

## **Computers an aid to learn a language: a case study**

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### **Summary:**

Computers have been considered a tool in language learning since they became popular in the 90's. The School of Languages of Universidad Autónoma de Baja California has promoted the use of technology through the self-access center which hosts a room with computers that students use to support their learning of languages. The main purpose of this paper is to present the results of a study that has been conducted recently to find out how students are using this tool and its benefits.

### **Introduction**

This research project intends to find out how computers are helping students' learning in the self-access centers of the Language School of the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California in Tijuana and Tecate. These centers include different technologies such as video players, tape-recorders and computers. They receive around 1,500 students every term. Since the centers were established, there have been high expectations about computers. It has been seen as an outstanding tool that would help learners improve their language learning. When the centers were opened special attention was paid to the acquisition of first rate technology because it was seen as an excellent resource

to improve students' learning. Furthermore, there is a belief that through the use of it students are going to improve some skills, such as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, listening comprehension, and others on their own (autonomously). It is time to know exactly how students are using computers, what they prefer and why and how they are using it.

### **The self-access centers**

The self- access centers in Tijuana and Tecate are practice and learning places where students can improve their grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, speaking, and pronunciation using the materials and having special sessions of conversation and pronunciation. Students are allowed to decide what to learn, for how long and how. Furthermore, they have access to different media and types of materials, such as books, magazines, cassettes, videocassettes, software, games, flashcards and posters; so that they will use whatever they feel more comfortable with.

This system contributes to the students' self-development and autonomy through a reflexive and participative methodology in several ways. First, students are invited to explore a place full of possibilities and with a flexible schedule. Second, they can work at their own pace and are taught to learn by themselves. Third, students gain confidence by deciding on what, how and when to learn, they learn to make decisions. Fourth, they can guide their conversation sessions all by themselves

CEMAAI (Centro de Medios de Auto-Acceso de Idiomas) includes different areas: the reception, the tutoring room, a video room with VCRs and monitors, an audio room with interactive tape recorders, the conversation room, the reading and writing area, and the computer room, ,with multimedia computers which are networked and have access to the Internet, which is the area explored in this project.

### **Computers in language learning**

***“Imagine an infinite number of resources available for your students to improve their skills in reading, writing, grammar, listening, pronunciation, vocabulary, idioms, slang, Test of English as a Foreign Language and even conversation. Or contemplate your class sharing their creativity with the entire world - essays, poems, recipes, biographies, or even art work. Or perhaps communicating - with text, voice, and live video - with ESL/EFL classes from all parts of the world. Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? It is!”***

(Sperling: 1997 in Eastment 1997:1)

Computers have become a complete resource because they integrate different technologies, what is commonly named multimedia. Brett (1995:171) describes it as having video, audio, text and graphics together. For instance, students can have access to interactive software in CD-ROM format with multimedia that includes interesting tasks. However, Eastman (1998:1) says that CD-ROMs are not that perfect for education because they are hard to copy, fragile and cannot be networked. The copying factor is not a problem most of the time at present though. Computers aid students in different ways because of their characteristics. For example, students have the opportunity to repeat the utterances as many times as necessary. And not only that but the activities themselves. Brett (1995:174) says that computers are “tireless workhorses”. Furthermore, Moore (1992:5) supports the idea that computers provide users with the interactivity that no other media can provide making it attractive for the students. She also says that even though computers are excellent for group work where students can interact directly among themselves, there are some types of activities such as the text based ones which can be worked autonomously. Computers are an excellent resource for autonomous learning because students decide on what they would study, the options they would use, for how long and when (Brett, 1995:175).

If connected to the internet students can have access to authentic communication and to special materials for ELT such as linguistic exercises in

the ELT pages (Graus J.,1999). This author states that very little research has been made to measure the impact of the Internet in English Language learning. However, it is a fact that it is stimulating for students to get into chats, e-mail and electronic discussions in direct communication with other people using the English language and be able to get information from different sources in English. In addition, students can download practical exercises and have access to free on-line English Lessons and complete English programs where students can autonomously work on them, choosing tasks that benefit them better. The Internet sounds very attractive. However, teachers and administrators have to be very careful because students might not be using the web to practice the languages but to get into prohibited areas or to use their own language. Windeatt et al (2000:5) poses an interesting question “How can you ensure that your students’ Internet time is productive in terms of language learning?” It is in fact difficult to know unless there is some administrative filter to access web pages. This is still expensive technology that not everybody can afford and that not everybody knows how to exploit. Nowadays, excellent books to exploit this resource have appeared in the market. For instance, *Internet for English Teaching* by Warschauer et al and *CALL (2000)* by Hardisty and Windeatt (1989). These include excellent activities to be developed with computers and can be used by people with little experience in this field. To summarize, computers can help students develop any skill they need if they chose the appropriate software, or Internet tool. For instance, the word processors can work as excellent editors that can make things easier for students when writing an essay, a pronunciation software with a speech recognition tool can help students improve their pronunciation, a chat room can help students to start to communicate with people in English and acquire fluency. A game on a CD-ROM can help students learn language by solving problems. The list is endless because computers offer many options, what is true is that students and teachers have to learn to exploit it well and invest a lot of time and money to find out the benefits. We will now explain the role of technology in SACs will be explained.

In addition, computers have some characteristics that help learners develop autonomy. For example, Hoven (1999:88) mentions that computers provide personalized and immediate feedback and that students can have direct and real communication. Vilmi (1997) stresses this idea mentioning that Internet provides a cheap phone in the sense that people can communicate synchronously. She also adds 2 characteristics, that courses are available internationally and that Internet is independent in time and place. There are many reasons why computers as well as tape-recorders and video players are excellent tools to help students learn, many of these reasons were already stated in the previous section.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative research project with the format of case study. Nunan (1992:77) defines this type of research as “an attempt to provide a portrait of what is going on in a particular setting”. In this study it is expected to describe how students are using computers in their learning and whether they are benefiting from it or not.

