Chapter XXVII
Technology in Support of Self-Access Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the results of a study into the use of technology in the specific pedagogical setting of self-access centers. As part of the study, 46 self-access centers in six countries were visited and an evaluative framework was applied to each of them in order to be able to compare the types of support offered by the centers with the help of technology and the range of tools used by them to deliver that support. It was found that the use of technology was limited, especially for the provision of learning support, as opposed to the more common provision of language learning content.

INTRODUCTION

Recent technological developments offer great potential for language learning and teaching. But how are such developments drawn on in practice? Self-access centers are often said to be technology-heavy environments and their role in providing flexible opportunities for individualized learning may make them particularly suited to the practical application and development of new technologies. This chapter draws on an evaluative framework developed by the authors to chart current use of technology in 46 self-access centers in five countries. The results were analyzed to identify the relative use of a range of both practical and learning support tools and to identify the use of certain tools versus others.
BACKGROUND

When investigating applications of technology in language learning and teaching, it is useful to investigate practical uses in real contexts. This can inform practitioners working in those contexts, and show how their use of the technology differs from others. It can also inform researchers and others interested in CALL and related areas. A wide range of tools and approaches now exists in CALL but it is not always clear how those tools are selected, adapted, developed, implemented and evaluated in teaching contexts. By looking at the use of CALL in one type of pedagogical environment we can gain insight into which tools are favored in practice and which approaches to learning and teaching they support.

This chapter focuses specifically on the use of CALL in self-access centers (SACs). Such centers have become increasingly common in recent years, both in language schools where they supplement teaching and learning opportunities as well as in higher education where they perform an important support role for students in mainstream courses. A self-access center ‘consists of a number of resources (in the form of materials, activities and help), usually in one place, that accommodates learners of different levels, styles, and with different goals and interests. It aims at developing learner autonomy among its users’ (Reinders & Cotterall, 2001, p. 87). There are many types of SACs and they differ widely, but on the whole they share a number of characteristics. In many cases:

- Use of the center is voluntary.
- Learners determine what they learn, how and when.
- There is little or no formal assessment.
- Staff is available and offer advice, select materials and activities, and encourage reflection and autonomous learning skills.

Perhaps one of the key words to summarize the above list is ‘flexibility;’ SACs offer a very flexible and learner-centered approach to learning (and teaching). This flexibility poses challenges to those working in SACs. What are the best ways to make resources available as widely as possible without constraints of time and place? How can student learning be monitored if students themselves decide what to learn? How can feedback be provided if students decide when (and if) to come back to the center? Possibly as a result of these challenges, SAC practitioners have often looked at technology to support their work and SACs are perceived to be ‘technology-rich’ environments (Gardner & Miller, 1999). What solutions have been found in practice to the specific challenges the SAC environment poses? And how is learning supported at the practical as well the pedagogical level, through the use of technology?

LITERATURE REVIEW

No previous research exists to our knowledge that has specifically investigated the use of technology across several SACs. There are reports of initiatives in the area of CALL in individual centers and we will briefly discuss these below.

A great deal of the research focuses on the application of technology for the delivery of language content. For example Gardner and Blasco García (1996) and Gardner (1994) discuss the use of interactive video with bilingual support screens to provide authentic language input. Others used the capabilities of word processors to support student writing. For example, Milton, Smallwood and Purchase (1996) developed a word processing tool that supported students in generating and working out ideas for writing academic texts. Early reports also discuss the development of multimedia software especially for self-study of listening and vocabulary skills (e.g., Mak, 1994).