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Who Are We? What Do We Want? – An Insight into an Academic Language Center

Background

The foreign language center *treffpunkt sprachen* was established by the decision of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture on 7 September 2001, in the form decided on by the Senate of the University of Graz on 9 May 2001 (cf. University of Graz 2001). For the sake of assuring the quality of university further education and training and in light of the increasing internationalization of the higher education system, the foreign language center of the University of Graz was expected to fulfill the following duties for university students and staff in accordance with the material and human resources at its disposal:

- Coordination, administration, and provision of demand- and practice-oriented language courses (also in the form of continuing education programs). This does not affect the compulsory subjects of the study programs offered at the University of Graz.
- Administration and provision of German courses for foreign students who are studying at the University of Graz as part of an exchange program and who are unable to take advantage of the university preparation program.
- Provision or teaching of continuing and further education courses for foreign language teachers in university foreign language teaching and in the area of adult education (also in the form of certificate programs).
- Information on and, if applicable, preparation for international foreign language certificates.
- Supervision of teaching materials for autonomous language learning.
- Cooperation with other foreign language centers and foreign language institutions on a local, national, and international level.
- Performance of tasks as an information center for questions concerning foreign languages.
(Ibid.)

The director is appointed by the Rector's Office. A research advisory board was established to advise the Rector's Office on all matters concerning the foreign language center of the University of Graz. The advisory board consists of five people, three of whom are representatives with relevant subject-related qualifications and two user representatives who have been appointed by the Senate upon the recommendation of the Rector's Office.

In 2009, *treffpunkt sprachen* was converted into a center for language, plurilingualism, and didactics (cf. University of Graz 2009) in order to promote plurality and plurilingualism on several levels (language policy, language documentation, language didactics, language teaching research, language teaching and language learning). Since there had been a long tradition of examining language-related issues in teaching, language didactics, language teaching research as well as language documentation, it was natural to merge the fields of teaching and research. The reciprocal connection between teaching and the areas of research plurilingualism and didactics allows for optimal use of the existing potentials for synergies, the exchange of expertise over the boundaries of departments and institutes, and the conception and implementation of research projects whose results end up being applied in teaching. The founding of a center for language, plurilingualism, and didactics created the organizational conditions necessary for combining activities in language policy, language documentation, language learning research, and language didactics, expanding previously completed work, networking, and thus contributing to the exploitation of plurilingual potential in Austria.

Teaching

Supply & Demand

In the initial months of its existence, *treffpunkt sprachen* was already successful in establishing itself as a service institution. The first course program, comprising of 40 courses in the languages German, English, French, and Spanish, was offered in winter semester 2001/2002 and received an enthusiastic response with 850 course participants. The continuous expansion of the course offerings in the following years was based on working together with philology departments on basic courses in high demand languages and taking over the course offerings on the basic level for students of the School of Business, Economics and Social Sciences. The expansion of the language course program for general and academic staff (cf. *treffpunkt sprachen* 2022a; *treffpunkt sprachen* 2022b; Welcome Center 2022), concepts for German courses for specific purposes for students from Central and Southeastern Europe (cf. *treffpunkt sprachen* 2022c), as well as the possibility of oral assessments (cf. *treffpunkt sprachen* 2022d), certificates (cf. *treffpunkt sprachen* 2022e), and series of modules (cf. Hofer/Unger-Ullmann 2015 and Unger-Ullmann 2018) rounded off the diverse range of service offerings.

