

# Chapter XXIII

## Computers and Independent Study: Student Perspectives

**Huw Jarvis**

*University of Salford-Greater Manchester, UK*

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter reports on a quantitative study that examines how language students make use of an extensive range of computer-based materials (CBMs) in a language resource centre (LRC) and elsewhere for self-study purposes. Students were asked to indicate the extent to which they make use of CBMs in and outside of an LRC and whether such materials help with their language studies. The study suggests that an LRC offers more than the sum of its parts and therefore should not be put under threat on the basis that materials can and are being accessed anywhere and anytime. The data also reveal that many students, particularly Asian students of English as a Second Language (primarily from China), view a wide range of CBMs as helping with their language studies, and it is suggested that the practices and perceptions of these students may offer insights for all language learners and providers.*

### INTRODUCTION

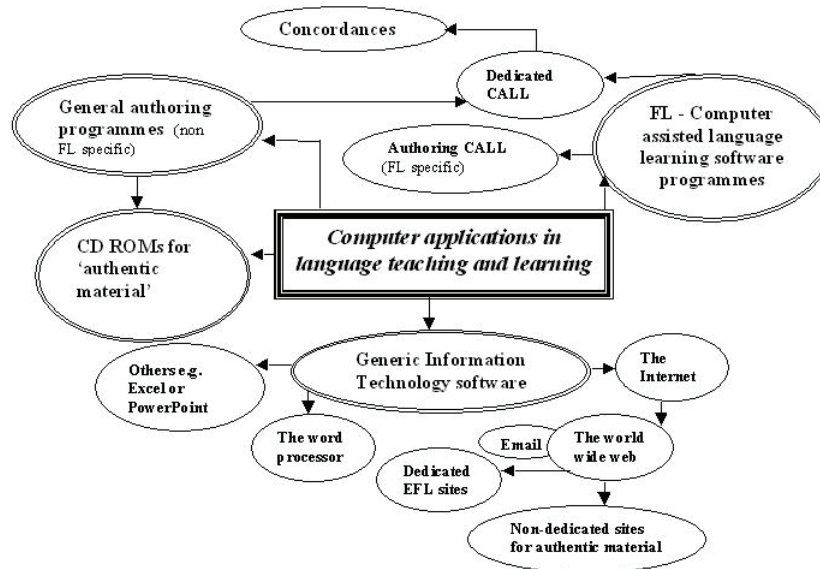
Language resource centers (LRCs) have come to be a prevalent feature in a wide range of contexts in schools, colleges, and universities, or higher education institutions (HEIs). The resources in such centers will typically include paper-based materials such as reference and self-study books, as well as technology-based provisions such as

TVs, videos, DVDs, and, above all, computers and computer-based materials (CBMs). But first, let us define what is meant by CBMs.

Figure 1 (Jarvis, 2004) provides an overview for conceptualizing CBMs in languages.

The types of CBMs that arise out of such a framework have been used in previous studies (Jarvis, 1997, 2004) and typically include the software applications listed in Section 3 of the

Figure 1. A classification framework for CBMs



questionnaire used in this study (see Appendix 1). This includes, among other things, Microsoft Office Suite as well as more language-specific programs. Such CBMs can be seen as tool-based or tutorial-based (Levy, 1997; Taylor, 1980). The former does not have an explicit teaching function; in this sense, the material is neutral and has any number of applications in educational contexts and beyond. In contrast, tutorial-based material has a clear and explicit application to teaching and learning; the material is used in a tutorial capacity for language learning, and such material will frequently, but not always, provide feedback to the student; it can be seen as supplementing and/or replacing some teaching. Inevitably there is, of course, an overlap between these notions with, for example, a word processor that is usually viewed as a tool, but its spell and grammar check have a tutorial role for language students. The Web is usually viewed as a tool that allows students to access information, but some Web-based materials explicitly focus on providing language practice for students and can thus be viewed as having a tutorial function.

While LRCs provide a range of self-study materials, it would be fair to assert (and this is supported by the data in this study) that it is computers and CBMs that dominate. Indeed, arguably they have become the defining characteristic of such centers. In many educational contexts around the globe, it would be difficult to imagine a resource center without CBMs. LRCs are often the showpiece of institutions, and it is the computer facilities and the CBMs they support that provide the kudos.

The advantages of LRCs in general and CBMs in particular are frequently discussed in terms of learner strategies, learner training, and learner autonomy (Pujola, 2002; Smith, 2003). Learner training is about becoming an efficient and effective learner by developing appropriate strategies for learning, whereas learner autonomy is concerned with the capacity to take charge of one's own learning and can be traced back to the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project established in 1971, and to the work of Holec (1981) and others (Dickenson, 1987; Little, 1989). Learner strategies, to a certain extent at least, can be viewed as the realization of these notions, and

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