

## MOVING THE GREEK LANGUAGE ONLINE

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### Περίληψη

Η προετοιμασία και διδασκαλία ενός καινούριου μαθήματος προϋποθέτει τον προσδιορισμό και καθορισμό των στόχων που θέλει ο δάσκαλος να πετύχει. Μιλώντας για διδασκαλία ξένης γλώσσας σε αρχάριο επίπεδο, θα πρέπει κανείς να λάβει υπόψη ότι η γλώσσα είναι επικοινωνιακό όργανο κι ως εκ τούτου θα πρέπει να διδαχτεί ως τέτοιο, εφαρμόζοντας αυτό που λέμε επικοινωνιακή μέθοδο. Στόχος επομένως θα πρέπει να είναι η διδασκαλία της γλώσσας ως ζωντανής γλώσσας για να μιληθεί σε σύντομο χρονικό διάστημα. Η ανακοίνωση αυτή θα παρουσιάσει το πρόγραμμα διδασκαλίας της Νέας Ελληνικής ως ξένης γλώσσας για αρχάριους μέσω διαδικτύου. Το διαδίκτυο είναι ένας καινούριος χώρος στον τομέα της διδακτικής πράξης. Στόχος αυτής της ανακοίνωσης είναι να εξετάσει και να αναλύσει πώς μπορεί να γίνει εφικτή η διδασκαλία μιας ξένης γλώσσας στο διαδίκτυο. Και κάτι ακόμα. Θα προσπαθήσουμε να καταδείξουμε ότι μια γλώσσα μπορεί να μαθευτεί μέσω διαδικτύου χρησιμοποιώντας ως παράδειγμα το μάθημα της Νέας Ελληνικής για αρχάριους, όπως διδάσκεται στο Πανεπιστήμιο Νέας Νότιας Ουαλίας στο Σύδνεϋ Αυστραλίας.

In organising a face-to-face course, i.e. one in a 'normal' face-to-face class environment, the aim is to examine both what the student is to learn and to achieve and then map the road to that goal. An online course follows the same process, with the development of a student's knowledge base remaining both the aim and the outcome of the course. The only difference lies in the route taken to achieve this. Though successful online language courses have been created at all levels, this paper will focus on the beginner's Greek course offered at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. The course's online environment will be explained, and elaborating on its key elements, the benefits of and the differences in the pedagogy of each component will be demonstrated.

In preparing the student for the journey, the aim was to keep the aspect of a communicative methodology alive online as it would be in a classroom. This was particularly important as the very essence of language is communication.

Additionally, one has to remain conscious of becoming too excited by the use of modern but often expensive, time-consuming and complicated supplementary software and hardware. This became all the more important when the majority of the online students were older and in most cases, less familiar with a 'virtual' world. The aim was to entice the older students into this new learning environment and at the same time, keep them there. The prospect of learning a new language is challenging enough without adding complicated new computer knowledge to this; therefore, the focus was on keeping the learning concise, accessible and affordable because conversely to a traditional classroom student, an online student is dependent on themselves as both 'teacher' and 'student'.

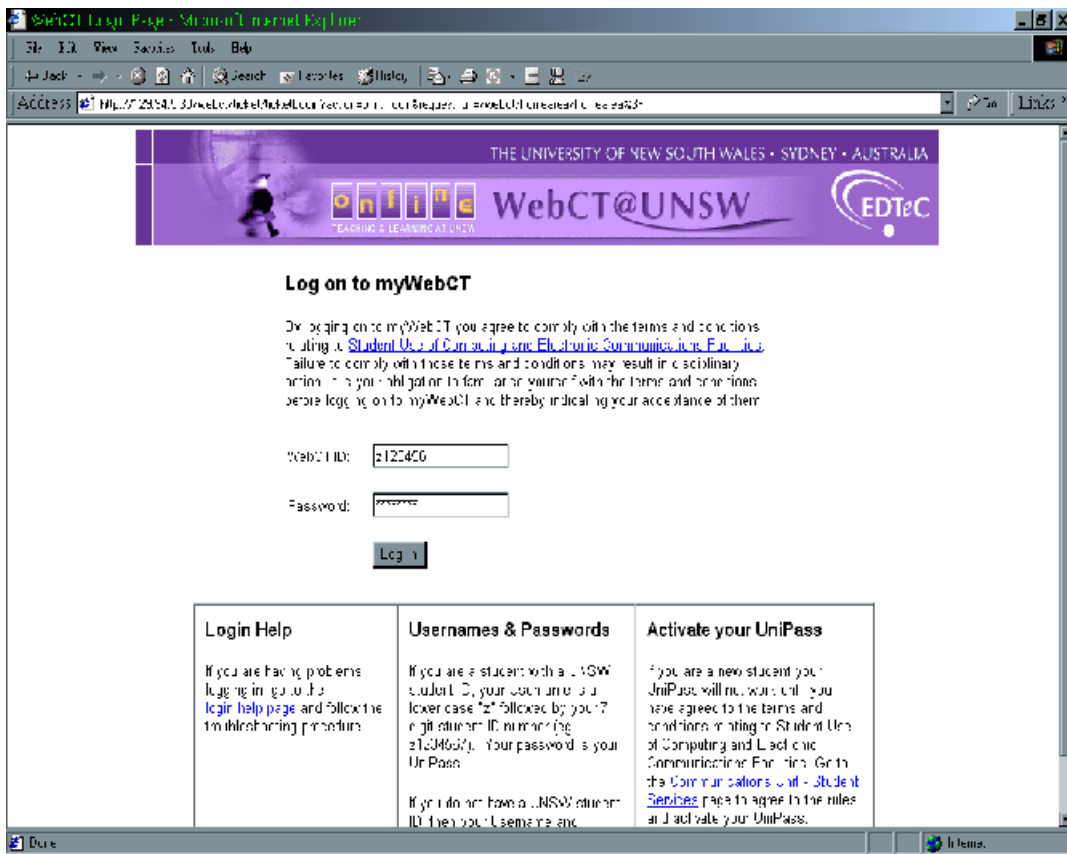
This brings us to the four significant distinctions between a face-to-face learning environment and that of an online one. Firstly, an online student has the ability to create their own individual timetable, and is therefore not dependent on class timetables or group needs. This is a significant benefit to most students, who are increasingly combining part-time study with full-time work.

