University language advising: Is it useful?

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a language advisory programme established at one New Zealand university to support students (mostly New Zealand residents from Asian language backgrounds) experiencing difficulties with the English language. The programme was offered through the university self-access centre and consisted of students meeting several times over a period of three months with a personal language advisor. The advisors helped the students to identify language learning needs, develop a learning plan, recommend resources and monitored progress. Not much research has been done on the effectiveness of such approaches as identified by their participants. In this exploratory study, students' feedback about the programme was obtained through a questionnaire and the three language advisors who worked on the programme also completed a questionnaire with open questions. The results show that overall the programme was perceived to be successful but a number of factors are identified that influenced if and how students and advisors engaged with the programme.

Language advising

In recent years language advisory services have been offered in an increasing number of educational settings around the world. This is partly due to an increased interest in fostering autonomous (language) learning, but practical reasons also play a role where traditional classroom teaching is either too costly or impossible, where student numbers are too large, or learning needs too diverse (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001). This type of service is sometimes provided by advisors operating independently, but usually within Self-Access Centres (SACs) by self-access staff. In the university context, SACs often deal with large numbers of mainstream students who have little time to improve their language skills. Opportunities for contact between staff and students are therefore limited. Advisory sessions offer one way of creating opportunities for more extensive and regular contact and to extend the influence of the language learning environment beyond the Centre itself and into the students' academic lives. Generally, advisory sessions consist of a meeting between a student and advisor to identify learning needs, establish priorities, develop a plan and discuss approaches to learning (e.g. through a discussion of learning strategies). In subsequent sessions, the advisor monitors progress and gives feedback, and generally remains accessible for the duration of the programme to answer students' questions. One of the key characteristics of advisory sessions is the attempt to hand over to the students

control of the learning process by encouraging them to reflect on their progress, revise their own learning plans, and perhaps through self-assessment. Although advisory sessions generally take place in self-access Centres, this type of service is also offered online. Makin (1994), for example, reports on 'telesupport' through email, and Hurd (2001) reports on advising in open and distance learning programmes. One thing that many advisory sessions have in common, though, is that participation tends to be voluntary and ad hoc; structured programmes are less common.

The voluntary aspect of many language advisory sessions can be problematic. Voller, Martyn and Pickard (1999), for example, report on a number of problems, including the fact that these sessions lack clear objectives and fail to provide learners with an opportunity to acquire appropriate study techniques. Fu (1999) highlights a common problem: "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 points out, "a seed may have been planted" (p. 107) but this is difficult to tell. Assessing learners is problematic in a self-access setting in general and in advisory sessions in particular, as is clear from previous literature (cf. Champagne et al., 2001; Morrison, 1999). One of the reasons for this is that students often self-select their course of study, making it difficult to know, for example, what to assess. In addition, many students do not make use of self-access on a regular basis. Many 'dip in' and 'out' of the available support based on their needs and time available, and staff often do not know if and when students will return. This makes it difficult to select an appropriate time for assessment; a student may have just returned from several weeks of not studying at the centre.

A major issue in assessing self-access learning is that learning gains cannot easily be attributed. Do learners improve because of their self-access work or because of individual differences (e.g. motivation, ability to learn independently) that made them engage in self-access work in the first place? Do learners improve only because of their self-access work or because of their interaction with the language outside the centre? In addition, for an evaluation to be successful, goals and outcomes have to be clear and measurable in some way. However, in the case of advisory sessions, these are mostly couched as 'encouraging self-directed learning', 'raising awareness', or 'the promotion of strategy use'. Concepts such as these are notoriously difficult to define and measure. It is therefore often not possible to evaluate advisory services on the basis of clear guidelines and outcomes. Furthermore, one of the key aims of advisory sessions, and one of the key characteristics of Self-Access Centres (cf. Cotterall & Reinders, 2001) is to foster autonomous learning. Although numerous definitions exist, "autonomy is a concept that remains elusive, particularly in relation to language learning and teaching" (Hurd, 2005, p. 1), and there is little consensus on how it is to be assessed (cf. Morrisson, 1999). Also, students come with their own expectations and ideas of self-study, self-directed learning, the teacher's role in this, and other aspects of the learning process, adding additional variables that need to be

