

## First Steps of Hermes Offers 4 in 1: Project-based Reflections

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### Abstract

*The current trends in learning and teaching less widely used languages may considerably affect the implementation of multilingualism and preservation of the linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe. The use of ICT in language learning/ teaching has increased accessibility of language resources and their adaptability to individual needs. ICT have changed the interaction pattern between learners and teachers (tutors), they suggest a variety of learning modes and offer better adjustment options in terms of time, place, intensiveness, cost etc. The present paper deals with designing language learning materials; the author reflects on the newly developed course ([www.hermes-world.com](http://www.hermes-world.com)) and shares her observation of the changes in teaching / learning attitudes.*

*The First Steps in Hermes (FS Hermes) project team have produced an on-line and CD-Rom based course in Greek, Hungarian, Lithuanian and Turkish (A1 level CEF); the course is targeted at young learners; it can be used both in class and for self-study. The underlying principle of the course is to meet the actual needs and expectations of the target group regarding their specific attitudes, lifestyle and preferences. The choice of the target group was based on the assumption that, due to the widespread of communication means, the increased mobility and learning options, young people would have specific expectations regarding language learning resources. The initial needs analysis (NA) carried out both in formal (universities, schools) and informal settings determined the choice and shape of the course materials; the results of NA also give food for thought and further research into learning strategies and language didactics in general. The paper presents the content of the course and its supplementary materials – Teacher's book and Learner's Manual, it tracks the main stages of the project work and reveals the dynamics of the creative cooperation between various types of institutions that constitute FS Hermes project team: a publishing house and an IT company (Greece), a language school (Hungary), a university (Turkey) and a language centre for adults (Lithuania). The final conclusions on the course applicability and FS Hermes project results suggest possible future development in ICT-based learning resources for less widely used languages.*

### 1. Introduction

The global changes in general and the changes in the European economic and socio-cultural space in particular have brought about new attitudes to language as a means of communication. Due to low cost flying and little bureaucracy in crossing borders, lots of Europeans often occur in situations where their competence in a foreign language, no matter how rudimentary it might be, is of undeniable practical use. The direct link between mobility of European labour force and European competitiveness is regarded as one of the main ideas behind the process of European integration [1].

The free movement of people across borders in pursuit of personal interests, education- or employment-induced aims have influenced both learning styles and individual learning tasks: learners decide for themselves where and how to study, which languages and to what extent they need to learn. Those who come to study will have to master the language of instruction not just for getting around, but for being able to comprehend and produce the language in various academic contexts.

But even in such cases the target language has to be adequate to facilitate one's adjusting to culture-sensitive aspects and ways of living in a new environment. Although English is the main working language in most international mobility programmes, there are initiatives aimed at promoting less widely used languages, one of them is the Erasmus Intensive Language Courses (EILC) in the less widely used and less taught languages organized in the countries where these languages are used as teaching languages at higher education institutions (see more information and statistics for 2008-2009 at [2]). The figures for Lithuania in 2008-2009 show that the students that took the EILC in Lithuanian (total number 86, i.e. 1.651% of the total amount of EILC for the reported period) come from Germany (22), Italy (13), Turkey ( 11), Poland (10), France ( 9), , Austria (4) Hungary ( 4), Czech Republic (4), Portugal (3), the Netherlands ( 2), Slovak Republic (2), Latvia (1), Slovenia (1).

Apart from Erasmus and other mobility programmes, there has been a substantial contribution to supporting and promoting less widely used languages via EU projects: courses and learning materials in various combinations of languages, many of them are ICT based, see websites <http://www.oneness.vu.lt>, <http://balticlanguages.eu>; <http://vocalprojects.eu> – all the projects include Lithuanian as one of the target languages.