Secondly, an online student guides themselves through the course material. Though students are still able to contact their facilitator<sup>1</sup> with matters that they may be struggling with, in an online environment, they are both student and teacher.

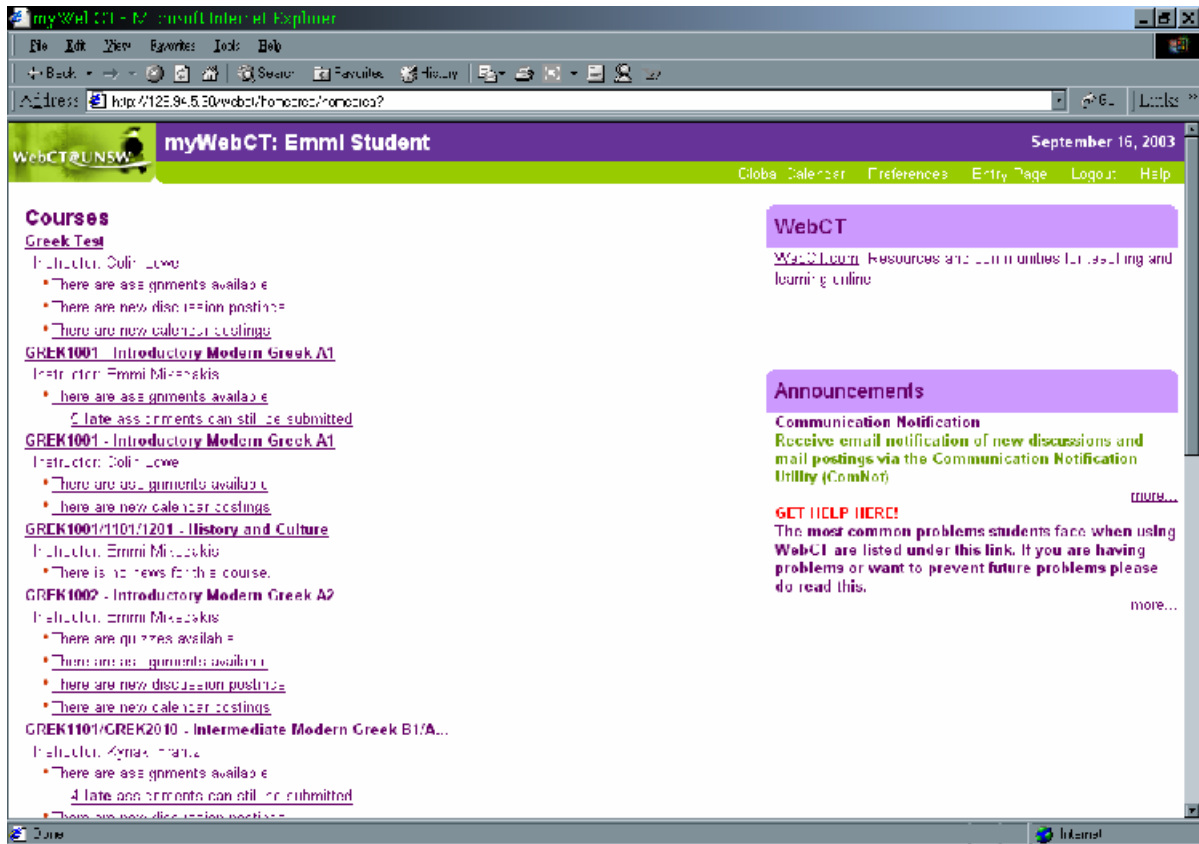
Thirdly, an online student has immediate access to supplementary material (extra grammatical or etymological explanations, links to cultural information, extra vocabulary) without having to rely on group need or time-restrictions in class. This becomes an increasingly important advantage in an intermediate language group where the level of oral, written and grammar skills of students varies substantially within the group.

