14 Open Learning

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Key words

Open Learning (OL)

Individualisation and openness

Student-centered learning

OL in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

Assessment in an OL context

In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

How can individualisation and student-centered learning be applied in teaching?

What role can OL play in a CLIL setting or classroom?

What are some skills conducive to individualised, student-oriented learning?

How can those skills be assessed in a transparent way in an OL context?

Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

Open learning (OL) and open instruction derive from reform pedagogy, for example, the methods of Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator, Peter Petersen, the founder of the Jenaplan schools in Germany, Helen Parkhurst, an American educator and founder of the Dalton-Plan, and Célestin Freinet, who started to reform the French school system in 1920, just to name a few. Reform pedagogy sees learning as a process in which learners are actively involved by exploring and understanding content with all their senses. Instead of learning just facts, learners should acquire skills and competences. They are also required to take over responsibility for their own learning while the teacher becomes a mentor who supports the learning process (Grass, 2011).

In Austria, schools that are run according to the principles of OL are usually non-confessional, private schools, although certain aspects of reform pedagogy can be found in 'regular' public schools as well (ORF, 2017). Some aspects of reform pedagogy such as 'explorative learning', 'project-oriented learning' and 'open learning' also appear in the Austrian curriculum for elementary schools (RIS, 2012). The curriculum for secondary schools in Austria has a stronger focus on learning objectives in the various subjects and leaves it up to the teachers to decide on the methodology needed to reach them. However, it does suggest that an open form of teaching and

learning that involves learner participation regarding organization, methodology, content and social form results in feelings of increased self-efficacy and personal responsibility (RIS, 2020b). In the curriculum for *allgemein bildende höhere Schulen (AHS)*, academic secondary schools, OL is mentioned in the context of student-centered teaching and learning and of learning strategies and methodology, but it is not elaborated on in detail (RIS, 2020a).

Definitions of OL

Although various attempts have been made to define the term 'open learning', there is no uniform understanding of this concept in the Austrian school context. The term has been widely used for all forms of teaching and learning that are student-centered and allow learners to have a certain degree of autonomy, which enables them to decide what, how, when and where learning takes place and who they want to learn with (Juen-Kretschmer, 2017).

Peschel (2002) claims that OL enables learners to acquire knowledge and skills in a setting in which they can freely choose their location, time (and pace) and the social dimensions they want to work/study in (i.e., in a group, with a partner or by themselves). The learners can decide on the content they want to engage with, and they do so in a methodologically individual way. Furthermore, according to Peschel (2002), OL fosters social aspects such as a high degree of learner participation and co-responsibility in terms of class infrastructure and community rules.

Individualisation and openness in OL

OL includes various dimensions of 'openness', in which individualisation is possible. These are:

- organizational openness, which enables learners to choose the setting, i.e., the time, place and social form in which their learning process should take place;
- methodological openness, which leaves it up to learners to decide how they want to acquire new skills and knowledge;
- and openness in terms of content, which allows learners to decide on the topic (or subtopic) they want to focus on.

In addition to the aspects listed above, Peschel (2002) describes two more forms of 'openness', which are social openness and personal openness. While social openness encourages learners to decide on social settings and rules, personal openness

refers to the relationship between teachers and learners as well as to that of learners among each other (Peschel, 2002).

Reasons for OL

Munser-Kiefer (2014) regards OL as an essential concept in the school context due to the heterogeneity of learners in contemporary classrooms. Since learners come from various different backgrounds and have a variety of different skills, interests and needs, uniform lessons do not result in uniform learning outcomes. Therefore, an individualisation of learning processes is called for. Munser-Kiefer (2014) lists four reasons for open learning:

- To begin with, learning is an active, constructive and self-regulated process, in which content is acquired in real-life situations and knowledge is constructed through social interactions. OL can offer a setting which fosters active involvement in the re-construction of content in a self-regulated manner.
- The learner's intrinsic motivation increases with the ability to make choices; hence, learner autonomy is a key element in any learning process and OL offers many opportunities for autonomous learning.
- Younger learners generally have limited learning experiences and approaches. For this reason, it is important for them to engage in concrete and activity-oriented learning processes, which OL can offer them.
- Lastly, intensive social interactions during the open learning process encourage personal development. OL should leave space for individual interests, which are a crucial part of learners' identities. In OL, learners take over responsibility for their learning and develop autonomy and social competences.

