



Language Developmental Teaching: A Didactic Approach to Lift Teaching Levels, Retention Rates, Academic Success and Language Skills

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Abstract

Retention rates in the first year of higher education in Flanders are rather low. On average only one in three students succeeds. Research shows that language proficiency is a possible predictor for study success, next to motivation, study method and other cognitive variables.

This paper starts with research results by Artevelde University College Ghent that confirm the correlation between language skills and study success. There was a positive and very significant correlation between the language test scores and the January exam results ($n= 3000+$, $r=0.23$, $p<0.01$), regardless of their field of study (ranging from Midwifery to Journalism to Graphic Design).

To improve retention rates, Artevelde University College Ghent aims to enhance students' language skills in order to boost study success. In Flanders, most language coaching approaches are student-centered and extra-curricular. This paper argues that improving language skills of students also requires staff involvement for sustainable effects. In 2014 Artevelde University College started a continuous professional development (CPD) programme on Language Developmental Teaching for academic staff in different degree programmes. After developing a didactic tool with original class footage and a booklet explaining the principles of the didactic method, stafflecturers were supported to implement it in their lessons by helping to prepare lessons, making lesson observations and giving feedback. In each degree programme one member of staff was trained to coach colleagues in this didactic after original implementation. This train-the-trainer model is considered as a sustainable form of continuous professional development.

The paper concludes with research results of the effectiveness of the CPD programme. The results indicate benefits for the lecturer and for students' retention rates. An interview with the lecturers involved, shows that they are satisfied with the CPD programme. The training not only raised their knowledge of academic language acquisition and their motivation when teaching but also the quality of their teaching. The latter was confirmed by a small, exploratory study. A pre- and posttest of the CPD programme indicates that exam results of over 100 students were significantly higher when the professor took the CPD programme.

Keywords: didactics - language diversity - continuous professional development - CLIL - academic language proficiency - sustainable education

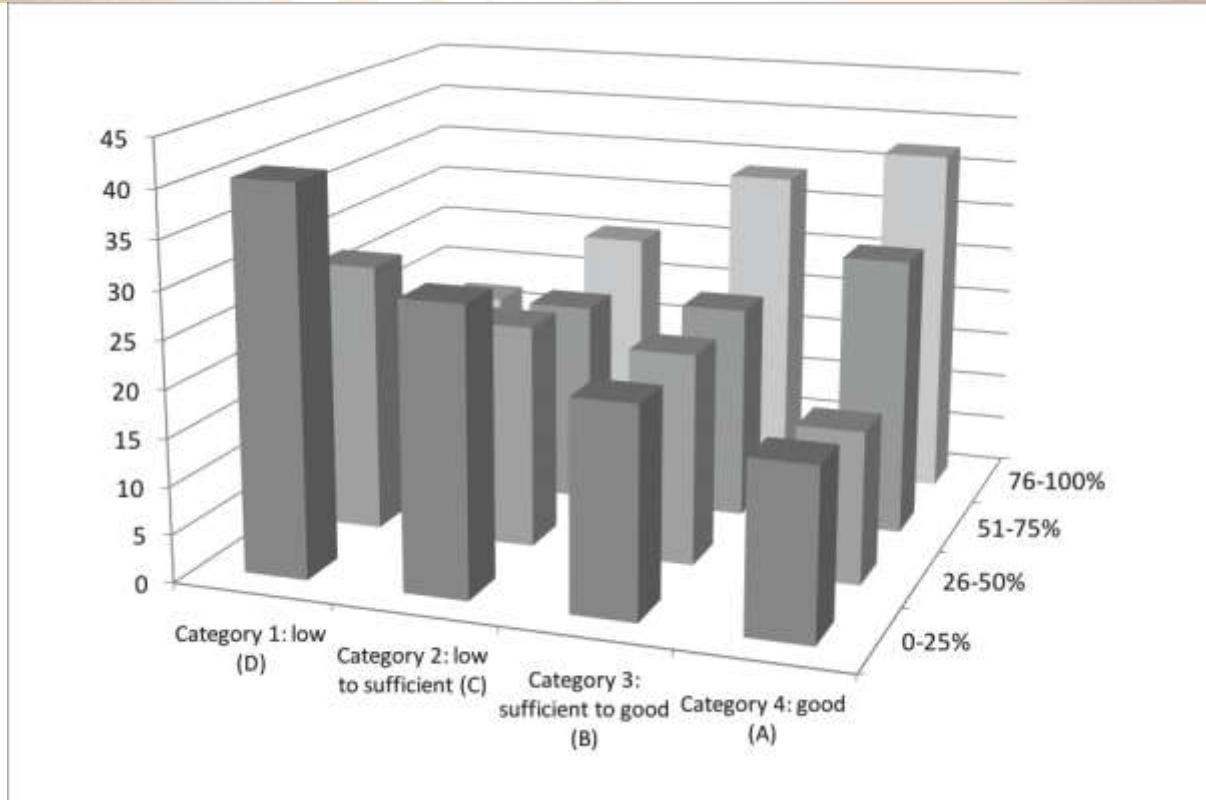
1. Language as a lever for academic success

Artevelde University College Ghent started focusing on language policy in 2006 with a language screening of academic Dutch. In this screening students are tested on 'academic vocabulary', 'spelling', 'grammar', 'formal writing' and 'reading skills'. The goal was to offer students an indication of their academic language proficiency. Students were ranked from A (good), to B (sufficient to good), to C (low to sufficient), to D (low). The result did not have an effect on their curriculum, but aimed to sensitise students with C and D-scores to brush up their language skills by enrolling in one or more of the language workshops offered.

