Enhancing the Quality of Adviser Support for Self-directed Language Learning

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A b s t r a c t

This paper reports on an Action Learning Project investigation into the approaches adopted by advisers in the first two years of a self-directed language-learning programme. Drawing on data from tape-recorded interviews and advising sessions, and focusing particularly on the language used by advisers in their meetings with learners, we show how advisers changed their approaches in the second year of the programme, and describe the benefits of this kind of research for the development of advising skills.

Introduction

Recently there has been increasing interest in the ways that teachers can and do 'advise' or 'counsel' learners when supporting their self-directed language learning (e.g. Gremmo, 1995; Kelly, 1996; Riley, 1997; Voller, Martyn, & Pickard 1997; Mozzon-McPherson, & Vismans, forthcoming). One of the main research focuses in this area is likely to be the discourse of advising. This has recently been highlighted as an important and fruitful area of future research (Gremmo, & Riley, 1995; Riley, 1997), after pioneering work over many years at the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL) at Université Nancy 2 (e.g. Régent, 1993, cited in Riley, 1997; Gremmo, 1995).

At Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), we have run a self-directed language-learning programme for postgraduate students for the past three years. In its first two years, the programme was the subject of a two-year Action Learning Project, whose aim was to evaluate and enhance the effectiveness of adviser support for self-directed language learning in the programme. In this paper, we briefly report on what we have learned so far of the approaches towards advising of the advisers involved in the programme. We also report how the advisers changed their approaches in the second year of the programme. We hope to illustrate the benefits of action research when implementing innovative programmes of this type.

The Research Project

The Context

The programme from which the data are drawn is offered at HKUST, one of the seven universities in Hong Kong. As at other Hong Kong universities, the vast majority of our undergraduate students are local Cantonese-speakers. Full-time postgraduate students fall into two main groups – those from Hong Kong (Cantonese-speaking) and those from mainland China (mainly Putonghua-, i.e. Mandarin-speaking) - although there are also several from other countries. English is the medium of education, as at the other local universities, and this policy

is very largely adhered to at HKUST. (Even outside class, English is often used as a medium of communication between Cantonese-speaking students and HKUST lecturers, the vast majority of whom are US-educated, and have Putonghua (Mandarin), Minnan dialect (Taiwanese) or English as their first language rather than Cantonese.).

Like other tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, HKUST has had a Self-Access Centre for several years, and has developed programmes where students carry out a period of self-directed language learning, either as an optional extra-curricular activity or as a part of a taught course. The programme to which we will be referring here differs in that, like programmes described by Moulden (1990) and Karlsson, Kjisisk, & Nordlund (1997), the whole course is designed to develop learner autonomy, and the majority of the student time is spent carrying out learning that the students themselves have planned.

The Programme

The 'Postgraduate Self-Access English Programme' is described in detail in Pemberton, Ho, Lam, & Toogood (1999). It was first offered in 1998, runs in the Spring semester, and is expected to take approximately 42 hours of the students' time (i.e. approximately three hours over 14 weeks). Many of the students have already taken a taught course in English for academic purposes at postgraduate level in the previous semester (although this is not a prerequisite). The programme is purely optional, carries no credit points and students are rated 'Pass' or 'Fail'. The aims of the programme are twofold:

• to help participants to develop their language skills in a particular area;

• to help them to develop their ability to direct their own learning.

So far, the majority of those opting to take the programme have been from mainland China, with the second largest group being from Hong Kong. Participants have ranged in the level of English from Elementary to Advanced, and in age from 20+ to 40+ years. These students tend to be quite highly motivated to improve their English in order to function effectively both in an English-medium university and in the academic world at large. Many also hope to go on to the USA to continue their postgraduate studies or do post-doctoral work. As research students, they also tend to be in tune with the idea of planning and directing their own learning.[1] However, in addition to their classes, assignments and research work, students often have to work as research assistants (RAs) or teaching assistants (TAs) and are under considerable pressure, leaving little time for 'non-essential study'.