considered (Bartle, 2001; Pemberton & Toogood, 2001; Toogood & Pemberton 2002; Reinders & Cotterall, 2000). As a result, there has always been considerable interest in investigating learners' own perceptions of their learning. Some argue that the development of learner autonomy can only be measured by subjective standards, i.e. from what the learners themselves say about it (or possibly from teachers) (Sinclair, 1999). This has led to a recent increased interest in 'learner voices' as a learner-centered approach to (amongst others) evaluation of autonomy-focused contexts, such as advisory sessions (cf. Benson & Nunan, 2004).

Pemberton and Toogood (2001) specifically investigated learners' views by looking at student and advisor 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. 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.

The study

This study reports on a language advisory programme offered in 2005. First some background information about the programme will be provided, followed by a description of the research questions and method, and finally the participants.

Background

The university where this study took place has a very high proportion (an estimated 30-40%) of students for whom English is an additional language (the majority of them permanent residents in New Zealand). For many, this poses considerable academic difficulties with understanding lecturers, written expression and coping with the vast amounts of academic reading. Many students receive lower grades as a result of their English proficiency and fail rates are also

considerably higher than for students with higher English proficiency. The University has set up various types of support for these students, such as a diagnostic needs assessment, for-credit writing courses and also a Self-Access Centre. The Self-Access Centre provides an Electronic Learning Environment (http://www.elsac.auckland.ac.nz) that gives students access to (electronic) language learning resources and supports students in their self-directed learning (Reinders, forthcoming). These facilities are complemented by the provision of language advisory sessions, where staffing allows. In a previous year, the Self-Access Centre was successful in obtaining government funding for the setting up of a structured self-study programme in which students were to meet regularly with an advisor, over a period of three months. Participation in the programme was voluntary and free and students were encouraged to sign up through advertising in the Self-Access Centre and around the university. As part of the programme, self-access staff were given (additional) training in language advising consisting of viewing video recordings of advisory sessions, group discussion about its benefits and differences with direct teaching, and guided practice. Training sessions were audio recorded and discussed afterwards. As part of the preparation, a programme framework was also devised for the students consisting of semi-structured needs analyses, workplans, advisory session protocols, etc. The explicit goals of the advisory programme included the fostering of autonomous language learning, as well as the development of students' academic English (see above for a brief description of the general structure of such sessions).

Research questions and method

One of the reasons for conducting the study was the requirement from the government funding agency to document the success or otherwise of the programme. In addition, as advisory sessions are also part of the standard services provided by the Self-Access Centre, it was deemed important to investigate how successful such programmes can be. The research questions for this study were thus:

— How do students perceive the advisory support given to them in the programme?
— What are the main issues staff identify as affecting the success of the programme?

From the literature discussed above, it is clear that 'success' in language advising cannot easily be measured as one of the key motivations because this type of service is to foster autonomous learning and to develop in learners a lasting ability to take charge of their own learning (Holec, 1981; for one attempt to measure autonomy, see Lai, 1999). For this reason, one of the main sources for identifying the effect of such a programme becomes how it is perceived by students and teachers. Learners' beliefs are considered to strongly affect learners' behaviours and they "…may either contribute to or impede the development of their potential for autonomy" (Cotterall, 1995, p. 196). Since it is these beliefs that the sessions aim to affect, for this study it was decided to probe students' and their advisors' views of the programme. Although such personal reports can

be criticised for being subjective, it was the students' individual and personally held views on 'success' of the programme that we were interested in. Although this has the potential drawback of the conclusions based on such results not being generalisable, it was felt that, this approach had the best chance of achieving meaningful results, by measuring what was important to the participants themselves. Another source of information was the students' participation in the programme. Students may not return for follow-up sessions and this can be an indication, for example, of dissatisfaction with the programme. For this reason, attendance results are reported below.

