

Frisian futures

Aletta Stevens shares her experience of discovering a new language through FutureLearn, a new online course platform for CPD and other learning



Aletta Stevens is a freelance Dutch mother tongue translator and founder member of ITI. She is the author of *Looking for Uncle Joop: A Long-Lost Story from Nazi-Occupied Holland*, set in Friesland and to be published in April (Ashgrove). See www.alettastevens.co.uk.

Discovering a free online course in Frisian is one of those magical surprises that the internet brings. I had been on the lookout for such a course for some time, as research into the death of my Dutch uncle during the Second World War had led to several visits to the province of Friesland in the north-east of the Netherlands, and I have written a book to be published next April in which I record his story. Fryslân – as it has officially been called since 1997 – was already familiar from childhood visits, but our family spoke Dutch, rather than Frisian. An extra incentive to study the language presented itself when I discovered that my Dutch grandmother was of Frisian descent. However, the fact that this language is not well known even among linguists in the UK was brought home to me recently when a colleague asked, ‘What is Frisian?’

Frysk (or ‘Fries’ in Dutch) is the second official language of the Netherlands, and a much older language than Dutch. The variety commonly spoken in the Netherlands is *Westlauwers Fries*, the West Frisian variety, rather than the Saterland Frisian or North Frisian spoken in Germany. Frisian is not a dialect of Dutch, but a language in its own right. English, Dutch and Frisian are very closely related, since all three are part of the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European language tree, but each has developed independently. While Old Frisian is very close to Old English, contemporary Frisian is closer to Dutch, although there are differences in pronunciation. To give two examples: ‘Goeiemiddei’ is Frisian for Dutch ‘Goedemiddag’

and for English ‘Good afternoon’; and ‘Oant sjen’ is ‘Tot ziens’/ ‘See you again’.

Frisian is the native language of over 50 per cent of the inhabitants of Fryslân, but many more can understand it. There are approximately half a million Frisian speakers, mostly concentrated in the province itself, but some having migrated to other parts of the Netherlands, as well as abroad. For most, it is their mother tongue, the language they speak at home and with friends. All Frisian speakers also speak Dutch, which is used for more formal purposes. Dutch and Frisian are required languages at primary and secondary school, making

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Friesland officially bilingual, as is expressed in its road signs, eg the place name Sneek is listed together with its Frisian equivalent, Snits. By law, Frisian citizens can use Dutch or Frisian in a court of law or when dealing with the local authority. There are also Frisian newspapers, and radio and television stations. On Facebook and Google, Frisian is one of the languages you can choose.

Rural province

The Fryske Akademy in the capital, Leeuwarden, carries out research

regarding the language, history and culture of the Frisian people, who are proud of their identity. Frisians are especially known for being extremely hardy and tall, and having white-blond hair. The Fryske Nasjonale Partij does not advocate independence for Friesland, but rather protection of the Frisian language and more autonomy for the province. English people are more familiar with the word when an ‘e’ is added – ‘Friesian’ – and usually associate it with the famous breed of cow. This rural province is indeed renowned for its cattle and high-quality dairy products. It is a peaceful area without metropolitan centres and a deliberate policy of keeping out big industry. A popular tourist destination, it is also known for horse-breeding, ice-skating, sailing, lakes, and the unspoilt Wadden Sea islands of Vlieland, Terschelling, Ameland and Schiermonnikoog to the north.

When the Frisian language course was announced, there was a report in one of the Frisian newspapers featuring two of the first participants, an American and myself. At that point – more than five weeks before the start – a staggering 3,700 people had registered, eventually rising to more than 5,000. The three-week course was hosted by FutureLearn, the online social learning provider. This digital learning platform, a private company wholly owned by the Open University, is run from the British Library. Since it launched its first courses in September 2013, more than 4.8 million people have joined FutureLearn, 70 per cent of them based outside the UK.