Data Collection

To focus on the extent to which learner and adviser expectations matched, we chose to look in depth over the two years at the attitudes and interactions of four of the five advisers and to focus on a small subset of the 50 learners in the programme. Each year, each of the four advisers selected one of their allocated learners as data sources. These learners agreed to have their

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[1] In our experience, there is little evidence to confirm that self-directed language learning is somehow inappropriate for Chinese learners. In this we concur with those who argue that the capacity for autonomy is a human characteristic [Little, 1996]; that cultures are neither static nor uniform [Aoki, & Smith, 1996]; and that there is no direct correlation between ethic, national or cultural background and learning style [Willing, 1998; Press, 1996; Littlewood, 1999, forthcoming]. Even assuming a uniform Confucian-heritage learning culture [and students in Hong Kong are exposed to a range of sometimes conflicting influences], there are elements in that culture which would seem to match well with self-directed learning — for example, the value placed on effort, a comparatively strong tendency to use high-level learning strategies [Biggs, 1996], and a tradition of scholars encouraging people to think for themselves [Lee, 1996; Pierson, 1996]. For a useful summary of arguments against Autonomy is inappropriate in Asian Contexts viewpoint, see Smith [1997].

advising sessions recorded and to have two recorded interviews with our RA. Altogether, data were collected from the following sources:

- pre- and post-programme questionnaires given to all learners;

- tape-recordings of the three advising sessions for each of the eight selected learners;

- two tape-recorded interviews with each of the selected learners about their expectations and perceptions of the different advising sessions (conducted by our RA);

- tape-recorded interviews with advisers about their expectations of and approach to advising in the advising sessions (conducted by David Gardner of Hong Kong University (DG);

- a tape-recorded discussion about advising involving the four advisers;

- learners' and advisers' diaries;

- end-of-programme reports written by the learners and advisers;

- e-mail communication between learners and advisers.

The language used in all cases was English except on rare occasions when the RA used Cantonese or Putonghua to clarify a point.

The Learners and the Advisers

For the sake of convenience, we have labelled the four advisers (in random order) as A1, A2, A3 and A4, and their respective learners for the first year as L1, L2, L3 and L4. For the second year the learners are labelled L1*, L2*, L3* and L4* and again correspond in number to the advisers. All the advisers are here referred to as 'she'.

We would like to stress that the four learners chosen for analysis each year were not designed to be typical of the 50 learners enrolled in the programme. In fact, each is unique in certain respects. But we chose to focus on them because:

- they represented a range of learners in terms of their background and their assumed attitudes towards the concept of self-directed language learning;

- they provided the richest source of comparison between adviser and learner perceptions; and (in the second year of investigation)

- their level of English was fairly high, to avoid situations where we could not be sure of the meaning of transcribed passages.

The four advisers are all experienced language learners and teachers of English at tertiary level in Hong Kong. Prior to the study, A1, A2 and A3 had been involved for many years in the Self-Access Centre (SAC) team at HKUST. A1 and A3 had had experience of self-directed language-learning projects with undergraduate students. A2, A3 and A4 had had similar experience with postgraduate students. A2 had also had experience of running a special focus self-directed language-learning programme for postgraduate students.

Our Advising in Year 1

At the time of writing, the programme concerned had just completed its first semester. In the first two weeks of the programme, participants were introduced to the concepts and practice of self-directed language learning through two four-hour workshops which covered: an introduction to self-access language learning; needs analysis; goal setting; learning styles; a tour of the Self-

Access Centre (SAC) to look for materials; workshops for directing self-access language learning in specific areas; and planning and writing diaries.

After this induction, the learners were expected to carry out approximately 30 hours of self-directed language learning over the next ten weeks. The learners were free to focus on any aspect of English they felt they had a need to improve.[2] It was expected that by the end of the induction, they would have a clear idea of the aspect of language upon which they intended to focus. The requirements of the programme were that learners meet a personal adviser for three meetings of approximately one hour each at the beginning, middle and end of the programme; and submit a learning portfolio at the end of the programme, containing:

- examples of work completed;

- daily or weekly diaries to document the learning process; and

- a short report describing and evaluating their learning over the course of the semester.

The aim of the meetings or 'Advising Sessions' was to provide learners with an opportunity to seek help and guidance for their language learning. Advisers were expected to ensure that learners produced evidence of continued self-access learning and were also expected to write a short report at the end of the programme evaluating the learner's ability to plan, carry out and evaluate their own learning.