General and subject-specific skills required for an OL context

Salner-Gridling (2009) lists the following general skills learners need to have for this form of individualised, student-oriented learning:

- being able to activate one's personal excitement for and interest in a topic
- being able to ask questions
- having time and using it efficiently
- focusing on learning objectives
- dealing with frustration
- exploring individual learning paths and strategies and choosing between different forms of learning

- including all senses in the learning process
- choosing one's own learning companions and being able to learn together in a team
- being a team leader as well as a team player
- being able to listen actively
- knowing what is important to oneself
- reflecting on one's own learning processes

In addition to these general skills, learners also need to acquire specific competences associated with the respective subject in which OL is being applied. For example, in the subject of geography and economics, these might include map-reading skills; the ability to read, interpret and draw diagrams; research using online as well as print sources; filtering and summarizing information; conducting surveys and analysing data, just to name a few.

However, it is not just the learner who is required to have certain skills. The role of the teacher changes in an OL setting, and teachers need to be aware of a partial shift of responsibility towards the learners. Thus, the role of the teacher turns into that of a mentor who guides the learners in their learning processes. However, there are several aspects of OL the teacher is still accountable for. These are the preparation and the supply of suitable lesson materials, the training of learners' basic competences, skillful classroom management as well as efficient use of methodologies and the creation of reliable structures which enhance learning in an open setting (Salner-Gridling, 2009).

OL in a CLIL setting in an Austrian AHS

Since OL is an individualised, student-centered form of learning, it gives learners the opportunity to grasp a concept with all their senses and at their individual language levels. Learners can choose what topic they want to work on as well as the 'amount' and level of language involved in their learning process. Driven by their motivation to explore and understand, learners acquire new vocabulary and grammatical structures without conscious effort. They interact with their teachers and classmates in English, discussing their work and outcomes. When doing research, for example, learners read about their chosen topics, look at pictures and watch videos and summarize their findings. All these activities allow learners to develop their proficiency in English at their own pace and personal level.

The context

Graz International Bilingual School (GIBS) is a public Austrian *AHS* where both authors of this chapter teach. We have two languages of instruction, English and German, with English being the dominant one, resulting in a clear CLIL setting (see chapter 17 in this volume) and, in relation to this, a stronger language awareness in all the subjects taught at our school.

The motivation to introduce OL in geography and economics

When teaching geography and economics in English to learners with a different L1, the teachers at GIBS are aware of the fact that we teach subject matter and language at the same time and that our materials and learning environments have to be adapted to this situation. As a result, learner differentiation has to be catered for on two levels: knowledge of our subject topics ***and*** language proficiency. Inspired by the pedagogy of Maria Montessori and the Jenaplan Schools, we developed a new form of learning – 'Open Learning' – as a way of revising and consolidating subject matter while giving learners the opportunity to take charge of their learning concerning both subject matter and language.

The basic structure of OL

At the beginning of the school year, we provide learners with a so-called Skills Sheet (see figure 1 below), which lists both the main topics of the year and the three to four skills which learners are supposed to acquire or practice. We explain both the topics and required skills to the class in some detail. Each learner is encouraged to choose their two to three favourite topics ('hit list') and two skills which they want to put their main focus on in the upcoming school year. By the end of the year, they will, however, be required to have worked on all of the topics and skills.

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Geography and Economics
In Year 2...

... I am going to learn about the following topics:	... I am going to acquire the following skills:	
Cities	⇨participate actively in the lessons	
Egypt, an LEDC	⇨keep my notebook well organized and tidy	
Maps	⇨highlight the key facts in the basic information texts	
Economic Sectors	⇨note taking: write down one interesting fact about my class mates' talks	
Primary Industries	⇨work actively with our co-teacher and get their signature afterwards	
Manufacturing Industries	In the Open Learning phases:	Finished ☑
Service Industries	⇨make a "*Ten Facts about:...*"- sheet, add pictures and list the sources	☐
Water	⇨make a study help (*handwritten*)	☐
	⇨give a short talk (3 minutes) that is supported by a visual aid (poster, flash-cards, ...) including the sources	☐
	⇨draw a bar graph	☐

Sec.* Open Learning* Booklet

Figure 1: Skills Sheet of Year 2

Almost all of the topics of the school year are worked on in individualised OL phases in the following order:

1. Pre-OL – acquisition of the basic subject matter. Learners acquire the main contents of the topic in various forms (e.g., lecture by the teacher, expert groups, short practical work). This information is summarised in the so-called Basic Information Text (BIT), with which we provide learners. Since we do not use geography coursebooks, the BITs are a few sheets of paper which comprise the most important information on a given topic. They are given to the students prior to the OL phase and the information on these sheets is discussed and acquired in different ways, as mentioned above. Then the OL phase starts.