Distance learning

FutureLearn’s courses are an example of what is commonly referred to as MOOCs (massive open online courses). MOOCs were first introduced in 2008 as a development in distance learning, two of the first providers being Coursera and Udacity. FutureLearn enables a variety of leading universities and cultural institutions from around the world – currently 99 – to offer courses, taught in English, on subjects in which they have expertise. These partners are based in continental Europe, South Africa, New Zealand, Asia, South America

Op internet Fries leren vanuit het Engels

De Friese taal gaat internationaal: De Rijksuniversiteit Groningen biedt gratis een online cursus *Introduction to Frisian* aan. „Ik hoop met Friezen te kunnen communiceren.”

NOOR VLOEIMANS

ONDANKS dat Aletta Stevens (55) al lang en breed Friesland verlaten heeft, blijft het land en de taal haar fascineren. Ze schreef een boek over haar omgekomen Friese oom tijdens de oorlog en wil nu haar Friese taal bijspijkeren. „Ik zocht al een poosje naar een cursus Fries omdat ik graag met Friezen wil kunnen communiceren”, zegt ze. Stevens woont in Zuid-Engeland en vertaalt teksten in zowel Nederlands als Engels. In september start ze met de cursus. Met haar zo'n 3700 anderen. Gerbrich de Jong, projectcoördinator en hoofddocent, kwam op het idee om een cursus Fries voor buitenlanders op te zetten toen ze Nederlanders aan anderstaligen gaf. „Die cursus was een enorm succes. Er waren ook flink wat studenten met interesse in de Friese taal. Tegen hen moest ik altijd zeggen: sorry, er bestaat voor jullie geen cursus Fries.” Tot nu toe. De aanmeldingen komen van over de hele wereld. „De



Aletta Stevens (links) en Jeanette Jones hebben om verschillende redenen interesse voor de Friese taal.

'Foar de kofje net eamelje'

meeste mensen die zich aanmelden, hebben Friese banden. Hun voorouders komen hier vandaan bijvoorbeeld. Er zijn ook mensen die dat niet hebben, die willen gewoon een cursus doen.”

Aletta Stevens is een van de deelnemers met Friese voorouders. Ze is zelf geboren in Indonesië, getrouwd met een Engelsman en haar opa was

predikant in Balk. Voor haar boek over haar gesnevelde oom is ze verschillende keren in Friesland geweest. „Het is zo'n mooi land.”

Jeanette Jones (40) uit Maryland (VS) is ook een van de deelnemers. De Amerikaanse, die verder geen Friese banden heeft, houdt een weblog bij: *Fun with Frisian*. „Ik ben blij dat ik op afstand deze cursus kan doen”, mailt ze. Ze zegt grote interesse in taal te hebben, naast Engels spreekt ze Spaans en Russisch. Haar favoriete Friese uitspraak is *Foar de kofje net eamelje*. „Kofje klinkt zo leuk.”

Fries spreekt ze niet, maar het lijkt volgens haar erg veel op het Engels. „Ik kreeg een jaar geleden een boekje onder ogen van Pieter Sipma. Het was een heel oud boekje om Fries te leren, en dat verbaasde me. Ik leerde een moderne taal met een boekje uit het begin van de twintigste eeuw! Daarom ben ik begonnen met bloggen, om zo mijn vocabulaire uit te breiden en het Fries toegankelijker te maken voor Engelstaligen.” Jones startte haar blog in 2013

en was daarmee een voorloper van de cursus Fries die de RUG nu aanbiedt.

De cursus vergt ongeveer drie uur per week. In die tijd kijken cursisten filmpjes en leren ze zichzelf voorstellen in het Fries. Of ze dat doen is een tweede; ze worden er niet op afgerekend als ze het in het Engels doen. Ook moeten ze kleine schriftopdrachten maken.

De deelnemers leren in drie weken de basis van het Fries. De deelnemers zijn anoniem en zijn niet verplicht de opdrachten uit te voeren. De laagdrempeligheid kan ertoe leiden dat lang niet alle 3700 mensen de cursus afmaken. Deelnemers die dat wel met goed gevolg doen kunnen een certificaat kopen.

