

Overall report from piloting

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INTRODUCTION²

The beginning of the piloting period was generally mid-February 2015, and it ended at the beginning of May; as there are 10 learning units for every profession, we calculated the overall duration of 10 weeks as an average (as a matter of fact, most of those users who actively participated finished much earlier).

The number of participants for piloting *planned* (figures contained in the application form) was at least 30 per country (= **total of 180** for the whole group).

Effective number of participants: Germany 73, Greece 20, Italy 105, Spain 32, Turkey 49, UK 60. **Total: 339**

All units were ready for use on the SLEST 2.0 website at the end of January 2015. At the beginning there has been some preoccupation that the server might break down if too many users connect at the same time (more than about 100) but already during the first week we found out that this fear was unfounded.

² For details regarding the single countries please read the specific country report.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of the piloting was to test the online language learning materials created with the SLEST 2.0 project, with which learners from some professions in tourism (hotel reception; travel agency; tour-guide; waiter) can study in a completely autonomous way (self-study / teach yourself / maximum learner independence). As it seems that these kinds of activities are still quite unmapped, the aim of this part of the project was to collect important data

- a) by a phenomenological approach (the participants describe and assess their experiences) and
- b) by a quantitative analysis.

With the report the SLEST group wants to contribute to other investigations and research in the same field; another important outcome linked directly to the piloting are the interviews conducted especially with those participants who studied without the help of a tutor (see also the Report from Interviews). It is important to point out that with the interviews we concentrated particularly on the persons who didn't start or abandoned the course, in order to ascertain their reasons for dropping the piloting. Such cases are interesting to study because this has implications for the planning of online language materials and/ or courses.

One particularity of the piloting was that the learners could choose between absolute independent study and the possibility to be accompanied by a tutor, which meant the option to

- contact a teacher in case of need by email,
- receive regularly a written homework, which was corrected and sent back to the student,
- to contact a teacher in regular intervals of time by telephone.

In Great Britain (and *only* there!) each of the tutored groups were given also tutored sessions, because all their students were present in college, which means that online learning was combined with face-to-face learning. This had the added advantage that ECBM could receive immediate feedback about the materials and understand clearly where there were difficulties/problems and what worked well.

Different to all other partners most of the students came to the college with a minimum of B2 level, which is *not* the target of SLEST 2.0; these factors surely have influenced the results of the evaluation – but having clarified this, we trust that this will not be viewed negatively.

Various tutors delivered the sessions with staff support in attendance for administrative and technical help. Sessions included a range of language activities to support learning as planned on the scheme of work. The participants were asked to select one profession of their choice.

In the absence of electronic assessment and tracking in the SLEST software, participants were given a self-assessment sheet to track their performance.

The tracking sheet was used to:

- keep a record of completed units and exercises
- record hours spent using the e-learning materials
- give feedback on software
- give feedback on any other issues including language
- support overall evaluation at the end of the course

The course evaluation feedback and self-assessment sheets were used for data collection and subsequent data analysis. The questionnaire and the interview data was analysed separately.

After the end of the piloting, the partners revised the learning materials to reflect the users' feedback in conjunction with that of the partners. The following data offers background information about the research setting and an analysis of the collected data so that the reader may apply it to similar contexts.

FINDINGS – COURSE EVALUATION

In order to get a valid feedback about the pros and cons of the SLEST 2.0 language learning materials, every participant received a feedback form (see fig. 1) to be returned at the end of the piloting to the SLEST partner responsible.

Fig.1: feedback form distributed among participants in piloting

SLEST 2.0 PROJECT
(EUROPEAN LINGUISTIC STANDARD FOR PROFESSIONALS IN TOURISM)
COURSE EVALUATION

NAME:							
ORGANISATION:							
CONTACT DETAILS: ADDRESS EMAIL / TELEPHONE							
PROFESSION/STUDENT:							
DATE:							
PLEASE TICK AS APPROPRIATE							
INDEPENDENT LEARNER			GUIDED LEARNING (WITH TUTOR SUPPORT)				
TIME TAKEN TO COMPLETE COURSE	15 hours or under		16-25 hours		26-35 hours		Over 35 hours

Thank you for taking part in the piloting of SLEST 2.0 Project. In order to assess the learning materials and make any necessary changes prior to the formal launch, we shall be grateful if you could let us have your views. Please could you complete the following evaluation and feedback form and hand in to your tutor or return directly to us (as applicable).

