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DO ADVISORY SESSIONS ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENT LEARNING?

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Abstract

Many self-access centres, writing centres and individual teachers around the world offer tertiary students help with their (academic) writing by offering feedback on essays. Many students appear to use such services expecting a 'quick fix' to help them submit their essays on time with as few errors as possible. Many teachers, on the other hand, hope to raise students' awareness of the weaknesses in their writing and encourage further study by recommending strategies and materials for further study. Little research has been done to establish if they are successful. This study looked at one university self-access centre's writing support, as offered through its language advisory sessions, and monitored the subsequent work students did to find out if they had followed up on the recommendations made by their advisor and returned to the centre for independent study. It was found that in general this was not the case. It appears that students take a rather instrumental view of the sessions, one that may not align with that of the advisors helping them.

Literature review

Language advising is an increasingly popular form of learner support. Many self-access centres offer one-on-one advice and writing centres (especially in the United States) offer help specifically with writing skills. The purpose, from the staff their perspective, is generally to encourage the development of independent learning skills. However, evaluating whether such services succeed in this is problematic for a variety of reasons. Firstly it is difficult to decide what to evaluate. Should such services be 'measured' in terms of their contribution to student learning? Or should they be measured in terms of their success in developing autonomous learning or raising student awareness? Generally speaking the literature on advising has tended to focus on evaluating the latter (cf. Mozzon-McPherson 2001, Tsang 1999), but it is notoriously difficult to operationalise, let alone measure these.

One indirect approach has been to look at (changes in) learners' beliefs about independent learning. Pemberton and Toogood (2001) looked at student and advisors' expectations using a number of instruments including recordings of advisory sessions and interviews. They found that learners and advisors had very different expectations and assumptions about the purpose of the sessions. For example, where advisors were eager to focus on learning skills, students often were looking for answers to specific language-related questions. Similarly, students often saw the sessions as a chance to practise their spoken English, not so much to improve their learning skills. These mismatches sometimes surfaced in the sessions or became apparent from the analysis of the recordings. The authors recommend such analyses as a check to avoid these mismatches in subsequent sessions. Analyses of advisory sessions were also conducted by Crabbe, Hoffmann and Cotterall (2001) and these showed that there was a mismatch between learners' long-term and short-term language learning goals. They argue for the investigation of learners' beliefs when investigating advisory sessions as this will shed light on their expectations of such sessions and therefore possibly the outcomes. A student who comes in with practical questions may expect that an advisory session will provide answers to them and that this may help them to become better at learning the language. The advisor on the other hand may recognise that the student uses an inefficient approach to language learning and feel the need to focus on extending the range of the student's learning strategies. Unless such mismatches are identified and perhaps discussed between advisor and learner they can lead to students discontinuing the sessions.

Reinders (2006) investigated learners' perceptions of an advisory service offered in one New Zealand university through a questionnaire completed by 54 participants. He found generally high levels of satisfaction with the available advisory service, something which previous studies have also found (Voller, Martyn and Pickard 1999, Mak and Turnbull 1999). However, there were indications that many students had not understood the purpose of the advisory sessions which was to improve students' learning skills, instead expecting a kind of conversation practice, or a private tutor who would teach them, rather than facilitate their learning. Fu (1999) attributes this to a possible lack of experience with this mode of learning:

The approach [language counselling] may [...] seem vague and flexible to the users when we say, for example, that the counsellors can "give recommendations on language learning strategies for improving English" or "can help users design their personalized Language Improvement Plan". In other words, to these users what really is a "strategy" or what does "design" really mean? It may all seem rather confusing and appear to be just a lot of hard work. (Fu, 1999: p.108)

One of the most common types of help students seek is with essay writing skills. With the very high demands' on students' time and the difficulties of producing quality academic writing, this is one area where students may be eager to simply get their English corrected, rather than focus on improving their skills. Little research has been done to investigate what effects advisory sessions in this area have and whether they are used by students as an opportunity to have their work proofread, or whether the sessions can encourage students to continue to learn. The small-scale study described here is one attempt to look into this area.

Background to the study

The self-access centre where this study took place offers language learning materials, workshops and a language advisory service to university students. The centre is firmly built on the principle of fostering autonomy and there are a number of procedures in place to encourage students to develop skills for independent learning. The language advisory sessions play an important part in this. In these sessions students come to talk with an advisor about their learning, get help with analysing their needs and planning their learning, get recommendations for materials and workshops and get feedback on their progress. In the first session we explain to students that the purpose of the sessions is not to provide individual teaching but rather 'coaching' so that students can develop the skills to learn by themselves. We take time to explain that it is the students' responsibility to learn and that what we do is support them in that process. In following sessions we go over the work students have done since the last session and we encourage them to bring examples of their work.