No training was provided in how to advise, nor were advisers given a structure to follow in their advising sessions. However, advisers shared ideas and strategies from time to time during weekly project meetings, and assumed that they would approach the advising in a similar way to each other.

Findings

Although we assumed that we shared a common approach towards advising, the transcripts of the advising sessions show that while there were many similarities between the approaches of all the advisers, there were also noticeable differences between the approach of A4 and those of the other three advisers. The most noticeable difference in our advising styles was in the directiveness of the advice provided. To illustrate the differences, we will look at three features: the focus placed on course requirements, the degree of control exercised over the interactions, and the way that suggestions were expressed.

Focusing on Programme Requirements

A4 appeared to focus more openly on the course requirements than the other advisers, although all advisers said that they were (to varying degrees) directive in this regard. She made it very clear what was expected of the learners in terms of commitment and 'deliverables'. Here is one example:

> You have to remember one thing, one very important thing. One very important thing is that in our course three hours per week is important, three hours per week is important. OK. So this is the basic requirement. […] You have to really try to make the three hours

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[2] Projects chosen ranged across Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Grammar, Pronunciation and Vocabulary. Project foci varied in how specific they were, but broad foci such as Grammar were strongly discouraged. Sample foci included: Writing academic papers; Listening to the news; Increasing my vocabulary to enhance my spoken fluency; Increasing the speed at which I can read academic papers; Improving my oral presentations.

per week because this is the requirement. The requirement is important, all right? This is very important. *[From first advising session]*

A3, although not as forceful as A4 in her expression of course requirements, was much more directive than when suggesting learning techniques ("You need to make a plan and give it to me."). In contrast, A1 tended to qualify demands that the programme required the adviser to make on the learner:

So if you can send me, say, by the end of next week, if you can send me a copy of your diary and it can be on paper like that or you can send me e-mail. Doesn't matter. […] So you'll e-mail me next week. [L1: OK.] OK. Lovely. And I'll have a look at any problems that you've got. [L1: If I have some problem, I can] e-mail me. Yeah. I hope you get a bit of sleep. All right. Bye bye! *[From second advising session]*

Interestingly, it is quite feasible that A1's use of conditionals and expressions of concern for L1's health gave the opposite force from that intended. L1 appears to have picked up on the conditional form of the request ("If I have some problem, I can [e-mail you]") rather than the direct force intended by A1 ("So you'll e-mail me next week"). The result: no e-mail was received!

Organising the Conversation

There also seemed to be differences between A1 and A4 as regards the degree of control exercised over the interaction. A4 liked the sessions to have a clear focus. As she noted after the second advising session:

I like [L4] although she seems to be everywhere. *[Comment in diary after second advising session]*

By contrast, A1 was happy at first to let the learner talk and for the conversation to follow a relatively unstructured pattern:

Liked the session – got on well with him (from last semester), he did a lot of talking and he comes up with things unexpectedly (e.g. re. the amount of English practice he has as part of his studies) later in the session – shows the value of continued listening. […] Also liked the fairly free-ranging nature of the session: I tried to summarise at certain stages, but was able to get a good overall impression of him as a learner/PG student as he chatted.

Jotting down notes by me is useful – prompted [L1] to talk more. *[Comment in diary after first advising session]*

However, although she allowed the conversations to follow their own course, A1 began to feel by the second session that such chats were "rather unfocused" with L1 backtracking and almost contradicting what he had said earlier (e.g. "… no time […] will complete […] no time …" etc.); and that she herself was not sufficiently focused:

Felt the session went well at first, as I was listening, allowing him to express himself without too much interruption. However, have the feeling was not well structured – I didn't have a clear idea of where I wanted it to go. *[Comment in diary after third advising session]*

At this point, A1 was unhappy with the session, while L1 was quite happy to be getting speaking practice and rated the session 'useful' in the end-of-programme questionnaire. It may be that A1 here is showing a desire for focus that is not that different from A4.

Making Suggestions

A marked feature of A4's discourse was her frequent use of imperatives and modal verbs expressing obligation:

> But then you have to come to the last point: revision. Never, never forget revision if you want to remember what you have learned … Always remember … Don't forget to revise or else you will forget what you are doing.

> So you have to tell me now what areas of vocabulary you want to learn.

