Helping Learners Help Themselves: Counselling for Autonomy in a Self-Access Centre

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A b s t r a c t

This paper presents the results of two cycles of an action research project that used a consultation approach to help learners develop the skills needed to clarify and achieve individual learning goals by using self-access language learning resources. The project has investigated the way in which teacher-consultants interact on a one-to-one basis with learners who have enrolled in an English self-study programme. An analysis of data from transcriptions of these consultation sessions and from questionnaires is presented. A partial description of the process of negotiation between consultants and students is attempted and the way in which consultants' communication strategies were refined as a result of the project is discussed.

Background to the Project

Self-access language learning facilities have become commonplace in tertiary institutions in Hong Kong in the past few years as part of the Government's plan to enhance the language standards of Hong Kong undergraduates. They were seen as a means of providing this at a relatively high initial capital cost but with lower recurrent outlays. The Self Access Centre at the University of Science and Technology, the Independent Learning Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Language Resources Centres at the University of Hong Kong are all examples of such facilities. However, the setting up of such a centre does not ensure that it will be used by students, and each tertiary institution has been experimenting with various ways of bringing students into these centres and encouraging them to make effective use of their resources. One method that is being widely used in these centres is counselling, that is, giving advice and guidance to individuals or groups of students in how to use the resources and in how to learn languages effectively outside the traditional classroom context.

At the University of Hong Kong a counselling service, called the consultation desk, was set up in 1992. It was a drop-in service, available to all students and staff, initially for twenty hours a week during the school term. In its first year of operation the consultation service dealt with 419 learners, with 667 in its second year and with 918 in 1994-1995. This increase showed that there was a demand for the service and that it was being successful in reaching increasing numbers of students.

However we felt that there were some problems with the service. Its drop-in nature, though desirable in terms of accessibility, did not really help us to know how helpful we were being to individual learners. We often felt that our consultations:

- failed to help learners clarify their needs and objectives;
- did not make them aware of the resources and study techniques that would be in tune with

their individual learning styles;

- were unable to offer consistent support as learners adapted to self-directed learning.

We therefore decided to carry out an action research project to try and find out what was happening in our consultations, and to improve the quality of our interactions with individual learners.

Aims of the Project

The overall aim of the action learning project was to improve the quality of teacher-student interactions during short (15-20 minute) one-to-one consultation sessions in the Language Resources Centres of the University of Hong Kong, so that teacher-consultants would become more proficient in giving advice and support and learners would become more competent at managing their self-directed learning of English and more autonomous in their approach to learning in general.

In order to achieve this goal, we recorded, transcribed and analysed our consultations with students. The data thus collected could also be used for analysis of the nature of the discourse employed by teacher-consultants and learners. As Gremmo and Riley (1995, p.161) point out, very little research has been done in this area. Most advice to language counsellors to date has been based on reflective thinking of experienced practitioners and not on data.

Research Method

Given that this was an action learning project, it was necessary to go through a minimum of two cycles of research, action and reflection: In the first to describe the interaction, to identify areas of interaction amenable to improvement and to select means (or appropriate actions) to improve the consultation process; and then in the second cycle to see whether there had been any measurable improvement in the counselling techniques employed by the teacher-consultants.

We decided that analysing drop-in consultations alone would have given us a limited set of data with which to explore our concerns, since we really needed to look at the *process* of consultation, for which we needed to have a series of consultations with the *same* learners over a period of time. We therefore advertised a new consultation desk service, the Self-Directed English Course (SDEC), in which individual learners would enrol for a series of five consultations over a period of two months. Forty-eight students signed up for the course between October 1994 and February 1995. In the second cycle of the action learning project 50 students enrolled between October 1995 and February 1996. Of these, 20 students in the first cycle and 14 in the second agreed to participate in the action learning project by having their consultations recorded.