In addition to the advisory sessions we offer workshops. These focus on the development of learning skills, rather than on the teaching of content (e.g. we would show students how to proofread their own writing or how to brainstorm with another students, rather than practise writing with them in class). Students can also use the Centre whenever they wish to access our resources. These are offered through the Electronic Learning Environment, a programme designed in-house for the purpose of giving students access to online language learning materials and to encourage the development of learner autonomy (see Reinders 2007).

In the past we had noticed that an increasing number of students came in with drafts of their essays to get advice on their writing skills. In principle the Centre does not have a problem with this. We gladly read some examples of students' work to identify common errors and make recommendations on how to improve. We do make it clear to students that we cannot proofread their essays and that it is not the goal of the advisory sessions to help them with one essay, but rather to help them with their writing skills in general. Nonetheless, some students seemed to be more interested in feedback on a specific essay only. Since the advisory sessions are very staff-intensive (in addition to the one-on-one time there is also preparation time and subsequent monitoring involved), they are one of the most expensive parts of the Centre's operation. We

wanted to ensure that our resources were put to best use and establish if such sessions led to increased independent learning or whether they were used by students mainly as a 'quick fix'. In other words: did the sessions lead to students taking up further study to improve their writing and other English skills, or did they use the sessions simply to get some feedback on an essay in order to be able to hand it in on time?

Methodology

The participants in this study are all full-time students at the University of Auckland for whom English is an additional language. All of them were undergraduate students in a wide range of subject areas. The participants investigated in this study all used the services of the Centre voluntarily; they did not receive credit for their study there. None of them had been trained in independent learning or in the use of self-access, at the University of Auckland (although it is possible that they had instruction in these areas in their home countries). The study took place during the second semester of 2006 (July-December) and we avoided tracking students (see below) at the start or towards the end of the semester as the end-of-year exams may otherwise have skewed our results. There was also no financial incentive for students to participate in the study.

To establish if there was a link between the advisory session and subsequent independent learning we used the following procedure:

1) Identify students who request an advisory session for feedback on their writing.

To do this we only selected students who had not been to the Centre before and had not participated in any of our workshops. We were interested in seeing if the sessions would lead students to return to the Centre and prior visits would have obviously confounded the answer. We identified twenty such students over a period of one month. All information pertaining to these students was recorded in our The Electronic Learning Environment.

2) Record any subsequent meetings with the advisor and their purpose (essay check or otherwise).

We recorded subsequent meetings over a period of one month after students' initial session. Although recording subsequent meetings over a longer period of time may have been useful, it would have meant that monitoring would have had to continue during semester breaks when the Centre operates on restricted hours. All the participants studied with the same advisor. This decision was made to avoid confounding the data. The advisor was a highly qualified teacher, trained in the area of language advising.

3) Record the number of workshops attended.

It is common practice for the advisors to recommend students with writing problems to attend one or more of the (free) workshops the Centre offers on academic writing skills and we were interested to see if this recommendation would actually lead students to enrol.

4) Record the number of visits to the Centre.

Any subsequent visit to the Centre for the purpose of self-study was electronically recorded. Advisory sessions always conclude with recommendations for materials to use in the Centre. Through our electronic monitoring system we were able to see if such recommendations were followed up on.

Obviously looking only at return visits to the Centre, workshop attendance and advisory sessions gives a limited picture of the effects the sessions may have had. It is possible that a student does not return but that the advice given leads her to study independently elsewhere. We were unable to track learning outside the self-access centre and this is a weakness of the study. However, considering that the recommendations by the advisor are specifically to attend workshops, to return for follow-up sessions, and to use materials in the centre, uptake of these recommendations was seen as one useful indication of the effects of the session.

Results

The results are presented in table 1. This shows 1) the number of advisory sessions students attended, 2) the number of workshops they attended, and 3) their total number of visits to the Centre.

