.

All this resulted in a low assessment by Flemish teachers of the extent to which the academic wisdom presented by the average inservice trainer could be of practical use in their classroom practice. Peeters & Van den Branden (1992) coined the term 'post-coursal depression': teachers return to their school from a training in rapture because the trainer was so eloquent and the ideas that were raised seemed so attractive, yet the next day they are back with their two feet on the ground when it turns out that putting these great ideas into practice is not straightforward and colleagues are not jumping about with enthusiasm either. In the end, this kind of inservice training may even have the opposite effect: the enthusiastic teacher does not do anything with the new ideas, and may even think twice before attending another training course in the future. In the long run, this may result in an increasing number of teachers no longer attending training unless they are obliged to do so by the headteacher, or into a growing aversion among teachers to any kind of educational innovation.

3 Combining inservice training and introduction of task-based courses

In this section, I will discuss a number of studies that report the impact of inservice training programmes in which the theoretical paradigm was replaced by a combination of syllabus introduction and theoretical background sessions.

3.1 Linsen's study

The first study I will review in this section was conducted by Linsen (1994). This study focused on the effects of a nationwide inservice training programme aiming to raise the quality of second language education of Dutch in primary schools in Flanders by introducing teachers to task-based language teaching. This inservice training

programme was set up by the Centre for Language and Education at the University of Leuven. The training programme was financed by the Flemish government out of a concern with the many Educational Priority Policy (EPP) schools that faced a growing influx of migrant pupils who acquired a language other than Dutch (the main medium of instruction in Flemish schools) as their mother tongue. On the basis of a literature survey and an extensive round of consultations with Flemish and Dutch experts, the Centre for Language and Education decided that task-based language teaching would probably be more suitable for stimulating low-SES (socio-economic status), non-native speaking children to build up Dutch academic language proficiency than the form-oriented, teacher-dominated language teaching methodologies that were common practice at that time.

Most of the inservice trainings were organized in central locations in Flanders (e.g. Leuven, Brussels). The participants were invited to come and participate in the training sessions there. The inservice training sessions were attended by one teacher (the so-called 'key person') per EPP school. In most schools, these were teachers who were granted class-free hours (through the EPP funding provided by the government) in order to build up expertise with regard to second language education and to transmit this expertise to their colleagues.

The potential success of this inservice training programme was further enhanced by the fact that a number of crucial conditions for the successful implementation of educational innovations (Ellis, 2003; Van Den Bergh & Vandenberghe, 1999) were met:

1 *Problem awareness*. The EPP schools were in dire need of support (Jaspaert, 1996a,b; Terkessidis & Van de Velde, 1991). Among most EPP school staff members, there was a strong awareness that the academic results of substantial groups of children, especially non-native speakers of Dutch, were very poor and that the language gap between the children's Dutch language proficiency and the academic language proficiency demanded by the school needed to be bridged. On the other hand, schools were very uncertain about how to tackle this delicate problem. As early EPP studies (Terkessidis & Van de Velde, 1991; 3; OVGB-evaluatieteam, 1997) showed, schools were very eager to accept any kind of support that was offered.
2 *External pressure*. Schools were not only motivated to seek support themselves, they were almost obliged to do so. The official Flemish government policy stipulated that EPP schools would only be granted additional funding if these were used to raise their quality of education. One of the actions the schools had to take,

and actually had to provide evidence of, was to stimulate their staff members to be supported by EPP educational counsellors and to receive training by expert institutes with regard to Dutch second language education.

3 *Support structure*. The Flemish government created an extra contingent of EPP school counsellors with the task of intensively supporting the schools in raising their quality of education. Simultaneously, the Centre for Language and Education (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) was founded to also support EPP schools by providing inservice training on second language education, developing new syllabuses and conducting research. The EPP school counsellors, who operated close to the schools, were trained by the Centre for Language and Education: they quickly adopted the task-based rationale, and followed up the introduction of the task-based syllabuses that were developed by the Centre for Language and Education in the EPP schools. The official government policy also stimulated intensive exchanges between all EPP educational counsellors.

4 *Team building facilities*. Official EPP government policy further stipulated that part of the extra school funding had to be used to allow teachers 'class-free' hours. These hours were specifically oriented towards team building. In each EPP school, one EPP teacher (the 'key person') was assigned to stimulate team building, support the EPP target pupils, build up expertise and exchange it with the other team members. Reports issued by the Flemish EPP inspectorate showed that this aspect of the EPP policy was taken up particularly well by the EPP schools: many of the EPP school teams gradually developed a culture of joint deliberation and negotiation.

Aware of the potential drawbacks and limitations of offering inservice trainings in which only the theory of task-based language teaching would be transmitted, the Centre for Language and Education opted for an implementation strategy combining inservice training programmes with the introduction of task-based syllabuses, ready to be used and tried out in the classroom. The task-based syllabuses that the Centre developed were intended to be used by all interested teachers in the EPP schools. The key persons' tasks included following up the implementation of the syllabuses in their school and providing feedback to the Centre on how the syllabuses could be improved:

> Since the task-based pedagogy is so different from the currently used language teaching methods, EPP support

> structures have chosen to combine theoretical training of teachers with practice-oriented support. The latter happens through the introduction of suitable syllabuses. An exposition on the theoretical background (of TBLT) will not lead to change in teachers' classroom practice. Teachers need suitable syllabuses, and they cannot develop these themselves. On the other hand, one may expect that working with syllabuses that are developed along innovative principles will not lead to sufficient change in teachers' practices if the teacher does not have a profound insight in the theoretical and pedagogical rationale behind the activities. It is likely then, that 'new' syllabuses will be used 'the old way', and will miss their target. (Linsen, 1994: 138; my translation)

Linsen (1994) evaluated the introduction of TBLT in EPP primary schools between 1992 and 1994. She analysed 114 teacher logs, conducted 21 oral interviews with teachers and analysed classroom interaction through observations in 20 schools. The main research question her study addressed was: how do teachers respond to the task-based syllabuses and to the theory of task-based language education they are presented with (either by the key person, the school (educational) counsellor or the Centre)? This research question was further broken down into a number of subquestions:

1 Do teachers notice a difference between TBLT and their current pedagogical approach?
2 How do they handle the tasks in the syllabuses? How do they cope with features of the methodology that may be expected to differ from what they are used to in the classroom: (a) task difficulty (b) functional tasks (c) dealing with differences between pupils (d) pedagogical tasks, and (e) group work?
3 What is the general attitude of teachers towards TBLT?
4 To what extent have the teachers understood and incorporated the theory behind TBLT?

