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Becoming a Language Learning Advisor: Insights from a Training Program in Brazil

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Abstract

Advising in language learning is a relatively new field in applied linguistics that has attracted a great deal of attention recently as a result of its focus on individual language learning trajectories. It is an effective way of fostering learner autonomy, motivation and self-regulation as it encourages reflection on the language learning process. In this regard, proper training must be provided for language learning advisors. This paper briefly describes a training program conducted with fourteen pre-service language advisors at a university in northern Brazil. Using a focus group interview and an open questionnaire, the authors explore its effects on those who participated in that training program, by reporting on participants' initial advising trajectories. Implications for future training is discussed.

Keywords: language advising, learning advisor, training program, self-access center.

Over the last few years, advising in language learning has been implemented in several universities around the world. Because of its focus on individual and personal learning trajectories, several authors have given a great deal of attention to language advising (e.g. Castro, 2018; Kato & Mynard, 2016; Magno e Silva & Borges, 2016; Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans, 2001; Mynard & Carson, 2012). It is a learning resource usually taking place in self-access centers that aims to help learners to become more aware, reflective, and effective regarding their language learning, so they can become more autonomous, motivated and self-regulated learners (Ciekanski, 2007; Kato & Mynard, 2016; Mozzon-McPherson, 2007). By engaging in advising sessions, the learner is encouraged to be an active agent in charge of choosing, designing and evaluating learning plans with the support of a language advisor, a person who guides learners' learning processes, rather than directs it (Mynard, 2012).

The language advisor's role is different from that of a teacher as advisors do not tell learners what they should do, but encourage reflection on the learning process and, thus, agency on the learners' side (Kato, 2012; Kato & Mynard, 2016; Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans, 2001). They do so by helping learners to "define their needs, formulate learning goals, reflect on strategies for achieving these goals, monitor and evaluate learning outcomes

and the learning process, and make decisions for further learning” (Tassinari, 2016, p. 77). As language advisors put into practice a set of unique skills that differentiate them from language teachers, Kato (2012) highlights the importance of specific initial and ongoing advising training programs. This paper describes the first training program for language advisors offered at a university in Brazil. More specifically, this paper attempts to explore how participants experienced that training by reporting on their initial trajectories as language advisors.

In the interest of clarity, we first briefly describe the context where the training program took place. Next, we show the steps undertaken and, in the third section, we show the results implementing such a program.

Background: The Autonomous Learning Support Base (BA³)

The Autonomous Learning Support Base (BA³) at the Federal University of Pará in Belém, Brazil, is the self-access center open for language learners of this university. Tracing its origins back to 2004, BA³ was created as a space for encouraging learner autonomy from a social learning perspective (Magno e Silva, 2018). In its early stages, the support consisted of strategic training through a learning contract established between a learner and a tutor, whether a teacher or a voluntary student-assistant (Magno e Silva, 2008). However, it soon became clear that students needed training that focused on more than learning styles and strategies as they kept reacting to tutors’ directions without taking steps towards their own paths in learning.

Back in 2008, the hypothesis was that learners were not autonomous because they were not motivated enough to move from the pre-actional to the actional phase of motivation (cf. Dörnyei, 2001). Inspired by that, we studied motivation in order to understand its relationship with autonomy and eventually better support our language learners’ learning processes. At the end of the project in 2011, we agreed that autonomy and motivation are complementary constructs, one feeding into the other (Magno e Silva, 2012). However, we also noticed the nonlinear nature of such a relationship as learners were still not autonomous, even though motivation had been the focus of their training at that time.

The need to provide more personal and individual support for the development of autonomy, self-regulation, and motivation became apparent in our research group when Ana Barcelos visited us in 2011. On that occasion, she talked about the roller-coaster of language

learning and the role played by emotions in this process (Murphey, 2006). The first author of this paper also remembered a talk about advising in language learning given by Marina Mozzon-McPherson in Brazil a few years before when she first heard about language advising. After looking for some basic references in the field that were available online, we then initiated our self-training in advising.