LEARNING MATERIALS			
		Scale of 1 to 10 (Low to high)	Comments/suggestions for improvement
1	How would you rate access to the learning materials via the SLEST website?		
2	How user-friendly would you rate the learning materials?		
3	Are the materials structured in a way that was easy to follow?		
4	Do you think that there are enough variety of exercises?		
5	Do the scenarios closely reflect typical situations you would come across in your profession?		
6	Does the language content closely reflect typical situations you would come across in your profession?		
7	How much do you think your language levels have improved?		
8	Would you recommend these materials to a colleague in the industry?		
Any other general comments about your experience			

Results

Total of feedback forms (questionnaires) received:

DE 10, ES 12, IT 20, GR 8, TR 26, UK 60. Total: 136

Hours spent to complete the course:

	up to 15 hours	from 16 to 25	from 26 to 35	more than 35
Germany	94,00%	6,00%		
Greece	55,00%	22,50%	22,50%	
Italy	50,00%	28,60%	7,14%	14,26%
Spain	no valid answer available			
Turkey	85,00%	7,50%		7,50%
UK	93,00%	7,00%		

The following table gives the overall findings based on the information provided by the full analysis of all feedback forms (complete dataset), showing a preponderantly very positive nature of participants' views on the SLEST 2.0 online language learning materials:

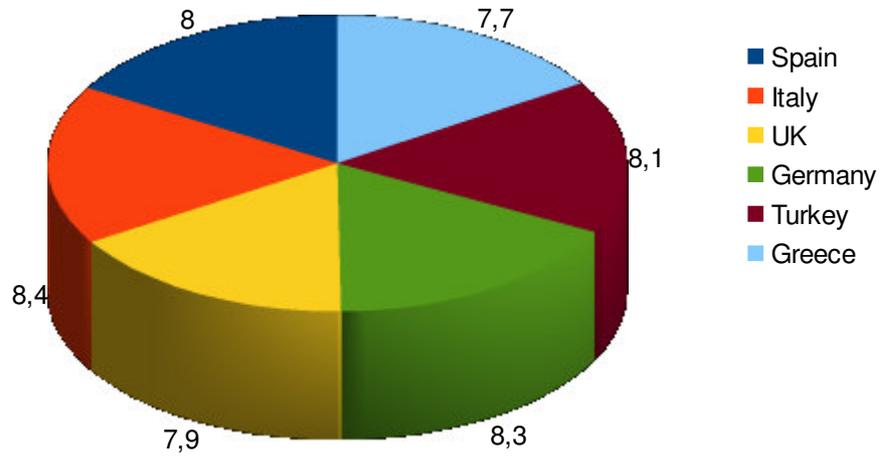
	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5	Question 6	Question 7	Question 8
Germany	8,43	8,75	7,95	8,01	9,02	9,07	8,32	8,82
Greece	7,7	9,3	8,9	8,4	9	8,6	7,9	8,6
Italy	8,4	8,4	8	8,5	8,6	8,74	7,4	9,35
Spain	8	8,5	7,5	8,5	8,5	7,5	7,5	6,5
Turkey	8,15	8,38	8,65	8,76	8,65	9,19	8,57	9
UK	7,87	7,39	8,1	7,35	7,45	7,4	5,0*	6,4
total	8,1	8,45	8,2	8,25	8,5	8,4	7,5	8,1

(* The significantly different evaluation of the participants tutored by the British partner could be explained by the fact that they often started from a much higher level of knowledge (many B2, some even C1!) than the others, as the course level is – as declared in the handbook, A2 or B1.)