To obtain information about the students' perceptions, a questionnaire was administered at the end of the advisory programme (see appendix A) which, in addition to a number of closed questions, also included open questions to allow participants to voice their views of the programme. In addition, the advisors on the programme were given a questionnaire with open questions. Although questionnaires can only give limited information and ideally follow-up interviews with the students would have taken place, practical constraints meant this was not possible. Most students started their semester breaks at the end of the programme and were not available for further comment.

The participants

A total of 54 students participated in the programme when the study took place. All students were studying at the University and had been in New Zealand for at least two years, many much longer. Of the 54 participants, 32 identified themselves as Chinese, 3 as Korean, 2 each as Asian, Indian, Indonesian, Samoan and South American, and 1 each as African, Arabic, Bangladeshi, Brazilian, Czech, Pakistani, Russian, Spanish and Thai. Twenty-four were females, 30 males, all ranging in age from 18 to 47.

Results: programme participation

Nine learners (or 17%) completed only one session, i.e. only had one formal meeting with their advisor. These initial sessions lasted between 25-50 minutes (see Reinders, 2005, for a study investigating the topic of non-completion in advisory programmes). Thirty-eight (71%) of the students attended more than two sessions and the average number of sessions was four, held over an average of 7 weeks. This compares favourably with a study by Voller, Martyn and Pickard (1999). Of their 32 participants, 12 attended only one session (i.e. 37%), seven (22%) attended two sessions, and 13 (40%) more than two. In a later programme, 30% of the students attended four or more sessions. Our figures are comparable with those of Mak and Turnbull (1999) who report that 85% (43 out of 51) of students completed the three sessions that formed part of their programme. As in the Voller, Martyn and Pickard (1999) study, one of the main reasons why students indicated they could not attend more sessions was because of busy study schedules. No further studies exist that we are aware of that report participation data. Such data is vital if we are to understand the effects of advisory programmes

such as the ones described here. Many studies only report findings for students who actually completed a programme, but it is equally interesting to establish why some students discontinue a programme (and similarly, why some do not choose to participate at all; see Reinders, 2005, for a study in this area).

Results: student feedback

Twenty-five of the participants in the study (46%) completed the questionnaire and their answers are discussed here. Although this response rate was less than hoped for, given the fact that the questionnaire was administered towards the end of the semester when many students were busy with exams or already on leave, it was deemed acceptable. Most of the respondents had been to several sessions, but there were also five respondents who had only attended one session. The answers, therefore, do not only represent the opinions of those who may have been expected to benefit most from the programme.

Firstly, what did the students think of the programme? For 21 out of the 25, it was either their first or one of their first self-access experiences. Fifteen of the students found the programme useful, three found it reasonably useful, and one student found it not very useful. Twenty students thought that studying in the SAC was helpful for improving their English. This compares with other reports in the literature where self-access facilities (Cotterall & Reinders, 2000) and advisory programmes (Voller, Martyn & Pickard, 1999; Mak & Turnbull, 1999) were found to be perceived favourably by students.

The reasons why students felt the programme had been useful to them were varied and included practical, affective, and learning-related reasons, as shown by these three student responses:

Someone there to guide and check my learning so that I know that I'm on the right track; feel that is someone there to support and encourage my learning, gives me confidence to carry on.

Being made aware of areas that I need to work on.

They can give me some useful advice and let me know how to learn English by myself.

The above students experienced the type of support that the advisory sessions aimed to provide; i.e. learning support in the form of facilitating self-study, identifying difficulties, suggesting strategies for self-directed learning. However, some students saw language-related advantages to the sessions:

When we discuss about my problem and this is also very useful for speaking, because I need to explain her about my situation and sometimes she provides me some resources and suggestions.

From this and other responses from the students it was clear that some saw the language advisor as a language teacher, rather than an advisor. This is similar to what Pemberton and Toogood (2001, p. 70) report.