Student	Initial advisory sessions	subsequent sessions	Workshops	Self-study
1	1	0	0	0
2	1	0	0	3
3	1	0	0	0
4	1	0	0	0
5	1	0	1	0
6	1	2	0	0
7	1	1	2	0
8	1	0	0	0
9	1	2	0	3
10	1	0	0	1
11	1	0	0	0
12	1	0	0	0
13	1	0	1	2
14	1	0	0	0
15	1	1	0	0
16	1	3	0	0
17	1	0	0	0
18	1	0	1	2
19	1	0	0	0
20	1	0	0	0
		Average: 1.45 (incl initial session)	Average 0.25	Average: 0.55

The results show that: students only attended on average 1.45 sessions in four weeks. This includes the initial session. Only 5 students (25%) had more than one session. Two had one additional session, two had two more sessions and one student saw the advisor four times in four weeks. A previous study done in the Centre (Reinders 2006) showed an average of 3.55 sessions for all users in the centre who, at the time, had had at least one session. Although that figure was obtained by looking at student visits over a longer period of time (seven weeks), most visits fell into a relatively short time-frame, with students seeing the advisor several times in short succession. The figures presented here thus appear to be considerably smaller.

Next, in looking at workshop attendance, we find that only four students attended one or more workshops. Previous figures obtained in the centre showed an average of 1.3 workshops and the students in this cohort thus frequented the workshops considerably less often.

Finally, the average number of visits to the Centre was only .55 (this does not include the advisory session, which took place in the Centre), compared with 3.6 for the general centre student body. In fact, 15 (75%) of the students never came to the centre at all.

There appears to be no pattern in the results: students who had several sessions did not come to more workshops or study in the centre more often than those who did not. Similarly, students who came to the centre more often did not have more sessions.

Almost half of the students (9, or 45%) only came to the advisory session and did not return, either for a follow-up session, a workshop or for self-study.

Discussion

What do we make of these results? It is clear that students who request help with writing do generally not return for independent study as much as students who come to the centre for other purposes. In this sense they appear to take a rather instrumental approach to the advisory sessions. Previous research (e.g. Voller, Martyn, & Pickard 1994) has made similar observations. A prior study conducted in the centre (Reinders 2005) investigated the reasons for the lack of participation in a guided self-study programme. Students had been offered the free programme after completing a diagnostic test that had identified them as needing to improve their language skills. The reasons found were of two types. On the one hand there were practical reasons such as a lack of time and difficulty fitting language study into a full study programme. A more subtle, and in some ways, more important reason, appeared to be a misunderstanding on the part of the students about the type of support that such a programme would offer. Many students expressed a preference for teacher-led tuition, preferably one-on-one. Similarly, it is possible that the students in this study were 'scared off' by the initial session with its heavy emphasis on self-responsibility and autonomy. It appears that the sessions failed to convince students of the potential benefits of this type of learning, possibly due to a lack of experience on the part of the students or a lack of preparation offered by the staff. It appears that students who come in for a practical purpose (e.g. having their essay proofread) may not easily be 'converted' to continue to learn independently. Perhaps this requires a certain predisposition on the part of the student or a different approach on the part of the advisors. A previous study (Reinders & Cotterall 2001) found that one of the main reasons for the success, or lack thereof, of the language support offered at the self-access centre at Victoria University of Wellington was the amount and quality of learner training preceding students' self-access language learning. Since the students in this study were new to the Centre and had not had prior training (at least not at our University), this could explain the results.

The results reported here confirmed the suspicion that the advisors in the centre held. Having these figures is nonetheless useful as it allows us to have some proof and act on it. Management can draw on this data to make decisions about whether or not to continue to offer such services. It would be difficult to identify students who are not going to follow-up on the recommendations beforehand and indeed it is questionable if this would be the best approach. An alternative approach we have taken so far is to firstly place even greater emphasis on informing students about the purpose of the session. When they sign up for a session the assistant confirms with them that they are aware of and comfortable with the goals of the session. At the start of the session the consultant once again double-checks that the student knows about the purpose of their meeting.

There are a number of limitations to this study. Even though we monitored students for four weeks there were only 20 who matched our requirements. The period over which we monitored return visits was also small at one month. As mentioned above, we made the decision to restrict monitoring to learning during the semester. It is possible that the effects of the advisory sessions are more delayed and that some of the students will come back at a later date. Finally, the perennial problem with studies on self-access learning is that one can not be sure that one is getting the complete picture. It is possible that some of the students in this study went on to study independently outside the centre. Nonetheless the data presented here offer one piece of the puzzle that is self-access learning.

Conclusion

We strongly believe that advisory sessions can have an enormously beneficial effect on language learners. In practice, however, there are a number of reasons why their potential may not be realised. Students who come in for help with their writing may be particularly instrumental in their view of the help that is on offer in our Centre. It is our job as educators to help them realise that

developing their own writing skills, rather than relying on others to correct their writing, is the only viable long-term strategy. From this small-scale study it appears we still have some way to go.

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