

Computer Assisted Estonian Language Learning

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This study focuses on computer-assisted learning of Estonian, a less taught language, belonging to the Finno-Ugric language family. This study offers a broader analysis of Internet-based language learning, considering both the positive and the negative aspects of this learning method. This article will also discuss the special linguistic characteristics of Estonian that make its learning and teaching via Internet different from teaching and learning of the other languages - when developing learning materials and e-courses, in addition to general didactic principles one should consider the grammatical structure and other characteristics of a specific language.

Impulses for this article came from a course "Estonian course for beginners" that started in the University of Tartu in autumn 2010, and from other courses opened in spring 2011 and in 2012. The idea to create these courses came from developing on-line learning materials intended for self-learners in the framework of international project ONENESS (On-line less used and less taught language course). These one-year teacher-assisted courses are intended for adult learners at the beginner level (A1) and are based on English. On all the courses the students gain introductory knowledge of Estonian and develop active skills in Estonian. Courses activities are structured around access to online resources and communication via social media (Skype). This provides the learners of Estonian with the flexibility of performing drill and practice tasks at one's own pace as well as communicating and cooperating extensively through a computer.

This article also shortly discusses the attitude of the students towards the computer assisted Estonian learning. Data to gain information about student's opinions about the most difficult aspects of the Estonian language was collected via a questionnaire survey.

Introduction

The following article will focus on web-based Estonian language learning / teaching. Estonian, a less taught language belongs to the Finno-Ugric language group and is spoken by a relatively small number of people.

The current short study discusses the characteristics of web-based learning primarily in the light of the web-based courses developed at the University of Tartu, which allow to study Estonian at the levels of 0–A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages provided by the Council of Europe.

Eesti keele kursus algtasemele (Estonian course for beginners), Eesti keele kursus videomaterjalide põhjal (video-based Estonian course) and Eesti keele sõnavara algkursus (Estonian vocabulary course for beginners) help the students to develop different skills and to get acquainted with the grammatical structure of the Estonian language. Courses activities are structured around access to online resources and communication via social media (Skype). The year-long courses include teacher support and are based on English. The courses are available in the University of Tartu learning environment Moodle.

Before the development of the aforementioned e-courses, the University of Tartu mainly compiled web-based materials without teacher support for individual learners of the Estonian language. The University of Tartu Department of Estonian (as a Foreign) Language also participated in the international Socrates Lingua 2 project ONENESS—*On-line less used and less taught language courses* (2004–2006) <http://www.oneness.vu.lt/>. The compilation and use of ONENESS materials was the driving force behind the development of new courses with teacher support.

The need for e-courses with teacher support in the past years arose from the growing number of people outside Estonia who are interested in studying Estonian, but are not able to do so in their home area. The students who used or are using the Estonian language e-courses are from many different countries (European countries, Australia, Japan, USA etc.). They have studied other foreign languages before but these have been Indo-European.

This overview does not explore aforementioned courses in detail, but analyses web-based language learning in general, concentrating on the positive and negative aspects of this kind of learning, basing the discussion on both the experiences of the course teachers and the results of the feedback



questionnaire filled by the students, which helped to gain information about their opinions about the most difficult aspects of the Estonian language.

The positive and negative aspects of e-learning

The positive aspects of e-learning include the possibility to present information in many different ways via the computer—using texts, pictures, graphics and multimedia, which makes computer assisted language learning more exciting and varied than classroom-based learning. Using the Internet allows the students and teachers to communicate and collaborate in a more diverse way.

Web-based learning also allows the learners to plan their own time and choose the order for working through the materials. In the context of language learning, this means that the student can concentrate on a particular skill—paying extra attention to reading or listening.

Flexibility is the key word for good language learning materials. One advantage that the computer has over study materials on paper is that virtually created materials can be quickly changed and adjusted.

In addition to the abovementioned positive aspects, e-learning also has negative factors which reduce the efficiency of web-based learning: limited or non-existent communication with the teacher and fellow members of the group, which prevents the students from getting quick answers to the questions that may arise during the learning process; limited Internet access; time — e-learning requires precise planning and keeping deadlines; limited technical skills — the course developers, teachers and students are not always at ease with technological advancements and they may not have enough computer knowledge to create and use elaborate study programs; insufficient teacher support or technical problems. [1]

The learner motivation is also important. Motivation can be both a positive and negative factor—computers are associated with playfulness and excitement, so this provides the students with extra incentive for learning. On the other hand, technical problems may diminish the learners' interest in the courses.

Estonian language e-courses at the University of Tartu

The teachers and students of the Estonian e-course have encountered the aforementioned positive or negative factors which influence e-learning.

As positive aspects, the students who use Estonian e-courses pointed out the possibility to choose their own learning speed, place and time; the possibility to learn a foreign language that is not taught as a regular course in their home country; user-friendly learning environment, easily accessible information; systematic learning of grammar and vocabulary.

In relation to the negative aspects of e-learning, the respondents pointed out the difficulties with time planning and keeping to the schedule, as well as self-motivation.

The lack of learner motivation is also a problem that arises from teaching the courses. This is even more important in the case of computer-based courses than in regular learning. Lack of motivation hinders teaching courses that last longer.

