NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS in AUSTRIA

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1. General introduction

This article deals with the role and situation of new learning environments in foreign language teaching (FLT) and learning at Austrian institutions of tertiary education. It is based on information received through a survey carried out among language teachers at Austrian tertiary institutions. A questionnaire about the situation of language teaching was sent to about 120 language teachers at language teaching institutions and institutions that teach other subjects where languages are considered additional qualifications or optional subjects. 73 questionnaires (54 from Universities, 19 from Fachhochschulen – Universities of Applied Science) were returned to us. We consider this number of responses to be a small but still representative sample of the field.

2. The role of new learning environments in language teaching and learning

The rapid emergence of new technologies and the increase in student mobility have changed the language learning situation in Austria. New technologies in language learning have been introduced (CALL programmes, materials on CD-ROM or from the Internet) and led to new strategies in language teaching and learning (increased learner autonomy) but also to new problems (e.g. infrastructure, challenges for teachers concerning further education and course design, sceptical attitudes towards new learning environments).

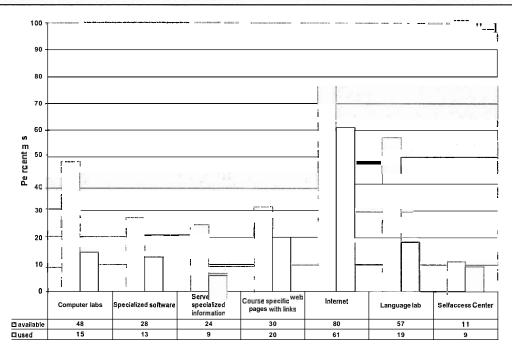
Because of the importance of the new media, the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has published guidelines ("Handbuch – Neue Medien in der Lehre an Universitaten und Fachhochschulen in Osterreich"= guidelines for the use of new media in teaching and research at Austrian universities and universities for applied science). These guidelines recognise the importance of new technologies and their innovative potential for the teaching process at tertiary level and recommend several measures to be taken:

- Innovations in teaching: use of multimedia and interactive tools should lead to an improvement in the quality of teaching and a higher degree of effectiveness
- Increased co-operation: intensifying contacts between various institutions on regional, national and international levels in order to pool expertise
 - Easier access to education: open distance learning (ODL) support for people who are interested in learning (languages) or in receiving further education to have access to programmes.

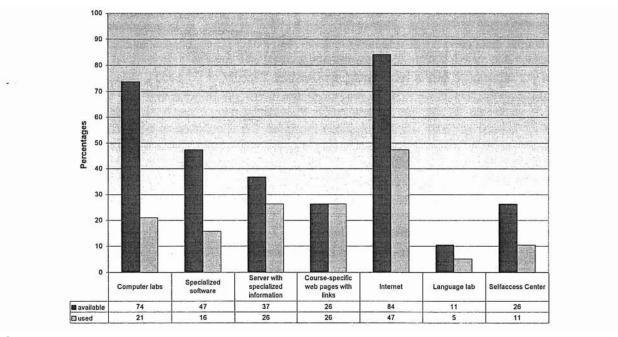
Therefore a forum of new media including teachers of different subjects at tertiary institutions has been set up to incorporate these goals and build up an information and exchange network and co-ordinate measures at their institutions.

2.1 The integration of new learning environments in language teaching and learning

Many teachers incorporate new learning environments into their regular teaching as they see the didactic need and the positive effects although some teachers still are sceptical about the methodological advantages of the new media. The use of the Internet for preparation and also during teaching is the most popular application. Generally speaking, the use of new media depends largely on the initiative of the individual teacher, as there is no general policy adhered to at individual institutions. Computer rooms or language laboratories are sometimes available (about 50 to 70 % of the institutions have them) but they are not frequently used for language teaching (only 15 to 21 % of the teachers use them for teaching). Special software, servers with special information and programmes as well as web pages especially designed for courses are used but only to a small percentage. Self-access centres (including computer rooms) are rarely available (only 11 to 26 % of the institutions have them – the number at Fachhochschulen is higher than at universities) and materials of self-access centres and their uses are hardly ever integrated into the teaching process (only 9 to 11 % of the teachers use them).