Fourthly, an online student is able to still interact with other students verbally as well as in written form, even though it is not in 'real time'<sup>2</sup>.

Let us now examine how these important pedagogical elements are incorporated into the 'virtual' classroom.

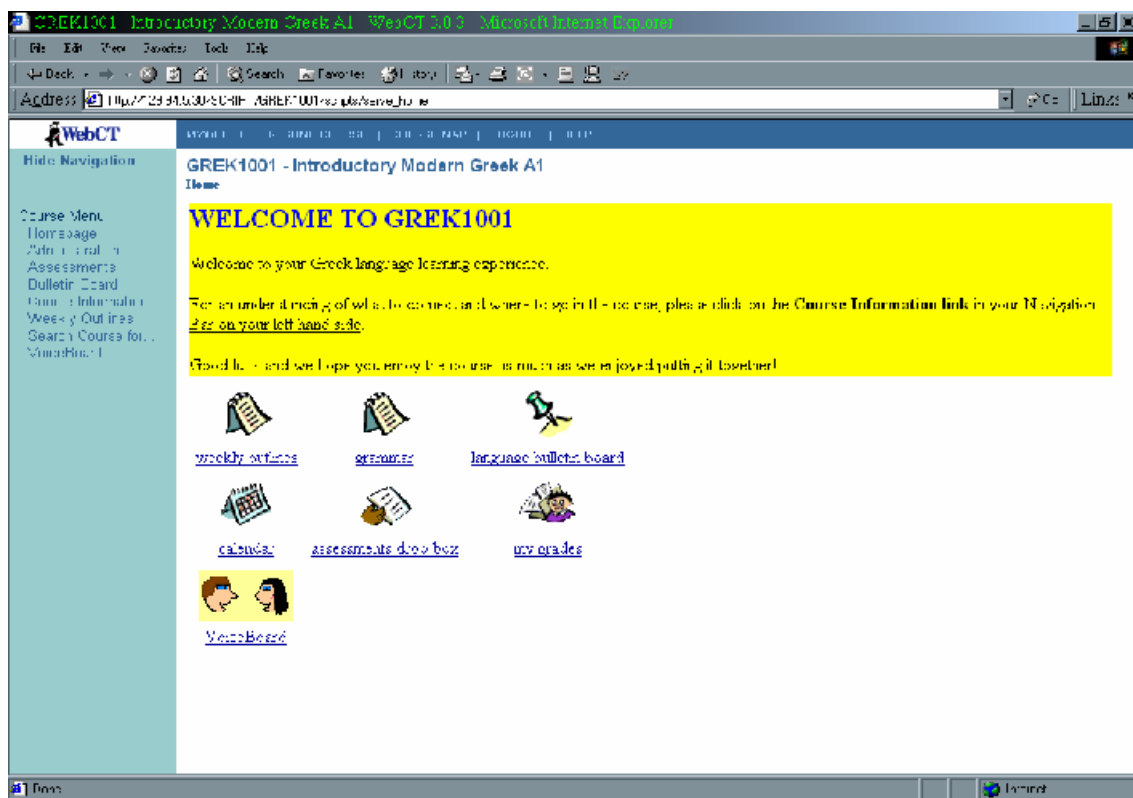


The course was created within already established educational software licensed to the University of New South Wales, called WebCT. A student enrolled in an online course will go to any computer with internet access and log on to the website using their student number and password.



Having done this, they will be faced with all of their available online courses. Each course has a direct link to it, as well as useful quick links to various components within the course such as assessment reminders, or new bulletin board or calendar postings. From here a student can also see any specific WebCT announcements and is provided with immediate links to useful sites, such as the University library, the Modern Greek Studies website of the University, Greek news and other information websites. These can be added with ease by the course co-ordinator and therefore can be catered specifically to each individual course.

Once a student accesses their course, they are faced with a contents page that boxes everything up into easily recognised and accessed components.



The *Homepage* (the main component of the diagram above) and the navigation bar on the left, list relevant information that students can be linked to immediately. The contents of these can be altered and catered specifically to each individual course.