Findings in detail (based on the information given by all partners)

Question 1

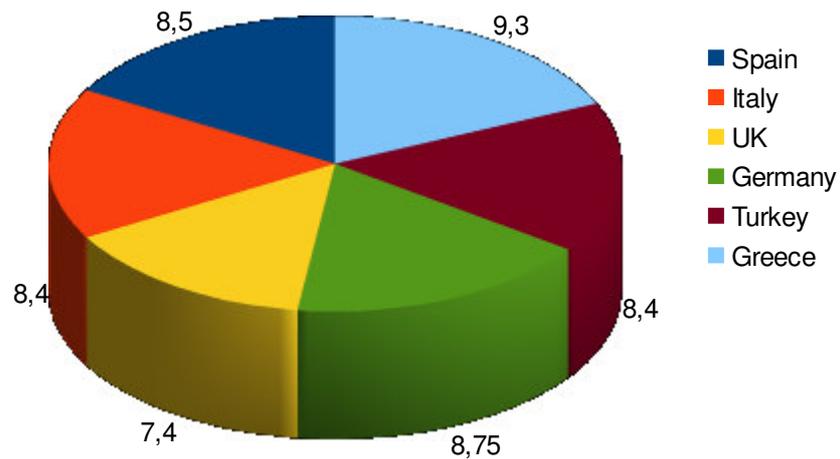
How would you rate access to the learning materials via the SLEST website



total: 8,1

Question 2

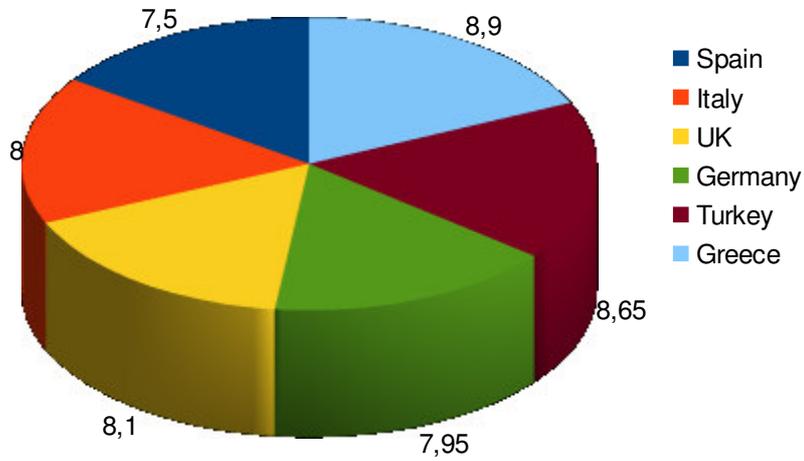
How user-friendly would you rate the learning materials?



total: 8,45

Question 3

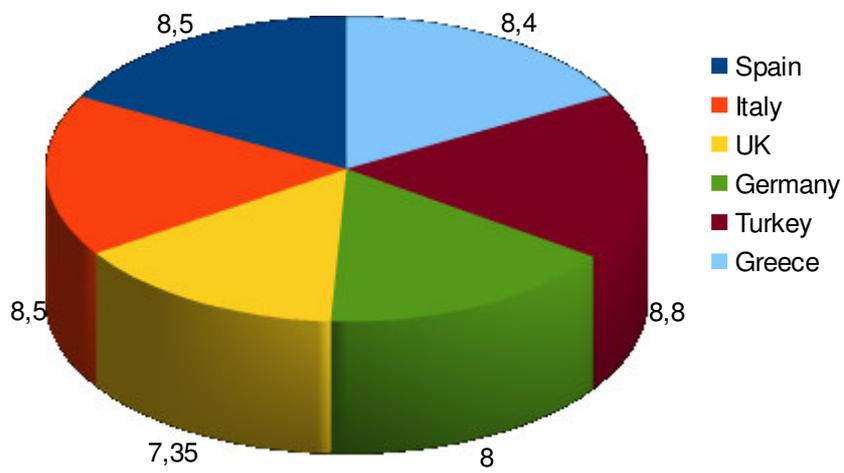
Are the materials structured in a way that was easy to follow?