When asked if the advisory sessions had helped them to learn how to learn

English by themselves, most students (20) said either 'yes', or, 'yes, very much so'. Similarly, when asked if they thought the advisory sessions had helped them to focus on what they wanted to improve in their English, 23 said 'yes, absolutely', or, 'yes, somewhat'. The sessions were also perceived by 22 students to have been successful in helping them set manageable goals by themselves.

When asked about the types of strategies the sessions had helped them develop, students gave examples of learning related strategies (e.g. vocabulary learning techniques), as well as metacognitive strategies, as shown below:

Listening to the way people speak in daily lives, and on radio and cassette tapes and map out their intonation, trying out riddles and rhymes, tape own conversation speech and correct own mistakes.

Try to figure out what your problem is, work on it.

Perhaps surprisingly, there was less clarity in the response to the question whether the sessions had helped make students work more on their English, with nine students saying "yes, absolutely" or "yes, to a certain extent" but with five students saying 'a little' (there were several non-responses). Also, opinions were divided over the usefulness of completing a weekly study plan, using a template provided by the advisor. Twelve students said they did not find it either helpful or unhelpful. One advisor remarked that a better approach might be to get students to write a study plan by themselves and bring it to the next session for discussion.

As for the language advisor and the support students felt they had received, 19 (out of 23 responses) were positive about this and their perceptions of the advisors' skills were very high. Next, the focus is on the advisors and how they perceived the programme.

Results: language advisors' feedback

At the end of the programme, the language advisors were asked to complete a questionnaire containing open questions about their perception of the usefulness of the programme and their experiences. From this, a number of themes emerged which will be described below.

Usefulness of the programme

The three advisors all felt the programme had been useful for those students who seemed dedicated. One advisor writes:

'One student wrote to me: '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]'.

Of those who only showed up a few times, they were less sure. It was hoped that for them the sessions had, at least, been awareness-raising. For this, the initial needs analysis was seen as crucial. Through the needs analysis it was hoped the students would reflect on those aspects of their English that were in urgent

need of improvement. The needs analysis was also seen as pivotal in creating a working relationship between the student and the advisor. It provided a framework for organising study routines and shaped subsequent advisory sessions.

Fostering autonomous language learning

The programme was seen to be reasonably successful in fostering autonomous language learning behaviour. This was one of the goals of the programme and was made clear to the participants from the outset. The advisors cited as evidence for this the fact that 'their' students became less dependent on them, came up with ideas about what to learn and how, displayed a greater range of strategies and seemed to know better what they were working on and why. However, one advisor questioned the extent to which the acquired autonomy would be translated into ongoing autonomous language learning behaviour once the programme finished.

Another advisor made a good point in remarking that *'Deciding to enrol in the programme was a major act of autonomy [in itself].'* This is precisely what makes measuring success of the programme difficult; one cannot tell whether the students who enrolled for the programme were more autonomous or more inclined towards autonomous language learning from the beginning (the opposite could, of course, also be true; the really autonomous learners did not join the programme but studied on their own).

Student differences

Something that made providing a good service quite hard was the fact that the students who enrolled in the programme came from a very wide range of backgrounds. There were first year students, PhD candidates, 18 year-old recent arrivals and 47 year-old citizens. The range of language and learning problems they had was also vast. As one advisor put it:

> *I think the range of participants and their respective needs both in terms of affective needs and more concrete language goals was staggering.*

Another point made was that the language level of enrolled students was sometimes surprisingly low and seemed not to have progressed for a long time despite continuous exposure to and use of English. One advisor sees in this a task for the advisory programme:

> *I was surprised how many of the students with an "advanced" language level had really quite fossilized awareness of language. The advisory sessions seemed often to be a process of making language learning explicit in order to help participants set goals.*

It is interesting to note that many students did not come to improve academic English, although according to the advisors, they needed it. Instead, many indicated that they wanted to concentrate on informal English, pronunciation, and speaking skills.

Language support or life support?

Sometimes the narrow line between language support, general learning support, and emotional support were crossed. One advisor writes:

Around exam time and the end of the semester, some of the participants seemed to be coming more for a chat than for language advice.

