

Reinders, H. 2008 'The what, why, and how of language advising' In: *MexTESOL*, 32(2).

THE WHAT, WHY, AND HOW OF LANGUAGE ADVISING

Hayo Reinders
Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching
www.hayo.nl

Abstract

Language advising is a type of language support where teachers meet with students on an individual basis to offer advice and feedback and to help students develop self-directed learning skills. Language advising is an increasingly popular form of language support in many parts of the world, especially where for practical, financial, or pedagogic reasons students are asked to learn the language by themselves. Language advising is also more and more offered alongside classroom teaching as a way of focusing on individual learners' needs and to make links between classroom and out-of-class learning. This brief article looks at what happens in advisory sessions, what their potential benefits are, and offers some practical advice on how teachers can get started with offering this type of language support as a complement to their classroom teaching.

What is language advising?

Language advising (also called 'language counselling') is a form of language support. It consists of one or more meetings (online or face-to-face) between an advisor (a teacher or dedicated language support person) and a student, usually one-to-one. The purpose of advising is to provide guidance to students about their language learning and to encourage the development of learner autonomy. In this way, it is different from tutoring or conferencing in that the focus is not directly on the language, but rather on how to learn the language. Also, the advice is specific to the individual student, and the advising takes place over an extended period with ongoing monitoring and feedback (and so is different from the brief meetings teachers may have with students after class to discuss their progress). Language advising sessions can be conducted in any language that the teacher and the student share, and can take place at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, at language schools, and to support self-directed learning. However, it is most common at the tertiary level to support self-access language learning.

Is language advising useful?

Research has shown (e.g. Reinders, 2006) that yes, advising is useful in the sense that students are grateful for the help and rate it very highly. Here is a recent, and quite common, comment that I received from a student:

Thanks for all the help you've given me. I wouldn't know how to improve my English without your help. I really enjoyed all my sessions with you. I'll really miss talking to you when I get back to... [my home].

In terms of formal assessment, less is known about its effects. One of the reasons for this is that the sessions never take place in isolation; students are at the same time also enrolled in language classes or make use of a self-access centre. It is thus difficult to attribute language gains to the sessions alone. There is also the question of differences between learners; perhaps the more motivated students are more likely to come for advice. An important goal of advising, as mentioned above, is to encourage learner autonomy, and this is one aspect for which there is a lot of anecdotal evidence from advisors who see clear improvements in the ways students approach their learning and their level of independence. Formal measures to assess students' autonomy do not exist (but see Sinclair 1999, and Lai 2001 for attempts), however, and clear findings are therefore not available. Having said this, advisory sessions are an important form of support for students engaged in self-study, such as in self-access. Many of those learners would be likely to have withdrawn from their learning without the help they get from their advisors.

What types of language advising exist?

There are probably as many different kinds of advisory sessions as there are advisors because such sessions allow a great deal of room for the advisor's (and the student's!) creativity. However, certain characteristics can be found in most sessions and these include first and foremost that the sessions are *negotiated*. Telling a student what to do would be contrary to the goal of developing autonomy. That does not mean that practical and specific advice is never given, but that at least it is left up to the students to choose from different options.

A second characteristic is that the sessions are by their nature highly *personalised*. Although the advisor may be working from a template of pre-determined questions, or recommend from a limited set of resources, the fact remains that everything centres completely around the student's wants and needs. Sessions are also highly *flexible*. This applies to both the content of the sessions where one thing could happen in one session and something entirely different in another but also in the fact that such sessions are often on a drop-in basis where it is frequently completely unknown who will come and for what reason. Where bookings are made, students do not always show up. This creates a challenge for many advisors. As Fu (1999) writes:

A person will come for what the counsellor perceives is a substantial and interesting discussion or learning dialogue, and then the counsellor never sees that person again, therefore getting neither any feedback nor report on progress (or lack of it) (p. 107).

This does not necessarily mean that the session has been fruitless. As Fu (ibidem) points out 'a seed may have been planted' (p. 107). However, the voluntary nature of such sessions creates other problems too. Voller, Martyn and Pickard (1999), for example, point out that sessions can lack clear objectives and fail to provide learners with sustained guidance. It would thus only be fair to include as an additional characteristic that language advising is *challenging* and *very different from classroom teaching*. In fact, advising is so different from classroom teaching that in our self-access centre every new staff member, regardless of the length of their previous experience as a teacher, is trained in language advising over a period of several weeks and many say it takes much longer than that to become good at it.