Academic year	No. of language courses	Difference	Increase (in %)
2005/06	130	0	0,00%
2006/07	140	10	7.69%
2007/08	163	33	25.38%
2008/09	221	91	70.00%
2009/10	235	105	80.77%
2010/11	262	132	101.54%
2011/12	243	113	86.92%
2012/13	256	126	96.92%
2013/14	255	125	96.15%
2014/15	257	127	97.69%
2015/16	251	121	93.08%
2016/17	268	138	106.15%
2017/18	256	126	96.92%
2018/19	254	124	95.38%
2019/20	229	99	76.15%
2020/21	205	75	57.69%

Table 1: Number of language courses

Starting from 130 language courses in the academic year 2005/2006, the highest numbers of courses were achieved in the academic year 2010/2011 with 262 and 2016/2017 with 268. These can be attributed, on the one hand, to the start of the preparatory language courses for students of the Romance, Slavic and Translation Studies (ITAT) and language courses specifically designed for students of the School of Business, Economics and Social Sciences, and on the other hand, to newly introduced and already established series of modules (*Language Learning with Adults* and *Interdisciplinary Language Learning*) as well as international certificates and oral assessments.

Since academic year 2019/2020, the number of courses has decreased due to the pandemic. The registration period for the semester courses had already ended before the first lockdown in March 2020, and the first lessons were still held in person and then later in the form of online teaching. As such, the coronavirus pandemic did not have an effect on the language offerings at first. However, due to further developments and restrictive measures, neither the ÖSD nor the IELTS examinations and the preparatory workshops could be offered. The *Language-Culture-Literature* intensive summer course also had to be canceled in July 2020. Besides a general reduction in course offerings, there were also cancellations due to fewer registrations in winter semester 2020/21. The semester courses could still begin in person but had to switch over to online teaching in November due to another lockdown.

In summer semester 2021, courses were held in the form of online teaching right from the beginning of the semester to give the course participants some ability to plan ahead.

Academic year	No. of participants	Difference	Increase (in %)
2005/06	2,299	0	0.00%
2006/07	2,691	392	17.05%
2007/08	2,950	651	28.32%
2008/09	4,865	2,566	111.61%
2009/10	5,037	2,738	119.10%
2010/11	5,840	3,541	154.02%
2011/12	5,644	3,345	145.50%
2012/13	5,786	3,487	151.67%
2013/14	5,836	3,537	153.85%
2014/15	5,937	3,638	158.24%
2015/16	5,897	3,598	156.50%
2016/17	5,628	3,329	144.80%
2017/18	5,456	3,157	137.32%
2018/19	5,993	3,694	160.68%
2019/20	5,678	3,379	146.98%
2020/21	4,844	2,545	110.70%

Table 2: Number of participants

The following conclusions can be drawn from the table concerning the number of participants from academic years 2005/2006 to 2020/21: the increase in participants, especially in academic years 2010/2011, 2014/15, and 2018/19, was such that it pushed the organizational team to the limits of its capabilities. While the entire organizational team was responsible for 2,299 course participants in the academic year 2005/06, the number of participants in the academic year 2018/2019 increased to a remarkable 5,993. This increase of 160.68% (!) shows very clearly how great the demand for language courses was before the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic-related decrease from 5,993 to 4,844 course participants over the last two years can be attributed to internal university measures according to which in-presence courses could only be held with 50% of the room's capacity and group sizes had to be reduced from 24 to a maximum of 12 persons. As in summer semester 2021, the courses were held entirely in the form of online teaching, the group sizes could once again be increased, and a total number of 4,844 participants could be achieved in the academic year 2020/21.

Quality Assurance

The University of Graz provides a framework for an innovative and high-quality development of teaching and research through regular reviews of the agreed objectives (cf. University of Graz 2022). The achievement of objects is discussed at least once a year with the responsible member of the Rector's Office. If objectives have not been met, detailed root cause analyses are carried out and appropriate measures are taken by the member of the Rector's Office. Objective agreements enable reliable planning and guarantee the implementation of new teaching projects. They can be amended and/or supplemented by agreement between the responsible member of the Rector's Office and the head of the department in response to changes in the framework conditions and different factors affecting the achievement of objectives. Any changes or additions must be documented in writing.

