

- *Do you want to learn Dutch?*
- *Do you think it is hard to learn a foreign language?*
- *Do you think Dutch is a particularly hard language to learn?*
- *Do you see the task as a high mountain to climb?*
- *Do you think that learning a language is mostly learning vocabulary and difficult grammar rules by heart, which you find boring and challenging?*
- *Do you think the way to learn Dutch is to go to expensive language schools far from your home, and it will take years to achieve the intermediate level?*

*Well, if your answer is 'yes' to any of these questions, join the crowd!*

*You are not alone!*

*In fact, things are not so grim at all. Read on why ....*

The fact that you are reading this means that you know English (to some extent at the very least). English and Dutch are closely related, share a lot of vocabulary, and originate from the same language: German. Dutch also has a lot of vocabulary in common with the Romance languages, so if you know any of them (Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, or Romanian) you have a huge advantage.

The fact of the matter is that even though Dutch is not the easiest language, by comparison it is only moderately difficult. Take pronunciation, for example. Yes, there is the harsh 'g' sound which can be hard for foreigners, but you do not have to get it 100% right to be understood. Most of you will be happy to be able to *communicate* fluently with the Dutch, which in my book means being able to understand the Dutch and being understood by them - more or less effortless. For me that is what fluency is all about - understanding and being understood, not speaking perfectly.

Many people are afraid to make mistakes, but if they themselves listen to foreigners speaking their native language and understand what is being said, they do not care at all about any mistakes! Just imagine this: someone asks you:

“Where train station? You help, please?”

Now obviously there are several mistakes in these two simple questions, but you get the drift perfectly well, don't you? If you are anything like most people, you understand:

the person wants to go somewhere

does not know how to get there

asks you directions

is addressing you in a polite manner (very important!)

So the message comes across at 100%. Now I am not saying that this level of language mastery is my goal for my students. I have taught students of all possible levels and aim for the best level they can achieve given their talent, motivation, and available time. And believe me or not, but I am just as happy, if not happier, as they are when I notice progress! Progress fuels motivation like nothing else. And of the three factors: available time, talent, and motivation the latter is by far the most important in my opinion.

You might say 'is discipline and a good teacher not important?' Yes, they are important factors too, but if your motivation is very high, you will not find it hard to practice *every day*. Daily practice is the key to learning foreign languages. This is where many people go wrong. Many people think they will take lessons once or twice a week and that is it - they will learn the language. Unfortunately that is not the case. All linguists and language enthusiasts agree on the fact that daily practice is the key. Actually it is easy to understand. Just think about this: *is there anything at all you can think of that you have been doing every day for a year or more for at least half an hour that you find very hard to do?* I bet there is nothing you can think of! So that is the answer right there! Strong motivation makes you practice every day and makes you listen to people who speak the language you want to learn with full concentration and attention. So what method should you choose and how important is a good teacher?

About the method, let me first make one thing perfectly clear: there is no such as thing as the best method for everyone. Everybody is different and has different motivations, different talents, and consequently different preferred learning style. That said, there are a few things one can conclude from many years of (scientific) study of language learning and lessons of people who have successfully learnt many languages. For example it is now known that someone who studies complete sentences learns five times faster than someone who studies single words. Five times faster! Another thing that most linguists and language enthusiasts agree on is not to focus too much on studying grammar rules. Most native speakers are not

able to explain the grammar rules behind basic concepts of their own language, yet they (unconsciously) apply these rules perfectly well! That is not to say grammar rules are useless. I think that sometimes it can be very beneficial to learn a grammar rule, especially if the rule is very simple, like the word 'will' in English to indicate the future (zal / zullen in Dutch). Why is this a good grammar rule to learn? Because it is so simple, yet very useful and effective, it gives students the feeling it is perfectly doable to learn the language (and it is!), which further boosts their motivation. So I teach grammar rules when they are very simple to understand, yet very effective, and when students ask for them.

Now what else can be said about the method of learning / teaching a foreign language? In the free trial class I give I always talk with the student about what s/he wants, already knows, and how to approach the learning process. But most students expect the teacher to suggest a certain method, and I do. My preferred method is to simply speak with the student about whatever comes to their or my mind. Usually it starts with getting to know each other: I will ask them where they come from, what they do, their goals in life, what they like and dislike, and we take it from there. My advantage is: I have travelled a lot in my life, studied many subjects, and am interested in even more subjects, so I am not easily without a thing to say. I am genuinely interested in people and what makes them tick. Getting to know people is what makes travelling and life interesting in my opinion, and what fuels the motivation to learn foreign languages! Most language enthusiasts are very interested in getting to know new people and cultures, and this never stops. I never thought to myself 'now I have talked with so many people, now I know all about people there is to know and there is no reason to go further along the path of language learning'. On the contrary, I now speak Dutch, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and some German and would still love to learn more languages and get to know more people of cultures I do not know yet. The human mind is a mysterious thing, and sometimes you live for years in a country with a different culture from your home country, but you still do not get the feeling you really understand the people at a very deep level.

Or ... you think you do, but you are not totally sure. Not being sure is a good thing in my opinion, because when you are sure, learning stops and you might be (totally) wrong. Of course learning about new cultures and getting to know new people is not the only reason to learn foreign languages. For many people the reasons are of

economical nature: they want to work in a certain country and that requires them to learn the language. There is nothing wrong with that. Some people only study a foreign language because it happens to be the language in which most has been written about the subject they happen to be interested in.

Former Dutch world champion checkers Ton Sijbrands learnt Russian only for that reason. If you happen to be interested in one very particular subject, I will just speak about that subject with you! In fact, this is an excellent method. Because you know so much about the subject it will be easier to understand what I mean when I talk about it, and this will further fuel your motivation.

I also have students who prefer a more structural approach. They want to use a book, with them I use the 'Delftse Methode' (Delft is a famous city in the Netherlands). Perfectly fine with me! When my class centers around free conversation, I will type everything I say (as much as I can and is useful for the student) and translate it if necessary. *Reading what you hear makes it so much easier to understand!* I want to teach new language elements as much as possible each lesson, but at the same time I think I should make that as easy as possible for the student. There is no use in thinking for a long time about what something means. That is just a waste of time and usually diminishes students' motivation.

In the end it all comes down to this: my lessons are fun, my students feel relaxed, time flies, and when the lesson is over I check what I wrote in Word and record it on a MP3 file. That way students can repeat what they have learnt as many times as they want. I have never had a student who hears something once and remembers it forever. Therefore repetition is very important. I teach quite a lot of words and sentences in an hour (today I typed more than 2000 words during an one hour class!), but the student has the responsibility to repeat it during the week, and when they do they can learn very fast.

I have never had a student I did not like and I have never had a student whom I considered 'stupid', whatever that means. Most of my students are highly educated and highly motivated, just like me, which is the reason why lessons usually work out great. So to conclude, since you read all the way to this point, and since the trial lesson is free, why not add me on Skype (my Skype nickname is miguelholandes40 / [michielsmissaert@hotmail.com](mailto:michielsmissaert@hotmail.com)) and / or email me at [dmsmissaert@gmail.com](mailto:dmsmissaert@gmail.com) to schedule your trial lesson? You

**can also watch some videos from former students on the left or read comments of former students on the right. Happy learning! :)**