The majority of the teachers in Linsen's study noticed many differences between TBLT and their own approach. The main differences they noticed were in the kind of activities performed in the classroom (62 teachers), the kind of topics and themes covered (57), the kind of oral (53) and written input (41) provided, the methodological formats used (33), the type of syllabus used (28), the goals that are pursued (27), the learning activities performed by the pupils (25) and the grouping formats that are dominant (21). As the interviews and the classrooms observations indicated, these differences were prob-

lematic for many teachers. The main problems they experienced had to do with task complexity, maintaining control of what was going in the class, differentiating between pupils and handling group work.

The issue of task complexity has been particularly problematic for teachers. In Linsen's study, teachers often noted in their logs, that the reason for a task being unsuccessful in their classroom was that they thought the task too difficult for their students or pupils. According to the Flemish task-based rationale, tasks are supposed to be just above the level of the pupils' current language proficiency (see also Chapters 3 and 4 in this volume). In other words tasks should be challenging. Difficulties may lead to negotiation, stretch learners and extend their language resources and may also make instructive demands on their abilities to comprehend and produce new language. To a certain extent, tasks are designed to have learners run into cognitive or linguistic problems. This clearly differs from the traditional, 'linguistic' view on language teaching, in which the teacher presents a linguistic feature, makes sure that everybody has understood and then gives the learners exercises that they are all supposed to be able to do correctly. Linsen's logs, classroom observations and interviews illustrate that when teachers change the task-based activities they face, their main motive is to make them easier. When the teachers anticipate that their pupils will not be able to cope with the tasks, they simplify them. One way of doing this is by changing the task itself (for instance, by simplifying the vocabulary in a text or by asking the students to fill in only one word instead of writing complete sentences). Another way is to leave the task unchanged, but to adapt they way it is implemented. For instance, some teachers stretch the introduction phase by explaining all difficult words in a text before the students are allowed to read it.

3.2 Later implementation studies

Teachers struggling with the complexity of meaningful tasks is in fact a consistent pattern that has also been repeated in later empirical studies. For instance, in a recent study, Timmermans (2005) reports a qualitative study, including classroom observations and extensive interviews, into how ten teachers of the first year of primary school reacted to the introduction of a task-based syllabus aimed at giving early readers the chance to perform functional, motivating reading comprehension tasks. Timmermans concludes that when teachers manipulated the task-based activities they were given, their aim was to make the tasks easier or more accessible to the pupils. In this study, the teachers mainly manipulated the implementation of the

tasks. Apart from explaining words they believed would be difficult for the pupils, the teachers read aloud texts that were supposed to be individually read in silence by the children, because they feared that some pupils still lacked the technical reading proficiency to read the texts themselves.

Luyten & Houben (2002) and D'hondt (2004) report similar results in two field studies on the implementation of a task-based multimedia course of basic Dutch as a second language for adult non-native speakers (NNS) in Flanders (see also Chapter 6 in this volume). This course consists of two parts:

a *Multimedia soap*. The adult learners, individually or in pairs, sit behind a computer screen and watch a soap in which the characters are involved in all kinds of real-life situations. The learners are continually asked to interact with the programme by clicking the mouse, dragging icons to the right place, filling in forms, etc. The learner can only perform these tasks by comprehending the conversations. This part of the course offers learners a high degree of self-regulation and control over their own learning process since they move through it at their own pace.
b *Classroom periods*. These are organized in groups of about 10–15 learners. These periods take the language tasks in the multimedia soap as their starting point. The teacher confronts the students with speaking tasks and with further examples of tasks that were covered in the multimedia soap and also focuses on form.

Luyten and Houben's research indicates that the learners reacted very enthusiastically to this course. This was also noticed by the teachers, who emphasized that many learners refused to have a break because they wanted to go on with the multimedia soap and that in general the learners were very concentrated. The teachers' own reactions to the course, however, turned out to be more varied and disparate. Again, the complexity of the tasks turned out to be one of the main obstacles teachers brought up. For teachers who stuck to the idea that learners can only do functional, communicative things with language *after* they have acquired implicit or explicit knowledge of isolated linguistic elements such as words and grammar rules, presenting learners with complex, functional language tasks from the onset of a basic language course appeared to be hard to accept.

Of course, teachers' assessment of task difficulty is to a large degree a subjective matter. It is closely linked to their personal views on language education and attainment goals, and to their general expectations of what pupils at a certain age, or students at a certain level, will be able to do. In her study Linsen (1994) quotes a teacher

who concludes that a language lesson built up around a writing task was not a success because the texts that the pupils had written were full of spelling errors. Linsen's own interpretation of the same texts is that the pupils succeeded in writing communicatively adequate messages.

Teachers may have very precise and high demands in mind when it comes to pupils performing tasks: for instance, when performing writing tasks, learners should make no spelling errors, and when performing reading tasks, they should understand every single word in the text. These expectations, however, may not entirely match the task outcomes that were intended by the syllabus developer. Clearly, one of the main aspects in which TBLT differs from traditional, 'linguistic' approaches is the emphasis the former puts on functional, communicative adequacy rather than on correctness alone. Paradoxically, teachers who are concerned about the tasks in the task-based syllabus being too 'difficult' for their students, may be unaware of the fact that they themselves raise the difficulty level of the tasks by imposing unnatural, or excessive, demands on their students' language output.

