

Jip and Janneke

THE FIRST GUIDES

WHEN LEARNING DUTCH

Expats actually wanting to speak Dutch in their everyday life meet almost insurmountable problems when attempting to practise what they have learnt. Why? Well, Amsterdam, for instance, has become such an international city that nearly everyone who finds themselves communicating with an expat automatically switches to English.

By Sander van Lubeck

“Wilt u nog wat te drinken bestellen?”

“Yes, I would like another beer.”

“Nog een biertje dus?”

“Yes, please.”

A typically frustrating conversation between waitress Katarina Mlynárčiková and an Amsterdammer. The 34-year-old Slovak acknowledges their good intentions. “They immediately detect my accent and switch to English,

but then I ask them to continue in Dutch.”

Daily practice is essential, Annelies Vermeulen, NT2 teacher at Amsterdam’s Volksuniversiteit, tells us; “One of my students lives in a village near Haarlem. She’s lucky. When she drops by her local baker’s, she *has* to speak Dutch. They aren’t used to customers from abroad, so they don’t reply in English.”

All of which means that teachers have to invent other ways for their students to practise their Dutch on a daily basis. To give them practical experience, Vermeulen asks her students to write shopping lists in Dutch. “They write the lists in class using recipes and words found in *Allerhande* magazine. I also ask them to write out a shopping list at home and bring it to the next lesson.”

Mirjam van Deijl, Vermeulen’s colleague, says that watching school television helps a great deal. “We

recently watched a programme about healthy eating and anorexia. The students learn by listening, and I make them repeat difficult words such as *weegschaal* [weighing scales].”

Van Deijl, who mainly has people such as architects, biologists and business students in her class, focuses on conversational Dutch. “Right from the word go we rehearse: ‘*Hallo. Dag. Ik heet Mirjam. Hoe heet jij?*’ I want the students to interact when they stand in the queue at the butcher’s or at a bus stop.” Vermeulen: “I teach students who have lived in Amsterdam for eight or nine years and who have seemingly coped with learning and speaking the language. They pick up a copy of *Metro* at the station, or they overhear snippets of conversation while strolling along the Albert Cuyp market. All the same, after a while they feel

they are missing out on something.”

Volksuniversiteit Amsterdam runs a monthly NT2-café where expats have no choice but to speak Dutch. Volksuniversiteit students, and their guests if they want to take them along, can gather on a Friday evening at Rapenburgerstraat 73 for a chat and a drink. “It gives our students a chance to chat informally,” says Van Deijl. “We give them a

theme for the evening beforehand, and we follow it up with a short quiz, or a Happy Families type of game. We serve wine and soft drinks by candlelight, and do our best to create a relaxed atmosphere. Some of our less advanced students come, as well as the more experienced speakers. The fact that they can bring friends too, helps them open up.”

Mlynárčiková agrees. She’s only been living in the Netherlands for 18 months and her Dutch is almost

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Jip and Janneke,
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fluent. She goes to the NT2-café every month, taking along her 14-year-old daughter, who is currently attending the Berlage Lyceum school. Her daughter no longer thinks it strange when her mother What-sapps: ‘*Wat ben je aan het doen?*’ “People respond positively when you communicate with them in their own language; they’re pleased that you’re giving it a go. That, in turn, makes me feel good. When they hear me speak Dutch with a light accent they often think I am from Great Britain or Australia. Not so long ago someone actually thought I was from Belgium, so I’m improving all the time!” she says with a laugh.

At a recent expat gathering, Mlynárčiková gave a presentation entitled *Learning Dutch*

Opens Doors. “Ultimately you can survive here without learning Dutch if you have very specialised work. Otherwise you risk only being offered simple, low-brow work. I can see this happening to a lot of people from Eastern Europe. If you want to communicate and work with people either in education, or in some cultural capacity, then speaking Dutch is crucial. That applies to me too. I’m looking for a job teaching art history.”

During their lessons, expats learn something about the Dutch culture, as well as how to speak the language. Annelies Vermeulen points out, “We devote a lot of attention to dealing with everyday habits. People don’t know whether to keep their shoes on or take them off in someone’s home. Likewise, do you use *je* or *u* when addressing the girl at the cash desk? The French often ask what time they are expected when invited for a *borrel*. And the Spanish haven’t got a clue about all the various bonus stamps they are offered when they shop in a supermarket.”

One big misunderstanding is that Dutch is a complex language to learn. Deijl remarks, “Many students speak English well, and the structure of Dutch is relatively similar.” “Dutch grammar is actually quite easy!” Mlynárčiková adds. “Slovak has seven verb conjugations. Here there are only regular and irregular verbs, so that makes it easier.” However, she does

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struggle with placing verbs, “Especially in sentences which begin with words like ‘because’ or ‘but’. If I say, for example, *Ik moet een werkwoord in de zin gebruiken*’; for me, and other foreigners, placing the word *gebruiken* at the end of the sentence is unnatural.”

For Asian people, learning Dutch is more complicated as

they have a lot of trouble with the pronunciation. The *u*, the *ui* and *g* sounds often prove to be very difficult to pronounce. They can be a problem for Europeans too. “Even someone who speaks Dutch relatively well can be heard saying *boerman* instead of *buurman*. For the *ui* pronunciation I tell my students to form their mouths like they’ve just tasted a lemon!” laughs Vermeulen.

Has Mlynárčiková any tips for the many Russians, Italians, Australians and others who’ve come to live in Amsterdam and seriously want to learn Dutch? “The first Dutch book I ever read was an atlas of the world – it was very instructive! I also read *De Voorlezer* by Bernhard Schlink. Most of all I read lots of children’s books, fairy tales like the stories of the Brothers Grimm, and the *Jip en Janneke* series of children’s stories by Annie M.G. Schmidt.” ❧



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