We decided to record and transcribe our consultations with learners in order to build a database from which we could:

- analyse the nature of consultant-student interactions by investigating such questions as: how do negotiations proceed? What is the nature of the discourse used by the consultant-teacher? What are its effects on the learner? How does the learner respond to the interaction?;

- attempt to identify which forms of discourse have a positive effect on learners and which do not; and

- concentrate on the types of discourse that seemed to have positive backwash on learners in a second cycle of consultations, and see if we can thereby increase learners' self-direction and ability to use the learning resources available to them.

We also decided to obtain written feedback from all participants in the form of a questionnaire, so that we could investigate learners' attitudes towards the Self-Directed English Course as a whole and the consultation process in particular.

The action learning project required two cycles of investigation, which were carried out as follows.

Timetable of Action Learning Project

September 1994	project planning: preparation of documents and publicity for SDEC.
October 1994	Students enrolled in SDEC. Start of consultations: learners met with consultants on a one-to-one basis for twenty minutes every two weeks. Consultations with participants in the action learning project were audiotaped.
January 1995	Transcription of recorded data began.
February 1995	Writing of questionnaire for learner evaluation of SDEC.
March 1995	Questionnaires sent out to all who enrolled in the SDEC.
April 1995	Analysis of questionnaires from participants. First attempt to analyse transcriptions of initial consultations using model proposed by Rena Kelly (1996).
May 1995	Problems with this approach (*see* Kelly, 1996) to data analysis. Attempts to analyse data using an inductive approach that can produce theory grounded in the data.
June 1995	Analysis of data using an inductive approach and of questionnaires suggested ways in which consultations could be improved in the second cycle of the action learning project.
September 1995	Preliminary analysis of transcripts of initial consultations completed. Agreement about ways in which teacher-consultants would try to improve their consultation techniques. Publicity for SDEC, now renamed SDEP.
October 1995	Start of second cycle of action learning project: initial group orientations for the SDEP leading to one-to-one consultations. Qualitative analysis of data from first cycle begun.
November 1995	Results of qualitative analysis of initial consultations provide a hypothetical framework for consultations.
February 1996	Transcription of recorded data from second cycle begun.
April 1996	Questionnaires sent out to all who enrolled in the SDEP.
May 1996	Quantitative analysis of data from second cycle begun.
September 1996	Quantitative analysis of data from second cycle and analysis of questionnaires from participants completed.

Methodology for the Analysis of Transcriptions

The process of deciding how to analyse the data was itself problematic and instructive. Initially we had thought to analyse the transcriptions on the basis of a model of the kinds of transactions that occur in self-access counselling developed by Rena Kelly (1996, pp.95-6). However we found that it was very difficult to isolate individual utterances/turns according to the model, and also that it was very difficult to distinguish between categories of speech acts in this way.

We therefore adopted the approach used by Lockhart and Ng (1994) based on the constant comparative method of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Lockhart and Ng describe the method as follows:

> This is an inductive approach that produces theory grounded in the data. One important concept in this approach to qualitative research is to allow categories to emerge from the data, rather than imposing pre-conceived categories on the data. (1994, p.10).

Although a lot more data analysis is needed before we can produce a sophisticated theory of the categories of speech acts that are common to the consultation process, certain categories did become clear as we were reading through our transcripts of the first cycle consultations and these were highly influential in determining the changes in consultation techniques we adopted in the second cycle of the action learning project. They are discussed in greater detail below.

Results: First Cycle 1994-5

The results of the first cycle of the action learning project cover students' attendance of the SDEC, their responses to the end-of-course questionnaire, a quantitative analysis of the data derived from the transcriptions from consultations with the 20 action learning project participants and a qualitative analysis of the transcriptions of their initial consultations with us.

