

# Online Estonian language learning

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**Abstract.** This presentation focuses on computer-assisted learning of Estonian, one of the lesser taught European languages belonging to the Finno-Ugric language family. Impulses for this paper came from Estonian courses that started in the University of Tartu in 2010, 2011 and 2012. In all the courses the students gain introductory knowledge of Estonian and develop active skills in Estonian. E-courses include asynchronous learning activities available in Moodle and the synchronous computer mediated communication via Skype. This provides the learners with the flexibility of performing drill and practice tasks at one's own pace as well as communicating extensively through the computer. This presentation addresses the linguistic challenges that the students face. The special linguistic characteristics of Estonian that make its learning and teaching via the Internet different from learning other languages will be discussed. The short overview also discusses the attitudes of the students towards the computer-assisted Estonian courses and considers both the positive and negative aspects of Internet-based language learning. Data was collected via a questionnaire survey.

**Keywords:** Estonian, e-learning, Estonian e-learning courses for beginners, computer-assisted learning of Estonian for grown-up learners, teaching Estonian online.

## 1. Introduction

This short overview is based on the course “Estonian Course for Beginners”, which was created and taught at the University of Tartu in 2010, and on the course “Video-based Estonian Course for Beginners” which was opened in the spring of 2011 (both courses were created and taught by Maarika Teral and Sirje Rammo).

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In 2012, the same authors also constructed a new e-course, “The Basic Course of Estonian Vocabulary”, which focuses on introducing vocabulary to learners on the A1 level. The one year teacher-assisted courses are intended for adult learners at the beginner level (A1 according to the CEFR) and are based on English. Next, we will not only focus on the aforementioned courses but will also expand upon Internet-based language learning, concentrating on the positive and negative aspects of this type of learning as well as discuss the special linguistic characteristics of Estonian that make its learning via Internet different from learning other languages.

## **2. Short introduction of the Estonian language e-courses**

People who participate in the Estonian e-courses come from many countries. The learners have previously studied other foreign languages but are doing so online for the first time. All the courses are available in the University of Tartu Moodle study environment.

### **2.1. Estonian course for beginners**

The course offers a chance to study Estonian by using authentic study materials which help improve different constituent skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking. The course is entirely web-based, to support the learning of Estonian of the growing number of people outside Estonia who are interested in studying Estonian, but are not able to do so in their home area (see also Teral, 2013). The ten lessons of the course cover different areas of life.

Grammar references and pedagogical suggestions assist the student with the exercises. The vocabulary and grammar exercises include tasks with multiple choice answers, matching, and filling in the blanks. The Moodle environment gives feedback to the student during the tasks and it gives the teacher a chance to observe the process of solving the tasks and comment the work.

Meanwhile, students can also get help from various additional online materials: the webpage ONENESS (<http://www.oneness.vu.lt/>) which is intended for independent learners (created by the authors), online dictionaries, links to websites that introduce Estonian culture and life, etc.

The online learning environments cannot check creative writing exercises so these were assessed by the teachers. The students are given feedback on their work in Moodle (in the forums and private messages that are sent to the students) as well

as via e-mail. One of the drawbacks of Internet-based language learning is little spoken communication. One of the possibilities to develop direct communication in the foreign language is to use Skype. We used Skype successfully in video as well as in audio communication.

## **2.2. Video-based Estonian course for beginners**

The video-based Estonian course for beginners was planned to be somewhat methodically different from other language courses. The material of a lesson is based on a video clip. It is especially suitable for students who prefer web-based learning materials with plenty of illustrations. The use of video clips in teaching is also appropriate for introductory courses (Berk, 2009).

As Berk (2009) points out, it is recommended to use short video clips, not longer than one or two minutes, to keep the students from watching the videos passively. Thus, short two minute clips were chosen as the bases of the course materials. Video players allow the students to view the clip several times and work thoroughly with the materials.

## **2.3. The basic course of Estonian vocabulary**

After a year, the two aforementioned courses were accompanied by a vocabulary course, which was created by taking into account the previous experience of composing courses and the wishes and recommendations of the students. The lessons of the course are put together so that they cover topics that introduce everyday life and the Estonian way of living: *nations and countries, institutions, services, appearance and clothing, holidays, climate, nature, travelling*, etc. The course is first and foremost about developing the students' vocabulary on these topics at the beginner level (A1-A2).

The course introduces inter-word relations of meaning (synonyms, antonyms), and deals to some extent with words from the aspect of word-formation properties. In addition to traditional formation tasks, it also includes exercises which help understand the meanings of words and use them in the correct context. The course uses a lot of illustrative materials, such as photos, drawings, and schemes.

## **3. The positive and negative aspects of e-learning**

Carrying out the studies, analysing the students' work, and communicating with them orally as well as in writing raised the need to find out the students' attitudes

towards the current courses. A questionnaire was conducted which was answered by 17 participants.

One of the questions was: what differentiates Internet-based language learning from learning languages in the classroom? Bring out the positive and negative aspects of e-learning.

The following were brought out as the positive aspects of e-learning:

- the chance to study at a suitable pace and at the time and place of own choice;
- not depending on other students or the teacher;
- the chance to study from afar, without attending the classroom;
- a user-friendly study environment, easily accessible information;
- the chance to study a foreign language which is not taught in regular courses in the student's home country;
- it is possible to study grammar systematically and at a pace suitable for the student;
- e-learning improves self-discipline.

The following were brought out as the negative aspects of e-learning:

- e-learning is more time consuming than the students had planned. The students think that work in the classroom would take less time because then the questions could be answered immediately;
- problems with planning the time and motivation;
- lack of competitiveness and little chance to compare one's language skills to other students;
- not a lot of speaking opportunities;
- technical problems.

Several of the positive and negative aspects of e-learning that were mentioned have also been pointed out by previous researchers of Internet-based language learning.

In addition to the general problems of online language learning, the language specific aspects also need to be taken into account when creating the courses. During international projects, study materials are created simultaneously for studying several European languages. Usually, the technical and methodical framework of the materials is based on teaching Indo-European languages, and Finno-Ugric languages have to be forced into the same framework. In addition to the general principles of foreign language didactics, the grammatical structure

of the particular language should also be taken into account when devising study materials and e-courses.

Estonian is rich in morphological forms. In addition to word endings, inflection and conjugation may also change the medial sounds. When introducing vocabulary, the students' attention should therefore also be drawn to morphological word formation.

#### **4. The key issues of computer based learning**

Although computer software offers more and more opportunities, it is difficult for teachers to grasp all of them because language teachers often lack the computer-related knowledge needed to create/use language learning programmes with a complicated structure.

Computer-assisted language learning should not be seen as separate from other language learning and studying forms (e-learning should definitely take into consideration the general pedagogical developments and tendencies).

Limited chances to improve pronunciation and speaking skills have always been considered the biggest shortcomings of computer-assisted language learning. In recent years, more attention has been given to improving speaking skills by using a computer.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Computer-assisted teaching of Estonian brought out the same positive and negative aspects that were highlighted in international studies. Based on initial experience, it can be said that using the computer to teach Estonian at the beginner level is practical and efficient. The development of new web-based study materials must consider the special features of the grammatical structure of the language.

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