The aforementioned flexibility and continuity of teaching and research are key principles which should be respected, especially in times of a pandemic. In the course of the rapid transition to online teaching, the regular high-quality of teaching could be maintained:

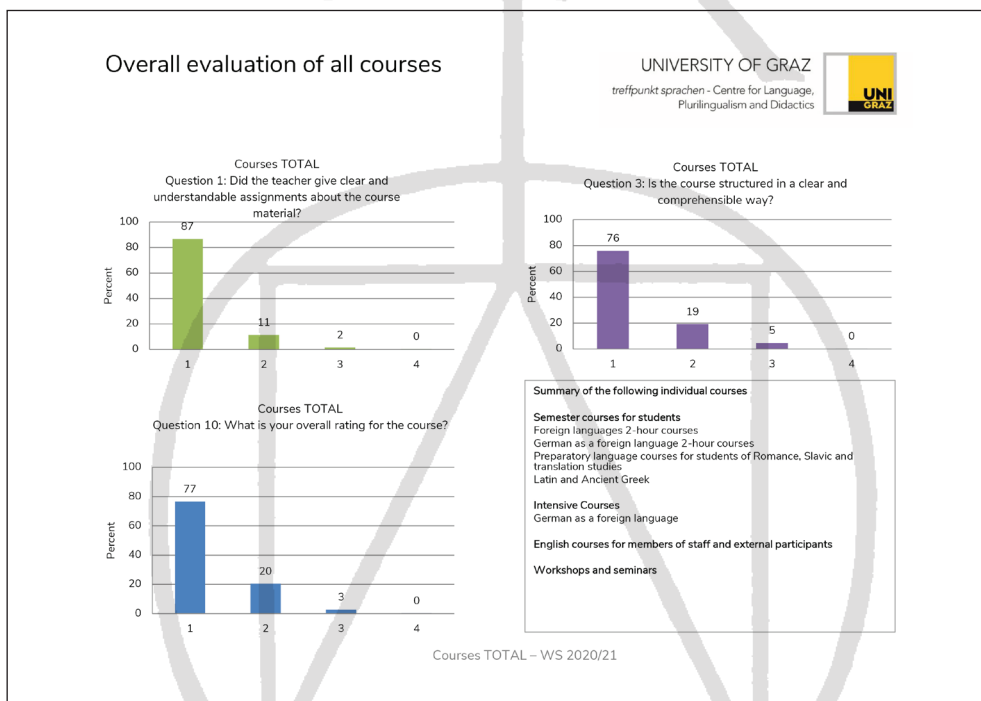


Figure 1: Evaluation results winter semester 2020/21

Based on the encouraging evaluation results for the academic year 2020/21, which was primarily held in the form of online teaching, it can be concluded that *treffpunkt sprachen* meets all the demands for didactically appealing teaching and is able to fulfill the high expectations of the course participants. Evaluation results of more than 80% *Very good* re-

