The Low Countries roughly constitute the northern part of the Kingdom of Belgium and all of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Although other languages, such as Frisian, are also spoken, the main language is Dutch or Nederlands. This review offers some historical perspectives on the development of spoken and written Dutch; discusses the social context of literacy in the Low Countries; and presents information on the teaching of reading at the various stages. Finally possible directions for future research are considered.

**THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF DUTCH**

The Holland dialect spoken in the areas around the cities of Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht, forms the basis of the standard language of today. Other dialects are still very much alive in both home and community, but the dialect of the provinces of Holland and Utrecht is used in official and more formal communication and is also the basis of standard written Dutch.

Dutch is written with the roman alphabet adapted to accommodate phonemes which did not occur in Latin. In earlier times, variation which reflected dialect differences was common. Gradually, however, there was a move towards a greater uniformity in both spelling and grammar. Important factors in the standardization process were the invention of printing in the fifteenth century, the political unification of the 'Low Countries', and the influence of formal education. A major landmark in this process, which continued rather longer in the case of Dutch than certain other European languages, was the publication of the Siegenbeek's first official rules for spelling in 1804. Since this time, there have been several other spelling reforms the most recent of which was accepted in 1995 by both the Dutch and Belgian Governments.

Sound-symbol correspondence in Dutch is very regular, although there is no perfect one-to-one relationship (Booij, 1995). Departures from regular phonemic mapping on to the orthography are motivated by morphological or etymological considerations. The rule of congruence or uniformity prescribes that the root form must be spelled in the same way as in derivatives; for example, whereas the final $d$ in *goed* is pronounced as /t/ the letter $d$ is used, reflecting its relationship with derivatives such as *goede*
and goedig). The rule of analogy also stresses morphological or syntactic relationships between words. For example, the verb forms ik vind and hij vindt (I or he finds) are pronounced the same, but the different spellings reflect different syntactic functions (Assink, 1985). A third principle is that of etymology. For example, the letters q, x, c, y, reflect the Latin origin of words; the digraph th, pronounced as /θ/ as in thee (tea), is retained in some loan words. Generally, however, the pronunciation of most native Dutch words can be derived by applying the basic rules of grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences (Reitsma & Verhoeven, 1990).

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF LITERACY

As John Edwards (this volume) points out, discussions of literacy need to take into account not only factors relevant to the acquisition of skills and strategies, but also the ways in which this knowledge is applied. Various studies in the Low Countries address these issues. Piek (1995; 1996), for instance, points to differences in reading habits between and within different age groups. She reports that about a quarter of the population above the age of 12 never read books, papers or magazines, whereas approximately half had read at least one book during the month prior to questioning. In contrast, 8 per cent of children between the ages of 7 and 12 report that they never read a book in their leisure time, while about 60 per cent of children in this age range read one book or more every week.

Data is also available on reading habits at home which indicate gender differences. Research using diaries and questionnaires with children between 6 and 16 years of age reveals that children read at home for 25 minutes a day on average; equal amounts of time are spent on reading books and reading magazines, etc. (Piek, 1995). However, girls spend more time reading than boys – about 30 minutes a day, compared with 20 minutes. No significant relationships have been found between the amount of time devoted to literacy activities and social background, except that there is a tendency for ethnic minority children to read less at home (Verhoeven, 1994).

Another variable which has been considered is the influence of television on reading habits. Koolstra (1993) establishes a relationship between the frequency of reading and television viewing: children who watch television more often tend to read less frequently.

Our understanding of reading habits can be illuminated by statistics on the use of public libraries (Piek, 1995). In 1992, approximately 30 per cent of the total Dutch population were members of a public library, borrowing 171 million books in that year. However, a much higher proportion of children regularly visits libraries: 90 per cent of the eight to 11 years olds and 72 per cent of the four to seven year olds. Interestingly, use of libraries