Besides complexity, the issue of maintaining control over what happens in the classroom is crucial to many teachers. In fact, complexity and control are closely linked. From a psychological point of view, a pedagogical approach in which the teacher first presents certain linguistic features in a predetermined and logical order, and then evaluates whether exercises performed by the learners are correct according to clearly defined criteria, gives the teacher a high degree of control. This sense of control may be the perfect antidote for the uncertainty that teachers have to struggle with by definition. In a sense, one of the main challenges of the teaching profession is to deal with uncertainty. No matter what researchers, teacher trainers or educationalists may claim, there is no perfect match between teaching and learning. Education offers no guarantees. In order to cope with this unsettling truth, teachers must create for themselves a feeling of being able to control and direct learning, at least to a certain extent. They can do this by, for instance, making use of standardized tests, explicit methods and tightly organized curricula. One of the main attractions of 'linguistic' syllabuses lies in the psychological comfort they can give to teachers: by spelling out to the teacher in full detail what is to be taught in which particular order and what learners are supposed to do, say and learn, they belittle the unpredictability of the actual learning that is going on: what *should have been* learnt can be described in exact terms and can be assessed very precisely.

Conversely, confronting a class with a task that may or is even intended to result in as many different learning experiences as there are learners, depending on the specific problems each individual learner runs into, on the idiosyncratic task performance and learning process they go through and on the interaction learners engage in together, leaves the teacher wondering what exactly was learned. This feeling of uneasiness may even be aggravated to the extent that teachers are explicitly reminded, for instance by inservice trainers, of the fact that learning, in essence, is a mental process going on inside students' heads. In a number of Flemish field studies involving the implementation of syllabuses containing task-based reading activities (Duran, 1994; Timmermans & Van Eekelen, 1999; Timmermans *et al.*, 2000; Timmermans, 2005), some teachers were found to interrupt the pupils' silent reading constantly in order to check the latter's comprehension. Some teachers also changed tasks that were supposed to be performed individually by the learners to lockstep activities. The activities where teachers turned silent reading activities into listening activities by reading aloud the texts themselves can also be interpreted in terms of the teacher regaining control.

In their implementation study of the above-mentioned multimedia course for adult NNSs of Dutch, Luyten & Houben (2002: 15) conclude that teachers found the loss of control particularly troublesome in the time when the learners were working individually on computers with the multimedia soap:

> For teachers who were used to clearly describing the contents and structure of their lessons beforehand, the confrontation with the cd-rom was troublesome. … They felt they had no control over the learning going on, while they used to believe they could make every single learner make steady progress at the same pace. For some teachers, this was the end of the line (i.e. they stopped working with the course). In some groups, a lot of time was devoted to synchronizing the learners' progress, by explicitly dealing with the input in the classroom. The fact that the characters in the soap talk quickly and use difficult syntactic structures, was disturbing for these teachers. … Some were annoyed because the input included words that they believed were not part of elementary vocabulary at a basic level. Some teachers wanted spelt-out versions of the subtitling and vocabulary lists. (my translation)

Teachers' striving for control can be linked to another aspect they find problematic about TBLT: the frequent use of group work. A number of Flemish implementation studies (Devlieger *et al.*, 2003;

Hillewaere, 2000; Linsen, 1994) reveal that many teachers do not like group work and only hesitatingly introduce it in their classrooms. Many arguments against group work tend to be given: the classroom becomes noisy and chaotic, the teacher loses control over what is happening in the groups, learners are suspected of idle talk and laziness, pupils of lower proficiency are said not to participate, pupils of a higher proficiency are assumed to dominate interaction or to do all the work. In the above-mentioned studies, the teachers who experienced these problems were found to try and compensate for their loss of control by converting group work into lockstep activities, and by turning task-based activities into explicit vocabulary training sessions. In her study, Linsen mentions that some teachers actually became quite suspicious of the students' enthusiasm with the task-based activities: if their students thought of the language lessons as playtime, they were left wondering whether any 'real' learning could actually result from all these games and riddles.

All this is also reflected in the way the teachers handle differences between students. In the inservice training the Centre offered, teachers were told to differentiate first of all in the way in which and the degree to which they interactionally support individual learners as they are performing a task. The inservice trainers place a strong emphasis on this way of differentiating, because of their strong awareness of the inherent dangers in task differentiation. Flemish studies of classroom interaction in the early 1990s (e.g. Van den Branden, 1995a,b), as well as the above-mentioned implementation studies, indicated that teachers' standard way of differentiating is by making tasks much easier for the pupils with a relatively low language proficiency. This, however, may often lead to oversimplification, exceedingly low teacher expectations and demands and, in this way, a sharp reduction in the tasks' educational potential.

All the above-mentioned patterns are further corroborated by Duran's research (1994) into the implementation of task-based syllabuses in Flemish secondary education, and by an implementation study conducted by Van Avermaet *et al.* (1994) with regard to adult education of Dutch as a second language. Duran observed six teachers in three different secondary schools, working with a new task-based syllabus. She observed a total of 57 classroom hours. Van Avermaet *et al.* (1994) conducted observations of task-based teaching in two schools for adult education and asked the teachers to evaluate the newly developed syllabuses. Both studies vividly illustrate that many teachers who are confronted with new methodologies that do not match their current teaching practices use various strategies to cope with the arising tensions. In Duran's study some teachers either

chose not to use the materials or to use them very selectively i.e. only running the activities that differed the least from their current practices; another commonly used strategy is to refashion the tasks in that direction. Van Avermaet *et al.* (1994: 216) give the following example:

> Starting from language use situations in which people ask each other what time it is, the language learners learn to tell the time in Dutch. One teacher saw this activity (in the task-based syllabus) as the perfect occasion for elaborating on the theme of clocks. Diverting from the materials, he gave the learners an exposé on different types of clocks: stopwatches, alarm clocks, cuckoo clocks, church bells, etc. All these different kinds of clocks were then categorized in various categories such as electronic clocks, mechanical clocks . . .