The changes in the acquisition of the less widely used languages in Eastern Europe and particularly in the post-Soviet space have been subjected to a thorough analysis by language policy makers, researchers and language practitioners. Ramoniene [3] presents an overview of teaching and testing Lithuanian as a second /foreign language and their reflections on language attitudes in Lithuania's multilingual setting. Summing up the comprehensive language reform in teaching and assessment of Lithuanian as a foreign language, the researchers [4] agree on the shift to the strong learner-oriented approach. Assuming the possibility and rightness of extrapolating from this conclusion (made regarding Lithuanian) to other less widely languages, we believe that learners and their real language needs and ways of learning should be in the limelight of language material designers.

## 2. FS Hermes project overview

First Steps of Hermes is one of the projects that take advantages of young people's increased interest in ICT-assisted learning languages. As stated in the Application ( FS Hermes No 14396-LLP-1-2008-GR-KA2-KA2MP), the aim of the project is to produce the internet- and CD-Rom-based A1 level language learning courses in Greek, Hungarian, Lithuanian and Turkish (with EN interface) that can be used in classroom and by independent learners. The courses are supplemented by Teacher's Book (TB) and Learner's Manual (LM), both accessible on-line and/or printable.

The project international team represents the various profile institutions:

- Stafilidis Publications – a developer of educational materials (dictionaries, encyclopedias, textbooks and CD-Roms); project co-ordinator;
- 01 Pliroforiki SA – an IT provider in the area of Integrated Education and Training Solutions and Services;
- Tudomány Language School Ltd – an accredited Educational Enterprise that offers various modern language services;
- Public Service Language Centre – a provider of a wide range of language services for adults and an active participant in promoting less widely used languages and modern technologies application in language teaching / learning (see EU supported projects [www.euro-languages.net](http://www.euro-languages.net), ODLAC, [www.linguanet-europa.eu](http://www.linguanet-europa.eu))
- Turkish and Foreign Language Research and Application Centre TOMER, Ankara University – a well-recognized authority in promoting learning modern languages and active international project participant.



Each participant has contributed not only their expertise in designing language teaching/learning materials but, which is no less important, the country- and language-specific approach to methodology and content of the future product. Since the course is to be used both in formal and non-formal settings, it was important to reach as wide as possible range of potential learners: high school, college and university students, as well as life-long-learners who combine studying with other occupation. As in other EU funded projects, the common work has enhanced professional links and networking, which adds to European integration and harmonization of practices in language learning/teaching.

### 3. Methods and Research

The underlying principle of the future product is to fully meet the needs of the target groups: high-school and university students, young adults who study on their own and teachers of HU, GR, LT and TR as foreign languages. The project partners shared their observations of the relevant target group in the respective countries: at the age of 16-25 most young people start high school or university, they also start moving around on their own and are most receptive to new impressions, including encounters with other language and cultures. The specific features of the target group in terms of their learning styles, habits, socializing preferences were considered while compiling Needs Analysis questionnaires, selecting topics, situations and pictures, at further stages of the project. Although the course has been designed for the described age group, the piloting has shown that it can also be used by older learners.

Needs Analysis (NA) questionnaires for learners and for teachers were used to collect data about learning or teaching preferences and previous experience, including the ICT-assisted ways of language learning/teaching. There were also questions about what makes learning/teaching materials more or less attractive, what kind of support learners / teachers need, which aspects are decisive in choosing ways of learning/teaching. NA was conducted in all the project countries, there were also responses from learners of the relevant languages in other countries. In total 365 responses were received from learners (238) and teachers (127). The findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Learners:
  - Over 95 % of the respondents are computer literate and have computer access either at school or home or both;
  - Over 30 % of the respondents have tried ICT-assisted learning; one third of them quitted before completing the course (main reasons - lack of or insufficient assistance from teachers, not interesting materials, too complicated instructions);
  - Over 80% of the respondent are willing to try ICT-assisted language learning (main reasons – learning can be more flexible , some do not like learning without computer); at the same time, over 50% of the respondents prefer the combination of ICT assisted learning with conventional classes;
  - the main expectations from the ICT language materials are modern /up-to-date content ( topics, exercises); attractive design and user-friendliness.
2. Teachers:
  - Over 80 % of the respondents have access to a PC and/or the internet for teaching / learning purposes at work; though less than half of them use ICT in classroom;
  - 70% of the respondents support using ICT assisted products both in classroom and self-study (main reasons – ICT provide an easy access to teaching / learning resources, they foster interest, save time and break the routine);
  - the main disadvantages: lack of or insufficient personal contact , control and feedback.