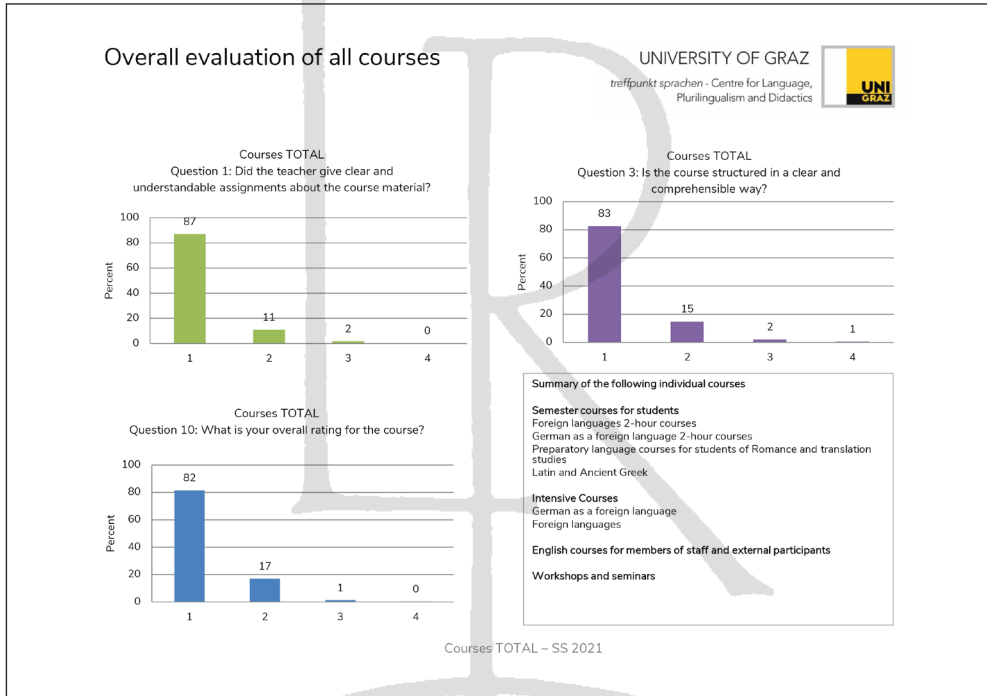


Figure 2: Evaluation results summer semester 2021

sponses cannot be taken for granted but require proactive actions, which were taken right from the beginning of the pandemic. Free webinars on synchronous and asynchronous online teaching, on the basic principles of *blended learning*, and on changes to the examination and assessment process for online instruction (cf. Unger-Ullmann 2021, pp. 41 ff.) prepared the language teachers for the virtual classroom and led to a reflective exchange of experiences on the new challenges and opportunities presented by the online format.

Improving the teaching quality goes hand in hand with the establishment of the Center's Didactics research unit and involves the combining of teaching and research. In accordance with the provisions of the Vice-Rector for Studies and Teaching (cf. University of Graz 2022), the two sections of teaching and research mutually reinforce each other and lead to the reciprocal promotion and development of teaching and research skills. Research achievements have been made in this regard, which meet the methodological/didactic needs in the context of university language teaching and ensure a high level of teaching in terms of quality. The aforementioned continuing education and training, which is based on transparent criteria and represent an essential feature of the Centre, make a major contribution to optimizing the teaching. In terms of promoting teaching and research skills as a factor for improving the quality, *treffpunkt sprachen* advocates focusing on action research projects. The aim is to ensure the quality of teaching through action research. In this way, (prospective) teachers who are practicing active research play a decisive role, especially since their interests in professionalization form a fundamental basis for innovative teaching approaches.

Research

Didactics

The Didactics research unit deals conceptually with selected topics and objectives of university language teaching and focuses, in particular, on the productive interaction of the stakeholders involved in the process of development. In the form of regular needs assessments among language teachers and students, specific language teaching and learning experiences are drawn on for methodological/didactic approaches and comprehensive solutions are developed, the application of which is intended to enhance the profile of the research center. As the research activities increasingly involve various disciplines and have been expanded with the change from in-person teaching to distance learning due to the pandemic, it is essential to create a research-oriented basis which is reflected in the action research projects in the field of language didactics.

The problems that have arisen due to digitalization go hand in hand with the recognition that challenging teaching conditions cannot be overcome by disciplinary segmentation but rather through cooperation with other disciplines. To achieve this desideratum, the Didactics research unit focuses on the exact observation, documentation, and analysis of foreign language teaching and learning processes, as well as the continuing education and professionalization of (prospective) teachers. In terms of these two emphases, action research projects are intended to give teachers and students the opportunity to learn from each other, to think in networks, to put their personal ideas gained from their experience with language didactics up for discussion, and to defend their own approaches while taking other disciplines into consideration.

treffpunkt sprachen – Centre for Language, Plurilingualism and Didactics has set the following objectives in the field of didactics:

- To promote action research in language learning,
- To promote research on language learning and teaching,
- To promote evaluation research,
- To promote young researchers in the field of language teaching and learning research,
- To develop and promote innovative methods in language teaching for adult education,
- To promote an individual language learning guidance for language learners,
- To develop specific (continuing) education and training programs for language teachers and learners,
- To expand cooperation with different educational institutions.

(University of Graz 2022, p. 7)

The Didactics research unit offers research and continuing education on important topics concerning language teaching and learning and investigates these in action research projects