2. The OL process – selection of the learning objectives. Assisted by their teachers, each learner finds an additional aspect of the topic which they want to focus on during the OL phase. They also decide which skill they want to tackle during this OL phase. If a learner cannot find an interesting aspect of the topic or they think that the acquisition and presentation of a new topic in English is still too challenging for them, they are also free to prepare a study help sheet of the basic information, which will help them revise the subject matter for the test later on. Learners enter their choices in a list provided by their teachers, which constitutes a kind of target agreement or commitment. Teachers then briefly discuss a work plan with each learner, specify the tasks and the learning objectives involved and set deadlines. The selection of the learning objectives takes up to one period.

3. The OL process – focus on topics and skills. In the following three to four periods, the learners focus on their chosen topics and skills. Together with an English language assistant teacher, learners are guided and supported where necessary. In the last lesson of OL, learners submit their work, which teachers assess according to the aspects and skills mentioned in the learners' target commitment.

4. Assessment and feedback. As OL is regarded as an ongoing learning process, learners can correct and improve their work if they are not content with the initial assessment and hand it in again. The final version of the work and/or – depending on the type of work – ideas and thoughts during the development of the work are collected in the Open Learning Booklet, a kind of portfolio of each learner's open learning work, which also supplements the traditional grading (see figure 2 below).

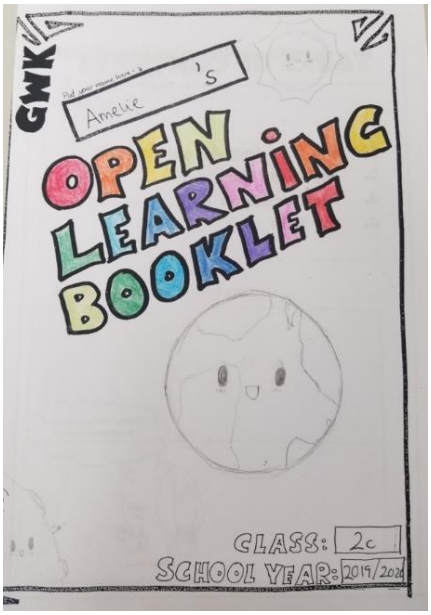

Figure 2: An Open Learning Booklet

In a feedback round after the last OL lesson, learners are encouraged to assess their work and to discuss strategies to improve it if necessary. After most OL phases, there is a test to determine learners' growth in knowledge and skills. The focus of the test lies on the contents of the BIT; additional aspects which the learner acquired individually can be added in either open questions ('Write down five facts about…') or in extra credit tasks in the test.

OL tasks and skills

In the eight years in which we have been practicing OL at GIBS, we have tried out a variety of tasks to foster the development of essential skills. We decided to include subject-related skills (e.g., cartographic work or using graphs in geography) in OL as well as general ones like designing a study help, giving a presentation or writing a newspaper commentary. We base our selection also on skills that support the acquisition and consolidation of new language. Some of the tasks described below can be used with all age groups; others can only be included in the upper levels. The following list provides a short description of some of the tasks we have used so far:

1. Study help

The study help (see figure 3 below) is a piece of work which contains the most important information of our basic BIT. We encourage learners to organise and present the information in the way in which they can best understand and memorise it. At the beginning of Year 2, we do short learner type tests with the learners to help them find out what learner types they are and what exercises best support their preferred way of learning. We consider a handwritten task a very valuable activity in a child's development and therefore we do not allow study helps which were made on the computer. The most commonly produced study helps are question-answer cards (also used in combination with elaborate board games), gapped texts, crosswords, word searches, mind maps, real maps and colourful summaries. We have also received posters with flaps, comics, memory games and even a rap. Before the test, learners sometimes bring their study helps to class and work with them (especially board games).

Figure 3: An example of a study help

2. 'Ten-facts-about' sheet

For this task, learners need to go beyond what they learned in the BIT. They are encouraged to find supplementary aspects of the basic information or work on new, related topics. They are allowed to find information on the internet, and especially in Year 2 it is necessary to guide them towards reliable sources, which are also appropriate for the age of learners and their level of English. In the first few OL phases, we even suggest the use of German websites designed for children to make

sure that learners fully understand the texts and find facts which are interesting to children at their age.