3.3 Positive reactions to task-based syllabuses

Despite these obstacles and unintended outcomes, the balance of the implementation studies was not negative overall. Many teachers were found to react in a positive way to the fact that new syllabuses had been developed, and that, even if these materials did not meet all of their expectations, at least they freed them from one immense task: developing syllabuses themselves. In addition, the majority of the teachers were charmed by the students' enthusiasm: their motivation to perform the language tasks contributed to the teachers being motivated themselves to use the syllabuses. A number of teachers in primary and secondary education also saw a link between what the pupils were asked to do with language while performing the tasks and the kind of language tasks they were asked to perform across the curriculum. The sensitivity of these teachers to functional, communicative goals had clearly been raised.

Many of the studies also showed that teachers needed sufficient time to adapt their teaching practices: incorporation of task-based principles into daily classroom practice appeared to be a slow process. In general, the studies indicated that teachers do not like to throw everything they know overboard and replace it with something completely new. They prefer smooth transitions. This lends further empirical support to the complex relationship between teacher cognition and teacher actions. The basic argument supporting the use of syllabuses is that theoretical, declarative knowledge (knowing what TBLT is about) does not automatically result in procedural knowledge that teachers draw upon when taking action in the class. On the other hand, a theoretical basis is hypothesized to be necessary,

otherwise teachers will incorporate the new practice into their old ways. In other words, teachers will not adopt let alone integrate new practice if they do not believe in or have clear understanding of the rationale behind these new practices. And vice versa, new materials giving rise to new methods are prone to destabilize the teachers' practice. Even if they may be mechanically adopted, for these methods to be truly incorporated in the teachers' practice, they need to be integrated in the system of teacher cognition that drives teachers' actions.

In other words, educational innovation strategies need to address the practical and theoretical concerns that teachers have while adapting their classroom practice, preferably in an integrated way (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). With regard to task-based language education, some of these concerns go right to the heart of the teachers' educational and interactional style. For instance, teachers' reluctance to give students challenging tasks may be closely linked to their limited competence and willingness to flexibly adapt their teaching activities to the needs of individual learners, and with their reluctance to accept that student difficulties with understanding and speaking a foreign language can in fact be conducive to language learning, especially when these difficulties lead to negotiation of meaning, a focus on form, or to other forms of interaction. However, in order to enhance teachers' competence in these areas, it is clear that an implementation strategy combining theoretical training with the introduction of task-based syllabuses needs to be supplemented with more refined strategies that can offer teachers the problem-oriented, differentiated, interactional support they need.

4 School-based, practice-oriented coaching

In this section, I will report a recent longitudinal study into the implementation of task-based language education that was conducted in Brussels, the bilingual capital of Belgium: Dutch-medium primary schools in Brussels with a considerable percentage of NNS pupils were intensively supported by an expert team of school counsellors. The support programme was based on the following principles:

1 *School-based coaching*. Instead of teachers going to the inservice training centre to participate in the training, the inservice trainers and counsellors visited the school.
2 *Team-based coaching*. Rather than having one or two teachers per school team ('key persons') follow the inservice training programme and burdening these teachers with the task of transmitting

the acquired expertise to their colleagues, the intensive support addressed the whole school team. Coaching of individual members of the team alternated with whole-group meetings.

3 *Needs-based coaching*. Rather than offering a standard programme to the audience on predetermined topics, the intensive coaching was tuned to the specific needs of and questions from the school team.

4 *Practice-based coaching*. The intensive coaching was explicitly intended to avoid being theoretical or abstract, the coaching systematically took action in the classroom and in the school as its starting point. Moreover, the coaching sessions were also oriented towards new actions in the classroom.

These four principles were derived from the overarching principle that the learners, in this case the teachers and headteachers, are the active 'agents' in their own learning process. The coaching programme consisted of a number of meetings, spread over a relatively long period of time (one to three years, or even more), in which teacher activity in the classroom and reflection on these actions were continuously alternated. The content of coaching sessions were the result of intensive negotiation in which all parties were involved. Throughout the support programme, many different training strategies and methodological formats were utilized (Joyce & Showers, 1998). Theory, demonstration, introduction of task-based syllabuses, training of skills, classroom observation and feedback were all part of the coaching programme.

Devlieger *et al*. (2003) carried out an evaluation study into the effects of the first three years of this intensive coaching programme in Brussels (2000–2). The study showed that the coaches visited each school about 20 times a year, with each individual teacher participating in three to five coaching sessions a year. Devlieger *et al*. (2003) based their research on three observation periods of nine weeks. They:

a observed the coaching interventions undertaken by the EPP school counsellors and members of the team;
b conducted classroom observations to establish what teachers actually did with the advice, the task-based syllabuses and feedback they were offered during the coaching sessions;
c interviewed the coaches, the teachers and the headteachers in order to analyse their perceptions.

Over the three data collection periods, they observed 170 coaching interventions, performed 21 classroom observations and conducted a total of 277 interviews. In the first phase of their research, they

focused on the effects of the coaching interventions on the teachers' perceptions and their reported practice in the classroom. In the second phase, they focused on the effects of the coaching interventions on the teachers' actual practice in the classroom. For this latter phase, they conducted a new round of classroom observations. In the third and final phase, they focused on the effects of the coaching interventions and the resulting implementation of TBLT on the learners' Dutch language proficiency.

The first phase of the research revealed that the teachers most appreciated the individual coaching sessions, especially those that accompanied the implementation of new syllabuses. These sessions either focused on preparing the teachers to work with particular activities from the syllabuses, or reflecting on a lesson in which the syllabus had been tried out. The Brussels teachers experienced this kind of coaching as a real support for their heavy job. First of all, this study corroborates that teachers strongly appreciate not having to develop syllabuses themselves. Devlieger *et al.* (2003) report that 50 per cent of the teachers were constantly on the lookout for better syllabuses and teaching aids. Frustrated with their pupils' disappointing results on Dutch language tests or feeling unable to deal with the immense range in the Dutch language proficiency of their pupils, they place a lot of hope in the introduction of new and suitable syllabuses. The Brussels EPP coaches offered task-based syllabuses, but these were not imposed. It was the school team's own choice to implement them or not.