The first and most obvious question was how to gauge the success of the SDEC. Using the simplest yardstick is perhaps the place to start. Therefore, (following Esch 1997, p.168) we decided first to see how many learners 'completed' the course. The results were not that impressive in 1994-5 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of consultations attended by SDEC participants in Cycle 1
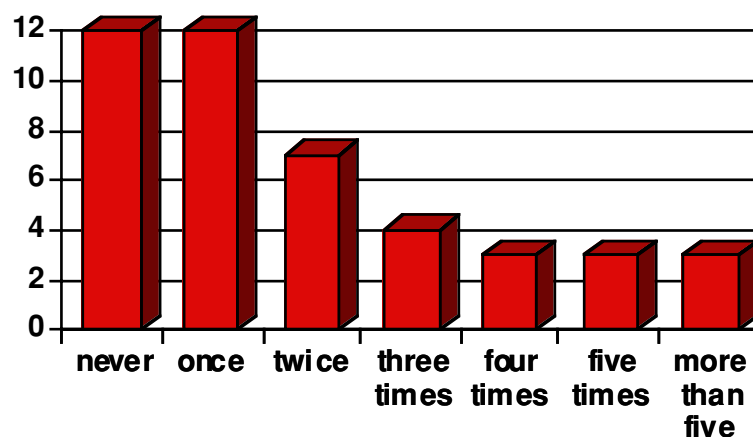
Half of the 48 enrollees either did not attend, or attended only one consultation. Thirteen per cent completed the course (i.e., attended at least five sessions). This low completion rate suggested some problems with the structure of the course.

The Questionnaire

These problems were articulated in responses to the questionnaire (see Table 2). Twenty-three of those who had enrolled in the SDEC returned the questionnaire. The responses suggested that one of the major problems had been the initial setting up of the course: people had not been informed about their first appointments, or had been unable to attend because of time clashes. Another problem that emerged was the use of the word 'course'. A number of respondents who attended only one consultation complained that they were not given sufficient direction or guidance or that it was simply 'study on their own'. In other words, a number of students had obviously expected to be 'taught'.

Table 2: Summary of replies to SDEC questionnaires in cycle 1

ATTENDANCE	n	COMMENTS
never	4	time clash
		not enough time
		lack of contact
once	8	time clash
		too busy
		lack of guidance/direction/instruction
		more flexibility about times
		prefer to study on ther own
twice or more	11	time clash
		too busy
		lack of incentive and enforcement
		difficulty in finding consultant
		need longer/more frequent consultations
		need more resources
		want pair/group study/consultations
		individualised advice and guidance
		chance to speak English
		controlled own self-study plan
		helps me to achieve my goals
		helps me to identify & work on my English weaknesses
		reinforces my self-motivation
		helps me to use self-access resources efficiently
		helps in solving my problems

However, the responses from the questionnaire did show that the SDEC was achieving its objectives for some students. Such comments as 'helps me to achieve my goals' and 'reinforces my self-motivation' suggest that for some students at least the SDEC helped them to take control of their learning. The unanswerable question is whether these students learnt to be self-directed as a result of the course, or if they were already self-directed before they participated in the SDEC.

Quantitative Analysis

A quantitative analysis of the transcripts for 1994-1995 showed that there was a preponderance of teacher-consultant talk, that much of the talk of learners was non-verbal or one word utterances and that very little of the negotiation consisted of questions, from either the consultant or the learner. A summary of the results of the analysis for learners' talk is provided in Table 3.

Learners' talk averaged 34 per cent in initial consultations[1] rising to 42 per cent in final consultations. Non-verbal and one-word utterances constituted 60 per cent of learners' talk in initial consultations, dropping to about 40 per cent in subsequent ones. As for questions, these averaged 9 per cent of learners' utterances in initial consultations, but dropped as low as 4 per cent in later ones. This, coupled with the high quantity of one-word and non-verbal utterances, suggested to us that there was a lack of negotiation in our consultations. The results also suggested that the roles and relationships between consultants and learners were not much different from those traditionally found between teachers and students, and that consultants were perhaps giving advice by lecturing students rather than by listening to them.