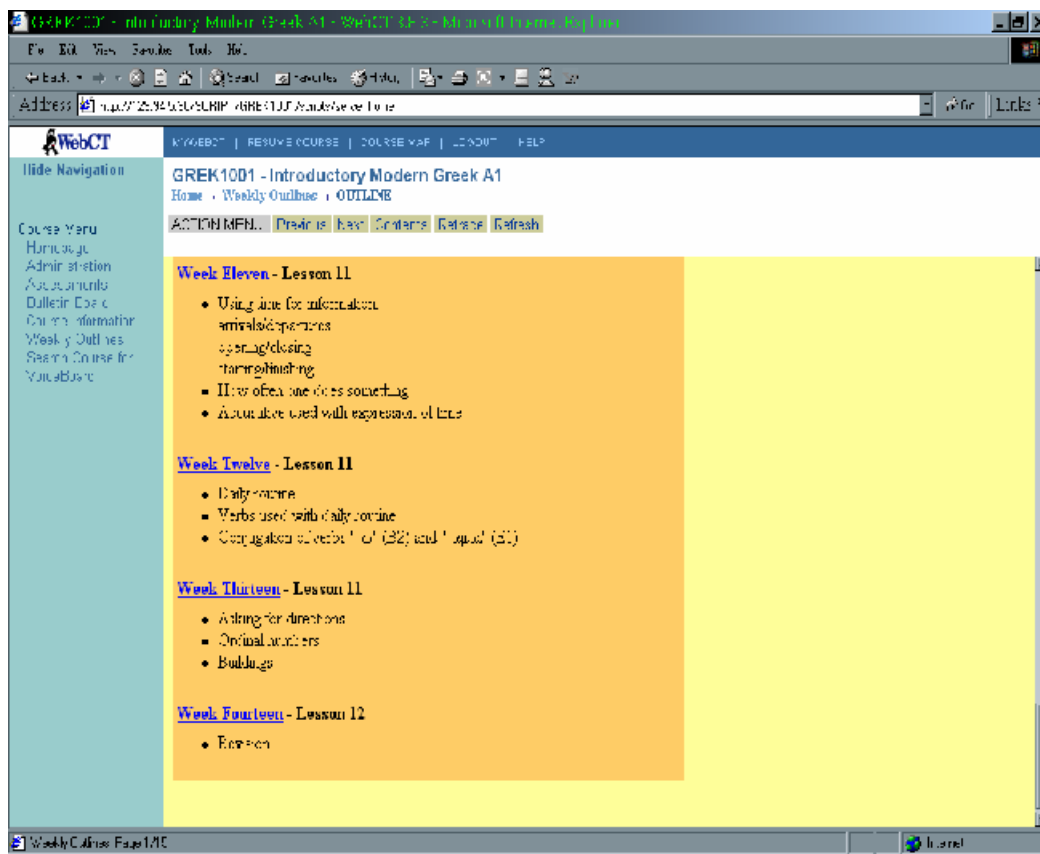
Administrative components (*administration, assessments, assessment drop-box, calendar, course navigation, my grades* and *search course for...*) keep the student organised and informed about any administrative matter concerning the course, the Greek Department and the University. The clarity of these components is crucial to the student's successful use of the programme and therefore, their successful achievement of the programme goals.

Interactive components (*Bulletin Board*, i.e. an online forum and *VoiceBoard*) offer the students an instant ability to communicate verbally and in written form with other students and their course facilitator. They additionally function as tools for the submission of oral and written exercises. The interactivity of these tools helps to combat the isolating aspect of distance learning –the number one concern of distance education students.

The *Grammar* and *Weekly Outlines* components contain the actual language-related course content. The grammar component provides a content list of the grammar that is covered in the course with direct links to each grammatical section. The grammar, as we shall see, is incorporated into various components of each individual week. For the most part, students are discouraged from approaching the grammar as a separate component all together; however, it is provided to be used