> Then you learn those first. Right? Learn to use that. *[From first advising session]*

A4 gave very clear suggestions (including alternatives), but did not tend to reduce their force by using qualifying language. She said that she would "shift to a directive mode" of advising when learners were having difficulties with their learning (stated in her diary and the interview with DG) or wanted a tell-me-how-to-do-it approach from the adviser:

> … they said "You are the adviser. We expect you to tell us something", so I usually start with telling them because they didn't have many ideas. *[From discussion with other advisers]*

She also felt that this was appreciated by those who were in difficulties:[3]

> For the student who did not know what he or she was doing, then I would become very directive. And in that way I felt that they were happy, I mean happier than if I just leave them in the dark and ask them to think or give them a lot of choices. *[From interview with DG]*

The other advisers reduced the force of their suggestions. A3 made plentiful use of *may* and *maybe*, often put suggestions in the form of questions (e.g. "So why don't you choose one piece of news a day?"; "Do you think it's useful to compare with someone in the class who you think is good at taking notes?") and presented them as a possibility for consideration:

> After listening to you for some time, do you want to hear some of my advice? [L3: OK.] But I'm not sure if it is useful or not because everyone is different so we will have to try and see which method is best for you. *[From first advising session]*

Similarly, A1 hedged when presenting an alternative strategy to one mentioned by L1:

> I think that's … a good way of evaluating … it's just your own idea, a feeling. But you might consider some other ideas as well. For example, when … you have your conversation, it may be useful to do some tape recording and listen back, because you know, this has two purposes … *[From second advising session]*

A2 was even more tentative:

> Perhaps you should look at different ways of connecting sentences … I'm not sure if this works but …

> And that might be an idea to just try and focus, perhaps the things that you're working on …

> I don't know if it will work. But you can have a try. *[From second advising session]*

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[3] In this she was undoubtedly correct. However, the advice given by the other advisers, although less directive, was also rated positively by the students.

Our Advising in Year 2

Changes Introduced

As a result of the differences we observed in our approaches to advising, and problems that we identified with the programme as a whole, and the learners' perception of our role as advisers, we introduced the following changes for Year 2 of the programme:

a) We discussed the transcripts of the advising sessions and the interviews with each adviser. We also viewed 'One to One Consultations', an adviser development video focusing on advising strategies, produced at the University of Hong Kong (Voller, 1998). Based on our experiences and on Voller's (1998) video, Kelly's (1996) list of macro- and micro-skills for language counselling, and Régent's (1993; cited in Riley, 1997) list of counselling roles, we devised a preliminary list of advising strategies to act as a focus for our advising and help us identify strategies that we came across in the transcripts.

b) We extended the frequency of the advising sessions from three to six times during the 14 week semester but reduced the length of the sessions from one hour to 30 minutes.

c) We made the requirements more explicit and directed students to complete a standard weekly input, practice and evaluation (IPE) form to show how they were carrying out their learning and to ensure that the learning they achieved linked clearly with their aims.

d) We made clear our expectations of them and asked them to make clear their expectations of us to ensure that there would be no misunderstandings about roles and responsibilities before learners actually embarked on the learning process (cf. Riley, 1997: 120-121).

Findings

Results for Year 2, specifically those from our post-programme questionnaire, learner interviews and advisers' diaries, show that the above changes were successful in solving the problems. With regard to (a) above, the process of discussion between the advisers led to a more uniform approach to advising in Year 2, with A4's advising style showing a marked change. On several occasions in the second year of the programme, when her advisee asked her for advice, she first asked him what he thought. This sometimes resulted in the learner thinking through answers to his own questions, e.g.:

> L4* Do you think it is better to divide the 3-hour into two or three separate sections?
>
> A4 So what do you think first?
>
> L4* Er … for me to allocate one 3-hour is more practical because I don't need to squeeze out time … different time from different days. But I find […] it's quite difficult for you to concentrate at the end of the session.
>
> A4 That's true.
>
> L4* So in terms of efficiency, maybe it's better to divide a 3-hour session into at least two one-and-half-hour sessions. But then you need to find out suitable time for you … for me at least.