total: 8,2

Question 4

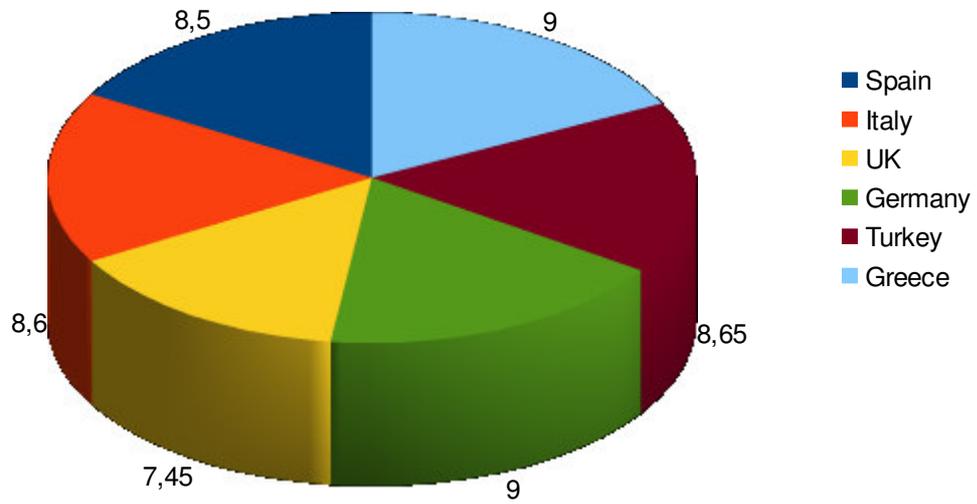
Do you think that there are enough variety of exercises?



total: 8,25

Question 5

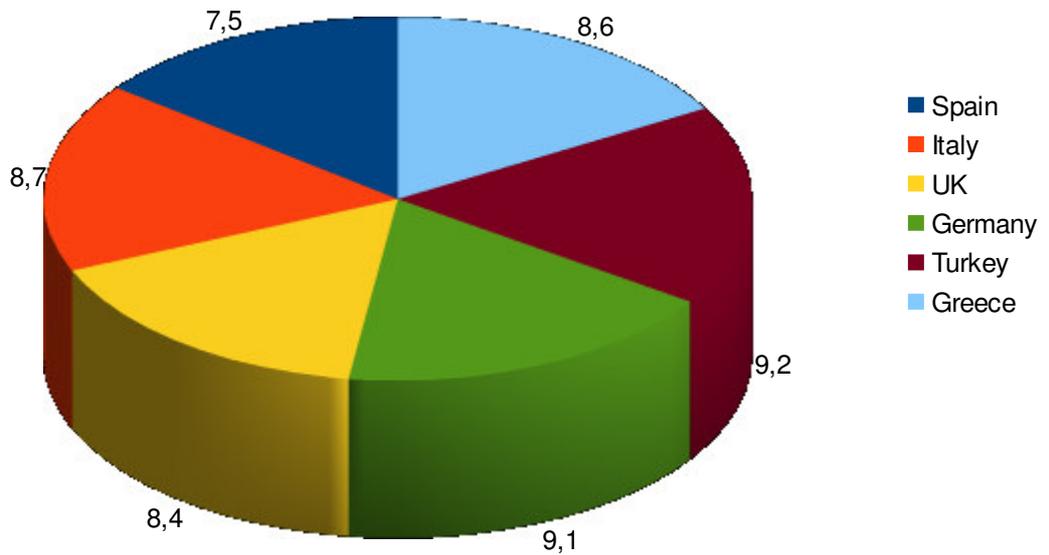
ie scenarios closely reflect typical situations you would come across in your profes:



total: 8,5

Question 6

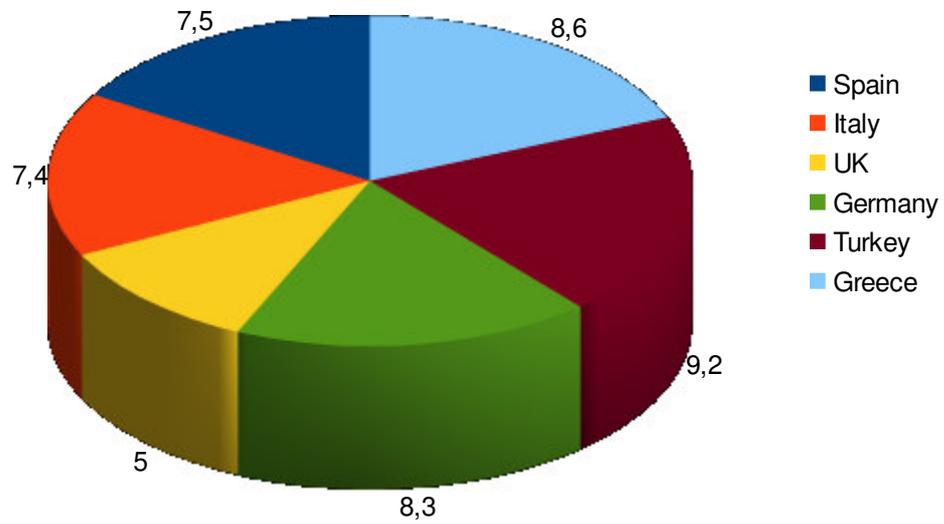
he language content closely reflect typical situations you would come across in your profe



