Shifting roles: From language teachers to learning advisors

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Received 7 November 2011; revised 18 June 2012; accepted 6 July 2012
Available online 12 August 2012

Abstract

Although learning advisors are often qualified teachers, the skills they apply, such as those discussed by Kelly (1996), require a significant shift in approach regarding interaction with students. As teachers reorient themselves to advising, their role changes quite markedly from teaching language to advising on learning (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001). This challenging move requires professional development training to support and ease the shift in professional roles (Hafner and Young, 2007). As part of the professional development for advisors at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan, advisors undertake a series of ‘observations’ where they record and reflect on advising sessions. An analysis of these reflections was undertaken with a view to identifying common themes which provide important insights and practical implications for teachers considering advising and those involved in professional development for educators. The findings of the study show that the skills most commonly referred to are goal-setting, guiding, questioning and attending. A further skill of negotiation of meaning was also observed as being important in successful advising sessions. A greater understanding of these skills can inform language teachers who take on learning advisor roles.

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Keywords: Learner autonomy; Self-directed learning; Advising; Counselling; Professional development; Reflective practice

1. Learner autonomy, self-access language learning, and advising in language learning: a clarification of terms

For the past three decades language education has seen a marked increase in the number of studies conducted on learner autonomy (Little, 1989; Cotterall, 1999; Benson, 2011) and self-access language learning (SALL) (Sheerin, 1989; Gardner and Miller, 1999; Cotterall and Reinders, 2001). As Mozzon-McPherson (2001: 8) points out, these days it would be difficult to find an international conference, an educational policy document, or a state-funded language learning project that does not refer to learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy and SALL are approaches to learning, and more recently, teaching (Little, 1995; Mackenzie, 2002) responding to the ever-changing developments in language education and the perceived need to offer wider access and a more personalised experience for learners. They are movements brought on as a result of increased internationalism, the commercialisation of language provision, and the desire to make education more accessible to larger populations (Gremmo and Riley, 1995). If we perceive individual freedom to be a significant source of personal
satisfaction in our internationalised world, and if choice and flexibility are manifestation of this freedom, then learner autonomy and SALL provide both language learners and educators the means, i.e. choice and flexibility, to achieve higher levels of achievement and fulfilment.

Moreover, the movement in language learning towards learner autonomy and SALL, not only reflects the philosophical and pedagogical shift in language education from a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred one, but also it takes this shift one step further, to a learner-led approach, where learners, coupled with appropriate support, are given the opportunity to fully direct their learning endeavours. The idea being that learning becomes more effective when learners are pro-active, taking control and making decisions (Sheerin, 1997).

The majority of criticism surrounding learner autonomy stems from its nebulous nature, as it can be a concept “notoriously difficult to define precisely” (Little, 2012). Terms often confused with learner autonomy include: self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975), self-planned learning (Tough, 1979), autodidaxy (Candy, 1991), and self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 1995).

An example of how the concept of learner autonomy can be confused with other learning-related concepts involving control, independence, and responsibility can be observed when comparing Holec’s (1981) idea of learner autonomy with Knowles’ (1975) idea of self-directed learning. Holec (1981) describes autonomy as learners’ taking responsibility for their learning through a series of steps that include:

- Determining the objectives
- Defining the contents and progressions
- Selecting methods and techniques to be used
- Monitoring the procedures of acquisition
- Evaluating what has been acquired

This ‘series of steps’ mirrors the work done by Knowles (1975) in the field of adult education. He describes ‘self-directed learning’ as a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in:

- Diagnosing needs for learning
- Setting learning goals
- Identifying human and material resources for learning
- Choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies
- Evaluating learning outcomes

Contemporary practitioners of autonomy attempt to remedy this overlap in meaning by making the distinction between capacity and practice: “‘autonomy’ is a capacity and ‘self-directed learning’ is a way in which learning is carried out” (Pemberton, 1996: 3). In other words, self-directed learning is the learning that goes on once the ability to learn in this manner has been attained.

SALL is another term often associated with learner autonomy, encompassing many of the same philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings. It is commonly defined as an approach to learning (rather than teaching) that attempts to develop autonomy through a combination of resources, specialist educators/professionals, and learners (Gardner and Miller, 1999). Integral to SALL are self-access centres (SACs), which operate often within different tertiary contexts “with their own philosophy and routines for engaging learners in language study” (Benson, 2011: 128). They are essentially the facilities in which SALL takes place (Cotterall and Reinders, 2001) set up to support learners in the individualisation of their learning.