Then, when giving advice, she tended to present options, as in the dialogue below (continuing the discussion above):

A4   That is true. Actually I mean, basically people usually believe that language needs practice, right? The more you practise, the better you are, you would be. […] *[Explains why]* So in my opinion, I also think that it's better to split, I mean use different times slots in a week to study. However, since you have a very tight schedule […] then you put it in one slot with three hours which is what you have said. […] What you can do is that maybe in the first one and a half hours, you can study one type of material, and then take a break, 5-minute break, and then change to another type of materials. […] In this case, you can focus either on accuracy in the first hour or fluency […] so in this case, you make the three hours easier. What do you think? But myself, I have my opinion. I would feel to split it in different days is better […] will be more beneficial for yourself.

L4*   I think I have to look back to my timetable first. So if I can find two one-and-half hour free time for me within my timetable, so I will … my first priority is to … to use two one-and-half hour sessions.

A4   Good.

L4*   Then if … but if I can't find this … if I find this option is not possible, then I will stick to one 3-hour session.

A4   Then after that maybe you decide what to do with that three hours.

L4*   Yes.

As her advisee confirmed, "She used to give a list of options from expertise and then the final decision is upon me." She also expressed her suggestions much more tentatively than before. Compared with her advising style in the first year of the programme, this represented a major change.

Another interesting development that became clear on reading the transcripts from the second year was that although the other three advisers continued to use seemingly non-directive discourse, they were in fact each using advising strategies that could have resulted in the learner handing control back to the adviser.

In the extract below, for example, A1 maintains a high level of tentative language, which was a distinctive feature of her advising from Year 1. We also see continual use of a clarification strategy. This approach is then seemingly non-directive. However, a closer look shows that along with the clarification there is repeated reinforcement of a particular pattern of learning. This pattern of learning appears to be a hobby-horse of the adviser's which she has assumed is also the learner's chosen pattern. There is an apparent lack of active listening and probing on the part of the adviser here, which could result in the learner interpreting the use of clarification as directive advising.

A1   [with movies] you already know what's going to happen. In the news, you don't know what's going to happen. So with the movies, you … you want to get the main point first, is that right?

L1*   yeah

A1   And then if that's easy, then you may concentrate on the language. *[pause: no response from L1* whilst A1 is writing notes]*

That seems a good idea. *[pause: no response from L1* whilst A1 is writing notes]*

Now, of course, the movies that you know, we've got the English subtitles and tape script.

But if you start concentrating on language, then it becomes much more time-consuming because you have to rewind, so I think if … let's … maybe you … you see how it goes at first to get the main point and then maybe later on, you might need to look at the plan again. I personally think that might be useful although it's time consuming. But you can find out what your problems are. And when you know what your problems are, then you can … When listening to detail, you can try to … you know, like a learning plan to deal with a … which … which will also be helpful for lectures as well.

L1*   Lectures.

A1   Because … getting the main point is the main thing but sometimes what stops you from getting the main point is the detail. Sometimes it's the language that stops you hearing the main point, so I think these two are connected.

L1*   … con - what?

A1   "Connected"

L1*   mmmm

A1   I mean detail and main point. They're different but they're also … also related to each other.

L1*   I … I think …

A1   You know, if … if you understand the … of course, if you understand all the detail

[A little later on:]

A1   I just want to clarify things. So basically you're focusing on the main point first. And then if you can get the main point, you plan to move onto detail.

L1*   yeah.

A1   If you still have problems with the main point, then you will continue. Is that right?

L1*   All right.

A1   I'm not telling you. I mean I'm asking you.

A2's advising was quite similar to A1's both in Year 1 and 2. However in Year 2 we found that the adviser seemed to use less tentative language as she tried to focus more directly on raising the learner's awareness of the need to meet the programme requirements (particularly in terms of input and practice). The key strategy identified here is the way in which the adviser attempts to raise the learner's awareness of problems in her plan in terms of how it matches with her aims. The adviser repeats a suggested learning path instead of eliciting and probing to allow the learner the opportunity to develop her own learning path.

A2   *[reading]* "I'll have a phone interview soon." [inaudible] OK, OK but that's … that's not really practice. That's almost like the test, isn't it?

L2*   uhuh yeah.

A2   So perhaps that's not so appropriate in this section. Although it's a good idea to write it in but you could just say, OK. 'Test'. Yeah? … OK. Well, having a look at this, what you've written down for the practice, it sounds fine, but it does sound very general. Like

general speaking practice. So … my worry would be that if you want to practise, specifically, for interviews … there's nothing really in here that shows, you're setting up an interview situation, so that you can really practise towards having a phone interview. Right?