total: 8,4

Question 7

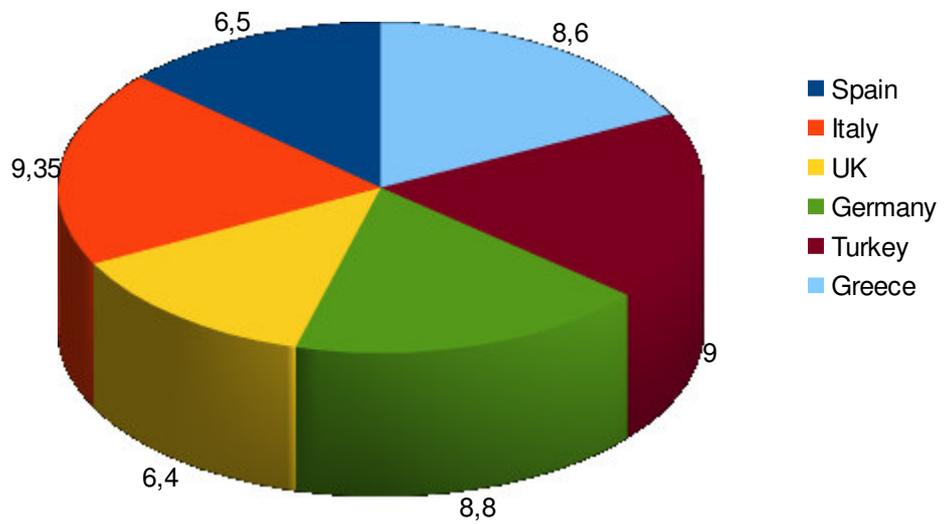
How much do you think your language levels have improved?



total: 7,5

Question 8

Would you recommend these materials to a colleague in the industry?



total: 8,1

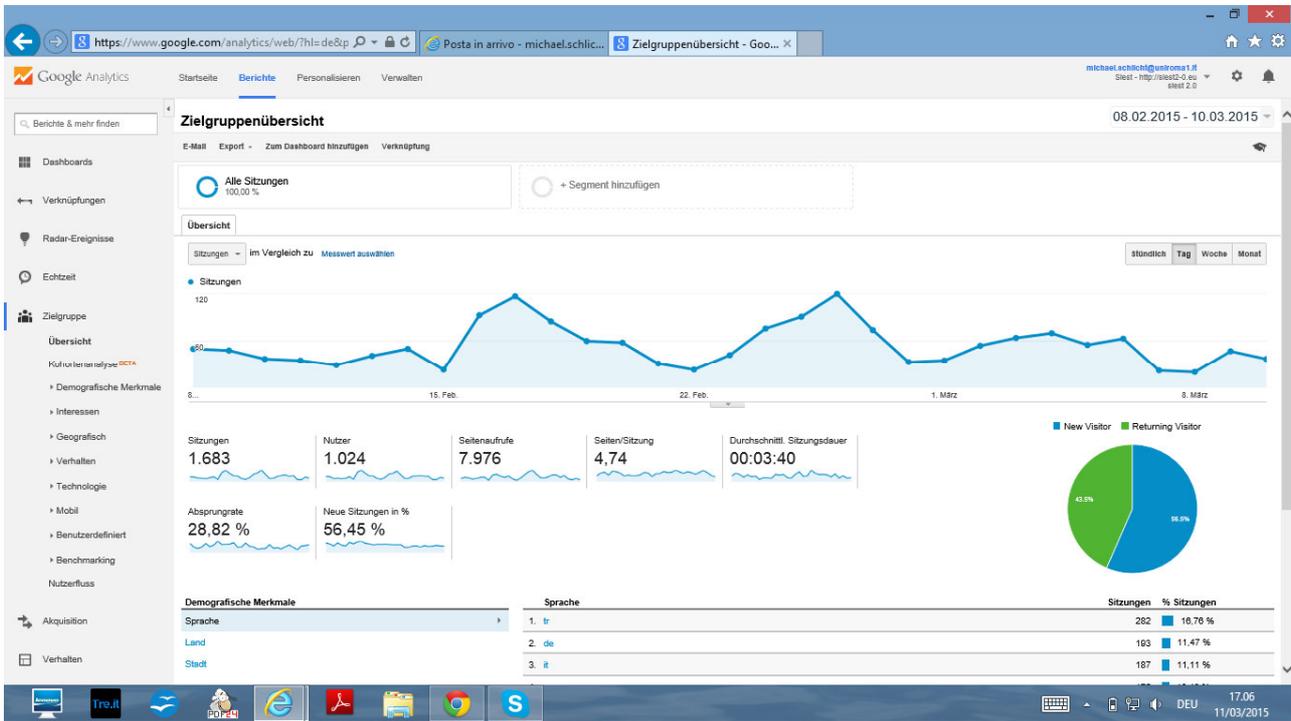
ACCESS TO THE SLEST 2.0 HOMEPAGE (data analysis)