„Als je alles meedoet, is het zeker mogelijk het gewenste niveau te behalen”, zegt De Jong. Ongeveer 15 procent van de deelnemers zal de cursus helemaal afmaken, verwacht zij. Een vervolgcursus is er nog niet, met bloggen, om zo mijn vocabulaire uit te breiden en het Fries toegankelijker te maken voor Engelstaligen.” Jones startte haar blog in 2013

and Israel. The British providers include not only Russell Group universities, but also other institutions such as the British Council and professional bodies such as the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA).

In general, the courses do not lead towards a qualification, but many give you the option of purchasing a certificate of achievement, provided you have completed over 90 per cent of the course, attempted every test question and scored over 70 per cent on average across all course tests. If you haven't, you can obtain a statement of participation. These certificates cost just over £30 and are a good way to contribute something towards the running of the course.

The Frisian course – the first of its kind – was presented by the University of Groningen, which has also run a successful Dutch-language course. It is based in the province of the same name next to Friesland and has a branch in the Frisian capital. Although FutureLearn also offers French, Italian and Spanish, it is in no way restricted to language courses. It offers a huge range of subjects, making it an ideal resource for CPD. For medical translators, for example, there are courses on everything from histology and Parkinson's disease to genome technologies and mental health. Other subjects vary from history, archaeology and sustainability to cybersecurity, digital marketing and starting a business, as well as more specialist subjects such as film production, stereoscopy and Japanese philosophy.

So how does it work? Once you have registered online, a welcome email provides links to a video about

Aletta was featured in a newspaper article previewing the Frisian course

how FutureLearn works and a copy of *The Crowd-Sourced Guide to Learning*.

You are encouraged to create a profile with picture, write an introductory paragraph about yourself and connect with others via an online forum. You can like someone's comment, reply to it and/or follow the person. It was fascinating to read where other participants lived and why they were interested in learning Frisian. Some had family connections, including descendants of Frisian émigrés in the US and Canada; others had come to it through learning other Germanic languages, including Old English.

The course started on a Monday, but due to a heavy workload that week, I did not log in until Friday, catching up over an extended session (the recommended three hours per week) at the weekend. One of the disadvantages is that it is easy to be distracted by other priorities. Starting an online course is easy, but completing it requires considerable self-discipline. During the following weeks, I tuned in a couple of times during the week, with a longer session on Sunday.

User-friendly

The course structure is clear and user-friendly. The to-do list is divided

At every step, learners can ask questions and discuss topics, and these comments are visible to all learners

into steps which you mark as complete before you move on to the next one, while a progress bar keeps track of how much you have done.

The content is along the lines of traditional language learning. For example, a step consisting of a video with dialogue has the text printed underneath; this is downloadable, as is all course material. In the next steps, this dialogue is dissected into grammar, idiom and cultural content, and consolidated through audio, tests and short quizzes. Students are also given the opportunity to practise further on the online learning tool Quizlet. During the tests, the lead educator provides a response to each answer, and as this includes her picture, it feels more personal, even though her answers are preformulated.

The week concludes with a background article, and in one instance, a Frisian recipe. At every step, learners can ask questions and discuss topics, and these comments are visible to all learners. Every time another learner posts a reply or reaction to your comment, you receive an email notification, so you never miss a reply (you can turn them off if you do not wish to receive them). This also gives you an incentive to log in again. The more you interact, the more motivated you become and the more you get out of it. At the end of the course, students were asked to write a paragraph about themselves in Frisian and record it on SoundCloud, with the lead educator commenting on each recording.

One of the advantages of FutureLearn courses is that once you have registered, you can access the course even when it has finished. The only drawback is that the lead educator no longer answers questions, although this task is partly fulfilled by other participants. If you spot a course that you would like to do but that has already ended, you can register your interest and will be notified when it is run again. You can even suggest courses for the future. With a constantly growing list, FutureLearn allows you not only to indulge your personal interests, but also to tap into an ever-increasing range of CPD subjects. Now there really is no excuse not to be a lifelong learner.