There are many different forms of language advising, the most common (especially at the tertiary level) of which takes place outside the classroom and is done to support students' self-directed learning, as shown in Figure 1. These can be offered as a drop-in service or by appointment.

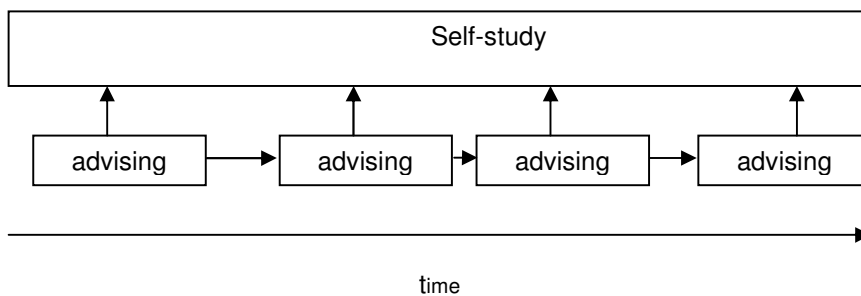


Figure 1

As the figure shows, the advising sessions take place over an extended period and support the self-study process. Similarly, advising sessions can support self-access learning or classroom learning. The sessions are not isolated but link from one to the next to ensure there is continuity in the support.

Often sessions take place in a self-access centre but also in a variety of other contexts. Makin (1994), for example, reports on 'telesupport' through email, Hurd (2001) reports on advising in open and distance learning programmes, and Reinders (2006, 2007) discusses support offered through an electronic learning environment. Advisory sessions are also commonly offered as an 'add-on' service to students enrolled in language classes. Language schools, for example,

increasingly offer an advisor to help students make the most of their learning. In secondary schools advisory sessions are offered as a type of remedial service and some countries have implemented elements of this at a national level (e.g. Thailand). Figure 2 shows the arrow originating from within the classroom. The content of the language advisory sessions are in this case informed by what happens in the classroom. The advisory session can be a great source of information to the teacher as they quickly reveal problematic areas, which is why the arrow points back from the advisory session to the classroom. The advisory session also affects students' self-study. Students bring their experiences back to the classroom and to the next advisory session. In this way language advising is an iterative and dynamic process. The following figure represents this process.

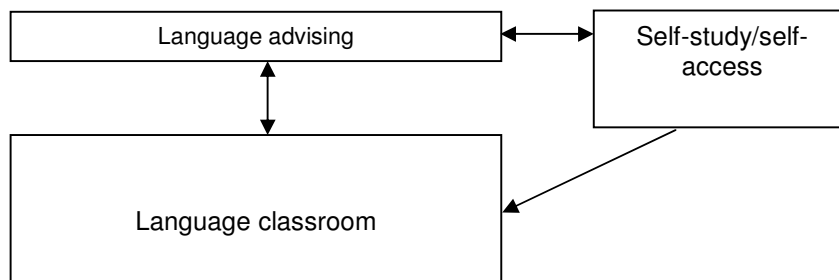


Figure 2

The rationale behind advisory sessions

There are different reasons why schools, self-access centres and individual teachers offer advisory sessions, but one of the most common ones is to prepare students for and support their out-of-class language learning. This is even more important with students who are not enrolled in formal language classes and who are working largely on their own to improve their language such as is the case for many students in tertiary education. Attrition rates in self-directed learning are high with many learners not achieving their own goals (Reinders, 2005). Another common problem is that many learners do not recognise the need to, and do not actively work on improving their language. In a recent study at the University of Auckland (see Reinders, 2007) it was found that an approximate 12,000 students had an English level that was not considered sufficient to be able to cope with the academic English demands during their studies. Many obtain lower grades or fail courses as a result. Of these students, only an estimated 15% sought help of some sort by enrolling for language courses, workshops, or by doing regular self-study. Offering a language advisory service is one way to encourage students to think about their language study and of ensuring that they are better prepared for their self-directed learning and thus more likely to succeed.