L2*   um

A2   Um, so what I would suggest is that you have a closer look at speaking advice sheets for improving interview skills, and then … so S4 … and then also have a look, like I said before at the learning tips and the evaluation for your progress, in the advice sheet um for improving your conversation and discussion skills. And see if you can think of, a way in which to set up a practice that enables you to create an interview situation, whereby you're practising what you're learning and trying to think about, uh, what kind of questions they might ask you, um in the interview and how you would respond.

L2*   mm hm *[agreeing]*

A2   So that you really prepare yourself well. Now within that practice, you can still improve your fluency and your accuracy

L2*   mm hm?

 [A little later on:]

L2*   Do you think it's uh do you think it's help … if it is helpful?

A2   Yes I think it is very helpful to do that as well

L2*   mm

A2   and then, if you're if you're going to do that then that's something to think about for adding to your input,

L2*   uhuh

A2   Wouldn't it be? Right? So then your practice is to um listen, and expose yourself to more conversations so that you can adopt more knowledge about how people talk in conversations, how they sound, so, yes I think that's a that would … that would go into input. Don't you?.

L2*   mm hm *[agreeing]*

A2   OK, so, I … I think this is fine. But it's a bit too general

L2*   It's too general?

A2   Yeah. And I think what you need to do is see if you can work out something more specific. *[pause]* To link to preparation for the interviews sorry for the interviewee. *[pause]* Because that's your main aim right?

L2*   uhuh

A2   What do you think about that?

L2*   um *[pause]*

A2   I mean I'm not saying you shouldn't do this. I think these things are fine. I think you should … you should do these things.

should … you should do these things.

L2*   yeah, yeah

A2   But I … I do, feel that you need to consider how you're going to practise for the interview.

A1's repeated attempts to clarify the path the learner had chosen while at the same time emphasising a particular strategy, could have resulted in the learner agreeing to follow what was in fact a favourite learning strategy of the adviser's. Similarly, A2's emphasis on the need to make links between input and practice could easily have led to the learner doing something that she didn't want or need to do.[4]

It is possible that these developments in Year 2 were influenced by changes (b) and (c) mentioned above. The increased frequency of the advising sessions and the focus on programme requirements were felt by all the advisers to have been positive changes, helping the learners to stay on track and get as much out of the programme as possible. However, the reduced time available for each advising session in Year 2 did make us conscious of having to operate within a tight time frame and may have led advisers to cut corners and direct at times when normally they would have asked.

A3, like the other advisers in the second year of the programme, made the course requirements very clear, and as with the other advisers, this emphasis seems to have influenced the way that she advised. In her case, though, in trying to ensure that the learner met the requirements (particularly in terms of practice), the effect seems to have been somewhat different. On some occasions, although using tentative language, she seems to be setting short-term goals for the learner, as if setting homework to be completed:

A3   Next time when you come and see me, could you promise me … well, I think maybe I can give you a little pressure. I don't know if you like it or not because … let me know if you don't like it.

L3*   No problem. Up to …

A3   So what I suggest is maybe next time when you come to me again, you could finish a certain number of chapters or even half of the book. So that's your goal during Easter.

L3*   Yeah. Yeah. That's a good idea.

In other cases, she actually stopped using tentative language and became quite directive in her discourse, as the extract below shows. In setting the agenda for the next advising session, the adviser also appears to decide on a learning path for the learner.

A3   So why don't you try out and tell me because what I want you to do next time is … [pause] because what I want you to do is you try out the materials and you try out the exercise and tell me what you think about it.

L3*   yeah OK.

A3   So next time the focus of the discussion would be whether the materials work for you or not.

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[4] In fact, the learners in these cases continued on their own paths regardless!

L3*   mm hm

A3   If not, then how else can you plan

L3*   mm hm

A3   your topic?

L3*   OK.

A3   It's OK?

[Interruption by someone else] Just a moment we're about to finish.

OK. So to summarise what we have discussed today, um, so you have told me that um you have told me that um you did two passages in Practical Faster Reading, right? And you have also gone through some topics

L3*   mm hm

A3   some units in Authentic Reading.