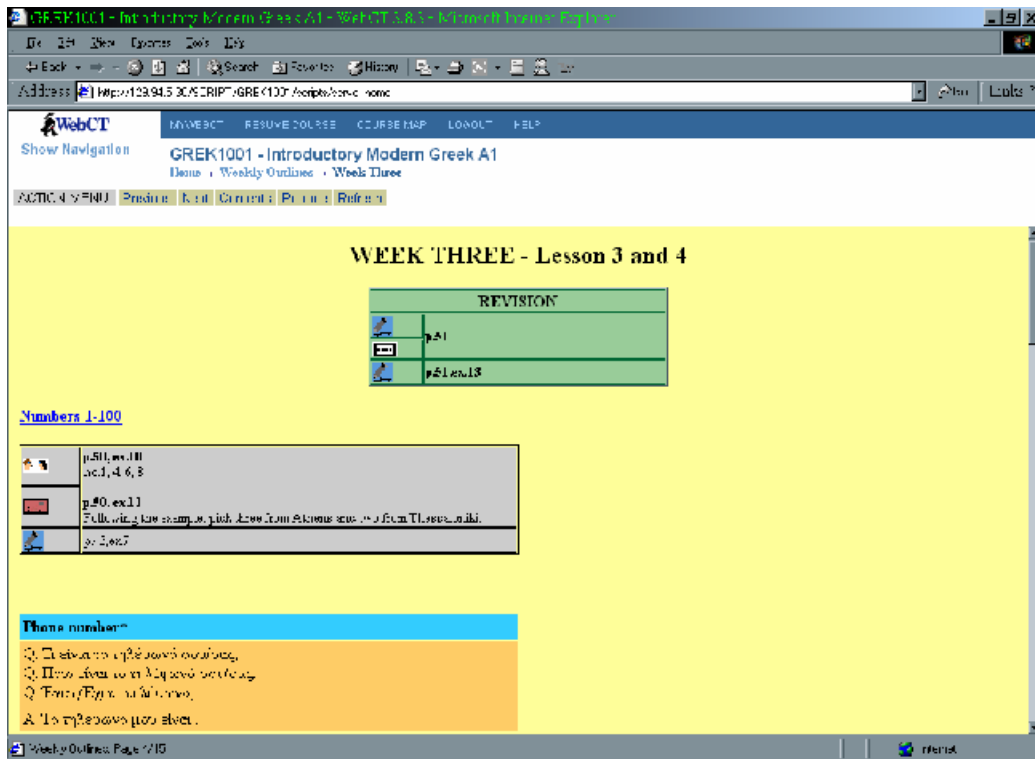
as a reference for students that are eager to separate the two or take a more theoretical approach to language learning.

When you are dealing with students whose use of the computer is limited to checking emails once a week and using Microsoft Word for assessments, the administrative aspect of an online course is paramount to the success of the course. A student must be able to navigate each new learning environment within half an hour, otherwise they will lose momentum, motivation and then ultimately, interest. The more concise a course system is, the more time they will spend on learning the actual course material. This is why the online language courses were created: to be able to teach Greek to a wider audience, seeking a more flexible and self-directed educational environment. Once a policy of self-directed learning is established, the next step is to make the course content as easy to follow as it would be pedagogically beneficial.



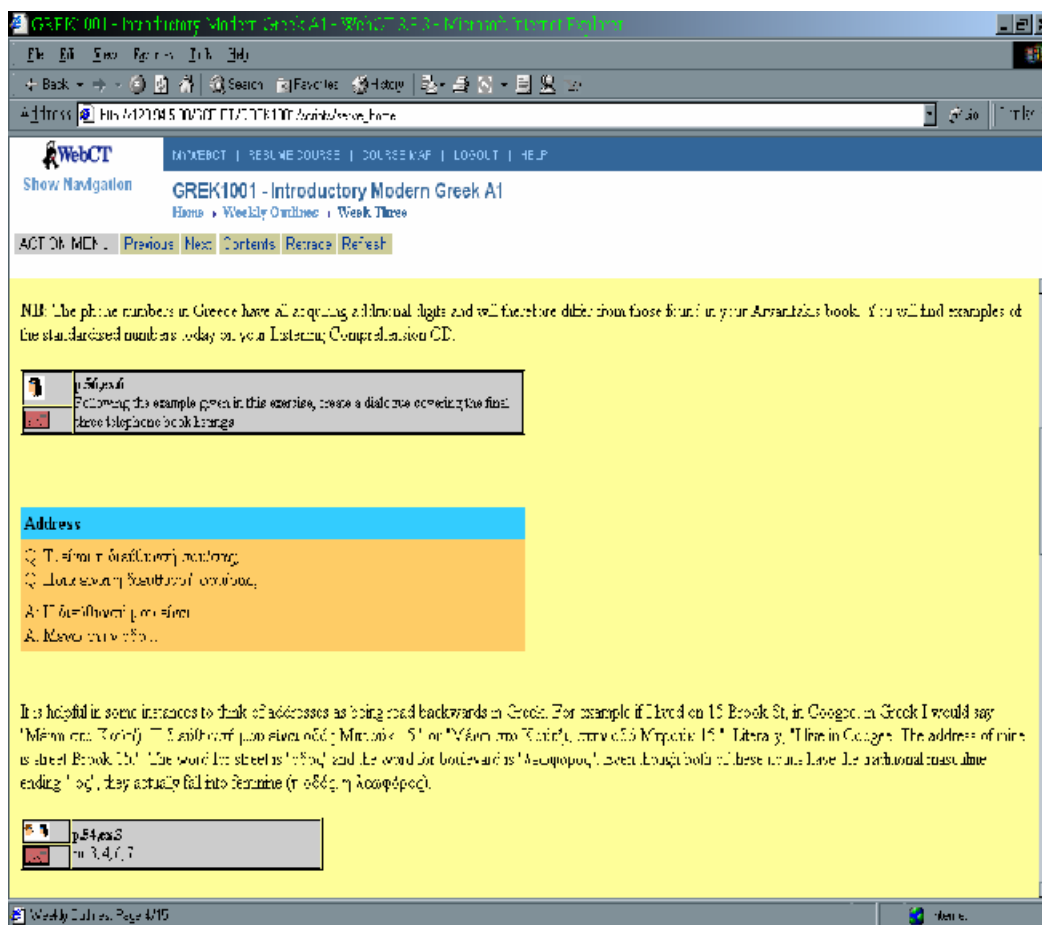
Each online student has to follow the 14-week University Session. Within the online programme, each individual week has key situational components along with their relevant grammar. *Week 8* and *Week 14* are revision weeks where students have a chance to go over any problem areas and re-practise the material that they learned so far. For the intermediate and advanced courses, an additional two weeks of revision are added where oral, aural and written exercises are isolated for the students to complete according to the components that have been covered. These revision