Graph 1: University: Which technical possibilities are available for FLT and which of them do you use regularly?



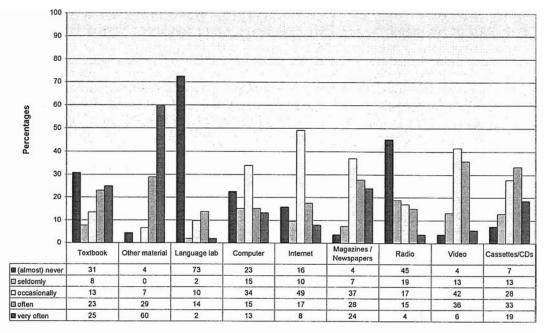
Graph 2: Fachhochschule: Which technical possibilities are available for FLT and which of them do you use regularly?

Two factors are mainly responsible for this situation:

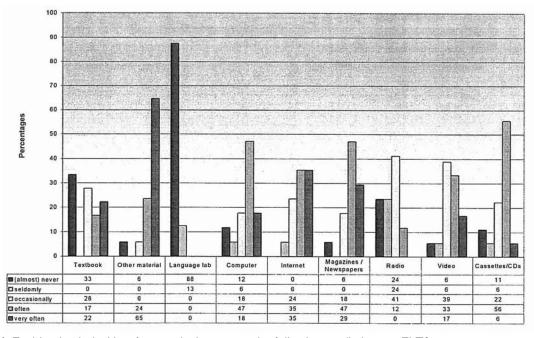
- 1. inadequate infrastructure and support (especially at universities, the situation is much better at the newly established Fachhochschulen universities of applied science)
- 2. inadequate in-service training or other further education measures for language teachers at universities.

2.2 Policies and strategies underlying the integration of new learning environments

So far there is no general policy for tertiary language education apart from the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2000), which address all subjects and are not directed specifically at language teaching. Therefore, the integration of new learning environments depends largely on the initiative of individual institutions and individual teachers. Concerning materials and application of media the questionnaires showed that teachers try to integrate different media but mainly copies, newspapers and course books are being used. Language laboratories, computers and the internet are not used very frequently and their use could be enhanced in the future.



Graph 3: University: How frequently do you use the following media in your FLT?



Graph 4: Fachhochschule: How frequently do you use the following media in your FLT?

The promotion of independent learning strategies is an aim of the guidelines and new programmes of open distance learning will be established in the future. This should lead to the development of study programmes for people who are already working and should also enhance further education programmes. Independent learning strategies will be mixed with traditional teaching units, which should lead to guided learner autonomy and increase the number of students with professional experience as well as of graduates doing further education seminars in their field of specialisation.

2.3 Facilities for independent learning

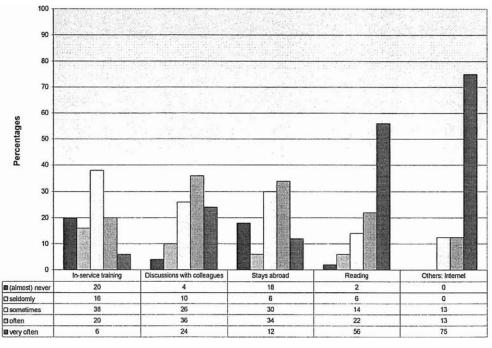
In order to incorporate learner autonomy the infrastructure has to be adapted. Self-access centres and computer rooms have to be provided. As only 50 - 70% of tertiary language teaching institutions have computer rooms or language laboratories and only about 11 - 26 % have self-access centres large investments will be necessary in order to ensure the use of new media in teaching.

Concerning the development of learning materials, individual or project initiatives are mainly responsible for new resources. The Ministry guidelines though aim at establishing a network of individuals and institutions interested in developing online-programmes and innovative web-based teaching and learning materials and fostering competition between developers. In order to ensure the realisation of these goals, content providers will have to be offered further and continuous education in information technology.