L3*   mm hm

A3   OK. And then you have some general idea on how to get started with your project.

L3*   yeah.

A3   And I think the best thing is practise a little bit on the … well, because you really … what you have done is just get some tips and ideas

L3*   yeah

A3   of how to get started

L3*   yeah.

A3   So I think the next two weeks, before you come to meet me again

L3*   mm hm

A3   is to really practise.

Overall, the examples above illustrate tendencies in the advising of Advisers 1, 2 and 3 in Year 2 to intervene in the learning process. Whether these tendencies are conscious or unconscious, they need to be guarded against.

With regard to change (d) – making it clear how we viewed the role of advisers and learners in the programme – we found the vast majority of students appeared to be clear about the adviser's role by the end of the first introductory workshop. As one learner said:

> The main purpose of this Self-Access is quite obvious to us is that we should learn ourselves. […] The main purpose for the advisers … is to help us … not to teach us.

Project Outcomes

Increased Awareness of Our Own Advising Styles

An important outcome for us as advisers on this project has been that each of us has learned a considerable amount about how we advise, and the messages we send to learners. It's our belief that advisers (and for that matter, teachers) rarely find out so much about the way they interact and the language they use with learners.

Development of Appropriate Approaches Towards Advising

A4's much less directive style of advising in Year 2 was a very positive outcome of the project. All the advisers have undergone a self-learning process in terms of how directive we are and should be in our advising. As the following quote from A3 suggests, this is a continuing journey:

> When I first started the advising, I tended to direct, because I still saw myself as a teacher […] And as I went along I thought that shouldn't be advising. […] If I end up telling them what to do, they would not know how to learn themselves, and so as I go along in my advising career or with my experience, I tend to listen more. At the beginning, although I knew the importance of learners' responsibility, I still talked a lot, without knowing that we actually influence the learners' decisions. But now […] I let them talk. […] It's more worth spending time exploring themselves than I tell them the first time and maybe that's not what they want.

We have found it necessary to be more directive with regard to programme requirements and expectations of roles. But at the same time we have come to believe strongly that we need to maintain a non-directive approach where giving advice is concerned. Finding the balance between 'force' in the form of required programme components and 'freedom' in the form of advising that helps learners to follow their own learning paths is not always easy; but responses from students suggest that we are not too wide of the mark. 92% of students in Year 1 and 93% in Year 2 rated our advising as 'Useful' or 'Very useful'. In both years, the great majority of learners said that the advising had helped them learn independently and said that they liked the style of advising they had encountered (which they characterised as 'listening and suggesting options' rather than 'telling me what to do'). The following are representative of the end-of-programme comments that we have received over the two years:

> I think it's up to me to choose some method, but her provision of some options is very important.

> The advising helps me to know the right way to solve the problem and I solve it by myself actually.

> The flexibility of learning and the advices and helps from the advisor is a good combination

> In this course, I was fully in charge of what I would learn and it gave me a opportunity to focus my limited study time on the area what my weakness was […] The course enabled me to take the initiative to choose when and how to learn. At the same time, my Self-Access Adviser gave me the constant support and guided and advised me as I carried my self-access learning. After this course, I not only improved my English, especially in pronunciation, but also knowed how to learn English by Self-Access

However, analysis of the transcripts from Year 2 has made it clear to us that knowing the importance of helping learners to make their own decisions is only part of the picture. Just

because we believe in promoting autonomous learning does not mean that our advising will necessarily support it. When we looked at the advisers' discourse from Year 1, we felt that using tentative language when giving suggestions and options to learners helped them take responsibility for their own learning and make their own decisions. However, when we looked at the transcripts for Year 2 we found that if we are not careful, we might push learners in certain directions without realising that we are doing so. We cannot assume that just because we use tentative language in our suggestions, the learner will understand or respond to them. Nor can we assume that we are being non-directive just because we are giving the learner suggestions. We need to keep checking that our attempts to promote learner autonomy are not undermined by our own preconceived ideas and unrealistic expectations.