In most of the schools, the task-based syllabuses offered by the coaches did not replace the older materials. Even though the older, 'linguistic' courses were found to address the pupils' language problems insufficiently and some of these courses were constructed along completely different pedagogical lines, most of the teachers in Brussels sought to reconcile the old system with the new one. They tried out the task-based activities for a couple of hours a week, while using their old syllabus for the rest of the periods. Quite typically, they stuck to the old syllabus for those aspects of language education that they believed were insufficiently covered in the task-based syllabus. For instance, teachers who attached great importance to explicit knowledge on grammar, to spelling drills or explicit strategy training, employed the older courses for these purposes. In the same vein, the new, task-based syllabuses were adapted to look more like the old approach. As a result, an eclectic pedagogical approach resulted. The Brussels EPP counsellors made the deliberate choice of allowing the teachers a considerable degree of freedom with regard to how and when they would make use of the task-based syllabuses,

and how and when they would apply the task-based principles. Teachers who strongly resisted the introduction of task-based language teaching were not forced to comply.

One striking effect of the introduction of the new task-based syllabuses was that even those teachers with completely different views on language teaching were stimulated to consciously reflect upon their actions in the classroom. The automatic pilot was temporarily switched off:

> There's a lot of talking now, mainly about these task-based syllabuses and so on. That became apparent during our staff meeting. ... It's not just reading the story they do, but they think about it, like, how am I going to do this, how am I going to get this across?' (Interview with headteacher: Devlieger *et al.*, 2003: 96; my translation)

Most headteachers did not mind that their teachers did not use the task-based syllabuses in exactly the way described by the coach or in the guidelines, or that the teachers were not fully convinced from the outset:

> From time to time, people (i.e. teachers) have doubts. But that is positive, I think. I mean, you shouldn't swallow everything that others say unthinkingly. Somebody comes up with a new gospel, you shouldn't believe everything he says. You should have your own opinion. They (the teachers) are occupied with this matter very consciously. And they are looking for new ideas themselves. You really notice that this has caused a lot of movement. (Interview with headteacher: Devlieger *et al.*, 2003: 96; my translation)

Teachers and headteachers emphasized that in the initial phase of syllabus introduction, it was of paramount importance that they received answers to the many questions they had. In this stage, they attached much importance to being followed up by their coach:

> You have a training, a meeting, you can try things out, and then there is another meeting, and then you can evaluate. I like that. Not too much, because then you can't cope anymore. Then it becomes an obligation, something you must do, and then it all comes to nothing. You need the space to make it work. (Interview with a teacher: Devlieger *et al.*, 2003: 96; my translation)

As the quotation shows, for inservice trainers it is important to follow the lead and the pace of the teacher. For teachers it is crucial

that they are given the chance to try out new ideas in the classroom and see how they work out. This again stresses the primacy of practice-oriented inservice training: it must lead to things that teachers can *do* in their classrooms (tasks they can perform), and if this is the case, teachers have a great need to reflect upon that practice afterwards, either with the trainer/counsellor, with a colleague or with the headteacher.

This, then, was one of the main functions of the coaching sessions provided by the school counsellors and inservice trainers. The questions raised during these coaching sessions, which preceded and followed the actual try-out of the new activities in the classroom, ranged from very fundamental questions about the basic rationale behind TBLT to very concrete, almost trivial questions on practical issues (such as the time that certain phases of a task-based lesson should take, or how to physically rearrange the classroom, or clever ways to quickly distribute pictures). These practical issues and contextual constraints occupied teachers' minds very strongly, to such an extent that, if these were not solved, some teachers refrained from implementing the syllabus altogether, because they found it 'too much trouble'.

Coaching that started from concrete classroom actions inspired by concrete materials were appreciated so much by teachers because they stood so close to their own classroom practice: high-sounding principles such as stimulating pupils' initiative, differentiating between pupils, working with challenging and motivating tasks and negotiating meaning, could be translated into a very concrete, almost tactile level and become 'real'. In addition, specific problems that the individual teacher faced and that differed to a great extent from the questions and worries that other teachers had, were not ignored. All this gave the teachers a feeling of being taken seriously, and provided them with a sense of ownership:

> I really like it [i.e. the coaching] very much. Before we started, I really had a feeling like 'oh no! what is this going to be like', so I was rather sceptical, but my impressions have become far more positive. It is really great, very concrete, it can really be put to practice. I have followed 1,001 inservice training sessions on how to do something, and that is a lot of theory but you can't put it to practice, because you don't get any feedback afterwards, and there's nowhere to go with your questions, and this was really a great help to me.
>
> (Interview with a teacher: Devlieger *et al.*, 2003: 43; my translation)

The Brussels EPP counsellors regarded the coaching sessions as crucial moments in which they slowly but surely tried to stimulate the teachers to further develop their professional competence. For them, the introduction of task-based syllabuses, and the coaching on the use of the materials, were means for getting teachers to reflect on many fundamental aspects of their language teaching (e.g. the goals they want to pursue, the topics they want to cover, the way they interact with the pupils, etc.) and to optimize their interactional style in the classroom. In this respect, the counsellors acknowledged that syllabus introduction has clear limitations as well. A focus on syllabuses gives the impression that a new syllabus itself can solve all the pupils' problems. If the syllabus is implemented in the 'right' way, then the pupils' Dutch language proficiency will grow, so the argument goes. The counsellors were aware of the dangers and inherent contradictions of this line of reasoning. There probably is no single 'right' way of using task-based materials. Devlieger *et al.*'s (2003) classroom observations reveal that if one and the same task-based activity, taken from the same syllabus, is performed in three different classes, three different lessons arise. This, in fact, is the intended outcome of the coaching: it is not the task in itself, but the interaction and mental activity developed by the students and the teacher that will eventually determine how much, and what language, will be learnt. Tasks are merely blueprints, they are not intended to and cannot be complete scripts for language learning (Coughlan & Duff, 1994; see also Chapter 8 in this volume).

