



Language Learner advising. Current developments and adaptations at the University of Pisa

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Abstract

Language learner advising is an established field of language teacher practice within university language education and language learning and teaching research. The literature in the field has provided examples of such practice in a variety of contexts and with reference to different methods, adaptations and tools. This paper will attempt to portray language learner advising current practice at the University of Pisa within two specific contexts: 1) compulsory language units within the Bachelor and Master Degree courses and 2) elective language courses run by the University Language Centre. Learner advising practices will be discussed both as individual advising sessions within self-access/study programmes and as advising for students enrolled in classroom-based teaching courses. This paper will discuss the learner advising practices currently in place in relation to ongoing research and best practice in the field in attempt to identify key issues in terms of quality of experience for the learner and for advisers. Examples will be taken primarily from English as a Foreign/Second language context but reference will also be made to the teaching of other languages with the specific university context. A discussion of how advising practices were adapted and used during the Covid-19 pandemic will also be provided.

Keywords: *Language learner advising, practice, research, Pandemic*

1. Introduction

Language learner advising has been an established field of practice in language education within tertiary contexts since the 1980's [1] [2]. Language learner advising - or counselling as it is sometimes referred to - is a professional practice that involves, in general, one-to-one consultations between a language teaching expert and a language learner in relation to the her/his learning of a specific modern language [3] [4]. The consultations are based on the learner's needs and may deal with the learner strategies, the use of resources, the language itself, and any other issues which emerge in relation to the learning process, such as learner autonomy, learner identity, and the affective dimension of language learning including motivation [5]. Learner advising can take place in a variety of contexts from self-access learning set-ups such as those available to tertiary and adult learners within many European university Language Centres, to instructor-learner conversations and language advising encounters within the framework of a formal course structure. This paper will take a look at examples of language learner advising at it is carried out at the University of Pisa within the formal context of both optional language learning modules at the university Language Centre and compulsory language units within the department-based bachelor and master degree courses.

2. Learner advising within the Pisa University context

Language learner advising within the Italian university system is generally incorporated into what is known as "ricevimento" in Italian and corresponds to "office hours" within the Anglo-saxon university tradition. "Ricevimento" is an opportunity for students to meet up with their lecturer or language teacher to ask questions about the course in general, for example about course requirements, materials etc. and to discuss issues which are related to course content. "Ricevimento" is usually carried out in the teacher's office and provides students with a more private space to discuss any course related issues they might have. Sometimes the teacher will carry out "ricevimento" sessions with a group of students in a way which is similar to a tutorial. The main idea behind this practice is, in general, to enable students to access relevant information for their personal learning needs. This can be particularly useful, for example, for students in part-time study because of family or work commitments who are not always able to attend face-to-face lectures. In some instances, where students choose not to attend lectures in person these encounters are the only form of contact with the teacher and other peers. Where students are not able to attend at the general prescribed times,



personal appointments can be set up to cater for individual needs. It is within this loosely structured but formal format of “ricevimento” that language learner advising usually takes place.

2.2 Learner advising at the Language Centre

Courses run by the University of Pisa Language Centre are elective. Pisa university students enrol in these courses to improve their language skills for a number of reasons. It may be that they are training for a job interview, interested in improving their CV's or preparing for a year abroad as an exchange student. The general cohort is made up primarily of students from those departments where language teaching is not available such as Engineering and Medicine, for example. The Language Centre currently provides language instruction in 9 languages: English, French, German, Arabic, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, Polish and Italian as a Second Language. Courses are run for all levels of the EFR (A1-C2) and provide training in general language skills and for international certification. There are also a number of courses aimed at training academic and administrative staff. Courses have a maximum number of students of 25 and all students sit a level test and are enrolled in courses that correspond to their entrance level. For students of Italian as a Second Language, the Language Centre also provides self-access opportunities which students access both independently of language courses and also as an additional learning opportunity under the guidance of their course instructors.

2.3 Learner advising for Department run courses

Language courses run within the framework of Bachelor and Master degree programmes grant credits and are generally compulsory. For students majoring in languages, language courses are a core component of their studies. For students majoring in Economics and Management, for example, students are only required to pass one exam but non-completion of the language component will bar students from graduating. Courses generally have large numbers of students enrolled (between 50 and 200) and there is no level test prior to enrolment. The implications for the teacher and the learner are that students within these programmes are under a considerable amount of pressure to pass the language exam in a context where the teacher-student ratio is higher and learning conditions are more challenging. Thus, it can be argued that within this context, the educational stakes are higher than at the Language Centre and learner advising has a more central role to play. Individual or small group sessions can allow students to access more tailored support that is not afforded to them in class because of the higher number of students and disparity in language levels compared to the courses run at the Language Centre. Likewise, it is also an opportunity for the teacher or language instructor to get to know the cohort better in the interest of the quality of teaching.

3. Covid-19 pandemic adaptations

As with all teaching at the University of Pisa, language courses made an abrupt shift to online teaching in March 2020. As this paper goes to press in October, 2021, University of Pisa students are making the shift to hybrid online-face-to-face lectures. As teaching is now taking place in lecture halls and classrooms, students can opt whether to access the lesson in person on site or in streaming from another location on or off campus. During the pandemic, “ricevimento” was carried out entirely online. The hybrid teaching conditions in place at the moment mean that students can continue to access their teachers online as well as in person on campus. In this sense, it can be argued that the changes in the way teacher-student interactions have been carried out under the Pandemic have afforded greater interaction opportunities between teachers and learners in general. Arguably, learner advising practices that are carried out within the context of “ricevimento” have also benefitted from this increase in modalities and spaces.

4. Conclusions

The main conclusion that can be drawn from the above is that that the lessons learnt during the Pandemic have had an impact on the delivery mode of language advising processes. This shift in delivery of language advising has also provided us with an opportunity to rethink some of our advising methods and modes. In addition, it can be said that we also now have a broader mental landscape in which to frame our understanding of the relevancy and the potential for language learner advising frameworks in general. The challenge is now to see if these different modes of interaction can/should become permanent. In terms of learner advising research, there is a need to analyze in particular the benefits for both teachers and learners in terms of ease of access, quality of experience and impact on learning and how face-to-face, online and hybrid combinations can support and enhance each other in language advising processes.



References

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