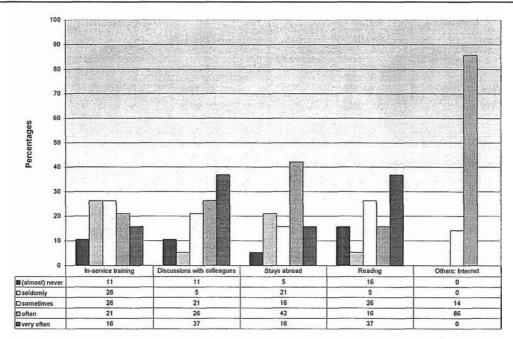
In order to meet the challenges of independent learning with the help of information and communication technology (ICT) teachers will have to redefine their role so as to regard themselves more as language advisors, mentors and mediators in the learning process and less as suppliers of input. Pre- and in-service training preparing teachers for this new situation will be necessary. Students will have to be guided into this new learning situation by their teachers in order to make new learning environments work.

2.4 Training programmes and courses for language teachers: in-service programmes, staff development

Our survey shows that training programmes for language teachers are clearly lacking although teachers regard themselves as quite well informed (42 to 47 % of the lecturers said they were well-informed and 37 to 38 very well). There is hardly any co-ordination in this area and only very few courses are offered for teachers at tertiary level. The need for courses and further education possibilities for language teachers at tertiary level was mentioned by 75% of the language teachers, especially the need to be informed about new technologies and the possibilities of their incorporation into their teaching. An increase in the number of in-service programmes and staff development programmes is needed and the quality of these programmes should also be increased.



Graph 5: University: How do you obtain information about new methods in FLT?



Graph 6: Fachhochschule: How do you obtain information about new methods in FLT?

3, Promoting multilingualism and cultural diversity

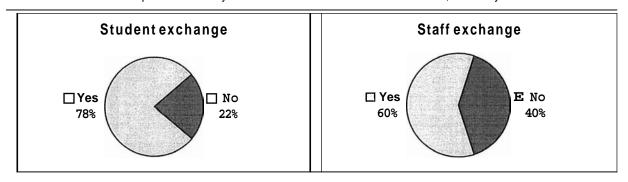
The European Commission's White Paper on education and training (1995) sets the goal of every citizen becoming competent in at least three Union languages by the end of compulsory education. This translates into additional obligations for language teaching at the tertiary level (e.g. awareness raising, diversification). At Austrian universities the modern languages that are being taught to students of different subjects (not taking the modern language departments into account) are varied with English being the most frequently learnt language, followed by French, Italian, and Spanish. Other languages (Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Hungarian etc.) are also being offered for certain study programmes but on a comparatively small scale.

Less widely used and less taught languages are offered at various institutions but this mainly depends on local demand and the financial situation. Language server projects with information about learning programmes for these languages could help to establish a forum for learning these languages on an individual basis.

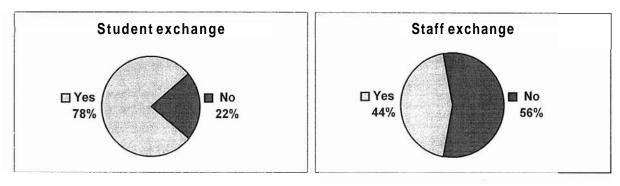
Cultural understanding and intercultural awareness influence the teaching of languages to a considerable degree and are promoted through the large number of native speakers that are employed as teachers of languages as well as through student and, to a lesser degree staff exchange programmes. Furthermore, intercultural awareness is a didactic principle that about 40 % of the teachers in our survey regard as very important for their teaching.

Authentic resources and materials can be accessed more easily now with the use of ICT. 90 % of language teachers have access to the internet and 60 to 70 % of language teachers use the internet regularly for preparing their courses and loading down materials and information from it. This is especially important as a high percentage of language teachers prepare their course materials themselves.

The importance for cultural understanding of exchange programmes is widely accepted and therefore contacts are established and widened, exchange programmes are being developed, the ECTS-system has been introduced at many Austrian tertiary institutions. About 80 to 90% of the institutions offer exchange programmes and organisational support for students. Staff exchange is clearly not as frequent, especially for language teachers. 44 to 60 % of the lecturers in our sample stated that regular staff exchanges take place. Their intensity and frequency remain unclear, though.