The access to the project homepage has been monitored right from the start with the help of Google Analytics (see fig.2). As stated in the application form, we expected an average of 400 accesses per month after the SLEST 2.0 online language learning materials have been put in full working order (end of January 2015). The analysis of the data received from Google Analytics shows the following results, with access rates far above the expected numbers:

Access to the SLEST 2.0 website

- from 01.09.2014 to 31.01.2015 (in this period the online materials have *not* been yet published): 1.401 hits (average per month: 280)
- from February 1st (start of piloting) to May 31st (shortly after the end of piloting): 4.122 contacts (average per month: 1.030)
- new visitors compared to returning visitors in the same period: 51,9 % - 48,1 %
- number of *users* (same period): 2.207
- users spread out over various countries (same period): Turkey 24,7 % / Italy 23,19 % / Greece 14,41 % / UK 10,82 % / Germany 10,41 % / Spain 6,45 %
(rest: Brazil 1,82 %, Mexico 1,21 %, Romania 0,90 % etc., and for example 11 users from Beijing (Cina), 9 from India, 3 from the Philippines, and even 1 from Cameroon and Cambodia!)
- cities with the highest access-rate: 1. Konya (TR), 2. Athens (HE), 3. Rome (IT), 4. London (UK), 5. Malaga (ES), 6. Milan (IT)

Fig. 2: Screenshot from Google Analytics (period 08.02.2015 – 10.03.2015) as an example for how the access rate to the SLEST 2.0 homepage and the other data given above has been verified.



Conclusion

As it can be clearly seen by these data, the actual number of accesses per month has exceeded every expectation; equally surprising (and gratifying!) is the fact that regularly a great number of new (and not only returning) visitors accessed the SLEST 2.0 website, which means that not only the participants in the piloting sought access, but also an important number of other users. And this even from such "exotic" countries like the Philippines, Cambodia, or Cameroon, where we definitely haven't taken any dissemination activities!

GENERAL NOTES ABOUT ONLINE LEARNING

Nearly all experts in foreign language teaching agree on the observation that for online learning activities the motivation of the learner is the alpha and omega³; international comparisons show that, let's say, "5.000 learners start an online course, but only 100 finish it" (Würffel) - commitment is the key. Beyond that all those who speak from experience underline the fact that online activities need *necessarily* individual support in order to be successful, and equally important seems to be some pressure from the outside (= by the teacher / trainer / tutor) to reach the learning objectives. It might be an audacious statement but it seems that for most people the intrinsic motivation is not strong enough to follow an online (language) course from the beginning to the end regularly and in a well self-organized way.⁴

"The relationship of attitudes and motivation to achievement in a second language" has been underlined by Gardner and MacIntyre already in 1993 regarding second language learning in general⁵, and some years later (1998) Francis R. Jones from the Language Centre of Newcastle University showed with the help of a multivariate analysis that self-instruction alone leads to "low command and high drop-out" (p. 378).⁶ If all this is true for more or less traditional ways of learning, how much more motivation and assistance must be important for online learning!