This last point emphasizes the importance of another training method that some EPP counsellors often used i.e. classroom observation and feedback. The counsellors stressed that the basic idea of these classroom observations was not to control or inspect the teachers, but to pave the way for a constructive 'knowledge-transforming' (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) dialogue between the teacher and the observer. Classroom observations were never imposed on teachers, but only conducted with their full consent. The counsellors conducted non-participating observations: seated in the back of the classroom, they observed and took notes on what was going on. In a limited number of cases the lesson was videotaped.

Shortly after the observed activity, a meeting was set up between the teacher and his coach, in which the former was invited to reflect upon the learners', and his own, actions, during the lesson that was observed. Through asking questions, the coach tried to stimulate the teacher into unravelling the mental forces and 'drives' behind the actions he took. The coach's aim with this session was to complete a

cycle of reflection (based on Korthagen, 1999a,b), which comprises the following stages:

1 action in real operating conditions (lesson activity) + observation of the action;
2 reflection by looking back on the action;
3 becoming aware of crucial features of the action on a more abstract level (by linking with earlier experience and theoretical or more general frameworks);
4 designing possible alternatives for future action;
5 experimenting with the alternatives in real operating conditions.

The main aim of the coach was not to convince the teachers of certain 'task-based' truths, but rather to help the teachers to discover their own truth. The trainers' aim was to set in motion a train of thought which would enable the teachers to ascertain for themselves the strengths and weaknesses of the learning environments they had constructed together with their pupils, and to come up with alternatives for areas that merited further attention. Similar to the way focus on form is inserted in meaningful task-based activities at the moment a particular problem is experienced or signalled by the learner, the EPP coaches tried to make their own pedagogical views explicit only when the observed teacher, inspired by a particular problem or question, requested it. The interviews with the teachers clearly showed that the latter expected the coach not only to ask intelligent questions, but also to 'give answers to their questions', 'demonstrate how particular lessons should be given', and 'make explicit concrete working points for the teacher' (Devlieger *et al*., 2003).

In a number of cases, the classroom observation and feedback sessions appeared to have a direct effect on teacher actions. Devlieger *et al*. (2003) report a number of instances in which a working point made explicit during the feedback session was taken up by the teacher in the next activity. Furthermore, many of the teachers who were involved in these sessions voiced their strong appreciation for this type of coaching.

5 The importance of contextual conditions

All of the above-mentioned research studies in which Flemish and Brussels language teachers were interviewed about their evaluation of inservice training aiming to stimulate educational innovation, emphasize the teachers' acute sensitivity to contextual conditions. If these are insufficiently taken into account by the inservice trainer or school counsellor, chances of new ideas being accepted and adopted almost

inevitably become smaller. To put it negatively, teachers often use bad contextual conditions as reasons explaining why they are not more open to the pedagogical ideas raised by the inservice trainer.

Contextual conditions can be subdivided into different categories such as those pertaining to:

a the organization of the inservice training programme itself;
b the implementation of the content of the inservice training programme;
c the educational policy in which the inservice training programme is embedded;
d the broad societal context in which the programme is embedded.

In interviews with teachers, the first category is prominent. Teachers are particularly sensitive to the spatial and temporal conditions under which they are asked to follow inservice training programmes. Inservice training programmes are ideally run during teachers' official working hours. If inservice training programmes are organized after school hours, on free afternoons, or late in the evening, teachers experience them as an extra burden in an already demanding job:

> In the beginning, teachers were suspicious, as if they wanted to say 'we are not going to have many more meetings, are we?' But what they mean is, 'after class hours'. Because they all have their families and their children. But up to now, it has been very good that the training sessions have been organized during class hours. So I can see no reason why we should not continue. I don't find it an extra load on people.
>
> (Interview with headteacher: Devlieger *et al.*, 2003: 41; my translation)

> I think it's positive that it happens during class hours. I mean, it makes the job more fun, I mean, it's not always in the classroom. I think it's a good thing for us. … On the other hand, we have to find a better system to organize things better or, like they say, have an extra teacher to work with our pupils in the meantime … (Interview with a teacher: Devlieger *et al.*, 2003: 41–2; my translation)

Teachers prefer to have inservice training in their own school. Peeters & Van den Branden's (1991, 1992) studies showed that when Flemish teachers follow inservice training programmes, they have high expectations of their working conditions: the room has to be spacious, warm and have good acoustics, technological aids such as video, projector and overhead projector have to work properly, the location must be easy to reach, coffee breaks are a must.

Teachers have high expectations not only with regard to their physical environment but also regarding the support, feedback and materials they are given as part of their inservice training. Thus, they appreciate the opportunity of being able to exchange views with their colleagues and trainers and having follow-up sessions with their trainers after they have tried out something from the new syllabus. In their handbooks on teacher training, Joyce & Showers (1988) and Richards & Lockhart (1994) emphasize the potential benefits of teachers working together and observing each other in their classrooms. As the quotation below testifies, teachers can also act as excellent coaches for each other partly because they have had similar experiences, worries or problems. Two teachers potentially have more experience and ideas than one, and it is likely that teachers are going to be more open to the ideas and advice they receive from colleagues than to those coming from an external inservice trainer not least because their colleagues' ideas have stood the test of classroom practice (in the very same school). Furthermore, if teachers of the same school can visit each other's classrooms, their co-operation may lead to more coherent school language policies: 'I love working together with other teachers because you have more ideas, you know much better what to do and what not to do, what to stick to, at what level the children are, where you should tune in. I think it's going to happen more and more in the future'. (Interview with a teacher: Devlieger *et al.*, 2003: 43; my translation).

In Flemish EPP schools, teachers were encouraged and motivated to team-teach from the mid-1990s onwards. Rather than pulling pupils of low proficiency out of the class to give them special Dutch as a second language courses, teachers were encouraged to enter a colleague's class and participate as the 'second teacher'. This made it more possible for the teachers to support more students or groups of students during the task-performance phase, and to give them the kind of support that addressed their particular needs. The second teacher was also often asked to observe children while they were performing tasks to find out what particular problems they ran into, in order to deal with these at an early stage. Research shows that this system of team-teaching has now been widely implemented in Flemish primary education (Hillewaere, 2000). Teachers find it stimulating to prepare their lessons together, it gives them the opportunity of seeing each other 'in action' in the classroom and of discussing activities afterwards. For teachers, this offers many opportunities to learn about themselves as teachers and to learn from each other.