Graph 7: University: Do you organise exchange of students and staff at your institution?



Graph 8: Fachhochschule: Do you organise exchange of students and lecturers at your institution?

4. The role of new learning environments in training programmes for language and language related professions

New learning environments are already being used in training programmes but the amount could be increased. Computer and internet are mainly used for purposes of preparation and materials construction but only to a small extent in the actual teaching process. The same applies to special software and servers with language related information. This may be a problem of infrastructure, but even if computer rooms are available language teachers seem hesitant to use them. Self-access centres, where available, are not readily integrated into the teaching process. Reasons for this situation are probably related to problems with change in general and to the lack of inservice training and to the lack of staff support.

4.1 New learning environments and the training of language teachers

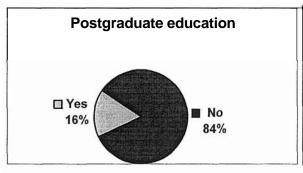
The modern language departments in general have not yet integrated new learning environments into mainstream teaching. So far the integration depends on the initiative of individual teachers or institutions. The methodology of new learning environments for language teachers is being addressed at some universities and universities for teacher education and will be integrated into the teacher education curriculum and into language teaching. In order to increase the use of new learning environments in language teaching university teachers have to be trained in both, the technical aspect and the pedagogical perspective, and should also take part in (action) research projects.

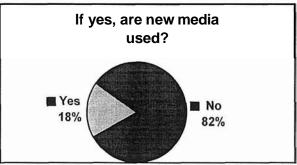
4.2 New learning environments and the training of translators and interpreters

As the training of translators and interpreters is closely connected to the general technical, scientific, political and economic changes, the need to use new learning environments, especially new media has already been identified by most of these institutions. Therefore, institutions in this area are working together in order to realise teaching projects that incorporate new media and open distance learning elements into their curricula, e.g. virtual translation and terminology seminars. Teaching tools and learning platforms are being developed or adapted and there is a pilot project under way on the development of a translation module based on the internet. Work on parallel and comparable corpora is in progress.

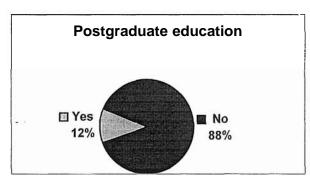
5. The role of new learning environments in continuing education programmes or courses

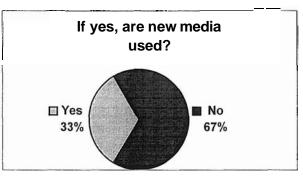
In the area of language related professions continuing education programmes or post-graduate courses for former graduates are not frequently organised by Austrian tertiary institutions, only 12 to 16 % offer such programmes to their graduates. When such programmes are available, the use of new media varies considerably (from 18 to 33 %). Further education and continuing education clearly needs to be enhanced.





Graph 9: University: Do you organise postgraduatelcontinuing education programmes or courses at your institution?





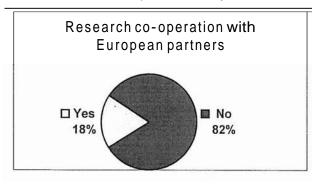
Graph 10: Fachhochschule: Do you organise postgraduatelcontinuing education programmes or courses at your institution?

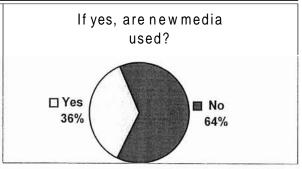
6. How to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for promoting European co-operation?

ICT offers a range of possibilities for promoting European co-operation, mainly through joint projects. Where such projects are carried out in co-operation with European partners, 36 to 42 % of the teachers in our survey use ICT for communication. Unfortunately, the overall number of international projects in the area of language teaching methodology and the incorporation of new media into the teaching of languages is low.

In Austria there is some ICT use for the co-operation in the development of programmes with other tertiary language institutions across Europe. Support clearly could be enhanced on the administrative and institutional levels in order to stimulate co-operation.

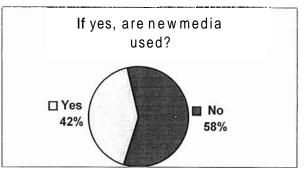
In the delivery of programmes ICT use seems to be limited. The degree of ICT use could be increased by providing more and better infrastructure and more and better in-service training for the application of ICT in language teaching.





