



Language Counselling and Learner Advising in and out of the Classroom

Luisa Panichi¹

University of Pisa - LP's Online Language Coaching and Consulting, Italy¹

Abstract

This paper will provide an overview of Language Learner Advising and illustrate some of the theoretical underpinnings. It will identify the key areas of adviser intervention with a particular focus on the promotion of learner autonomy, learning-to-learn skills, language awareness, learner motivation and the use of reflective dialogues. This paper will draw on examples of best practice from higher education with reference to the ongoing debate on the blurring boundaries of the classroom brought about by the use of technology.

Keywords: *language learning, counselling, advising, language awareness.*

1. Introduction

The practice of “Learner Advising” was initially developed following the establishment within many European Universities of Language Centres for self-access and independent learning in the 80’s [1] and in correspondence with a growing interest in language learner development in terms of learner strategies and autonomy in the 90’s [1][2][3]. Over the years, the literature has often referred to learner counselling and advising interchangeably. This ambiguity was addressed in 2015, however, by Mynard and Carson [4] who argued for a preference for “advising” on the grounds that, although the two fields share a lot in common, the term “counselling” carries with it an additional idea of therapeutic or psychological support which can be misleading in educational contexts. Finally, even though there is a natural overlap between the knowledge base and skills of *language teachers* on the one hand and of *advisers* on the other, the literature has increasingly emphasised the importance of providing advisers with specific training in the interest of quality and effectiveness of the advisory process both for the end user, i.e. the learner, and in terms of professional development for language experts and teachers working in the field of advising [3][4][5][6].

2. Learner advising

In the literature, the term “learner advising” refers to the following activity: individual sessions between language teaching and learning experts with students in support of independent language learning. This activity initially took place in relation to self-access language laboratories or libraries affiliated with universities or adult learning centres [1][2]. Indeed, it was often the case that students who were not enrolled in official language courses where they could rely on direct contact with teachers would often make use of “advisers” within the self-access centres for information about language-learning resources, materials and their learning. Issues that were often addressed with advisers included advice on learner strategies and content specific information. Furthermore, as many of the language learning centres provided digital learning support and technological resources for learning, advisers would often be approached by learners for guidance in the use of technology. Over time, language learning centres also became a point of reference for students enrolled in more structured language learning contexts such as in full scale language courses either within the various university departments or in courses run by Language Centres for non-language specialists [7][8]. Thus, learner advisers began to provide services for a broader range of students with diverse needs. In many instances, advisers were hired by the Centres for the sole purpose of language advising [7]. In other cases, language teachers would also act as advisers either for their own students or for the general self-access public [8].

Finally, the rise of the use of technology within formal teaching contexts, i.e. within the classroom, has led to the unavoidable blurring of the boundaries between teaching and advising as well. The more online and technologically driven options students have, the greater the opportunities for independent learning and learning outside classroom. This shift in learner options and practices has also led to a shift in the role of the language teacher with “facilitating” and “advising” becoming a key activity and an integral part of teacher expertise. An example of this is the blended learning approach of the “flipped



classroom” whereby student/teacher “in-class” time is devoted to answering student questions and participating in conversations about the subject initiated by students themselves rather than to the presentation of concepts and materials which can be catered for asynchronously with the use of digital resources [9].