As there is no other advising center in Brazil, we had to train ourselves through reading articles and books on advising, participating in discussions about such materials, and later reflecting on our initial practices, but it was the first author's 2013 visit to the University of Hull that consolidated our advising practices. Since then, advising in language learning has been systematically offered for language learners of our institution, leading to positive results in their learning trajectories (cf. Magno e Silva, Dantas, Matos & Martins, 2013; Magno e Silva, Matos & Rabelo, 2015; Castro & Magno e Silva, 2016; Castro, 2018, among others). Currently, there are 10 language advisors at our self-access center attending around 15 learners.

The language advising service is optional and usually offered to students majoring in teaching foreign languages. That means that these learners are pursuing a degree in order to become foreign language teachers. The advising service consists of individual meetings between an advisor and a student where they work together until the student feels confident enough to continue his or her learning without the advisor's support. It is noteworthy to mention that they are fixed pairs and the student can take as many sessions as he or she feels necessary. Advising sessions are usually weekly, last from 20 to 45 minutes and can be conducted in Brazilian Portuguese or in a foreign language, according to learner's language competencies and preferences.

Training Program for Language Learning Advisors

The training program for language advisors lasts four months and is divided into three main stages (Figure 1). Each stage will be described separately in the following subsections.

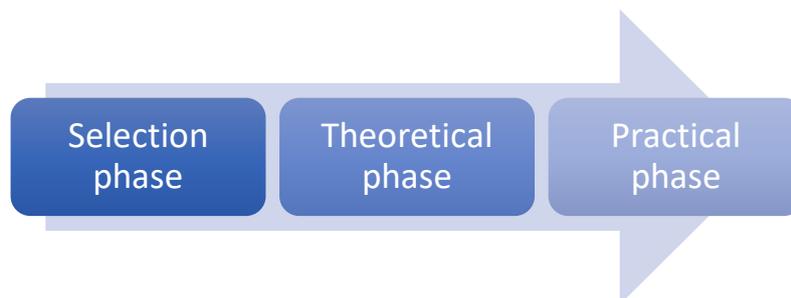


Figure 1. Stages of the Training Program for Language Learning Advisor

Stage 1: Selection phase

The first phase involved a call for applications in which people were asked to send a motivation letter to the first author stating the reasons why they wanted to participate in the training program. When applying, pre-service language advisors were directed to a selection of basic texts on advising they should read before the second phase of the training program strategies (e.g. Aoki, 2012; Kato, 2012; Kato & Mynard, 2016; Kelly, 1996; Magno e Silva, 2012; Mozzon-McPherson, 2007; Mynard, 2012; Stickler, 2001). They were then invited to take part in a focus group interview conducted by the first author and five other experienced language advisors. The aim of this interview was to observe some potential characteristics, such as being a good listener, empathetic, flexible, trustworthy, humble, motivating, tolerant to ambiguity, among other traits. Moreover, the interview also aimed to identify some beliefs about language learning and teaching, as well as their motivation for participating in the training. They all sat around an oval table with advisors and trainees intermingled.

The rationale for having a focus group interview was based on our belief that every language advisor can be a language teacher, but not all language teachers can be language advisors. In the focus group interview, pre-service language advisors were asked about (a) their language learning experience, (b) what they expected from the training program, (c) their best and worst experiences as language learners, (d) what it meant to be an effective language teacher and advisor, (e) the difference between teaching and advising, and (f) how foreign languages should be learned and taught. Participants talked freely about their ideas on the topics and reacted to others' opinions. Senior advisors refrained from interfering in the conversation but kept a close eye on trainees' use of language and especially on how they reacted to others' statements. Table 1 below presents the profile of trainees who participated in the first stage of the training program.

Table 1.

Participants of the Training Program

Major	Male	Female
English	1	7
French	0	4
Spanish	1	1

Stage 2: Theoretical discussion phase

The second stage of the training program involved the theoretical preparation that language advisors should have in order to effectively work with learners. This stage took the form of a group discussion, which was divided into two sub-phases. In the first one, an experienced language advisor guided the discussion with a small group of trainees, based on the texts previously read by them. In the second one, a whole-group discussion took place where questions were addressed. The theoretical phase focused on language advising, including the role of advisor and advisee, dialogue, tools, and advising process.