"Autonomy in foreign language learning has [...] gained a large and enthusiastic literature" (Jones: 379), and "there are indeed strong arguments for autonomous/independent learning [... but] there is little direct evidence that

³ At least I didn't find in the specialist publications any other opinion. See for example the lecture given by prof. Würffel during the IDT (International Conference of Teachers of German) in July 2013 in Bozen; furthermore lectures given by Riechert, Pfeil, Grieshaber and Mahara during the same conference.

⁴ Of course there are a series of other reasons why someone doesn't bring to the end an online course, or at least not in the way he/she should have done it (see also the section "feedback"), but this topic can not be discussed here.

⁵ Gardner, R.C. / MacIntyre, P.D. (1993): A student's contributions to second-language learning. Part II: Affective variables. In: Language Teaching, vol. 26, issue 1, pp. 1 - 11 (here: p.1)

⁶ Jones, Francis R. (1998): Self-Instruction and Success: A Learner-Profile Study. In: Applied Linguistics 19/3, pp. 378 - 408

autonomy [...] improves learning" (Jones: 380). Ten years later, Stracke underlined that there are many who say that the success of blended-learning courses (which in the meantime became 'the new frontier' of language learning) "is a consequence of the failure of many e-learning environments. [...] This failure points to the irreplaceable human component in any learning experience that cannot be ignored."⁷ (Stracke: 59) And more recent experiences changed nothing in the general rightfulness of this observation, as far as languages are concerned.⁸

If all this is true, the real reason why many institutions like universities fall back always more on the introduction of online courses in the didactics of language teaching, sometimes arriving even at the point of proposing them as the sole language learning offer, the rationality behind this must be chiefly economic rather than didactic, and generally against the will of the learner. In fact, the result of a survey carried out by the author at the end of two language courses at the Bank of Italy in 2014 (one only classroom, the other only online) showed a clear preference of the participants for lessons with a teacher, or in the traditional way or at least in blended-learning form⁹. In fact (and as mentioned before), with only online courses we can observe a very high drop-out rate. Stracke found three main reasons for this:

1. lack of support
2. lack of printed materials
3. dislike of the computer medium (Stracke: 70)

This brings us to the conclusions of our experience which show some interesting additional information.

⁷ Stracke, Elke (2007): A road to understanding: A qualitative study into why learners drop out of a blended learning (BLL) environment. ReCALL 19, pp. 57 – 78

⁸ Typical statements of learners: "If you do not have to do it, you simply don't do it." / "I had nothing real in my notebook." / "For me it is important that I know exactly what I am supposed to do." / "I also need this traditional learning." / "I cannot only do it at the computer." (Stracke: pp. 67 - 69)

⁹ 9 out of 9 students confirmed that they were "happy to have done the face-to-face language course". / When asked : What kind of language learning do you prefer?, 11 (out of 18) said: "Exclusively face-to-face", 1 answered "exclusively e-learning", and 6 opted for a combination of face-to-face and e-learning (= blended learning).

CLOSING NOTES REGARDING THE SLEST 2.0 ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING MATERIALS

The observations described in the previous chapter are confirmed by the outcomes of a series of interviews carried out on the phone after the end of the piloting period of the SLEST 2.0 project in June 2015 (see Report from Interviews).

Explanations given for dropping-out from the online language learning activities were (listed in sequence of importance)

1. no or little time (*by far the most important explanation*¹⁰)
2. the project materials were not what the person expected
3. the level was too simple (or sometimes too high)

All these observations lead to the conclusion that despite the omnipresent smartphones, tablets and PC, CALL (computer assisted language learning) and, in our case, online language learning “has not reached the stage of ‘normalisation’” (Stracke:74), and that it “seems important [...] to offer the right amount of guidance and support to suit the needs of each student”, with a “sensible balance between the paper and the computer medium needs” (Stracke:75).