3. The reflective dialogue

At the heart of the advising experience is what is referred to in the literature as the “reflective dialogue” [10][11]. Advising draws on two fundamental areas of expert knowledge: content knowledge and knowledge about the learning process including the affective dimension of language learning. While it can be argued that both types of knowledge should be part of any language teacher’s professional expertise, it is nevertheless fair to say that often the everyday conditions in which most language educators work are such that the focus is often on the transmission of knowledge and content for large numbers of students rather than on the learning process as it is experienced by the individual learner. And, it is indeed within the framework of the conversation between trained expert and novice that both aspects can be fully taken into account. The dialogue between adviser and advisee, while intentional is its purpose, is often loosely structured allowing for the learner to develop an awareness of their specific needs in relation to their language learning. Indeed, one of the key characteristics of learner advising is that it is student-led or student-determined as a way of encouraging and developing learner autonomy. The adviser’s role is primarily to support the learner in increasing their awareness about their learning in relation to their individual needs and goals. In some cases, students may require greater adviser intervention and probing, in other cases, for example, learners will display adequate self-determination and awareness and use the adviser more as an opportunity to check their learning is on track. Over the years, with more adviser practices being put in place, a number of studies and protocols have been developed which provide for a degree of structure to the reflective dialogue in terms of both what goes on in individual sessions and how the process can be structured over time. However, whatever the degree of structure and whatever the duration and the context, reflective dialogues are generally characterized by the following elements: a conversation-based dialogue where both adviser and learner can ask and answer questions; a comfortable and welcoming environment where the learner feels it is appropriate to discuss issues that may concern the affective dimension of learning; adviser expertise is readily accessible to the learner through the framework of the conversation; the adviser is able to direct or redirect learners through the use of specific questions about the learner’s beliefs about language and learning, about their learning strategies and habits and about their study plans in relation to their aims and goals. The ultimate aim of reflective dialogues should be that of ensuring that the learner is sufficiently autonomous and aware of the language learning process in which they are engaged in relation to their needs.

3.1 Learner identity

The degree to which reflective dialogues have an impact on the learner will depend on a number of factors but in particular it will vary with the learner’s needs. Advisers may also find that their degree of ease in addressing certain issues with learners may vary and that they may require additional training. Indeed, language learning often is a powerful trigger of emotions and may bring to the surface entrenched learner beliefs about learning, their perceptions and beliefs about their abilities, preconceived ideas about the target language and culture and about one’s own language(s) and identity. In this sense, advising can be seen to have an important transformative potential for learners as a means of increasing their understanding of self in relation to the other as part of the language learning process. The importance of this reflective activity and its implications in terms of learning and teacher expertise is also the subject of research in the related field of “Language Awareness” [12]. Awareness raising activities are indeed in no way confined to individual teacher-learner encounters. For example, many language awareness activities are frequently carried out in the foreign and second language classroom at all levels of education. In the classroom context, reflection upon learning, language and learner identity takes place as a collective learning process and is based on and benefits from teacher-led group discussion and reflective activities.

4. Conclusion

The field of Language learner advising has come a long way since its outset but its core contribution to language education remains the same: individual and personalized support to language learners in the interest of their learning, ongoing development and autonomy. What we are seeing today, however, is



a more systematic weaving together of the different fields of study (i.e. from research into language learner motivation, agency and self-determination, learner strategies, autonomy, language awareness, and to studies on affect) into a more uniform structuring of the field which, in turn, has led to a more robust understanding of what are considered Learner Advising best practices [11]. An additional development is the change in mode of delivery of reflective dialogues and learner advising encounters. Indeed, what was once a face-to-face practice is now an online option as well. Furthermore, a practice which was initially devised as an “out of class” option of independent study programmes is now making its way as a form of support in more structured educational contexts. And, with a rise in online language learning and in the scope and number of digital learning spaces and materials available to learners and teachers it can be argued that the advising process itself has become more complex. At the same time, with the introduction of technology-driven pedagogic innovation such as flipped classrooms, blended learning contexts and mobile learning, educators and language teachers are undeniably being nudged to question their roles and the structures which traditionally have shaped teacher-learner interactions and expectations.

To conclude, in spelling out some of the issues surrounding learner advising it is hoped that the pedagogical potential of adviser-learner interactions and reflective dialogues will inspire language teachers to seek greater opportunities for Learner Advising within some of their mainstream practices not only as a way of enriching the experience for learners but also as a professional response to the changing educational landscapes we work in. As a flexible and adaptable pedagogic framework it can be argued that Learner Advising is well suited to meeting many of the language learning and teaching challenges we are currently facing in and out of the classroom, online and offline.

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