weeks have been very beneficial to the online students, giving them the opportunity to catch up and not feel as if the course is moving too quickly for them.<sup>3</sup>



Each individual week is managed into particular learning tasks. For example, in *Week 3*, we have three learning tasks for the students: *Numbers 1-100*; *how to ask for a person's phone number*; and *how to ask for their address*. Each of these sections is visually identified as separate, i.e. it is boxed-off from the others, as learning separated into manageable tasks is visually easier to tackle and digest.

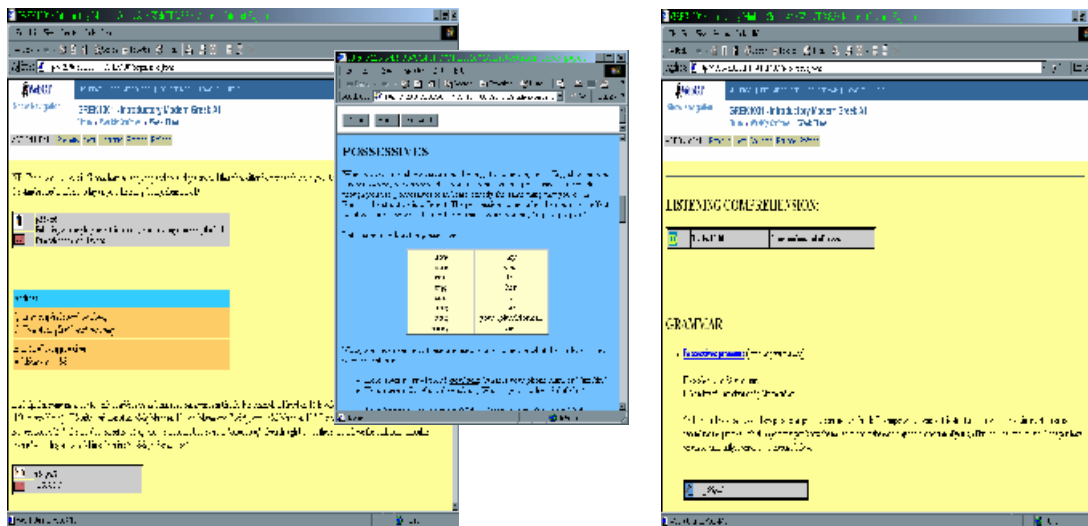
The blue title bar allows students to identify the topic they are learning at a glance, and therefore know instantly what they are going to learn each week. It also facilitates a strategy of avoiding direct English translations in that it becomes self-evident that the *Q*: (question) and *A*: (answer) in the boxes under *Phone Numbers* and *Addresses* will be asking and answering just that.



Following each component, a list of exercises is provided in order for the student to practise and cement the newly learned material. Most exercises refer to the required text-book and tape, though some of these have been created independently for the course.

Emphasis is placed on the re-iteration of learned material through practise. Students are encouraged to do as many of the set oral, aural and written exercises as possible, most of which can be self-marked by checking the answers at the back of the text-book. A selection of exercises from most individual components every week is compulsory and must be submitted to the facilitator of the online course for marking. These exercises form part of a 20% participation mark which further encourages each student to do continuous work. The advantages of this will be further developed later on.

Relevant grammar is linked to individual components within each week. For example, the grammar learned in *Week 3* along with *Phone Numbers* and *Addresses* is Possessive Pronouns and a reiteration of the case system, specifically the use of the Nominative, Accusative and an introduction to the Vocative.