The full data of the NA can be seen in [5].

#### **4. The Basic Concepts of the Course**

The NA findings have created a foundation for common work on designing language learning material in GR, HU, LT and TR. All course designers have agreed on the principal features of the future product:

- The content is coherent with A1 CEFR [5]; the course will not assure achieving all the language skills described or passing exams;
- The learning outcomes are relevant to the aims and needs of the learner, they have to be stated clearly in the supplementary materials ( LM and TB)
- To course uses authentic materials with regard to the learner's linguistic limitations; the authentic effect will be achieved by extensive use of real-life pictures that kindle interest and raise cultural awareness;
- The course offers situation-centered approach: the reading / listening materials and exercises focus on the vocabulary (words and phrases) needed to function in a certain situation; structures (basic grammar patterns) are introduced avoiding meta-language, mainly as reference tables and charts.
- The activities focus on the development of oral and aural skills; all the dialogues and most of the texts are recorded; learners can choose the mode of performing: listen, read, listen and read.
- The design elements are appropriate, attractive; the course is easy to navigate.

##### **4.1. Course Description**

The course consists of seven modules (Greeting, My Family and Neighborhood, Eating, Shopping, Transportation, Seeing Places, Accommodation) that cover the main areas of everyday life and travelling.

Each module is divided into seven sub-modules: the first six sub-modules present various communicative situations the learner can get involved in: ordering a meal, looking for a flat to rent, taking a bus or a train etc. The seventh sub-module is a revision unit. Each sub-module consists of an introductory text, mainly a dialogue that sets up a particular communicative situation, grammar reference, a list of key words and phrases ( recorded and translated into English), and a set of three exercises to practice in using the words and grammar patters of the sub-module. A distinctive feature of the course is a strong emotive impact produced by the authentic views (panoramic pictures with on-demand "hotspots") of the places and people in Greece, Turkey, Hungary and Lithuania. The initial piloting results have shown that, driven by natural for young people curiosity and encouraged by the uniformity in the layout and structure of the courses, many learners tend not to restrict themselves to just one target language, but browse through the pages of the other languages.

Another highly appreciated feature of the course is the option to use on-demand-subtitles for all the dialogues and key words and phrases, which is essential for beginners.

The Learner's Manual contains a short motivating description of the learning materials and technical options. It also introduces the learning strategies and attitudes needed by autonomous learners. Beginners in self-studying will learn how to set realistic goals and arrange studies, how to control one's work pace and to vary activities to make the learning effective and enjoyable.

The Teacher's Book contains a general description of the course and its coherence with regard to A1 level competences. It provides an overview of all the modules ( Aims, Topic & Vocabulary, Language Focus, Skills ) followed by a detailed Task Description (task objectives, developed skills and competences, type of exercise, recommended time, basic guidance in methods and didactics, answers).



As the initial piloting results have shown, teachers find the book very useful, especially for finding the optimal balance between students' independent work and classroom activities. Currently the Teacher's Book does not focus on the applicability of the course in blended learning environment; we assume that further development of the material in this direction is of practical use. It is also advisable to have practical recommendation on tutoring as opposed to teaching [6].

## 5. Conclusions

1. ICT-assisted learning/teaching and resources in less widely used and less taught languages are in demand in today's mobile Europe. The quality resources meet the needs and learning preferences of young people who travel for education, employment or pleasure.
2. FS Hermes course in GR, HU, LT and TR is based on the real needs and expectations of the young learners. The project international team has successfully built on the institutional and national expertise in designing the course content, defining the methodology and quality criteria.
3. The developed materials can be used in classroom and by independent learners; further adaptation for blended learning format is recommended.

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