Table 3: Ranges and averages for students' talk in cycle 1

Consultation		Students' talk as % of total talk	1-words and non-verbals as % of students' utterances	Questions as % of students' utterances
1	Range	22 - 48%	40 - 80%	0 - 20%
n = 20				
	Average	33.85%	60%	8.9%
2	Range	22 - 45%	24 - 54%	3 - 11%
n = 9				
	Average	38.11%	41.78%	6.6%
3	Range	36 - 46%	25 - 59%	2 - 13%
n = 8				
	Average	40.75%	40.375%	6.625%
4	Range	32 - 49%	33 - 61%	3 - 6%
n = 5				
	Average	42.2%	49.2%	3.8%

This hypothesis was borne out by an analysis of consultants' talk (see Table 4). The most surprising result to emerge from this analysis was again the low rate of questioning. Consultants' questions averaged 8-10 per cent of consultants' talk throughout the consultation process. This seems not

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[1] The percentage of talk was measured by counting the number of lines by learners and consultants (or other relevant features) and dividing the total number of lines in the consultation by these figures.

much different from the quantity of learners' questions, but given that consultants' talk was on average about twice as much as the learners', and given that the consultant's role should not only be one of advising but also of eliciting a response from the learner, we felt that this aspect was of central importance to our research and demanded further investigation.

One other factor emerged from this analysis — the average length of consultations increased as the negotiating process continued, possibly because a rapport built up between learner and consultant.

Table 4: Ranges and averages for consultants' talk in cycle 1

Consultation		Length of consultations	Consultants' talk as % of total talk	Questions as % of consultants' utterances
1	Range	192 - 558 lines	52 - 78%	4 - 15%
n = 20				
	Average	377 lines	66.2%	7.9%
2	Range	134 - 721 lines	55 - 78%	4 - 20%
n = 9				
	Average	430 lines	61.9%	9.3%
3	Range	222 - 786 lines	54 - 63%	4 - 15%
n = 8				
	Average	479 lines	58.9%	10.38%
4	Range	218 - 835 lines	51 - 68%	5 - 14%
n = 5				
	Average	533 lines	57.8%	8.6%

Qualitative Analysis

In order to explore further the questions raised by the quantitative analysis of the data we decided to look more closely at what was happening in the initial consultations: first, to see if there was any established pattern to the way in which they proceeded; second, to see what sorts of questions were being asked by consultants; and finally to analyse in further detail questions and responses of both consultants and learners.

This analysis of initial consultations showed that they followed a typical structure. First, the consultant would elicit knowledge about the course from the learner, then negotiation would move on to planning and goal-setting. There would then be a sharing of knowledge about self-access facilities and materials, and suggestions would be made and options presented for achieving the learner's goals. Negotiations would move on to ways of keeping a record of work done, to arrangements for the next meeting and finally to closure.

Whether negotiation is the appropriate word to describe this process is open to debate as the analysis revealed that the consultation closely followed the structure of the planning documents

used by the consultants, and of the way in which they felt the consultation should proceed - that there were certain areas that had to be covered so that the student could successfully accomplish his or her goals within the learning context of the language resource centres.

The low number of questions prompted us to investigate the nature of the questions being asked during initial consultations. With the help of a concordancer we were able to identify nine different types of questions that were asked by consultants. Two were related to goal setting, one being preferences for the type of English, level and topic, and the other preferences for study materials, methods, times and places. Three were related to self-access learning: previous experience of self-access facilities, previous self-access language study and reactions to already tried materials and activities. The remaining four types were questions to elicit personal information, questions about the administration of the programme, questions that teach and questions that confirm or check comprehension.

The final stage of qualitative analysis involved a detailed examination of three sample `successful consultations'[2]. Some interesting contrasts were revealed which further reflected traditional teacher/learner roles. The contrasts in question types used by consultants and learners may be seen by comparing points across Table 5. Examples for two categories of questions will be used to illustrate the differences.