One of the main issues with SALL and SACs is that often institutions establish these centres without a principled pedagogical justification, assuming that “self-access learning will automatically lead to autonomy” (Benson, 2011: 11). The idea being that building a SAC and loading it with resources and technology will not only attract learners, but also lead to learning development. This common misconception about SALL may be one of the main reasons why such centres are often mis-or-under-used (Mozzon-McPherson and Vismans, 2001).

Research conducted on SALL has shown that certain learning criteria and principles need to be encouraged in order for a centre to be successful in the fostering of learner autonomy. For example, SACs need institutional support and the necessary infrastructure to allow for the SALL system to work efficiently as a learning scheme (Serra, 2000: 98); SALL should be voluntary and students should have an integral role in the running of SACs (Cooker, 2010); The
presence of professional educators in SACs is necessary to “facilitate the pedagogical use of the resources” and to promote a more individualised approach to learning and the gradual development of autonomy (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001: 9).

This final point, regarding the need for experts working in SACs with the specific aim of developing learner autonomy raises another important issue concerning the practice of learner autonomy and SALL: the shift in roles of the professionals involved.

The importance of establishing the legitimacy of the role of a learning advisor and language learning advising as a distinct field of professional practice is deeply rooted in the work of SALL and learner autonomy.

Learning advising, or advising in language learning (ALL) as it has more recently been referred to (Carson and Mynard, 2012), is quite distinct from language teaching, both in terms of the practical skills required and in the discourse employed. The movement from teaching to advising is a shift requiring a reorientation of professional practice and identity. Essentially, this involves the introduction and development of new perspectives on the tasks to be achieved, as well as distinct ways to define their roles (Esch, 2001). Learning advisors have been referred to as bridging figures (Mozzon-McPherson, 2007) working outside the classroom, in SACs, to help learners develop effective individualised learning behaviour. Their roles are often associated with flexible learning, learning strategies, and self-directed learning — “specialists either in a language or in independent learning” (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001: 11). More recently, they have been defined as trained experts in language learning, with extensive experience related to resources, activities and strategies, who work with individual learners on personally relevant aspects of their language learning (Carson and Mynard, 2012).

Stickler (2001: 40) outlines three fields of knowledge and expertise that contribute to a successful learning advisor: First, the advisor needs to be a source of guidance on the learning of languages with particular emphasis on the use of learning strategies. Second, the advisor needs to be familiar with the environment of advisees to provide expert information on resources and materials. Finally, the advisor needs to have good counselling skills to make the session a learner-centred and empowering experience.

In addition to the differences in skills required between teachers and advisors, a unique discourse is also instrumental in achieving a successful shift. Through an examination of the interaction between advisor and learner, Kelly (1996) observes a distinctive ‘therapeutic dialogue’ meant to empower learners in their management of learning problems. The dialogue, which is characterised by its responsive rather than prescriptive nature, should facilitate a transformation by challenging beliefs about language learning and the roles and responsibilities of both learners and advisors. Kelly categorises the skills needed for successful advising as either macro or micro (see Table 1 below). The macro-skills are generally sequential and include initiating and concluding as the first and last of these. However, Kelly points out that some macro-skills may occur or reoccur at any point of an advising session. In contrast, micro-skills may occur in combination, for example appropriate questioning requires attending and may confront as well as question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Language counselling skills (Kelly, 1996: 95—96).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Macro-skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Micro-skills</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Initiating</td>
<td>Introducing new directions and options.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal-setting</td>
<td>Helping the learner to formulate specific goals and objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding</td>
<td>Offering advice and information; direction and ideas; suggesting.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modelling</td>
<td>Demonstrating target behaviour.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporting</td>
<td>Providing encouragement and reinforcement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving Feedback</td>
<td>Expressing a constructive reaction to the learner’s efforts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>Appraising the learner’s process and achievement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linking</td>
<td>Connecting the learner’s goals and tasks to wider issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding</td>
<td>Bringing a sequence of work to a conclusion.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Giving the learner undivided attention
Repeating in your own words what the learner says
Simplifying the learner’s statements by focussing on the essence of the message
Bringing together the main elements of a message
Using open questions to encourage self-exploration
Offering explanations for learner experiences
Surfacing the emotional content of learner statements
Identifying with the learner’s experience and perception
Surfacing discrepancies and contradictions in the learner’s communication.
Mozzon-McPherson (2001: 12) makes clear that while many teachers will recognise themselves using macro-skills, it is within the micro-skills (attending, restating, questioning, etc.) that the differences between advising and teaching are most obvious. As Kelly explains, the skills are not merely linked to techniques but require a philosophy which respects the views and decisions of advisees. This reflects the values of self-directed learning and the autonomy approach (Morrison, 2012), where decision-making transfers from the teacher/advisor to the student/learner. The adoption of these values and skills is not always straightforward and as the shift from teaching to advising occurs there can be marked changes in roles from teaching language to advising on learning (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001).

