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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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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

naturally come to our minds: are there quality parameters to ensure the learning efficiency of these resources? What are they? This will be discussed in the next sections.

3. Standards for Computer Assisted Language Learning

There is a general concern to establish standards that organize and improve scientific, industrial or economic activity. That is why there are many standardization institutions worldwide. These institutions have a three-fold purpose: simplify, unify and specify. In our context, three institutions stand out whose influence is relevant. The first one is ISO, the International Organization for Standardization. It was created in the middle of the 20th century and it is the organization responsible for promoting the development of international standards for manufacturing products and services, for trade and communication in all the industrial branches. Its main purpose is the standardization of norms for products and safety for companies or organizations at an international level. The norms they develop are voluntary, yet accepted and followed in the whole world.

There is also AENOR, The Spanish Association for Standardization and Accreditation, created in 1986, when Spain became a member of the European Union. It is a non-profit private institution. Its activities aim at the improvement of quality and competitiveness of companies, their products and services. It develops technical norms and certifications. It is present in all the regions of Spain, and additionally, it has offices in several countries in Europe and Latin America.

The last of the three organizations is the European Committee for Standardization (CEN, French: Comité Européen de Normalisation), founded in 1961. It is a non-profit private organization whose purposes are supporting European economy in the global market, achieving the welfare of European citizens and working for the preservation of the environment. In the next section, standards established by these organizations related to TIC-based training will be discussed in order to find out whether they may be applicable to CALL materials and resources.

On the one hand, in 2005 EFQUEL, the European Foundation for Quality in e-learning was created. This organization aims at unifying criteria for the development of evaluation standards, and promoted the establishment of a specific standardization for e-learning, UNIQUe. This is a certification specific to higher education based on the use of ICTs in teaching and e-learning (or electronic learning). It is awarded to universities after a self-evaluation and external peer review process, for a renewable period of three years. This certification is based on a very advanced concept of quality control related with integral certification of the institution, its strategies, its resources and its educational programmes.

In the same year, ISO publishes standard 19796-1:2005, Information Technology. Teaching, education and Training. Quality management, control and measurement. This suggests guidelines to establish general and specific objectives in virtual education. Moreover, it also specifies how to carry out the design and conception of virtual teaching.

In a similar way, the CEN has developed a series of norms related to training in general, including e-learning, and some particular norm related to language knowledge. This is approached from a general perspective, such as the establishment of communicative competences (CWA 14590) or recommendations for linguistic models corresponding to expressive communication skills (CWA 14927).

In 2008, AENOR, in turn, developed the first standard for virtual training quality, standard UNE 66181, with a version from 2012 which is still applicable. This standard specifies the characteristics of virtual training quality, in relation with potential clients, based on the degree of satisfaction of user's needs and expectations. The standard is oriented to non-formal education contexts and is applicable to any level at which any virtual training activity is carried out, either in a directed way or in self-learning situations. Its approach is focused on the satisfaction of potential clients, that is, it considers the learning resource as a kind of commercial product. The four factors its approach is based on are: (1) General information that the virtual training supplier should provide; (2) Quality level of the recognition of virtual training in terms of employability; (3) Training methodology; and (4) Level of accessibility. As can be seen, they are criteria applicable to training in general. Additionally, it describes elements of virtual training such as the terminology clarification between the training activity and the digital content. It also establishes the features of virtual training in terms of accessibility and employability. The learning methodology, the

interactivity, the reusability level and tutorial issues are described too. Finally, it includes a typology of teaching and learning methods in virtual environments, in general terms (Hilera, 2008).

Other institutions have also dealt with virtual training; for example, in the European Union, through the SEEL (Supporting Excellence in e-learning) framework, quality social educational policies at a regional and local levels have been observed, apart from developing a network of centers of excellence. Also, there is the SEEQUEL, Sustainable Evaluation Environment for Quality in e-learning, a European forum for e-learning quality, which promotes debate and exchange within the framework of the Quality Laboratory, an environment whose aim is to convert quality needs into action plans.

According to what we have seen so far, there is no specific standard for the computer-assisted self-learning of languages. There are, on the other hand, standards related to learning through ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in general and, more particularly, to virtual learning. These, if understood in a broader sense, can be applied to language learning in a context of Web-based linguistic self-learning, but, certainly, they will not cover the complexity of the acquisition or improvement of the language learner's communicative competence. Then, it is necessary either to develop specific standards or incorporate key issues of linguistic training to the existing ones. In our view, the following requirements, at least, should be considered:

- Work with the 4 main communicative skills
- Meaningful learning
- Standard completion levels
- Flexible learning paths (according to specific needs, age, learning style, previous knowledge, etc.)
- Complete nature of the learning resource (considered as a stand-alone learning experience).

4. Conclusions

Given the clear lack of quality standards to ensure the efficiency of didactic resources created for the self-learning of languages, both in pedagogical and technical terms, (Fernández-Pampillón, 2012), it is a matter of prime importance to develop specific standards that at least suggest criteria to ensure their learning efficiency. It is clear, nevertheless, that this is a complex endeavour, since it is multifaceted and changing, but this should not be an excuse not to deal with this fundamental issue in language education

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