Table 5: Questions and responses of consultants and learners

Consultants' Questions	Learners' Questions
1. comprehension & confirmation checks	1. clarification requests
2. experiences & reactions	2. expressing lack of confidence & problem-posing
3. teaching	3. seeking advice
4. planning & goal-setting, & knowledge of programmes & facilities.	4. nature of the programme & role of the consultant -

Learners' Responses	Consultants' Responses
• .(no time for response given)	• repetition, extended explanation & clarification
• listening response indicator/OK pass	• no clear response/non-listening response
• short explanations & clarification	• continue with own framework or agenda
• topic shift, follow own concerns.	

Consultants used comprehension and confirmation checks, while learners tended to made clarification requests as in examples 1 and 2.

E.g 1.   Learner   No, I haven't do this. I only had ... I don't understand it.

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[2] Each of the three consultants involved in this research project selected the learner whom s/he felt represented the most successful consultant-teacher relationship.

	Consultant	**You didn't do this cause you didn't understand it?**
	Learner	Mmm Mmm.
	Consultant	**What you have to do is, is ah, alright, you got the checklist, right?**
	Learner	Mmm (Transcript 15-1, lines 225-231)
E.g. 2	Consultant	So how much time can you spend on studying English. each week? **English each week. Plan to or?**
	Learner	**Hmm,. .** **(**Transcript 15-1, Lines 3-6)
	Consultant	

Similarly consultants often used question forms in teaching; in contrast, students generally sought advice as in examples 3 and 4.

E.g. 3	**Consultant**	Right. OK. Well, look we can start with this. **Why don't you just say these words to me?**
	Learner	Ah, yes, thanks. Ah ...
	Consultant	Just say them.
	Learner	Sort, short.
	Consultant	Mmm Mmm. That's OK.
	Learner	chop, shop. Tin, din.
	Consultant	Yeah. Alright. There's a ... question mark. This sound here is perhaps a bit problematic. **OK?**
	Learner	Ah. (Transcript 15-1, Lines 101-109)

E.g. 4	**Learner**	Yeah, ah, if I'm, by myself I would like to watch some films. **Can you recommend some, some films is ah easy to listen and then so that, so that I can remember the phase and I can reuse it if I have chance?**
	Consultant	Right. (Transcript 38-1, Lines 112-114)

Table 5 also clearly demonstrates the differences in consultant and learner responses. Learners were much more likely to be allowed no time for response, or perhaps just enough for a listening response indicator, such as 'Mmm Mmm' (e.g., 1) or 'Yeah'. Even when the opportunity for a full turn was given, an OK pass (a short listening response) was often used instead. In contrast, the teacher-consultants usually either gave no direct response (at least verbally) to student questions, offered extended repetitions, explanations or clarifications. Finally, consultants often responded by shifting back to their preset framework, while learners shifted topics to their own personal concerns on the less common occasions when the learner took control of the interaction.

Three main implications for self-access consultation were revealed by this analysis: (1) the importance of questions including an increased awareness of how little we used them, the need to give students time to formulate their responses and the need and value of probing; (2) the importance and need for more active listening on the part of consultants to both student responses and questions; and (3) the need to foster student questioning, initiative and autonomy within the negotiations.

Action: Second Cycle 1995-1996

After reflecting upon our analysis of the questionnaires and the transcripts of the first round of consultations we decided to initiate a number of changes both to the structure of the consultation process and to our participation in it.

With regard to the structure, we decided to change the name of the SDEC to the Self-Directed English Programme (SDEP) and to change the way in which learners were inducted into the

programme. We felt that these structural changes would help to deal with the high drop-out rate observed in the first cycle of the action learning project.

We hoped that the change of name would deal with the perception of some students (revealed in their replies to the questionnaire) that they were going to participate in a 'taught' course. The major change to the structure of the SDEP was the group orientation to the programme. This came out of our preliminary analysis of the transcriptions of the first consultations which suggested that a lot of the goal setting and advice-giving that featured so prominently in the first consultation could be handled in a much more learner-centred way by getting learners to work and negotiate together. The orientation also gave learners the chance to find out what the programme was about and to drop out before they had committed themselves to a two month programme of self-directed study.