The field of language learning advising, or ALL, has worked hard to develop its own shared practice and discourse (including a unique interdiscursive metalanguage). These differences in procedure and desired outcomes make it imperative that educators moving into learning advising go through training and professional development unique to the context of learning advising to support and ease the shift in professional roles (Hafner and Young, 2007).

It is important to note that the way in which advising is practiced in different SACs throughout the world will reflect a variety of contextual variables including, differences in the philosophy of the administration, and the social-cultural background of learners.

Advising at KUIS for example, is conducted in English and divided into written or spoken forms (Mynard and Navarro, 2010) or a combination of the two. Written feedback is common in self-directed learning modules such as those offered as out of class credit-bearing courses at KUIS (Cooker and Torpey, 2004) and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Toogood and Pemberton, 2007). The asynchronous nature of this feedback allows collaboration with other LAs before giving a considered response.

In contrast to written advising, the spoken advising sessions offered at KUIS, require the learning advisors to respond to the situation as it unfolds without the safety net afforded in written advising. The sessions in this study are 30-min one-to-one discussions booked by individual students. The purpose is to discuss the student’s learning. This may be to formalise a learning plan a student has developed, to discuss weaknesses, to set learning goals, to consider resources, something else or all of the above. Advising sessions at KUIS differ from a tutorial or one-to-one class in that they should be learner-led i.e. the learner should be informing the LA rather than the tutor informing the tutee. The LA aims to question and listen rather than teach or tell. The sessions in this study are 30-min one-to-one discussions booked by individual students. The purpose is to discuss the student’s learning. This may be to formalise a learning plan a student has developed, to discuss weaknesses, to set learning goals, to consider resources, something else or all of the above. Advising sessions at KUIS differ from a tutorial or one-to-one class in that they should be learner-led i.e. the learner should be informing the LA rather than the tutor informing the tutee. The LA aims to question and listen rather than teach or tell. In this context, the title ‘LA’ is a misnomer in that the LA offers little advice. A skilled LA guides learners to think through and consider their options. An LA may offer choices but not offer the only choice. The onus falls on learners to take ownership of their decisions and by extension, ownership of their own learning. The practice, as all LAs in the following study have reflected, is much more difficult to implement than the theory of how an advising session should proceed.

Face-to-face advising sessions are potentially the most challenging for new LAs. An investigation into these would cast light on the realignment required as teachers refocus their skills on advising. This knowledge could inform educators interested in advising, training and on-going professional development. With little research published on LA training and the perceptions of LAs, a study to consider these offers an insight which could inform educators and educator trainers considering advising as a way to support and encourage learners to develop a greater understanding of their own learning and the impact of their actions on their language development.

2. Methodology: studying reflections
2.1. Context

The professional development employed at KUIS is a process centred on reflection or more precisely, “intentional” reflection (Kato, 2012: 74). Reflective learning is considered by many to be the centrepiece of professional development (Boyd and Fales, 1983; Schön, 1983). It is used often in a variety of counselling affiliated professions to facilitate training and promote better practice. In nursing, educators look for ways to help students structure their reflection as a form of active learning. It is believed that if professionals can express past experiences, current situations, and expected consequences, it will help them explain what they do in various situations and why (Thorpe, 2004). Also, in clinical nursing or health counselling, practitioners use a structured reflection model (Johns, 1995) to examine their experiences and practice in supervision, and to take responsibility for their effectiveness.