And:

I don't think I had fully anticipated the affective side of the advisory sessions. The format of the language advisory sheet gave us a structure to work from which helped keep the language advisory sessions on track.

Students differed in the extent to which they required personal support. Sometimes it was difficult to make clear to the students that this was not what the service was for, without damaging the relationship between the student and the advisor. The other term used for language advisory sessions, language counselling, has (perhaps rightly) this connotation of providing a counselling service that includes general or emotional support.

Some practical issues

Some practical findings and suggestions made by the advisors included one that pointed to the importance of students taking something tangible away from the session. This could be a print-out with recommended resources, a study plan on paper, or a resource to borrow.

One advisor made the good point that more regular contact with university lecturers could be beneficial in order to find out more about the language requirements in various departments and also to create a larger support network for the students.

Finally, there was the issue of students not showing up. This cost a lot of time and was demotivating for the advisors. The need for a clear and strong policy on this was felt by all three advisors. In addition, it was felt that perhaps by making the programme 'less accessible' in some way, student participation and commitment would have been better:

Students might appreciate and value the program more if there were more pressure and higher expectations directed towards them.

And:

For these people, who knows, they may have been more committed had they been charged for the service...

Conclusion

In answer to the first research question, overall the programme was perceived by both students and advisors to have been successful, and students were grateful for the support. Although this is clearly only one measure of 'success' of the

programme, it is relevant to the participants (both students and advisors) in the study and corroborates findings from the limited previous research on this topic (e.g. Voller, Martyn & Pickard, 1999; Mak & Turnbull, 1999). Participation rates were also similar to what has been reported before. Although 17% of participants not returning for follow-up sessions may seem disappointing, in a voluntary programme aimed at developing learning skills (as opposed to, say, a proofreading service) for students who are often already overburdened with the demands of university study, the 83% of participants who do continue are considered to constitute a meaningful result. It is interesting to note that most students had no prior experience in self-access language learning. Yet, they found it to be a useful way of improving their English and of helping in developing their ability to learn by themselves. It appears that, with appropriate support such as that derived from advisory sessions, this form of self-study does not pose insurmountable problems to students (most of whom, it may be noted, are from background cultures sometimes said to be less prepared for this type of learning; but see Little, 1999). A fair number of the students seemed to have understood the purpose of the sessions, with its focus on developing independent learning skills. However, other respondents did not seem to have been aware of the intended nature of the sessions and instead saw (or reported on) only practical advantages of the sessions, such as the opportunity to practise conversation skills (cf. Pemberton & Toogood, 2001).

In answering the second research question, and unlike most previous research, the study also took into account the advisors' perceptions of the sessions. These were generally positive but a number of issues were identified as affecting the success of the programme. To minimise the possibility of students misunderstanding the purpose of the programme—perhaps the most serious problem identified—a greater explicitness in explaining the goals of the sessions could be helpful. A more thorough preparation for the very wide range of participants and their needs (including the affective demands of the sessions) could help the advisors in better supporting the students.

One of the key issues emerging from the data is the difficulty students experience in integrating language study into their university programme (cf. Voller, Martyn & Pickard, 1999). The issue of students' lack of participation in the programme needs to be addressed in future, and perhaps it is necessary to look for ways of creating stronger ties with other support staff in the university, with university lecturers, and perhaps also by integrating the English support into mainstream courses, a development that is currently underway at our university. Perhaps meeting a certain standard of English can become a requirement of such courses. The extra time this would give students to focus on the language (in addition to the subject matter) could well provide an important incentive.

There is, of course, a limitation inherent in this type of study in that the results are based on individual participants' perceptions and may thus not apply to other contexts. The results do, however, seem to match those from earlier studies. In addition, they provide information about how students and advisors perceive the success of such a programme, something that has been done only

very few times before. It is hoped that this exploratory study can be built on in the future to further probe participants' perceptions and possibly to gauge changes in their beliefs about (self-access) language learning by conducting pre- and post-programme interviews. Although programme administrators, advisors and students seem to feel there are benefits to language advisory programmes, more data needs to be gathered to establish exactly what those benefits amount to and additional measures of success in self-access language learning and language advising will need to be devised.