In this context, we emphasize the importance of academic honesty and the correct citation of sources. As the name of the task suggests, learners must find and list ten interesting facts about their chosen aspect in their own words. In at least half of the OL lessons, a language assistant teacher is present to also support the learners in this task. At the end of the OL phase, learners write the facts neatly in their OL Booklet and add a relevant picture (with caption) and all the sources. What we like about this task is that it works well for all the age groups – the facts simply become longer and more elaborate as learners progress.

3. Presentation

What has been stated for the 'Ten-facts-about' sheet above is also true for the short presentation (three to eight minutes, depending on learners' ages), which we consider an important skill at all of the levels we teach. We strongly recommend that the presentations should be completed during the OL phase - not at home - and that they should be handed in right at the end of the OL phase. Teachers normally correct them and give feedback before learners give their actual talks to avoid mistakes being passed on to classmates, who are supposed to take notes during each presentation.

4. Maps and graphs folder

The use of data and graphs as well as of maps is vital to the teaching of geography and economics (see figure 4 for a checklist of learners' handmade maps and graphs). In both years one and two, we therefore collaborate with arts and mathematics teachers to support our learners in drawing their first simple graphs and (fantasy) maps and plans. Some graphs are drawn during the regular geography and mathematics lessons; others are made during OL phases as part of learners' study help or as an additional activity (if learners finish their other tasks early during an OL phase). A special focus is placed on the interpretation and critical assessment of the data presented in maps and graphs. These aspects are introduced in the regular lessons preceding the OL phases.

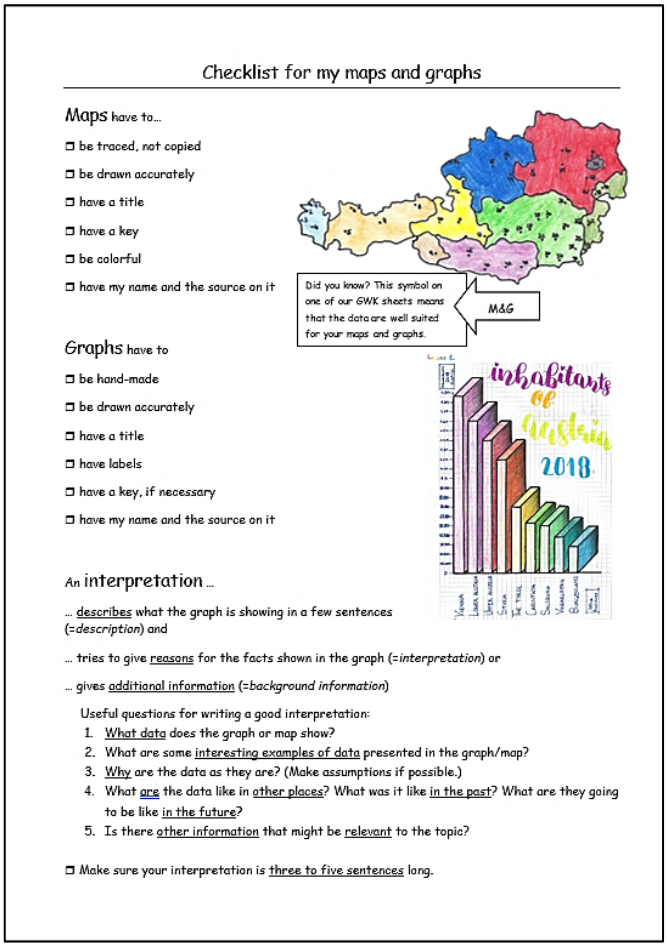

Figure 4: Checklist for learners' handmade maps and graphs

5. Newspaper commentary

Concerning this task, learners are required to find a current article which deals with aspects related to the topic of the OL phase. They then summarise the article and analyse and assess its contents and main statements, relating them to the theories and aspects which we covered in the regular lessons. Our main intention behind this task is obviously to allow our learners to build a strong, visible link between theory (our subject matter) and practice (the real world) and to encourage them to take an interest in current issues. Furthermore, it is a good way to revise the main aspects of the topic as presented in the BIT.

Reflection on applying OL in a CLIL setting

OL has proven to be an attractive and effective form of individualised student-oriented learning in a CLIL setting. It clearly serves the purpose of simultaneous acquisition and consolidation of subject matter and language for each individual learners' level. At the end of the school year, learners have compiled a learner portfolio which reflects the completion of the tasks as required on the Skills Sheet. This allows for a transparent form of grading supplementing the traditional forms of formative and summative assessment. Assessment is based on a discussion of the required skills and competences at the beginning of the school year, which makes the expectations clear to learners, and it takes the portfolio work into consideration, which includes personal feedback from the teacher on all the pieces of work in the learner portfolio (see chapters 9 and 10 in this volume).