For the PD reflections required of incoming learning advisors, we had the choice of either recording and reflecting on a face-to-face advising session or analysing and reflecting on written feedback. Since this is done once a semester for the first three semesters at the university, all LAs reflect on at least one face-to-face advising session, with several
choosing two. The reflection is written down and becomes instrumental to a documented discussion with a more experienced supervising LA, which provides constructive feedback and deeper understanding of any issues arising. The reflections are written on the understanding that these are confidential documents and will not be shared with others.

As one of the key ways in which advisors can foster learner autonomy in learners is by activating their reflective learning processes, it is beneficial for advisors to experience reflective learning for themselves (Kato, 2012). This can ensure that learning advisors are intimately aware of a key process in learning development and are at the same time exposed to proven methods of professional development.

2.2. Participants, data collection, and analysis

Permission was sought from all 15 KUIS LAs, past and present, to examine their professional development documents. Complete anonymity was assured to all participants. The documented reflections were kept digitally on record by the supervising LA and spanned six years, from 2004 to 2010. There was no indication to the participating LAs that this research would be conducted prior to any of the sessions, therefore the reflections can be considered true, unbiased, accounts. Consent was obtained from 14 LAs.

The study was carried out by conducting a document analysis of a total of 21 formal reflections taken from face-to-face advising sessions. As mentioned above, these reflections and the feedback provided, form an integral part of the professional development for LAs at KUIS. A multi-method approach was applied using a combination of ethnography and discourse analysis to examine advisers’ reflections and the reflective dialogue that ensued between each LA and the supervising LA. This approach contributed to the identification of advising skills that impact directly on professional development for learning advisors, therefore facilitating the shift in role from teaching to advising. Each researcher went through the 21 reflective documents and where available the transcripts of the sessions being reflected on with the view to identify common themes which would shed light on advising sessions from the perception of advisors. The researchers established common codes based on Kelly’s (1996) counselling skills framework, after an initial analysis. These codes were then re-checked for relevancy and reliability. The final analysis summarised the findings and categorised the codes. Kelly’s framework provided relevant categories for the qualitative analysis as a starting point, with subcategorisation of satisfied or unsatisfied to identify the perceived success of the skill. A sub-goal to consider whether Kelly’s skills require modification was also set.

3. Findings and discussion

As can be seen in Diagrams 1 and 2, the skills which were commonly self-identified across LAs, i.e. in 10 or more reflective reports, included goal-setting as an important foundation to developing autonomy and the cornerstone of any session while the challenges for LAs included the macro-skill of guiding and the micro-skills of questioning and attending. A further previously unidentified macro-skill, clarification, emerged clearly from the data in six of the reflective documents and will be discussed at the end of this section. By looking more closely at these skills, some clear trends surface highlighting common difficulties and repair strategies. For ease of organisation, these will be discussed below skill by skill. However, it is important to bear in mind that at times there is overlap between micro-skills e.g. pertinent questions are often the result of close attending and can be used to guide or negotiate.

3.1. Goal-setting

The setting or clarification of student goals was, in the vast majority of cases, viewed as a successful starting point to the entire session. It was clearly identified as an important step in students’ taking control of the direction of their own learning and provided a foundation around which the rest of the session revolved. During the sessions, LAs guided students to confirm appropriate, feasible goals. In two documents LAs identified goal-setting as problematic when mid-session it transpired that the students’ initial perceptions of their goals were at odds with wants, interests and needs. As one LA commented:

I should have reconfirmed her goals beforehand and then I would not have focused so much on trying to get her to use the TOEIC words [she was studying].
But it is possible to widen the scope of goal-setting to consider the LAs setting goals for their sessions, as several LAs reported doing. The goals that were set in this way can be clearly grouped into two distinct categories. Where LA goals seemed to provide the greatest success were when an LA had identified a weakness in their advising skills from a previous session, particularly from a session with documented reflection. At the end of these official reflections, LAs almost always compiled a list of action points they wanted to implement in subsequent sessions, i.e. the LA set advising goals for themselves. The seven LAs who submitted two spoken advising reflective documents wrote about the same skills in both documents eighteen times. Eleven of these instances went from ‘unsatisfied’ to ‘satisfied’ in the subsequent documented session and all of these LAs made this transition with at least one of skills.

