

News in brief

WELCOME! Linguistic and cultural introduction module for incoming exchange students

[Table of contents](#)
[en français](#)

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WELCOME is a one-year Lingua 2 project aiming at the development of five linguistic and cultural preparation courses for exchange students in higher education. At the same time it wanted to create a generic, transferable technological framework that allows teachers not specialised in ICT to create web-based courses in an intuitive way using the latest pedagogical insights (constructivism). The five courses have been developed as online courses providing exchange students who plan to go to countries where one of the LWULT languages is the official medium of instruction, with the opportunity to become familiar with the language and culture of their host institutions before they leave their home universities. The courses will be piloted this spring and can also be offered with classroom support. The project started at the end of 2001 and ended officially on 1 March 2003, but work continues on it nonetheless. The Dutch course is fully operational. The institutions involved in **WELCOME** are: Universiteit Gent (Gent, BE, the co-ordinating institution), Tartu Ülikool (Tartu, EE), Universidad Politecnica de Valencia (Valencia, ES), Helsingin yliopisto (Helsinki, FI), and Universidade do Porto (Porto, PT). The languages involved are Dutch, Estonian, Spanish, Finnish, and Portuguese.

All five language courses start out from the same language-independent development format designed especially for the project. It was defined in accordance with the principles of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEF) proposed by the Council of Europe. This makes it easy to develop additional courses for languages not covered in the project.

The project has led to the creation of a common web portal called Welcome Web (<http://talenc29.rug.ac.be/welcomeweb>) where all five language and culture courses have been brought together. Tutors with administrative rights can add to and edit the whole website of their course in real time and without needing any special ICT skills apart from word processing. They can also look at students' data, assign students to classes, add modules, edit and add to the hypertools etc... Visitors can access the portal and simulate being a student by logging in as Welcome (username) and Project (password).

Each course consists of a Learning Path consisting of 10 linguistic modules and 10 cultural modules (under Extra Resources). The linguistic modules each have six interactive units. These need a Java plug-in to enable the full interactivity to be accessed (see: http://talenc29.rug.ac.be/welcomeweb/Welcome_installer.html). The interactive units (which are in fact XML files interpreted by Java applets) were designed by each of the five language design teams using a very advanced but intuitive Authoring Package for web-based materials developed at Ghent University. Each module has a number of assignments that students have to carry out either on their own or in collaboration with other students. For this they use the inbuilt and fully integrated electronic forum that allows them to access personal, group, class and course workspaces. Learner support tools such as hyperdictionaries and hyperreference tools (e.g. grammar, course information, FAQ) for each of the languages are an integral part of the project. Special generic tools are used for this. The hyperdictionary can be filled in online by the tutors by means of an integrated HTML editor, or, more interestingly, be built up throughout the course by the students themselves as part of the assignments per module. Each of the courses also includes links to websites containing relevant cultural and practical information about the host institution and the host country, and about the topics and objectives dealt with in the separate modules.

A fuller description of the project can be downloaded from http://www.taalnet.rug.ac.be/Description_of_Welcome.pdf

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