A second rationale for advisory sessions is that they offer language professionals a chance to coach learners in becoming more autonomous. Elsewhere (Reinders, 2000) I have defined autonomous learning as 'an act of learning whereby motivated learners consciously make informed decisions about that learning'. By this I meant to emphasise that learners' awareness of themselves and their learning is a crucial part of autonomy. It is precisely this awareness that many learners lack and that as teachers we can encourage. In advisory sessions this is done through careful scaffolding: more guidance and support in the initial stages and a gradual hand-over of responsibility and decision-making to the student. The advantage of advisory sessions is that the advisor remains available to monitor progress and to offer help on an ongoing basis. So when a student is unsure, for example, which materials to use, or how to practise what they have learned in their classes, the advisor can help. The greater level of personalisation of advisory sessions makes it easier for an advisor to monitor such progress and to ensure students are taking control over their own learning. In the words of one of our advisors:

I feel different when I am advising. I don't feel I have to be 'in control' so much, partly because it is actually easier to know what the student is doing. I like getting to know the

student at this level and their particular preferences and needs. When I go back to my classroom, things can feel quite impersonal sometimes.

This certainly changes how advisors perceive their roles:

In a classroom situation, I tended to be obsessed with 'teaching'. We know that no one can educate another person, that all of us must educate ourselves, and that a teacher's role is that of a helper in this process.

Another reason for offering advisory sessions lies in its position half-way between the classroom and the students' lives. Crabbe (1993: 447) talks about the need for a bridge between 'public domain' learning such as in a classroom, and 'private domain' learning. Classrooms shelter students from the outside world and provide a safe environment for learning. Advisory sessions have the potential to make links with the outside world through flexible access to a wide range of materials and opportunities for practice. And this is certainly necessary; in a study at a University in New Zealand it was found that 60% of all users in a self-access centre only used English 'sometimes' outside the University (Reinders and Cotterall, 2001). Concerning this point another advisors says:

In class I always strongly encourage the students to go out and practise what they have learned in class but I know very few will. When I am advising students I will recommend something that is specific to what I know they like. The other day we used the student's portable gaming console and found a way to do some practice with that!

There are also practical reasons for offering advisory sessions: in many situations there are simply too many students to help through direct classroom teaching. In such situations (common especially in many tertiary second language settings; see above) self-study is the only practicable and financially viable way to improve students' levels. The guidance offered by the advisory sessions can help ensure students' success. However the soundness of this argument has to be tested in practice. There is a cost to students not having the required language level at the start of their course and advisory sessions and the infrastructure needed for them is, of course, certainly not free either.

The practice of language advising

So, what happens in a typical advisory session? In a first session an important part of the process consists of establishing rapport with the student. Part of this is explaining the purpose of the sessions and making it clear that they are not a form of private teaching. This helps avoid misunderstandings later. In the past we found that some students mainly used the sessions as an opportunity to practise their spoken English (cf. Reinders, 2005). The next part of the session is one of the most important ones: I encourage students to tell me their story. They talk to me about their studies, their difficulties and, with probing, what they have tried to do about it. From this I build up a picture of the students' needs. Are they academic, social, or perhaps psychological (in which case I may refer students on to Health & Counselling)?

The next stage consists of filling in the gaps in this picture. When they say they have difficulty with speaking, do they mean speaking in academic discussions, or talking to friends? If the former, is it because of a lack of vocabulary, or because of fear of speaking in public, or some other reason? In some centres this phase consists of a formal needs analysis, sometimes with the help of a diagnostic test. In other cases (for example where the student has very clear and limited language needs), this may not be necessary. In our case we ask the student to complete an online needs analysis which stores the results on the computer so that we can look at them again at a later date (and make changes if progress has been made).

The next step is to work out a plan of action. Together we look at the amount of time the student has available and discuss the strategies the student can use. This process is negotiated between the two of us. The student shares interests, learning needs and preferences. The plan is then

worked out in greater detail by specifying what materials, strategies, workshops, and other sources of information and practice will be used.

After a couple of (or with some students more) sessions, responsibility for the above is gradually handed over to the student. So instead of giving feedback, the advisor would ask the student to evaluate the student's own progress, similar to the way the way the advisor did in the preceding sessions.

Some advisors like to follow-up in between sessions via email and many also move to email-only advising when they feel the students only need occasional help. This process can be visualised as two triangles with the bottom one representing the advisor's role which is reduced over time and the top one being the student's role which increases. At all times, however, the advisor provides a solid base:

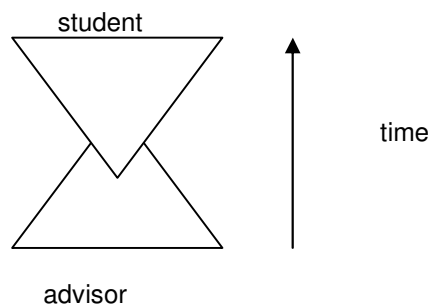


Figure 3

In summary then, an advisory session may include the following elements:

- explaining of purpose of the sessions
- building rapport
- identifying needs
- developing a plan
- recommending specific resources such as workshops, materials and strategies.