We have now just completed the third implementation of the programme and are discovering in ourselves a greater awareness or sensitivity towards learners' stages of learning in terms of how much time and help they need to understand needs, set workable goals, find useful materials and work out helpful learning strategies. Although there seems to be a tendency for most to go through particular stages at roughly the same time (according to a kind of general timeline set by the advising sessions and the programme requirements), what is fascinating to us is the way in which we as advisers are learning to allow for flexibility in our guidance, by allowing our directiveness to oscillate within the framework of requirements we set and timelines we construct. This learning in us seems to be derived from a more sensitive approach to learners' expectations and growing experience in understanding the kinds of problems or frustrations and successes a learner might go through at any given stage of their learning.

Development of a List of Advising Strategies

Overall, our advising sessions appear to involve the features and communication strategies listed by Voller (1998). He identifies key features of the first consultation (goal setting, narrowing down goals etc.) and what he calls the 'Feedback loop' (identifying problems, evaluating progress, advising, teaching etc.), and the communication strategies of Active Listening (restating, eliciting etc.) and Motivating (empathising, encouraging etc.). Based on the transcripts of our advising sessions, we have devised a list of advising strategies (see Figure 1 below) to act as a focus for our advising and help us identify strategies that we come across in the transcripts.

Figure 1: A list of advising strategies used in the programme

Asking questions

Eliciting (information, goals, progress, beliefs, feelings etc.)

Probing

Passing the learner's question back to them

Clarifying

Requesting clarification

Restating

Summarising

Interpreting

Checking comprehension

Highlighting contradictions in what the learner has said/planned

Advising

Helping analyse needs

Helping focus goals

Identifying possible problems in the learner's plan/learning method

Reminding the learner of their original goals/plan

Offering suggestions re:

- planning

- record-keeping (writing of plan, diaries, portfolio report)

- time allocation

- materials/activities

- (alternative) learning strategies

- evaluation

Providing feedback

Evaluating progress/performance

Providing information on language features/terminology (e.g. accents, contractions etc.)

Motivating

Encouraging/praising

Empathising

Mentioning experiences of other learners (including the adviser)

Agreeing

Our listing has elements in common with Voller's (1998) key consultation features and strategies, Kelly's (1996) macro- and micro-skills for language counselling, and Régent's (1993; cited in Riley 1997) counselling roles. There is also overlap between the four main functional areas (e.g. questions are asked in order to clarify; advice or evaluation given may motivate the learner) and there is no indication yet of the frequency or importance of the different strategies. However, we think the list will be useful in focusing our attention and that of our colleagues on four major features of advising discourse.

Conclusion

The evidence from the advising session transcripts of A1, A2 and A3 in the second year of the programme shows that trying to support autonomy within the framework of established course requirements is not easy. We feel that an adviser's approach is affected by a number of factors which influence levels of directiveness. These include:

- the length of time given for advising sessions;

- the difficulty of separating the need to ensure that students meet course requirements from the role of giving advice in support of self-directed learning;

- our students' perception of the adviser as someone to motivate and encourage but also as someone who is an expert in the field;

- the fact that advisers are trained as teachers;

- the need to justify the effectiveness of autonomous learning to the authorities, other colleagues, and the students themselves.

Investigating our own advising has made us aware of how each of us interacts with learners within our particular context. It has been an eye-opening process and we have developed a great deal as a result of it – both individually and as a team. Amongst other things, we have learned the importance of:

- not assuming that we share the same beliefs;

- guarding against the temptation to recommend our own favourite learning methods (assuming that problems will fit ready-made solutions);

- investigating learner perceptions beyond what can be gleaned from a questionnaire;

- conducting ongoing research in order to inform our advising practice.

It is our belief that this kind of research is a powerful learning tool. Some of the factors contributing to its success in this case appear to be:

- its combination of action and reflection;

- its use of data from a variety of sources, including interviews to probe/clarify matters that were unclear in earlier data;

- regular meetings;

- a small, committed team.

Apart from the work at CRAPEL, little research has been published so far on the discourse of advising. We see it as vital that advisers like ourselves start to analyse how we advise, and develop training materials or activities based on that analysis (cf. Bailly, 1995; Voller, 1998).[5] The very process of self-analysis is, as Riley (1997 p.131) says, "a highly formative one for the individuals concerned". And the results of this kind of analysis will be of use not only to other advisers but also to teachers interested in promoting self-directed learning in their classrooms.

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[5] cf. also the work of Marina Mozzon-McPherson of the University of Hull in professionalising the role of adviser within the UK.

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