Graph 11: University: Do you have any co-operation with European partners in ongoing research projects?





Graph 12: Fachhochschule: Do you have any co-operation with European partners in ongoing research projects?

7. Needs in the area of new learning environments

In order to improve the quality of language teaching at the tertiary level and to meet the challenge of new developments, new learning environments have to be integrated into the teaching and learning process. First of all, the infrastructure has to be put in place to meet these new needs. Second, teachers will have to be trained to use it and to develop didactically appropriate materials and methodologically sound approaches to teaching in this new environment. Third, dissemination of information on successful initiatives is necessary. This could promote co-operation between different institutions that could improve the quality of research and development and avoid the costly duplication of efforts as well as enhance multilingualism and multiculturalism.

7.1 Seen in relation to language teaching and learning

In order to make tertiary language teaching and learning fit for these new trends and to meet these new challenges, the following needs are identified:

- Improvement of infrastructure (new computers, larger rooms with ICT equipment, improvement of libraries, special software, establishment of self-access centres, smaller groups of students)
- Practical and methodological seminars for lecturers (frequently no in-service training is offered, or depends on private initiative, little knowledge about ICT and their possibilities for language teaching and learning)
- Dissemination of information and successful activities from other institutions (little knowledge of what is going on at other institutions, only little contact to other language teachers, development of a platform and an information network of language teachers)
- More exchange activities and co-operations between institutions on an international basis (for students and especially for staff as well).

7.2 Seen in relation to the promotion of multilingualism and cultural diversity

Little demand, inadequate financing and few resources usually hinder the promotion of less widely spoken languages. New learning environments could enhance the learning of less widely taught languages by providing self-access centre support to students learning these languages. Regular monitoring by advisors could lead to guided learner autonomy. Another possibility to promote the learning of less widely taught languages is the establishment of contacts with universities in countries, where these languages are spoken and the support of exchange programmes and international projects.

7.3 Seen in relation to the promotion of European co-operation

In order to promote European co-operation better information about programmes, networks and financial support would be necessary for dissemination activities about innovative projects and successful initiatives in language learning and teaching. Exchange activities and contacts with other European institutions should be established to ensure co-operation on different levels.

7.4 Seen in relation to the provision of language learning to students with special educational needs

Because of new learning environments specific purposes can be met more easily as authentic materials are becoming more varied and more widely available. Courses and materials should be developed and ODL-elements could be integrated. The number of participants should be reduced in order to make integration possible and teaching more efficient. Teachers should be offered possibilities of further education in order to better meet the needs of students with special educational needs.

8. Measures to be taken to meet the needs identified

To ensure improved standards in language teaching at the tertiary level, language competencies have to be regarded as an important part of qualifications not only for language related professions but also for professions in the technical and natural sciences, in economics, medicine, law, etc. as well, as Europe and the world are moving closer together. Considerable financial and personnel resources will be necessary to meet these needs.

Institutions themselves have to define new learning environments as important for the teaching and learning processes and should adapt or develop new learning environments and integrate them into their teaching. Further education seminars should be offered to their teachers to ensure that they are able to use new technologies and the new methodology that comes with those in their courses. Specific materials for courses could be developed in co-operation with other teachers or institutions in the form of joint projects. Self-access centres should be installed and multimedia equipment should be bought as these new challenges can only be met with appropriate infrastructure and technical support.

Institutions with the same or similar subject area should work together in the development of course materials, ODL-modules, programmes for graduates, national and international projects. A network of language teachers should be established to ensure the dissemination of know-how and information about research activities between institutions. Projects about and research into ICT didactics and methodology, ODL-elements, and materials development for teaching and learning languages should be promoted.

At national level a network of language teachers with a steering group that organises further education activities, distributes information and disseminates know-how, fosters co-operation in projects, research and materials design, and co-operates with individual institutions and teachers could provide support for the integration of new learning environments into language teaching and learning.