As the Estonian course demonstrated, limited technical possibilities are also a common problem. As of now, the computer cannot check all the exercise types yet. This becomes particularly evident in case of vocabulary exercises. Thus, the construction of vocabulary exercises should be thought through carefully.

There are learners who are held back by an unstable Internet connection and the courses include exercises that cannot be done in every web browser. There were many problems with typing, for instance, the learners could not find the necessary characters to insert into the text. The problem also lies in some of the characters in the Estonian alphabet, which are not included in other alphabets and require the installation of an Estonian keyboard.

The development of the courses should definitely take language characteristics into account. In international projects, study materials for different European languages are sometimes created at the same time. The technical and methodological framework of the materials created is usually based on the teaching of Indo-European languages, into which the Finno-Ugric languages have to be fitted as well. In addition to following the principles of general language learning didactics, the characteristics of the grammatical system of a specific language should also be considered. Learner feedback showed that most of the difficulties arise from acquainting oneself with the Estonian grammar system. Additionally, the students participating in Estonian courses also admitted having difficulties in learning the vocabulary. According to the students, the reason lies in the fact that they cannot base their learning on their native tongue or the languages they have studied before, since Estonian word roots do not include many words familiar from the Indo-European languages.



Estonian grammar is form-heavy (noun has 14 cases; verb has two infinitive forms etc.). In places where Indo-European languages use prepositions, Estonian tends to use more case endings and postpositional constructions. Additionally, declension and conjugation do not only change the endings and characteristics of many words, but also the length and stem sound groups. Thus, the numerous forms in the Estonian language make it important for the general dictionary used for the course to introduce the main forms of the words as well.

Pursuant to the structure of the Estonian language, the teaching of grammar and vocabulary should be closely connected. In comparison to teaching Indo-European languages, the emphasis should be on teaching grammar, as teaching vocabulary separately is not very reasonable in the case of a language that utilises different forms and has many suffixes.

This should also be taken into account when choosing exercise types. The rapid development of computer software has introduced many new technical possibilities for teaching a language, there is a vast choice of exercise types, learners can be provided with detailed feedback etc. The exercises in the Estonian courses can be divided into two—exercises that are checked by the computer (for instance, multiple choice tests, gap filling and matching exercises) and creative tasks that are graded by the teachers. The computer cannot check creative tasks independently, so one of the weaknesses of e-courses is the compilation of a longer text, creative tasks make up only 5–10% of the overall number of exercises.

Despite technical possibilities gradually becoming more varied, the students found that the technical solutions used for the e-course grammar exercises are somewhat rigid. The grammar exercises in Moodle accept only one correct answer, for example, when choosing short/long pronouns. Thus, the task descriptions should be worded very precisely or the teacher has to use only the constructions that are without parallel forms.

According to the learners, their listening and reading skills developed rapidly during the course. The reason probably lies in the fact that listening and reading exercises are very varied, they include dialogues, commercial and newspaper texts etc.; new course vocabulary is also presented with audio files. The respondents noted that the only way for them to learn Estonian is via listening tasks, as they do not have many opportunities to hear Estonian outside this language environment.

The learners found the pronunciation difficult: there are problems with some sounds that are absent from the learner's native language, and learning to stress properly. Estonian sounds have three different lengths that many learners cannot perceive. Web learners do not have an Estonian language environment—listening tasks and Skype sessions are insufficient for adopting the correct Estonian pronunciation (for instance, to hear the differences between Estonian vowels). The difficulties in acquiring the vocabulary are probably connected to pronunciation problems. A web-based course does not allow the learners to connect certain sounds to their signifiers, which makes learning new words difficult.

The lack of language speaking opportunities is the drawback of web-based learning. The students found that e-learning does not offer enough opportunities to develop their speaking skills. The Moodle materials used in Estonian e-courses do not include exercise types suitable for developing speaking skills, therefore, Skype sessions were the only way to offer the learners a virtual language environment where they could speak Estonian. Meetings on Skype took place after working through the material of every two units, yet the students still found that speaking does not get as much attention as other skills during the course. This is also why the role of Skype communication has been considerably increased when developing new Estonian courses.

Conclusion

It can be said that computer assisted teaching of the Estonian language brought out the same positive and negative aspects that were highlighted in international studies. Many of these difficulties, like limited access to computers, can certainly be overcome over time. The development of new web-based study materials for Estonian courses must consider all the aforementioned difficulties; the specifics of the language in question should also receive attention. The computer is not able to help the teacher grade creative assignments any time soon, so the number of these exercises in relation to other writing tasks will remain small. In addition to that, the computer cannot provide the students with explanations regarding all grammatical nuances.

Communication problems will find a solution as Skype-like programs are developed and perfected and students' speaking skills will also improve. In order to develop listening and speaking skills, more audio, video and picture material characteristic to good web-based language courses should be used. Additionally, developers should collaborate with computer specialists in order to find ways to expand



the technical possibilities of learning environments (for instance, to increase the number of different exercise types, include games etc.).

Web-based language learning certainly has a future, as it allows the learners to study languages that are not taught in the classroom-based courses in their own country and do it at a suitable time and in a convenient place.

References

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