Another aspect of LA goal-setting sometimes occurred through LAs requesting a copy of the student’s learning plan prior to the session. This allowed the LA to plan certain aspects of the session in advance, as a teacher might plan a lesson. When this was done well, it allowed the LA to consider ways of asking the learner to contemplate and clarify aspects of their learning. However, new LAs sometimes previewed the plan and looked for problems that should be fixed, and approached the session with a clear idea of what to fix and how to fix it. As one LA put it:

*Setting meeting goals can help in the assessment and critique of advising sessions, allowing me to gauge which areas I was successful with and which areas need improvement but it also makes it difficult to let a dialogue progress naturally because I feel I have to cover everything on my agenda and put pressure on myself to do so.*
Therefore conflict between having goals and allowing the session to flow the way the student wants it to may occur if the LA is not sensitive to this possibility. Perhaps this is in part linked to previous teaching experience and the notion of covering the lesson plan.

3.2. Guiding

Of the macro-skills, this was the most problematic. A common theme was striking a balance between guiding and prescribing. Six LAs expressed disappointment with their guiding skills, identifying too much advisor talk and imposing choice on their advisees as problematic. Jamieson (2001: 60) made a similar point:

*The LA who has also been a teacher for many years, may find it at times difficult not to be too prescriptive in discussing strategies, especially if she has the impression that this would lead to quicker results. It is important to remember that students ought to explore their own preferences. The LA listens to, interprets and guides learners by suggesting alternatives for them to try out. It has to be realized, though, that the line between guiding and prescribing is often very fine indeed.*

When questions were asked in such a situation they were often identified as being closed and were used to purposefully lead the advisee to a particular point, even when an advisee had clearly stated that they were not keen to do a particular activity. At times it would have been more appropriate to delve deeper to find out why the students had made the choices they had. This might reveal that the choices had been considered, or allow more student reflection around the choices they make. Either way, the student would be allowed to retain ownership of their own study plans:

*I tend to ask closed questions and avoid negotiations especially when a learner is a low-level English user. Instead, I give advice from my point of view which I feel is not helping students to be autonomous. In this session, I tried to listen to what the student needed to say and help her to think on her own of the ways to study.*

*As learning advisors we attempt to flesh out those underlying causes of concern and forge a plan of action. However we must also be careful not to impose our opinions and views on the student too strongly but rather lead them through a process of self-discovery.*

Interestingly, some more experienced LAs in later reflections suggested that not all students were ready to make some of the decisions for themselves. While learners might be able to make certain decisions with a degree of confidence, for example set goals, they found it difficult to select appropriate resources and instead tended to be more comfortable choosing what they had always done and were most comfortable with, even when those materials had evidently not met the goals they were setting for themselves. LAs who were more comfortable with their guidance in such situations first asked questions to clarify student ideas, and then tried to elicit initiatives from the advisees before providing options or reporting activities that other students had found useful. By presenting these ideas as genuine choices, LAs supplied additional support yet ultimately passed decision-making back to the learner.

*I think I did manage to conduct the session without being overly-prescriptive. It was not possible to let the learner take control of the session, as he is not yet ready to do so. Perhaps I could have encouraged this more? At this current stage, I do not see that this would be possible. Reflecting on this advising session was perhaps most illustrative of my expectations (as a learning LA) of a learner. It is very important to see each learner in their own individual context, and not compare their situation or progress with others.*

*As this was the beginning of a new module, [my advisee] was at a stage of high interdependence, so not ready to take control.*

The reflections demonstrate that many new LAs had difficulties guiding. This was likely linked to experience as teachers and the role that many LAs had taken on in the classroom. Nevertheless, the awareness that appeared to emerge through reflection indicated that guiding was often initially misunderstood and substituted with prescription. Equipped with this insight, LAs considered how they could approach similar situations in future sessions. LAs who guided successfully did so by greater questioning of learners, checking and negotiating to confirm what learners were really trying to express, and providing real choices when learners were at a stage where this offered support.
3.3. Questioning

Just as guiding was the macro-skill which garnered the most attention, so questioning was the micro-skill most widely discussed between the reflecting LA and the supervising LA. When used well, questioning can be used to enquire about what the learner is currently doing and to encourage self-exploration around the effectiveness of this study as well as encouraging the learner to consider further possibilities. Almost half the documents showed dissatisfaction with questioning. Six were self-identified as problematic application of this skill while the supervising LAs thought questioning was underutilised or less effectively applied in five cases.