In 2008 the screening was validated and from 2009 onwards all incoming students (around 3,000 a year) were screened. In 2011 the results of the language screening were compared with the academic success of the first semester of the first year. Graph 1 illustrates the results (Spittaels & Vrijders, 2011). A mere glimpse at the graph shows the relation between academic success (Z-axis) and the language screening results (X-axis). A significant correlation of 0.23 was found. ($p<0.01$, $N= 3306$).

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Graph 1 Relation between academic success and language screening
 Legend: X-axis: score on the language test (D (low) to A (good))
 Y-axis: number of students in percentages
 Z-axis: number of credits attained in percentages

The predictive value for academic success applies both for language-oriented study programmes (e.g. bachelor of speech therapy, office management, journalism etc.) as for non-language bachelor programmes (e.g. bachelor of midwifery, social work, nursing etc.). This suggests that focusing on the language policy is useful regardless of the nature of the study programme promoting language as an overall important lever for academic success. A similar study (De Wachter et al., 2013) confirmed these findings.

2. Language-in-education policy model

The research results imply that a language-in-education policy can be used to help students attain the necessary study success. Artevelde University College developed a Flamingo-model to visualise the policy model (visual 1) (Bonne & Vrijders, 2016). The model is a compass showing a twin-track policy that focusses on both screening and remedial teaching as well as on continuing professional development and prevention, on both students and staff, on both productive (speaking/writing) and receptive language skills (reading/listening). In the third part of this paper zooms in on the involvement of (academic) staff (staff and professionalization).



Visual 1 Language-in-education policy compass

3. Language Developmental Teaching

As a way to raise language levels of students, Artevelde University College Ghent started with Language Developmental Teaching (*Taalontwikkeland Lesgeven* – see also Alladin and Van der Westen 2009; Bonne, De Moor et al. 2014; Van den Branden 2006). The didactic method is related to the principles of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) but focuses on native speakers in their native tongue, in this case Dutch. The method looks at how teaching staff can apply language didactics in their teaching to ameliorate transfer of knowledge and raise language levels of students.

In 2014 Artevelde University College Ghent created a **didactic tool** (Bonne, De Moor, Van Hoyweghen and Vrijders, 2014) explaining the principles of the didactic method and illustrating it through original in-class material. The three main principles are:

- Adding context by for example addressing foreknowledge, by asking questions, linking to students' interests, framing the content in the curriculum/your course.
- Interaction: allow and support collaboration and interaction in class.
- (Language) Feedback and support: Offer your students language feedback, visual support and language strategies.

3.1 Train-the-trainer

To put the principles of Language Developmental Teaching to the test, Artevelde University College Ghent started a program of **continuous professional development**. During one semester a language expert coached two 'language coaches' who each coached two lecturers.

The coaching was not limited to a single session of two hours. Instead, lecturers met on a weekly basis with their coaches who either helped to prepare a lesson or observed a lesson and provided feedback in person and via email. During the entire programme more than 15 hours per lecturer were

one-on-one contact moments. Lecturers got feedback on what they tried, what made them successful, why they failed and how they could improve.

The CPD programme was designed to render the language expert obsolete. The expert equipped the coaches with skills to take over the role in the subsequent semester to coach other staff members in Language Developmental Teaching. This train-the-trainer approach is one of seven elements all applied in this CPD programme that ensures the training on Language Developmental Teaching is a sustainable form of professional development (Van den Branden, 2013).

3.2 Effect study

During the first try out of the CPD programma (2013-2014) four lecturers, employed in the Bachelor of Nursing, were trained. A quasi-experiment conducted in one of the courses aimed to measure the causal impact of the coaching intervention. Half of the student group (intervention group, N = 104) was taught by a lecturer who was trained in language developmental teaching. The other half (control group, N = 106) was taught by a lecturer. This research design implies the assumption that the first lecturer is better at Language Developmental Teaching than the second one.

The analyses comparing the two groups reveal that the average result of the interventions group is significantly higher than the average result in the control group. ($t=2,40$; $p<.05$). As table 1 shows, the difference is roughly 1 out of 20 marks.

Table 1: Quasi-experiment on the effect of Language Developmental Teaching

	Number of students (N)	Average exam result on 20 M (SD)
Intervention group	104	13,93/20* (3,103)
Control groep	106	13,03/20 (2,181)

* $p < .05$

These results confirm the findings of other studies (a.o. Elbers, 2013) on the effect of Language Developmental Teaching. Although the exploratory study knows a number of limitations, since aspects such as cognition, study skills and differences in teaching experience have not been taken into account, it is a first quantitative indication of the effects of the approach.

These positive quantitative results confirm what the lecturers who took the training experienced. They notice that students answer in a more structured way, they use jargon more often and they understand the subject matter more profoundly. The combination of these two results motivates Artevelde University College Ghent to keep investing in a structured Language Development Teaching continuous professional development programme.

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