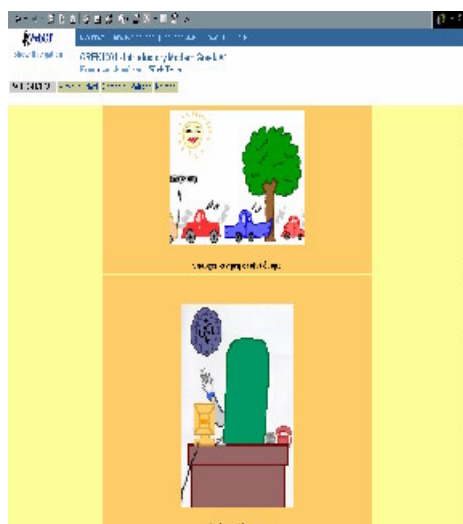
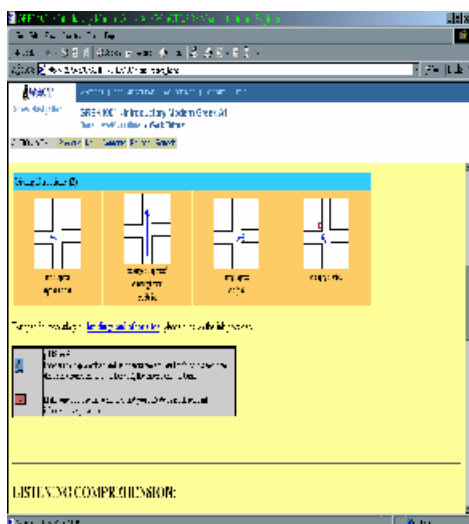


A student can keep the linked grammar open while they are still going through the component that the grammar is being used in. All they do once they finish with the grammar is close the linked page and continue working on that particular week's work, practising with the aforementioned exercises. As a result, a student learns a concrete situation that they can then communicate, along with the structure that lies beneath it. At the end of their situational language components, they have a grammar section which re-highlights what should have been learned and gives each student a chance to revise it –now in straight grammatical terms– with grammar specific exercises. Though, as previously mentioned, the grammar is available as a separate component on the *Homepage*, this unfiltered learning of grammar is discouraged, as for most students it is overwhelming.

Similarly, supplementary vocabulary translated into English for topics such as *Numbers 1-100*, *Occupations* and *Buildings*, is also linked as a separate page to each weekly component. The student can therefore continue working on exercises for a particular component on the main page, with an extended vocabulary list on a linked page.







The first image is from a *Directions* component and the second image represents two of a series of pictures discussing a component on *Daily Routine*. These *Daily Routine* pictures also accompany a monologue on the CD entitled 'What does George do every day?'. In this way, beginner's students are kept *thinking* in Greek and *understanding* in Greek without having to rely on English translations.

In the *Assessment* component, more than in any other, problems were encountered with the compatibility of the Greek typeface across Mac and PC systems. This problem was solved by converting the assessments into a PDF file which allowed all students to view, download and print all assessments without a problem.

The assessment breakdown is understandably quite different from a face-to-face course as students are geographically unable to take formal in-session written tests. External examination halls could be an answer in the future, however for these to work effectively students need to be from centralised areas and so far participating online students are from every corner of Australia.

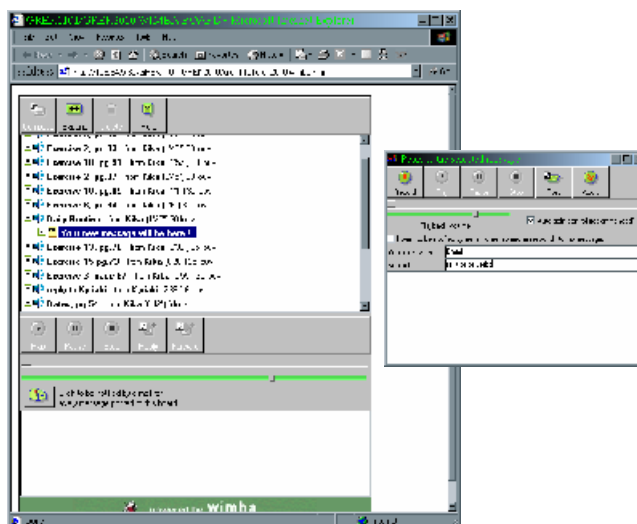
In preparing the assessments there were four things that were of immediate focus: one, that the design of the assessments would make it more difficult for a student to plagiarise;<sup>4</sup> two, that an equal emphasis would be placed on oral, written and aural work; three, that there would be a strong policy of regular and continuous submission of work; and four, that there would be flexibility in the method of submission of written work.

