

# Learning Dutch the Fast Way

A Review of *Home in on Holland*,

the Direct Dutch methodology

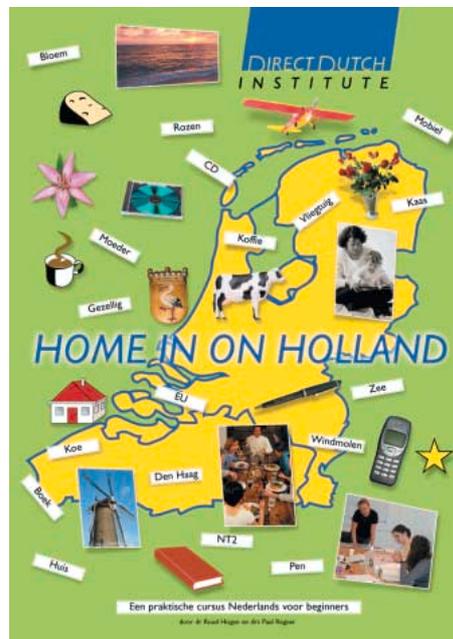
A review by Inez Hollander, Ph.D. Dutch Studies, University of California, Berkeley

**Total immersion...** We all know that is what it takes to learn a second language most effectively. But not all students of Dutch have the luxury of spending a summer in Amsterdam. Until students do, we, as teachers of Dutch, have to make do with artificial language situations in classroom and language lab contexts. This is far from an ideal situation, especially if one does not use the right method. But there is hope. Before I started teaching Dutch at UC-Berkeley, I had taught Dutch to embassy personnel and employees of big multinational companies in The Hague. I was helped by a complete immersion method, which was developed by a language school in The Hague that now has a huge following.

The founder of the school, Dr. Ruud Hisgen, had initially been teaching at the Berlitz School in The Hague. While using the Berlitz method, Hisgen was soon frustrated with the dull and cliché ridden dialogues in the Berlitz textbooks. What is more, he felt that this method barely gave any attention to the very social and cultural dimension of the language. The students were bored to tears and soon Hisgen (a talented author, translator as well as a publisher) was writing his own texts and exercises.

The other gap in the Berlitz method was the lack of grammar. At the time, Berlitz used the immersion method in its most rigorous form, which involved no explanation of any grammar in the student's first language. Especially the intensive immersion classes inundated the students with Dutch but left no room for letting the language sink in or allowing the students to test their newly acquired skills in actual grammar exercises and homework. This was a mistake, or to quote Hisgen: "A brief explanation about the grammatical underlying structure would have saved a tremendous amount of valuable lesson time." After all, Hisgen says: "most students were intelligent adults with college degrees and these people would have caught on quickly provid-

ed they were given a little bit of grammar." Having them guess at the grammatical rules, as the Berlitz method had them do, also involved the risk of guessing wrong and/or learning bad habits.



When Hisgen returned to The Hague a year later, the Berlitz School had gone out of business and he seized this opportunity to fill the void with his own language school. Direct Dutch was founded in 1985 and together with Paul Regeer (and later Mark Vermin), Hisgen developed a new method and curriculum. The lessons, which were in Dutch from the first day the student walked into the classroom, were not as strict and formal as the Berlitz lessons but more casual and with Dutch grammar explained in English. The texts, exercises, drills as well as the role-play situations were filled with humor but also carefully structured and supported with the necessary vocabulary. In addition, as the Direct Dutch website will tell you: "A language cannot sensibly be

divorced from the society and culture that produced it. That's why Direct Dutch pays so much attention to the people, the culture and the country we live in." Culture and humor yes, "nonsense no, so no double Dutch," Hisgen wrote in 1997, in a publication celebrating the twelve and a half years of successful Direct Dutch instruction. The fact that the school has many corporate and embassy clients is a validation of the no-nonsense but quick-results method. I myself taught at the school in the nineties and found consistently that within three months of the beginner's course most of my students were able to have actual conversations and reach a degree of fluency, which I have not managed to achieve with the textbook that the UC-Berkeley Dutch program uses.

One of the Direct Dutch teachers endorsed the method with these words: "The fun, casual atmosphere which this method promotes was a breath of fresh air after I had seen all the other

language methodologies at my teacher's training. Most of these methods seem to presume that the student is a humorless human being who, after some manipulation, can show off a trick. The writers of such methods will never manage to inspire and motivate a student who is made out of flesh and blood."

When I started at UC-Berkeley I decided to stay open minded and first of all use the course material (*Help! Kunt u mij helpen?*), which was in place. Although I was not too happy reviewing this material before I started, I decided that only practice makes perfect and try *Help!* on my students. Unfortunately, we became more and more annoyed as the semester wore on: the grammar that was introduced did not always correspond with the exercises in the same chapter, the exercises were far from challenging, the texts/language situations were poorly written and were not necessarily representative of contemporary culture or the Dutch character and, to top it off, one of the key characters in the book was Maria Borsato, an Italian woman learning Dutch and therefore speaking with such a heavy accent that my students should do anything but emulate her. Above all, the book was humorless and students frequently poked fun at the texts and its illustrations.

Because I found the *Help!* method inadequate and incomplete (the introduction of new grammar needs to be promptly reinforced by both spoken and written exercises, neither of which the method provided enough of), I had to supplement with extra exercises and eventually I resorted to the Direct Dutch exercises and texts I had used with so much fun with expats in The Hague. My students became curious. Where did I get these texts and exercises and could they not use these instead of *Help!*?

Encouraged by my students, I contacted Hisgen and found that the language school has flourished, with a high number of enrolled students, its own social club, its own monthly newsletter as well as a reputable translation service, which excels in the translation of Dutch-English and English-Dutch documents. The book I had used in the nineties had undergone several printings (after testing the curriculum constantly on the students) and now comes with an audio cd and a great teacher's manual as well as an answer key for the students.

Interested? For more information or a sample copy of the Direct Dutch method *Home in on Holland*, contact Ruud Hisgen at Direct Dutch, Laan van Nieuw Oost-Indië 275, 2593 BS The Hague, The Netherlands, tel +31 70 36546777, [info@directdutch.com](mailto:info@directdutch.com). Their website can be found at [www.directdutch.com](http://www.directdutch.com).

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