Student and staff exchange programmes as well as transnational co-operation in research and development of ICT applications to the learning and teaching of languages should be intensified. A European languages secretariat with a languages server and an expert group of language teachers should ensure the transfer of know-how into individual countries. This network could support the development of projects, programmes, dissemination and exchange activities on a European basis.

9. Examples of good practice

As the establishment and integration of new learning environments into the teaching and learning processes are defined as an important initiative and aim in the guidelines of the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Culture several projects have been started to design alternative multimedia learning platforms, develop new materials integrating ICT, design new courses using ODL-elements. Only two of these projects will be referred to:

Sprachen-Server-Projekt – Language server, University of Graz
This language server will have three layers of access, for the public at large, for language students and teachers and for researchers and will offer information about widely taught languages at Austrian educational institutions: authentic texts in written and spoken versions, online-dictionaries, online-grammars, useful literature and links. It is supposed to promote the possibility to learn less-widely taught languages as well and should support the European aim of multilingualism. Furthermore, independent learning strategies in language learning should be promoted. This language-server is also

directed towards language teachers and will offer them tools, materials and information about language teaching and language learning to improve the effectiveness of language teaching. It will also provide language data for research.

- TransTerm Departments of translations and interpreting, Universities of Graz and Innsbruck
 The aim of this project is to establish a new ODL-system that should become an integrated part of
 translation studies in the future and is directed towards four main goals:
 - The development of a translation module (ODL-module)
 - Pilot project for further developments in the area of ODL, which should be used for ODL-study programmes as well as for further education seminars for graduates
 - Promotion of collaborative learning and learner autonomy
 - Preparation of lecturers to integrate new learning environments into the teaching process

There are many initiatives being developed at the moment in Austria and several institutions work with multimedia, ODL-elements, course specific web pages and the internet.

10. Conclusion

New learning environments already play a role in the teaching and learning of languages at Austrian tertiary institutions but more emphasis will have to be put on their integration into mainstream teaching in the future. As many of these initiatives depend on individuals and their motivation for improvement and increased effectiveness, some kind of network and national organisational framework would be useful. In order to meet the challenges in this field in the next years, the following measures should be taken:

- Improvement of infrastructure for language teaching at tertiary level
- Regular further education seminars for language teachers at tertiary level
- Formulation of educational goals and didactic strategies
- Development of methodology
- Materials construction
- Redefining the relationship between teachers and students
- Cultural diversification with the integration of ODL-elements
- European co-operation concerning projects and exchanges
- Dissemination of information through a network of language teachers
- Evaluation of effectiveness.

It is assumed that the integration of new learning environments into the language teaching and learning processes carries considerable innovative potential. But as this is only assumed, emphasis has to be put on research into the effectiveness to accompany pilot projects to find out about the uses and effects as well as possible disadvantages and problems of learning and teaching languages with ICT. What matters most is the formulation of educational goals and didactic strategies and the development of language teaching methodologies to go with ICT.

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*Note

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Appendix

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7. Findet an Ihrer Institution .Austausch Studentenaustausch	Studenten bzw. D Ja U		ausch statt? Nein U			
Dozentenaustausch	U	24.000 p. 10.000 p.				
8. Für welche Sprachen we	rden Kurse für Stu	dierende Ihre	er Studienrich	ntung angeboten	?	
Sprache	Ja		Nein			
Englisch						
Französisch						
Italienisch						
Spanisch						
Russisch						
Ungarisch						
Andere:						
Andere:						
Andere:						
9. Haben Sie derzeit ein W dabei neue Medien einges		ammfur Abso	olventen Ihrei	· Studienrichtung	յlaufen?We	enn ja, werden
Weiterbildung		Ja	Nein			
Weiterbildungsprogramm		J				
Wenn ja, darin Einsatz voi	n neuen Medien	ı	U			
10. Haben Sie eine europa davon über das Internet In Forschungskooperation	•	n laufenden	Forschungs	orojekten?Wenn Nein	ja, wickeln	Sie Teile
Forschungskooperation m	rtnem		U			
Wenn ja, dabei Einsatz vo						
11. Wo ist Ihrer Meinung I Ihrer Institution gegeben Austausch, Projekte etc.) u	(Infrastruktur, Fo					
			· · · · · ·			