Practical Applications

Example 1

Goal: learners will revise and acquire vocabulary and phrases relevant to the topic

Activity: preparing a presentation on slums in Cairo (the topic has been chosen by the student, not by the teacher)

Rationale: learners use vocabulary they already know from class discussions as a starting point for their research, but they also come across new words and phrases

Pre-knowledge: introduction of the topic 'Modern Egypt' in previous lessons, reading and discussing the information in the Basic Information Texts (BITs).

Level: CEFR A2

Procedure

1. The learner does research on the topic of 'slums in Cairo'. This is usually done online, but print sources can be used as well. While researching and reading about the topic, the learner takes notes, asks questions and discusses the topic with classmates.

2. The learner creates a poster or a PowerPoint presentation, using the notes and adding pictures, maps and videos to explain concepts such as population density, roof-top housing, poverty, homelessness, unemployment and similar topics. By doing so, new vocabulary is used in context and explained in the learners' own words.

3. The learner receives feedback on the first draft of the presentation and uses it to make improvements.

4. The learner then writes note cards to prepare for the presentation and practices the presentation several times, ideally with a language assistant. During this step, the learner revises new vocabulary and phrases, practices pronunciation and uses the newly acquired language in an authentic situation (i.e., conversation with a speaker of the target language).

5. Finally, the learner presents the topic to their classmates. At this point, the learner is able to use the new vocabulary in a confident way.

Example 2

Goal: learners will practise new vocabulary from the BIT

Activity: learners create a study help about the topic of service industries

Rationale: learners revise vocabulary and phrases from the BIT

Pre-knowledge: information on the BIT has been discussed in previous lessons, with the help of a PowerPoint presentation on service industries and several other activities

Level: CEFR A2

Procedure

1. The learner thinks about how the information on the BIT can be summarized and presented in a way that supports them in preparing for the next geography test. Possible ideas are creating a mind-map, a memory game, any type of board game that involves questions and answer cards, flash cards with sketches, a poster with drawings and descriptions, a song or rap that summarizes the topic, a comic or a cartoon, just to list a few.

2. The learner spends several geography lessons on the creation of the study help. By doing so, essential vocabulary is revised in various ways.

3. Once the study help is completed, the learner submits it to the teacher and receives feedback on it.

4. The learner might make some minor changes to the study help (usually to increase accuracy and to add more details).

5. If the study help is a game, the learner has the opportunity to play it with several classmates. Usually, there are about four to six different 'study help games', so it is easy to split the class into small groups and give them the chance to play their games. At this stage, learners use newly acquired vocabulary actively in their groups.

Activities and questions for reflection

1. Consider some of the examples provided in this chapter. Could you apply any of them in your own teaching?

2. Design a lesson plan in which you consider some of the principles of OL.

3. Brainstorm the responsibilities you have as a teacher in an OL setting. What would you have to prepare before you start, during the various stages and at the end of the OL phase?

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Suggestions for further reading

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This book offers a good mixture of pedagogic theory and practical examples.

Juen-Kretschmer, C. (2017). Offenes Lernen - Offener Unterricht. https://docplayer.org/11646830-Offenes-lernen-offener-unterricht.html [22 November 2020]

This resource provides practical examples of different forms of open learning and discusses the new role of the teacher in this setting.

Peschel, F. (2002). Qualitätsmaßstäbe - Hilfen zur Beurteilung der Offenheit von Unterricht. In U. Drews & W. Wallrabenstein (Eds.), *Freiarbeit in der Grundschule. Offener Unterricht in Theorie, Forschung und Praxis* (pp. 160-171). Grundschulverband – Arbeitskreis Grundschule e.V. https://doi.org/10.25656/01:17637

This is a good source for definitions and the theoretical background and pedagogical principles of OL.

Commentary on reflection questions

1. to **2.** Your answers to these reflection questions will depend on your personal teaching experience and context. The point of these questions is to encourage reflection on including OL in your teaching.

3. Below are some possible responses:

Before teachers begin the OL phase, they need to consider the OL objectives, prepare the BITs, think about possible tasks that learners could do to develop the required skills, reflect on any difficulties learners might have and prepare for them (e.g., necessary vocabulary, how to research their topic).

During the various stages of OL, teachers need to present the topic and purpose of OL, discuss the required skills and competences, help learners find an interesting topic, support learners in their choice of activities, provide constructive feedback on learners' work, make sure pupils stay on target and meet deadlines.

At the end of the OL phase, teachers discuss learners' work and assess it.