The steps to develop this project are the following: a) stating the problem, b) justifying the project, c) selecting and designing the instruments, d) applying the instruments, e) obtaining data, f) analyzing data, g) drawing conclusions, and h) giving suggestions to improve the actual situation. This methodology is based on the proposal given by Canudas (2002) and some ideas by Cook (1999).

### **Justification:**

The reasons for developing this project can be stated from two dimensions, the administrative and the academic. First, authorities at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California are constantly encouraging teachers and students to use technology by assigning budget for the acquisition of new equipment and materials for students and teachers. There is a constant offer of courses to choose from for teachers and students to use the available technology. There is a strong academic reason and that is that the staff of the

center and the authorities of the school do want students to improve their learning through the use of technology. On one hand the students seem to embrace it and enjoy its use and on the other hand there has been a great deal of money involved implementing the center. It is a fact that computers offer a technology that is a powerful and useful tool when used to improve the learning of languages. However, the perception that students might not be making the most of it has to become an issue so an exploration of the situation is necessary. We need to know exactly what students are doing when using computers and if they think they are improving the language they are learning.

After having stated these academic and administrative reasons, it is evident that this project has to be developed and find out if computers are doing their job as expected or proposed by the experts in this topic.

### **Research instruments and their application**

Two instruments were devised, a questionnaire and an interview. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect data from students who attend the self-access center. 8 questions were included. It was kept short and easy to understand. Question number 1 helped us find out what they used the computer for whether they used Internet or software, questions number 2 and 3 were about their preferred software, questions 4 and 5 provided information about the use of internet. Question number 6 was about the type of exercises they look for in the computer. Number 7 was about the skills they have bettered by using computers. The last question was about their access to computers.

The second interview was a semi-structured interview. The interviews were made to the coordinators and tutors of the center. The purpose of it was to obtain data about their perceptions and information about the preferences of students in the computer rooms. On one hand, the questionnaires were chosen because they are considered an instrument that helps researchers gather a lot of data in a fast way in the field (Mills, G.E., 2203). On the other hand, interviews provide the opportunity to obtain first hand information from people who are involved in the

studied situation and they allow expansion of questions if necessary. These instruments will help us “ensure useful responses” ((Mills, G.E., 2203:63).

The questionnaires were answered by 20 people from each center, the one in Tijuana and the one in Tecate. 4 people were interviewed, the two coordinators of the self-access centers and two tutors.

## **Data**

Some of the results gathered are the following: Students said that their main access to computers is at school and home. Only 11 said that they go to internet cafes and 2 said they could have access at work. The majority of the students stated that they preferred to use educational software to learn a language instead of using the Internet. Among the most popular programs were: triple play, American Shine, Aprendamos Inglés, Encarta kids, and TOEFL. Students considered these programs interactive, entertaining, didactic, challenging, easy to do, and help them improve their language skills. TOEFL helps them pass the exam.

About their use of internet it was found that very few preferred the internet, 4 out of 40 said they surfed the net to learn a language. Only two web pages were mentioned [englishzone.com](http://englishzone.com) and [cansionestraducidas.com.ar](http://cansionestraducidas.com.ar). These 4 students said that the exercises they found were well explained and that the songs were in both languages, English and Spanish.

Students were asked what type of exercises they looked for in the computer, most of them looked for grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and listening exercises, and games. They said that through the use of computers they had mainly improved listening comprehension, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.

The perception data from the coordinators and tutors of the self-access centers are the following. They say students prefer the use of software to learn a language and the most commonly used are Triple Play, Focus on grammar, TOEFL, American Shine and Encarta Kids. They perceive that students do not access the Internet because they feel insecure or the web pages they have

access to are not suitable for them. Most of the students that access the internet prefer the list of links the centers provide in their web page. Among the webpages students access are: youtube.com and englishclub.com.

## **Conclusions**

It is a fact that students are using computers to improve their language skills. They mentioned in the survey that they have improved several skills such as listening comprehension, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, mainly. They also said they like the interactive exercises specially the games. It is good to see they recognize that interactivity is a good feature of computer exercises.

Most of the students said they liked educational software instead of other types, this shows that students feel more confident with specially designed materials than trying material that native speakers use such as movies, video clips, and so forth. This might also reflect the lack of confidence in their acquired knowledge and the avoidance of risk taking.

The results also show that students prefer to work with educational software than with other type of software and Internet. This reflects a lack of interest of students for the internet that according to experts offers excellent opportunities to learn a language with suitable and sophisticated resources. The explanation of the coordinators and tutors to this situation is that students do not feel confident with the Internet. Students sometimes think it is a waste of time because they do not find what they want or need. The school has a portal with webpages that students can access from the computer room, but it seems some of them are not updated what might discourage students to use them.

There is also the perception that students do not use the computer because of the lack of computer skills. Some adult students have never used a computer before entering the language course, they need extra help to be able to work with the software. It is evident these students feel more comfortable with the software that somehow offers a safer environment than the internet where they might get lost. Surfing the net might not be easy.



To conclude, this study provided information about how the students are using the computer in the self-access centers of Tijuana and Tecate making coordinators and tutors pay special attention to the use of Internet which is supposed to provide students with an excellent source of materials but that students are not utilizing. They know that they have to implement some actions to help students exploit this resource because access to it is not a problem.

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