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## Quality standards for the self-learning of languages through the Internet

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### Abstract

There is a very large supply of online resources for the self-learning of languages available at present on the Web. This abundance is due to a series of demands in society nowadays, such as the need for mobility, life-long learning and, therefore, self-learning. At the same time, there is a great interest in the proposal of universally accepted standards and norms that ensure product quality. In this paper the latter issue is discussed in order to check whether the existing collections of standards and norms include or may be applied to Web-based resources for the self-learning of languages.

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**Keywords:** self-learning; quality standards; computer-assisted language learning; standards.

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### 1. Introduction

The demand for having language skills in several languages is a characteristic feature of present society. This society, apart from experiencing a trend towards internationalization, is characterised as being highly technological and rapidly changing. On the one hand, the globalization process involves an increase in mobility, both during the people's training period and in their integration into the labour market. And, on the other hand, continuous innovations imply a strong need for further education that facilitates the acquisition of the new relevant skills. For those reasons, self-learning becomes a fundamental tool to meet these requirements.

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Additionally, there is a general concern to unify criteria, suggest standards and universally accepted guides and norms that guarantee the quality of the final products and the services in any area, especially in industry; yet such a concern has also influenced other fields, such as education. Training, after all, can be considered as a product or a service and, consequently, it must be subjected to quality control mechanisms.

In turn, there is a subdiscipline of Applied Linguistics that studies Computer Assisted Language Learning, known by its acronym CALL. This field of study started during the 1960s and has extended its potential with the advent and development of the Web 2.0, as we will discuss later on.

Nevertheless, in spite of the large amount of available online resources for the self-learning of languages, standardized quality criteria have not been proposed so far to guarantee their efficiency for self-learning through the implementation of Information and Communication Technologies. In this paper we review the state-of-the-art.

## **2. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)**

The discipline that deals with the research and study of computer applications to language teaching and learning is known as CALL, Computer Assisted Language Learning, (Levy, 1997). This term coexists with a series of acronyms used to refer to the wealth of possibilities resulting from the application of computer technology to teaching and learning, in general, and to language acquisition in particular. For example, we have, among others, Computer-Assisted Language Technology, CALT, CSCL, Computer-supported Collaborative Learning, ICAI, Intelligent Computer-Assisted Instruction, TELL, Technology Enhanced Language Learning, WELL, Web-Enhanced Language Learning, etc. Each one of these terms emphasizes a specific aspect of the training mode it refers to. But CALL is the general term that is most widely accepted by the professional associations related with this field, such as CALICO, The Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium or EUROCALL, The European Association for Computer-Assisted Language Learning. It is also the term that will be used here.

Research on CALL is very broad in scope. It involves issues as diverse as preliminary studies to inform the development of educational software, the study and analysis of outcomes of the learning process after the implementation of CALL materials with real students, the development of computer-based learning material prototypes, their pedagogical implementation, as well as other related research fields. CALL-related research has advanced to such an extent that the field of CALL has become a well-established field of study in its own right (Levy and Stockwell, 2006). This research based on information gathering and data analysis in the field of CALL can be qualitative or quantitative in nature, experimental or ethnographic and the results of this research are published in scientific journals specialized in CALL or related fields. Another sign of the maturity of this discipline is the fact that a specific terminology has been developed (Gimeno, 2002).

This academic field evolves very quickly. CALL started back in the 60s, rather restricted at that time to certain universities with prestigious departments and research centres in the field. At the beginning of the 80s, it spread considerably all over Europe –in the UK, especially- the United States and Canada. It extended significantly in the 90s, when CD-ROM became a widespread data storage method and with the advent of the use of the Internet. The CD-ROM-based language learning materials were mainstream at that time, especially for the practice of English, and meant an enormous step ahead in terms of self-learning (Romero, 2012).

More recently, the new resources based on the Web 2.0, together with mobile devices, are increasing the potential of language learning through the net. Most of the CALL resources nowadays are already developed through Web 2.0 applications, as opposed to earlier stages when the use of the local computer was prevailing. If one of the most significant lacks of technology-based language learning materials was the impossibility of interacting with another speaker in a meaningful way, this limitation is now overcome. Plenty of different communication, expression and collaboration tools are currently easily available (Romero and Seiz, 2011). There is also flexibility in the way they may be accessed and an amazing diversity in terms of formats. This has resulted in a great increase in the number of materials and courses for language learning; we can find resources for the learning of many languages on the Web, including both complete courses and resources that cover specific aspects of language competence. Some of these materials are developed by public institutions, others by private institutions and many others are created by language teachers that unselfishly make them available for any language user. Such a wealth of resources and materials aims at meeting the social requirements that we mentioned above. Nevertheless, some questions must

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