The orientation took place for one hour on two consecutive days, and involved a discussion of why, what and how they intended to study. The interval between preliminary meetings allowed them to 'discreetly disappear if they wished, and if not, to go around the language resource centres and look for materials they thought might be appropriate, and then to come back and share this information with other learners. It also made it much easier to set up pair and group study opportunities. One pair was formed for conversation practice, and another SDEP learner involved other students in a discussion group. Most learners, however, chose to study alone.

With regard to the process of consultation, we made a conscious effort to increase the number of questions we asked learners, and to allow learners more time to formulate and articulate their replies. Thus we hoped to raise the quantity of learners' talk, and the quantity and quality of consultants' questions.

## Results: Second Cycle 1995-1996

The results of the second cycle of the action learning project cover students' attendance of the SDEP, their responses to the end-of-course questionnaire and a quantitative analysis of the data derived from the transcription of some of the consultations with the 19 action learning project participants.

This provides a less complete picture than the analysis of the results of the first cycle for two reasons: first, because of difficulties with the transcription process (there were insufficient resources to fund a transcriber who could complete the task within the time limit imposed by lack of funding) and second, because we therefore had to concentrate the transcription process on the area that looked most promising for a qualitative analysis, a diachronic study of three of the most 'successful' participants, success being determined by the length of time they stayed with the programme. The result is that there is insufficient transcribed data to provide a complete comparison between the quantitative analysis of the first and second cycles at present, but the picture that has emerged thus far suggests that the goals we set ourselves in the second cycle of the action learning project have been substantially met.

Attendance

Of the 50 learners who enrolled, only eight failed to come to the first consultation, and over 30% completed the programme by attending four or more consultations. This was an improvement over the first cycle though the drop-out rate is still far too high for us to say that the programme has been an unqualified success. The improvement may be seen visually in Table 6: the completion rate increased dramatically from six to sixteen participants. However, there is undoubtedly a need to do further research to see whether the reasons for this are structural, caused for instance by a lack of time in students' schedules, to do with the process of consultation, or a mixture of both.

Table 6: Attendance rate categories for cycles 1 and 2 by number of participants
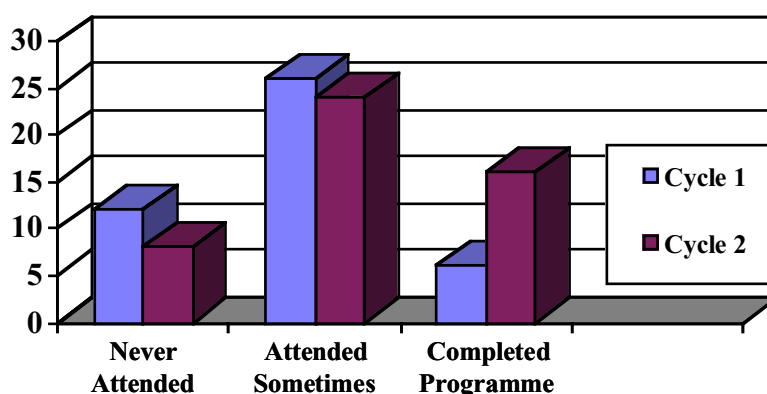
The Questionnaire

The quantity of feedback provided by respondents in the second cycle was far greater than in the first and in general it was more positive. There were few negative comments among the early dropouts, which was in line with what we expected after the introduction of the orientation workshops. Overall the feedback showed that the SDEP was appraised in a more positive light than the SDEC, particularly with regard to the relevance of the consultations (Table 7).