Follow-up sessions involve:

- checking progress
- giving feedback
- identifying difficulties
- recommending further resources.

How do I start?

The first question should probably be whether you need to offer this type of service at all. If you are a classroom teacher and there is a self-access centre in your school, it may make more sense to go and talk to the staff there first. They may already have an advisory service and you could discuss ways of referring your students to it and ask the staff to report back to you.

The second question is whether you can afford the time and energy to develop this type of service. Meeting students individually is obviously time-consuming. Having said that, in the long term it may save some time. Advising sessions allow you to detect and remedy problems early on. Also, by helping students develop their self-directed learning skills, you can gradually incorporate more activities that students can complete independently (time you could, perhaps, use for remedial purposes with individual students).

As always, the best advice is to start small and to work with a colleague. Rather than starting with a full-blown advisory programme, perhaps you could start seeing those students who need extra help. This will give you the basic skills and confidence to find ways to integrate advising into the

curriculum. Perhaps your department head could give you some time to set up a programme and to share your experiences with your colleagues.

If you are a classroom teacher here are some options to get started:

- 1) If your teaching is (in part) task-based, then you could make yourself available as a 'task advisor' for (groups of) students to come and ask you for advice.
- 2) This also works well with projects.
- 3) If you have a number of students in class who are struggling, you could offer advisory sessions as a remedial service.
- 4) You could offer advisory sessions alongside the course. In the first session have your students complete a needs analysis and ask them to report to you during the semester so you can give advice.
- 5) Ask students to develop an individual learning plan for part of their class time during which they can study independently. Offer an advisory service to support them.

At a practical level, you will need some type of recording system to take notes for the students you have seen. Any calendar/contacts software can be used as long as it lets you quickly look up the details of previous meetings with a student and to set alerts to remind you to follow-up with them. I usually record the student details, date and time, the number of the session (i.e. first session, second, etc), and the context (e.g. did the student ask for help, or is it a compulsory session?). I then take notes throughout the meeting. I have a column for 'language needs' as identified by the student and myself and a column next to it with preliminary ideas, which I often add to after the session ends. This could include materials I will recommend, learning strategies I want to model, or even my own reflections on the student and his/her learning, for example when I feel the student is not committed, or when I suspect certain impediments to their learning (e.g. a difficult home situation). The third column lets me record the actions we agree the student will complete. At the bottom of the page I write down my overall assessment (which I may or may not share verbally with the student) and the actions I need to undertake in relation to this student. This could be to look up additional learning materials, to talk to a colleague to find out more about a particular problem, or to contact the student to monitor their progress in two weeks' time.

It is important that the student also get a record of the session. In our self-access centre we use an electronic learning environment for this purpose but a pen-and-paper system, incorporating similar elements to the advisor record mentioned above works just fine. The advisory record could also be used as a learning diary where the student records what they do, what works and what does not work, and what the student can bring back to the next session.

If your school does not have a self-access centre then you may not have ready access to materials to refer students to. In that case it may be worthwhile to collect online materials you could bookmark on the school computers, or to set up a mini 'mobile self-access centre', which is a trolley that you can wheel from class to class and that has a selection of materials suitable for self-study. (Email me if you would like more information about this).

If you work in a self-access or other type of flexible environment, then you will find that simply advertising personalised help will quickly attract students. The key (in all situations) is to make it clear to the students what you will and will not help them with and how much of your time they can have. In our centre we sometimes make a 'deal' with the student: 'I will help you by giving some advice on your essay, if you come to the academic writing workshop and proofread your own essay with this help sheet before we meet again'. It is important to set limits and it is fine to ask some kind of commitment in return for your time.

Is language advising for you?

Of course, there is much more to language advising than I have been able to point out here. The reference section will give you some starting points and I would be happy to answer questions via email. The main point, however, is that language advising is one of the most creative, personal and rewarding types of language teaching. It can also be one of the most challenging, especially

when it is not clear if students make progress or when they do not return. If you enjoy dealing with individual students and are reasonably flexible, you will probably thrive in an advisory context.

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