In addition to the open questions Kelly advocates, closed questions were used effectively, for example to quickly establish a fact before asking an open question. Nevertheless, LAs unhappy with their use of closed questions identified how these questions limited answers, led to LA-dominated talk-time, and potentially directed rather than guided when a preferred answer was expected.

*I need to get better at asking more effective open questions and giving the appropriate time and space to reply and discover. I ask a lot of direct [closed] questions which she tries to answer but I seem bent on pushing my agenda on her and don’t give her responses proper consideration. I am too concerned with getting her to think like me and to say what I want to I want her to say.*

When LAs asked tangential, opaque or difficult questions, they normally realised almost immediately what they had done. Those that felt they had dealt with their own ‘mistake’ best had stopped, summarised what had gone before, contextualised their question and restated or further broken down the query:

*My first two questions were too abstract for the learner … Later in the session, I found that paraphrasing or summarizing what the learner had said and then continuing the questioning gave me more immediate results.*

In contrast to this, some LAs were self-critical after asking an unbroken series of questions. Often this was either the same question paraphrased several times or a question which became more focused through subsequent utterances. On all occasions, the LAs who did this felt it was potentially confusing and distracted from the session. Of these two distinct strategies for dealing with the problematic questions, the better strategy was the former: stop, summarise, contextualise and restate.

Despite the problematising of questioning as an advising skill, principled application was identified as guiding advisees to give more consideration to their learning and informing LAs about choices made by the learners. Other reflections identified questioning being used well for clarification of meaning and in summarising and concluding, particularly when questioning put the onus back on to the student to do these activities. Not only did this focus more on the learner, but also it clarified the extent to which the learner had followed the discussion and how they planned to move forward with their learning.

While some students required more support, they were able to make principled decisions from choices provided by the LA. Through follow up questions to establish why a choice had been selected, LAs were able to establish learning was being considered.

A final point identified is that questioning can be a powerful way of passing the conversation back to the student. It can make the conversation more learner-centred. Reflections show that to question well, students need to be given the space to respond, and the LA needs to relinquish control to the advisee so that the LA genuinely responds to the student and asks questions modified to their responses. This links directly with attending, a micro-skill directly associated with questioning. As one senior LA implicitly points out the importance of attending if a good session is to be made even better:

*Overall, I thought that this was a really nice interview and you evidenced effective questioning and guiding techniques, and helped [the student] to focus on vocabulary learning strategies. If I have one suggestion, it would be that you use the “questioning” skill to try to make your advising more learner-centred, in other words that you are more reactive to the learner, than pro-actively asking the questions that you want the answers to. I think one of the most difficult aspects of learning advising is relinquishing directive control of the learning situation, and being more of a resource that the learner can utilise, rather than a tutor.*
3.4. Attending

Attending was commonly referred to in reflections. As well as being associated by LAs with macro-skills such as guiding and concluding, attending was also identified as being evident in other micro-skills including paraphrasing, summarising, challenging and empathising. In these micro-skills there was little comment other than a general recognition that the micro-skills were evident and used appropriately. Rather it was attending as a discrete skill which caused a greater conflict within the teacher turned LA, and some unease perhaps as a result of cultural expectations of interaction norms.

If attending was identified as a challenge, three main underlying reasons emerged from the data: LA agenda, pressure to perform, and uncomfortable silence. The first, LA agenda, was introduced in the previous section. In typical moves, the LA asked the question, the student gave a short answer and the LA then either told the student how it should be, or moved on the next LA-chosen discussion point:

We identify an important point … this allows a discussion of exam strategy and although there are aspects of this that work well, i.e. the ideas come from the student and are well thought out, when I ask her why, I then interrupt to give the answer. This is clearly a time when I should have sat back and listened. It was time to attend rather than provide input.

The same LA on his subsequent reflection had identified attending as one of the main goals. Within this he had specifically planned to allow the advisee as much time as they needed to answer questions. This led to long silences which, although uncomfortable for the LA, were seen as vital to the integrity of the session:

The student held the floor for longer than I did. Although she lacked fluency, through giving her time to speak and allowing more pause time than I feel comfortable with, the advisee managed to gather her thoughts and express herself. The backchannelling we both use indicates to each of us that the message is being attended to. I also restated her point to confirm I was attending.