School-based inservice training can also involve the whole school team. However, rather than giving the team a theoretical exposition

on 'focus on form' or 'task-based reading education', the team can be given a task. For instance, for teams still working with very old language syllabuses and complaining that they cannot offer functional writing tasks to their students, inservice training sessions can be converted to workshops during which the school team develops these kinds of tasks. The school team members work together in groups, receive feedback on their work from the inservice trainer, try out the activities they have developed in the classroom, exchange their experiences during the following meeting, and then draw up the final draft of the writing tasks. School teams can also be invited to visit another school and observe classes there in order to share experiences later. School teams can also be asked to watch video recordings of task-based lessons and discuss whether or not they would run the activities the same way. The main idea behind all such training sessions is not that a single truth shall emerge from them, but that different members of the same school team can learn more about each other's views on language education. They can learn while discussing and negotiating, and while developing, thinking and acting as a team. For some teachers, team building may actually be more important than the potential cognitive benefits of such sessions:

Interviewer: So team training is useful?
Teacher: Yes, certainly, but not so much to acquire knowledge for myself, but for team building, yes, that's it. Eating cakes together.
(Devlieger *et al.*, 2003: 44)

Flemish research into 'effective schools' (Rymenans *et al.*, 1996; De Maeyer & Rymenans, 2004), and into the implementation of educational innovations across the curriculum (Van den Bergh and Vandenberghe, 1999), highlights the crucial role that headteachers play in this respect. Teachers are particularly sensitive to headteachers' support for the implementation of new pedagogical innovations, both psychologically (e.g. by encouraging teachers to try out new ideas, by coaching them, by listening to their worries, problems and needs), and from an organizational perspective (e.g. by passing on information, by facilitating team-teaching, organizing inservice training and coaching programmes, financing the purchase of new materials, etc.). Headteachers can also make sure that detailed planning for innovation programmes is formulated and adhered to. The implementation of educational innovations very often dies a slow death, because no decisions are taken as to 'who in the team will do what at a given moment?' Since 2002, Flemish EPP schools have embarked on implementation cycles of three years. Each cycle starts with a thorough analysis, conducted by the whole school team of the

state of the school with regard to the quality of education it is offering. Out of this analysis, domains of priority are chosen by the school team, and concrete actions for raising the quality of education in these domains are described. One of the domains they have to scrutinize is language education: guided by a set of inspiring questions, school teams analyse what their strengths and weaknesses are with regard to school language policy, and from this analysis, they decide upon a number of actions they believe have to be taken in order to raise the quality of their language education. The coaching provided by the school counsellor, inservice training centre or other external party, is then matched with this action programme. The coach acts as a guide to inspire, stimulate and support the school team to carry out the chosen actions. After the first year, the EPP school conducts a self-assessment of the degree to which their action plan has been carried out, and considers what adjustments need to be made. In the third year, the school is visited by the Flemish inspectorate for an external assessment of the execution of the EPP plan. A positive evaluation is necessary for the school to be allowed to apply for new grants during the following three-year cycle. This illustrates that even at the level of regional educational language policy, Flemish EPP schools are encouraged to improve the quality of their education, and to continuously assess what the value of educational innovations such as the implementation of task-based (language) teaching may be.

6 Evaluating support programmes

On the whole, after 13 years, the implementation of task-based language education in Flemish education, as described in the previous paragraphs, has been a success, especially in primary education. This is empirically borne out in Hillewaere's (2000) evaluation study of the effects of the Flemish government's EPP policy. Her main research question investigated the extent to which the quality of education was improved as a consequence of the Flemish government's support. To answer this question, she conducted classroom observations and interviews with teachers and headteachers in 20 schools; concurrently, language proficiency and arithmetic tests were given to the students. One of Hillewaere's main conclusions is that the EPP policy has been particularly successful with regard to language education. In comparison with other target domains of the EPP policy (intercultural education, prevention of learning problems/remedial teaching, communication with parents), language education shows the strongest effects in terms of implementing educational inno-

vation, both with regard to teacher perceptions and teacher actions in the classroom. The implementation strategy, combining the introduction of materials with regionwide inservice training and school-based intensive coaching, has been very fruitful. Again, Hillewaere's research shows that the implementation of task-based language teaching has not been a matter of 'all or nothing'. Teachers incorporating the task-based philosophy and working with task-based materials, did not abandon their old classroom practices altogether, but created their own personal blend with which they felt comfortable, found practicable and personally believed would have the greatest learning effects.

This is also corroborated in Devlieger & Goossens' (2004) second stage of their implementation study, focusing on the effects of the Brussels EPP support for teachers' classroom practice. Comparing teachers' actions in the classroom with the same teachers' classroom practice at the beginning of the implementation programme three years earlier, the main changes these researchers found were:

1 *Stronger orientation towards functional language goals*. One of the features of classroom practice that has been affected the most by the support programme is the functionality of goals that are pursued by the teacher during language-related activities. In the Brussels EPP schools, language activities are now far more geared towards functional language skills, than to the teaching of isolated linguistic elements (such as words and syntactic structures) or linguistic correctness. Tasks are predominantly seen and used in classrooms as tools to stimulate learners to engage in meaningful language use activities. The extent to which words, strategies and rules are blindly drilled has decreased. The task-based syllabuses that were introduced clearly had a positive impact on this aspect of language education.
2 *Higher quality of the teacher's input*. In comparison with the teacher's input at the beginning of the implementation period, the teachers' input has become more natural and functional. The type of questions the teachers ask provide more room for the children to freely develop their own thoughts and express their own experiences and opinions. Again, there is a link with the use of task-based materials, but the effect is stronger among teachers who were also supported through classroom observation and feedback.
3 *A higher level of involvement and motivation among pupils*. The pupils find the new task-based syllabuses much more attractive and more fun than the older materials. The activities in the

syllabuses that are introduced trigger learner activity and initiative, and are close(r) to the children's personal experiences outside the school.

