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Computer-based materials:
A study of learner autonomy and strategies

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study which examines the extent to which specified cognitive, social, and metacognitive strategies, are used by language students when working with computer-based materials (CBMs), in self-study contexts outside of the language classroom; particularly in a self-access centre (SAC). Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews and snap-shot observations from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students enrolled on a summer course at a British Higher Education Institution (HEI). The data identify the frequency with which students use a SAC and the value they attach to computers for language learning. The data then examine the types of strategies students use and the extent to which learner autonomy is being fostered. The vast majority of participants were found to have positive attitudes towards computer-based material (CBMs) and language learning despite frequent use of L1, furthermore they were found to use cognitive strategies and to apply metacognitive awareness in their use of such CBMs. Students believed CBMs assisted with learning and demonstrated conscious applications of a range of strategies while learning in an electronic environment. However, the study also found that less than half the students used social strategies in the target language and this raises a number of issues.
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1. Introduction

There has long been a perceived relationship between CBMs in general, and multimedia-based materials in particular, with self-study and learner autonomy and there are good reasons for this. Benson (2001, pp. 138–140) for example notes that multimedia applications offer a "... rich linguistic and non-linguistic input, by presenting new language through a variety of media and by offering branching options", which, it is asserted, give students control over the selection of materials and over the strategies to use. However, before we consider the extent to which these associations and assertions happen, the first part of the paper defines CBMs, learner autonomy and strategies, and reviews work which has already been conducted. The remaining part of the article deals with the study, it describes the SAC in which the study took place, and the course on which the students were enrolled. It then moves on to the research questions and the participants before considering the most significant findings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Computer-based materials

CBMs for language teaching and learning can be viewed as the software applications within the field of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) which (Levy, 1997, p. 1) defines as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning". More recently Egbert (2005, p. 4) defines CALL as "learners learning language in any context with, through, and around computer technologies". Jarvis (2004, p. 116) develops these broad definitions to characterise the software applications as CBMs which are "Language specific as well as more generic Information Technology (IT) programmes" and it is this definition which is used in this study. The most common examples of generic IT CBMs include the word processor as well as many web and\or email-based applications; these are not specifically developed for language teaching and learning but, as will be seen, are nevertheless considered to have an important role. There are numerous examples of language-specific web-based CBMs including commercially available products such as those offered by the big English Language Teaching (ELT) publishers including Cambridge University Press http://www.cambridge.org/elt/multimedia/ or Oxford University Press http://www.oup.com/elt/catalogue/general/multimedia/?cc=gb, as well as more specialist providers such as Clarity Software http://www.clarity.com.hk/. It is worth noting here that virtually all publishers explicitly refer to the value of their CBMs for self-study. Numerous language-specific on-line web sites, of varying degrees of quality, are also available, frequently free of charge; two examples include:

Activities for ESL/EFL students http://a4esl.org/ for general English and using English for academic purposes http://www.uefap.com/ for more specific purposes.

CBMs in general and web-based CBMs in particular for language learning can provide learners with a range of authentic and pedagogical materials. It is little wonder then that they have been widely regarded as having a positive influence on autonomy (Warschauer, 1995; Warschauer et al., 1996; Motteram, 1998).