Throughout this session I was keenly aware that although I find it difficult to keep quiet in a dialogue, perhaps as a result of my cultural tolerance of silence, I needed to hold back. I feel I have made progress with this aspect of advising even though I continue to find this difficult. I was also aware that initially I was asking follow up questions quite closely after her responses and then guiding her from one section to the next. As I realized I was doing this, I bit my tongue and held back as much as possible to allow the student to take the lead.

LAs’ eagerness to reply and ask follow ups were raised in reflections as impinging on the session. This was sometimes identified as pressure to perform i.e. to evidence knowledge, to keep the conversation flowing or to prevent the awkwardness of extended pauses. Nevertheless, the awkwardness of extended pauses may not be heard by both parties. Silence may be in the ear of the beholder as a supervising LA pointed out:

Silence is awkward! But of course the learner, who is busy formulating an answer in their head, probably doesn’t hear the silence.

This is an important consideration for LAs to bear in mind, particularly with a skill which involves an activity as seemingly straightforward as not speaking. Nevertheless, Mozzon-McPherson (2000: 122) draws attention to this challenge when she pointed out that “pausing and leaving enough time for reflection is one of the difficult skills which an adviser has to learn”.

Overall LA reflections made it clear that real attending, i.e. allowing the conversation to flow naturally with the learner and holding back to give the advisee time to formulate and produce, made a striking difference in the LAs’ perception of the session quality. In the limited sessions available for this study none of the LAs thought they had perfected attending, yet they all perceived that they had made progress and would continue to give this skill attention in sessions.

3.5. Clarification

This macro-skill could be realised by any or a combination of micro-skills such as paraphrasing, attending, summarising, concluding, restating, or questioning. By interacting to clarify and specify meaning, both the learner and LA
ensure they understand each other. Clarification could be instigated by either participant but it would go some way to ensuring the dialogue progresses in a direction both participants understand. Many LAs specifically refer to this notion, some to comment on what they had achieved and others to discuss what they would like to have done differently.

However on reflection I could have clarified a little more, for example when she said, “I write sentence” does she copy the sentence from the book or does she make her own sentences? Also I assumed when she says, “and speaking” that she means she repeats out loud the new vocabulary and sentences she has written down however she could have meant that she uses it in conversation.

Another LA also reflected on the terms a student had used when discussing goals.

I wonder what ‘daily conversation’ means? … Perhaps a more productive strategy here might have been to have asked what sorts of daily conversation she has, who is she wanting to talk with on a daily basis and about what kinds of topic?

Therefore, clarification is identified from the data as a relevant skill within the advising environment which can be initiated using existing micro-skills. Since it often requires the learner to clarify, it is the learner who is informing the LA. However, there is also the potential that by being more specific, the learner develops a greater understanding of their own learning.

4. Conclusion

This article provides an insight into the perception advisors have of their advising sessions and the common areas they focus on using Kelly’s (1996) counselling skills as categories for analysis. Despite the diverse teaching experience LAs had before coming to KUIS it became apparent through this investigation that goal-setting, guiding, questioning and attending are perceived as particularly important and requiring attention. The findings also suggest that Kelly’s skills require modification with the addition of clarification, a skill implemented to provide focus.

The professional development activity at the centre of this study, reflective practice with an experienced colleague, led to a clearer understanding of the practice of advising for the LAs involved. Encouragingly, when there were reflections on subsequent sessions, these always identified improvement indicating that this awareness-raising reflective practice contributes to the transformation. Indeed, a later self-reflection always showed the LA picking up and focussing on an area the previous reflection had identified as requiring more attention. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that reflection can contribute to improved LA performance.

Advisor trainers and teachers new to advising may therefore choose to focus on the skills above in practice sessions and when interacting with learners. Certain skills seem to be more challenging to implement well than others. As a result, an awareness of repair strategies, such as those mentioned, and practice using them should improve the advising experience and allow teachers to become familiar with an activity that aims to support and encourage learners to make informed decisions about their own learning. Research into the training and professional development of language educators involved with self-directed language learning and learner autonomy is emerging but still relatively new. There is a need for further research into this area to establish effective strategies for advising and for training learning advisors.

References