The absence of formal written tests meant that plagiarism became an issue so the grading of each assessment needed to change. This resulted in three written assessments spaced evenly over the session (10 marks each), two oral assessments (10 marks each), one aural assessment (10 marks), and a 20% participation mark involving the fortnightly submission of all required exercises and the student's online participation in the *VoiceBoard* and *Bulletin Board*. The other 20% is determined by the history and culture component that is a mandatory part of all first-year language classes.<sup>5</sup>

A student is required to submit a portion of written and oral exercises every week or fortnight. These, as previously discussed, are found in the *Weekly Outlines* under each related

individual component. Emphasis on continuous submission of small amounts of assessed work has three distinct advantages: one, it allows the teacher to keep apace of the student's learning and any particular problem areas; two, problem areas are solved quickly and efficiently; and three, student involvement with the language has to be continuous to be advantageous and this helps students get into a pattern of using the language every week.

The submission of written assessments has remained very flexible as the student can send their assessments in as a Word file by email, in written form by regular post, or by fax.



The addition of the Wimba *VoiceBoard* has greatly enhanced the online course making it into a virtual classroom where student and facilitator & student to student can communicate orally with each other on a regular basis. Here, all online students submit their weekly oral exercises by recording them straight to the programme with a microphone. Because all of the voice messages are held within this online programme, there are no timely or costly downloads and uploads to think about, just the cost of a microphone (about \$10-\$15 AUS).

Like the *Bulletin Board*, the ability to communicate with others limits the isolation that a distant student often feels. Additionally, through the regular listening of messages from their facilitator and their classmates, a student feels as if they are, indeed, part of a classroom. Students listen to their classmates' exercises and compare their level of learning to these, as they would do unconsciously in a face-to-face learning environment. This comparison is crucial to new language learners, offering students an added motivation to revise or re-cover material that was learnt.

A facilitator of a course can regularly note the progress of their students and correct any problem areas with pronunciation immediately. This fact alone benefits all students, not just the particular student who is being corrected, as all students have the ability to listen to these corrections just like they would unconsciously do in a face-to-face environment. A facilitator can make an oral correction immediately, posting it up on the *VoiceBoard*, and students can access it immediately, quickening the learning process.

This immediate access also greatly benefits the facilitator in that the same correction rarely has to be repeated again to other students, once it is corrected with one of them.

With this online beginner's Greek programme, the understanding of face-to-face versus online Greek language education has indeed been challenged. The outcomes and achievements of both modes are similar; it is simply the journey through the accessing and receiving of information, that is slightly different. By explaining the course's online environment, and elaborating on its key elements, the benefits of a self-directed approach to learning have been made clear. Students are now able to experience a more flexible learning environment –a need that is continually increasing in a predominantly worker-orientated student corpus. With the inclusion of the *VoiceBoard*, online language learning has become an accessible and a pedagogically beneficial learning experience to a beginner's student of Greek. This programme demonstrates that the Greek language can be effectively taught, and more significantly, learned, in an online educational environment.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'facilitator' refers to a 'teacher' of a given online course. Because online courses are self-directed learning environments and therefore, each student assumes the role of both student and 'traditional' teacher, the role that a teacher would ordinarily play in a face-to-face learning environment is no longer necessary. Instead, a teacher is there solely to facilitate and upkeep a student's learning.

<sup>2</sup> 'Real time' reflects the actual time during which a communication occurs; that is, a communication between two people occurs simultaneously, as it would in a face-to-face learning environment where speakers respond immediately to other speakers.

<sup>3</sup> For the online course to be complete students are required to purchase a specific text-book and tape: K. and F. Arvanitakis, *Επικοινωνήστε Ελληνικά 1. Σύγχρονη Μέθοδος Εκμάθησης Ελληνικών για Ξενόγλωσσους*. (Communicate in Greek 1) Athens: Deltos Publishings, 2002. There are three aims in requiring students to purchase these: firstly, most students prefer to have something tangible in front of them to read; secondly, should students not be able to get online access one day, the material is available in front of them, in a different form; thirdly, because the process of learning a language should be continuous, students are able to maintain learning and revising the material once the Session is finished, and their access to the course has ended.

<sup>4</sup> The main problem faced with plagiarism concerns other, more advanced Greek speakers doing the work for beginner's or intermediate students.

<sup>5</sup> The written assessments examine the material covered in each week and consist mostly of free compositions. The formal oral assessments are done over the phone with the course facilitator twice a Session. A student downloads a list of things that will be discussed which they can then prepare for. A convenient time for both student and facilitator is confirmed and the formal oral assessment takes place. The student is discouraged from reading off a pre-prepared sheet as this is taken into account when the mark is decided. The aural assessment is the completion of the Listening Comprehension Booklet and CD that was previously discussed with the *Weekly Outlines*. As this assessment is the most easily plagiarised of all of the online assessments, extra care is taken during the oral phone examinations to ask students many different questions, therefore, checking for discrepancies within a student's various listening comprehension tasks.

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