4 *Lack of transfer.* The above-mentioned effects are more evident in activities that directly relate to topics that were dealt with in the EPP training and coaching sessions than in other activities. In other words, there is as yet no transfer effect of the Brussels EPP support to the rest of the curriculum.

5 *A more functional arrangement of the classroom*. Following the advice of the Brussels EPP counsellors, the teachers have reorganized their classrooms, and have introduced book corners, in which reading materials, headphones and cassette recorders are at the children's disposal.

6 *Effects of guided implementation of syllabuses*. Syllabuses that are introduced without guidance and follow-up by the EPP counsellor have only a limited effect on teachers' actions in the classroom. On the other hand, when teachers have the opportunity to prepare lessons from the syllabus together with the counsellor, to reflect together on the use of the syllabus after lessons have been given, or to be observed while trying out activities and receive feedback, the effects are much stronger. The research also shows that effects do not immediately become apparent, but that teachers need a certain amount of (guided) time to get used to the new syllabus.

7 *Lack of effect on methodological formats*. Despite the coaching and introduction of new syllabuses, Brussels EPP teachers remain reluctant to introduce group work. They clearly prefer individual tasks or lockstep activities.

8 *Need for control*. Teachers remain sensitive about who exerts control over what happens in the classroom. They adopt the task-based principles to the extent that they can still maintain control themselves. Clearly indicative of this tendency, EPP coaching goals have not been reached with regard to stimulating children to try and solve problems they meet during task performance themselves, stimulating interaction among peers, and creating more chances for children to produce extensive stretches of language output.

9 *Effects of needs-based coaching*. Teachers adopt the principles and ideas offered by the Brussels EPP to the extent that they believe this constitutes a relevant answer to the specific questions and needs they have. For instance, for teachers who claim they experience no need to change their classroom practices or for those who have widely differing views on language teaching methodology the EPP support has little effect.

It should be stressed that these research results pertain to effects in the short term. After all, the Brussels EPP support programme has only been running for three years. The teachers whose classroom practice has already been affected, probably can be categorized as 'early adopters' (Markee, 1997) of the task-based innovation. Time will tell whether or not these teachers are the forerunners of a greater implementation of the task-based principles in the Brussels Dutch-medium schools.

Another feature of language education that has changed in Flanders as a result of the EPP and the introduction of task-based language teaching, has to do with the mixing of students into heterogeneous groups (Hillewaere, 2000; Van den Branden, 2003): the majority of teachers have abandoned the practice of systematically separating pupils of a lower proficiency from the rest of the group, in order to give them special teaching of Dutch as a second language. They have become aware of the risks of exclusively relying on task simplification, and of the affective and cognitive potential of working with heterogeneous groups. Many of them have developed the expertise to negotiate meaning with and interactionally support individual learners, and in doing so to cater for their particular needs (Jaspaert & Linsen, 1997). On the other hand, in their classroom practices, Flemish teachers, still seem to be reluctant to systematically introduce group work: many teachers continue to find group work hard to organize, and claim that it leads to chaos and noise, and deprives the teacher of a minimum sense of control in order to feel safe or 'in charge'. So as to comply with the principles of learner activity and initiative that most Flemish teachers and student-teachers now strongly endorse, and as demonstrated by a recent survey conducted by Van den Branden (2003), teachers make ample use of pair and individual work instead.

Jaspaert & Linsen's (1997) study into the effects of the implementation of task-based language teaching on the students' language proficiency involving classroom observations and test administrations in 20 primary schools found a strong relationship between the extent to which the teachers of an EPP school appealed to the learners' initiative during language lessons, and the learners' level of Dutch language proficiency. Evidence of the effects of changed teacher practices on language learning were also found in the Brussels EPP experiment. Devlieger & Goossens (2004) report a pre-test–post-test study, in which the pupils' Dutch language proficiency was measured before the inservice training programme on task-based language education was begun, and at the end of the third implementation year through the use of standardized Dutch language tests. Significant

gains in Dutch language proficiency were found at the level of kindergarten and primary education. These gains were found to be more substantial than the gains made by pupils in Flemish schools with a similar school population that were less intensively supported.

7 Conclusions

On the whole, the above-mentioned research studies show that regionwide, ambitious educational innovations can only succeed if sustained efforts are made: task-based language teaching takes a number of years to become fully incorporated in school practice. Furthermore, the incorporation will have better chances of success if the many different partners, who can potentially act as supportive agents for school teams (e.g. school counsellors, syllabus developers, inservice trainers, school inspectors, and educational policy makers) operate along agreed principles, and have the means and the competence to intensively coach and train the school teams that are involved.

In turn, these various partners will only be prepared to support the educational innovation if each of them can find their own 'truth', and their own 'worth', in the innovative concepts. This is exactly what 'task-based language teaching' in Flanders and Brussels has been able to achieve. For teachers, in search of suitable methods and syllabuses to cope with their low socio-economic status NNS pupils' disappointing academic results, task-based teaching was welcomed as a means to motivate their pupils for school work again, and to raise their functional, academic Dutch language proficiency. For teacher trainers, headteachers, school counsellors and educationalists, task-based teaching was a clear and coherent translation (alongside other techniques such as 'experience-based teaching') of the fundamental turn that, in their view, had to be taken by Flemish education towards more learner-centred and needs-based education. For educational policy makers, task-based language teaching could be conceptualized as a direct path leading to functional language performance, which in turn might lead to increased participation in society and in education. In the end, the strength of task-based language education in Flanders has been its multidimensional character: it has been far more than a pedagogical concept related to language education, but has been conceived as a powerful tool with which to emancipate learners from deprived backgrounds and underprivileged citizens in society. As such, the implementation of task-based language education has gradually developed into one of the emblems symbolizing the fight against social inequity in Flemish society.