So what is the consequence of all this? First of all and generally speaking, “the encouragement of more student-centred approaches to learning” (Stracke: 60). When it comes to language learning and teaching, it is a sheer illusion to

¹⁰ Unfortunately we had not the possibility to examine this question further (which however could be quite interesting and necessary), because one of the main reasons why one should follow an online course is exactly the fact that the learner is totally independent from time and place! So it quite seems that “lack of time” is more a self-serving declaration for something we yet don't know exactly what it can be.

think that a language learner could arrive at a somehow satisfactory mastery of a foreign language by only following online courses or activities. What they need instead is a combination of various approaches, and online learning activities can only be ONE of many propositions, amongst which we can recite

- connection of learners amongst each other (especially outside the classroom)
- connection of face-to-face phases with online activities outside the classroom
- combination of various forms of learning: collaborative, individual, product orientated, ...
- clear presentation of learning tasks
- regular feedback

And regarding the work with the SLEST 2.0 online language learning materials, all users should be aware of the fact that the exercises on the SLEST 2.0 homepage should be used (and/or)

- a) as support in a wider language learning environment
- b) connected with a blended-learning course
- c) connected with traditional classroom activities
- d) together with the support of a teacher / tutor
- e) as a brush-up of mainly already existing knowledge

However, the generally *very* positive feedback from learners have shown us that we are on the right way and that the products created with the SLEST 2.0 project respond in many parts exactly to the needs of the users. In the next future, we will concentrate on adjusting and up-dating the existing materials with the further aim of completing the offer with new products.

ANNEX: Selected statements from users in various countries¹¹

O.Ç. (Turkey)

It was great fun to participate in this course and I learned a lot more about my profession. I found the exercises very helpful and I will recommend them to all who wish to improve their German.

B.R. (UK)

It's really helpful to repeat and improve your English skills. Although some tasks are a bit confusing, most of them are set at a good level.

G. M. (Italy)

I just started with the exercises but it seems to me that they are valid; I have removed the dust from my vocabulary and the exercises are quite versatile.

N.N. (Spain)

The materials are very realistic.

A.K. (Greece)

I liked the experience very much. The units have a lot of situations I came across.

C.U. (UK)

You did a great job! The website is good but it needs a bit of over watching from the exercises. Thanks for working on this project.

F. T. (Germany)

I would very much recommend these materials.
As far as I can see the language content closely reflects typical situations in my profession.

R.E. (Turkey)

There were very good exercises but in my point of view there should be more dialogues.

¹¹ For reasons of privacy no full names are given; auditors have the possibility to verify the rightfulness of the statements by checking the single feedback reports.

In certain exercises there is a lack in pronunciation.

T.L. (UK)

You can also do the exercises with the mobile phone too.

N.N. (Spain)

The materials can help tourism professionals in their daily work.

C.S. (Greece)

I liked the fact that I could access the program at my leisure, without any pressure nor anxiety.

S. B. (Germany)

I learned a lot of new vocabulary.

The online material is a good possibility to increase the technical vocabulary.

P. M. (Italy)

The materials are very useful, updated and perfect for stepping-up one's linguistic and communicative competences.

Furthermore, the possibility to repeat regularly the exercises, after having comprehended the errors made, permits to learn better the correct terms.

S.Z. (UK)

I enjoyed doing the tasks. To sum it up, it is a very good and helpful programme if you want to improve your vocabulary or work abroad.

N.N. (Spain)

The materials are very orientated towards practice.

A. M. (Italy)

Altogether it was a good experience. I recapitulated some grammar rules and idiomatic expressions which are quite useful for my work. I would have desired more vocabulary regarding history of art history and architecture.

E.J. (Greece)

This program is very useful because it includes exercises that are interesting and are close to the situations that I will probably face in realistic scenarios.

T. S. (Germany)

It was a pleasure to work with this material.
I liked the fact that the exercises were quite varied.

E.G. (UK)

I liked the continuous story.

K.S. (Turkey)

Thanks to this project I have learned many useful things, and I will be able to apply them in my next work experience. I was very happy to get the chance to participate in this project. Thanks for