Table 7: Comparison of selected responses to cycle 1 and cycle 2 questionnaires

	n	1995	n	1996
First consultation was very useful	23	16%	25	22%
First consultation was very relevant		16%		35%
Subsequent consultations were very useful	19	18%	17	35%
Subsequent consultations were very relevant		18%		47%

The open-ended responses are selectively summarised in Table 8. Over seventy responses were recorded. They were overwhelmingly positive, particularly the responses from learners who attended two or more consultations. There were also far more responses in this cycle about the role of the consultant in facilitating the study process, and a great many more about becoming self-directed learners. Students talked about gaining confidence in using English, about learning to study more efficiently and about the quality of the help given by the consultants.

Table 8: Summary of replies to SDEP questionnaire in cycle 2

ATTENDANCE	n	COMMENTS
never	2	useful orientation, after which I can manage by myself
once	6	it's boring studying alone

		haven't the initiative to search for relevant materials
		hadn't done the work so felt embarassed about meeting the consultant again
		maybe group study would be better
twice or more	17	time clash
		too busy
		the consultations weren't particularly useful
		learnt how to use materials, CALL, resources in the Language Resource Centres
		learnt how to plan own study programme
		learnt some grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation
		gained confidence in ability to use English
		learnt to study more efficiently
		flexibility about time, pace and method of study
		consultants were helpful in giving advice, information, suggesting materials and checking progress

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis in the second cycle is not as complete as in Cycle 1. This was due to the slow rate of transcription and budgetary limitations. Also, there were a greater number of participants in the action learning project who completed the programme, and this meant that there was a greater quantity of data to analyse. So we decided to limit the transcribing of consultations to the initial consultations of those learners who completed four or more consultations.

As a result, we can only compare the data for the initial consultations at this point. The results are summarised in Tables 9 and 10. There were no differences in the learners' talk, except that the average amount of one-word and non-verbal utterances decreased from 60% to 50%.

Table 9: Ranges and averages for students' talk in cycle 2

Consultation		Students' talk as % of total talk	1-words and non-verbals as % of students' utterances	Questions as % of students' utterances
1	Range	17 - 48%	31 - 83%	1 - 22%
n = 14				
	Average	33.5%	50%	10.3%

With regard to the consultants' talk, there was improvement in the average number of questions being asked. This increased from 7.9 per cent in the first cycle to 15.5 per cent in the second cycle. Even if it could be argued that the nature of the initial consultations in the second cycle had been changed by the orientation workshops, there is still a significant change over the average number of questions asked in the second consultations of the first cycle, 9.3 per cent of consultants' talk. An increase of between one third and one half suggests that we had been successful in this respect. There had not, however been any change in the relative quantities of learner and consultant talk: consultants still talked twice as much as the students, even though the average length of a consultation had become shorter.

Table 10: Ranges and averages for consultants' talk in cycle 2

Consultation		Length of consultations	Consultants' talk as % of total talk	Questions as % of consultants' utterances
1	Range	171 - 445 lines	52 - 83%	7 - 28%
n = 14				
	Average	320 lines	66.1%	15.5%

Conclusion

Within the parameters we set ourselves, the action learning project can be deemed to have been reasonably successful. The changes initiated in the second cycle led to a greater completion rate among participants, and the questionnaire data suggest that participants were developing their language and learning skills more, and getting more appropriate advice and feedback in their consultations. The quantitative data analysis also reflects this: consultants were asking more questions, which suggests that they were listening to students more attentively.

The results are not, however, conclusive evidence. In order to get a better understanding of what was happening in the consultation process it will be necessary to do a far more thorough qualitative analysis of the data collected during the action learning project. We need to see whether the structure identified as typical of initial consultations in the first cycle was also true of the second; whether the types of questions asked were also similar; and to explore the structures of the second and subsequent consultations of both cycles to see how consultants gave feedback to students from one session to the next. The more positive results recorded in the second cycle suggest that we became more proficient at doing this, perhaps because of our greater attentiveness to students' responses, but this will remain a hypothesis until a thorough qualitative analysis of our transcribed data is attempted.