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Appendix A: Student questionnaire

About the advisory sessions

1. How useful did you find the advisory sessions?
   Not at all useful   very useful
           1   2   3   4   5

2. Do you think that the advisory sessions have helped you to learn how to learn English by yourself, in the future?
   ❑ Yes, absolutely   ❑ yes, to a certain extent   ❑ a little
   ❑ no   ❑ I don't know

3. Do you think that the advisory sessions have helped you to focus on what you want to improve in your English?
   ❑ Yes, absolutely   ❑ yes, to a certain extent   ❑ a little
   ❑ no   ❑ I don't know

4. Have the advisory sessions helped you to set manageable goals for yourself?
   ❑ Yes, absolutely   ❑ yes, to a certain extent   ❑ a little
   ❑ no   ❑ I don't know

5. Have the advisory sessions helped you to assess your progress and achievement?
   ❑ Yes, absolutely   ❑ yes, to a certain extent   ❑ a little
   ❑ no   ❑ I don't know

6. Have the advisory sessions helped you to develop new learning strategies?
   ❑ Yes, absolutely   ❑ yes, to a certain extent   ❑ a little
   ❑ no   ❑ I don't know

7. If so, what strategies are they?

8. Do you feel that the advisory sessions made you work on your English more?
   ❑ Yes, absolutely   ❑ yes, to a certain extent   ❑ a little
   ❑ no   ❑ I don't know

9. Did you feel supported by your language adviser?
   ❑ Yes, absolutely   ❑ yes, to a certain extent   ❑ a little
   ❑ no   ❑ I don't know

10. How useful did you find the weekly study plan?
    Not at all useful   very useful
            1   2   3   4   5

11. How often did you look at your weekly study plan in between meetings with the language adviser?
    ❑ Yes, absolutely   ❑ yes, to a certain extent   ❑ a little
    ❑ no   ❑ I don't know

12. What has been the most useful thing for you about the advisory sessions?

13. Do you have any suggestions that could help us improve the advisory sessions?

About the ELSAC

1. How often did you use the ELSAC during the program?
    - ❑   Usually more than twice a week
    - ❑   Usually once or twice a week
    - ❑   A few times
    - ❑   Never

2. If you have never (or rarely) used the ELSAC, could you tell us why?

3. How useful do you think that working in the ELSAC is, to learn English?
    Not at all useful   very useful
           1   2   3   4   5

4. What (if anything) did you find particularly useful about the ELSAC?

5. What (if anything) would you like us to change about the ELSAC? (e.g. buy certain kinds of materials, opening hours, staffing etc).

6. Did you study English anywhere else during the last few months? If yes, where? (For example, by yourself, at the Student Learning Centre, language course, etc.)

7. If you studied elsewhere, then how much (as a percentage of your time) did you study in the ELSAC, and how much in the other places?
    ELSAC   ……… %
    _____   ……… %
    _____   ……… %

8. What is the most difficult thing for you about working in the ELSAC?

9. How often do you use English outside Auckland University?
    ❑ Very often   ❑ reasonably often   ❑ sometimes   ❑ hardly ever

10. How much previous experience did you have with working in a Language Learning Centre like ours, before you started on this course?
    ❑ Very much   ❑ Quite a bit   ❑ a little   ❑ none

11. Did you go to any of the weekly activities in the ELSAC? Which ones?

12. If you did go, how useful did you find the activities?
    Not at all useful   very useful
           1   2   3   4   5

13. What was the most useful thing about them?

14. Do you have any suggestions that could help us improve the activities?

15. What other activities would you like us to provide in the ELSAC?

16. Finally, we would like to make working at the ELSAC as efficient and beneficial as possible for you. Your feedback is essential for this. Do you have any suggestions that could help us improve the ELSAC?