In this stage new advisors were encouraged to gain awareness of the difference between the discourse of advising and that of language teaching (cf. Kato, 2012). The theoretical preparation entails a reflection on one's own beliefs about language learning and teaching, which may facilitate or hinder the emerging role as a language advisor. It is not unusual to encounter misconceptions on the role of advisors as those who adopt a directive approach to language learning (i.e. tell students what exactly they should do) or deal with issues that go beyond the scope of language learning.

This session produced two hours of vibrant discussion and resulted in the expression of several insecurities about the effectiveness of the job, as participants felt somewhat puzzled by the new perspective they were facing.

Stage 3: Practical phase

The practical stage aimed at putting advising into action and was organized into two sub-phases. The first took the form of a role play where new advisors were paired with each other, one playing the part of "the advisor" and the other "the learner". Under the supervision of an experienced language advisor, they were encouraged to address real cases prompted by cards, i.e., situations already dealt with advisors (Table 2). The role plays were observed by

experienced language advisors who also asked participants reflective questions regarding their practice (such as: What strategy did you implement? Why did you choose this one? What other strategy could you have used?) By doing this, they could make informed decisions regarding their practice.

Table 2.

Examples of cards for role-playing in the language advisor training program

- ✓ Learner says: “I don’t understand anything that the teacher says in the classroom”.
 - ✓ Learner says: “I can’t understand academic texts written in a foreign language”.
 - ✓ Learner says: “I’ve been studying so hard, but I can’t get good grades in the foreign language exams”.
 - ✓ Learner says: “I will not study a foreign language here anymore. I will study it in a different course. After I learn the language, I will come back here to finish my major”.
 - ✓ Learner says: “I want to improve my vocabulary”.
 - ✓ Learner says: “I can’t write in a foreign language”.
 - ✓ Learner says: “I couldn’t do the assignments because I have no time”.
-

In the second sub-phase, the pre-service language advisors observed the language advising sessions of more experienced language advisors. The learners were clearly informed beforehand about the objectives and focus of the observation. The pre-service language advisors were urged to take notes on what can be considered as relevant aspects for their preparation, namely, how the language advisors initiate, develop and close a session, which advising strategies are implemented, and how goals and learning plans are set. When the advising session was over, senior advisors and trainees could exchange ideas and clarify the trainee’s doubts if necessary.

Pre-service language advisors observed as many sessions as they felt necessary. A minimum of two was established, but most of them were present for at least three encounters in order to get a feeling of progress in the process. The trainees themselves were the ones to tell when they were ready to start advising.

What Have We Learned from This Experience? Implications for Future Training Programs

After the training program, an online questionnaire was sent to the participants to understand their experiences as well as their suggestions for improvement. Some of the suggestions given were related to the time constraints for the theoretical discussion phase, as a couple of participants felt more time could be dedicated for such. Although this phase could have been extended, it is undeniable that one learns how to advise by doing it, as long as mentoring is provided. This practical characteristic of the training program was highlighted by all the participants as a positive feature of the training. For future training programs, it would be ideal to include more time for theoretical discussion and practical advising activities.

Another positive result was that participants perceived the training program as an opportunity for professional development, highlighting not only the motivation to become language advisors, but also how they would implement some of the ideas into their language classrooms. One of the participants stated, “I decided to participate in the training because I have studied about the subject and I wish to experience what I have read. Besides that, it is a way of contributing a little bit to our society and to make a difference in someone’s life”. Another participant reported, “I hope to present to my students more efficient learning strategies and help them to become more autonomous in relation to their own learning”. These comments highlight some positive effects on the participants.

Initially, fourteen pre-service language advisors took part in the training but only five are currently advising at BA³. As the others came from different institutional affiliations, it was already expected that they would implement what they had learned in their own contexts. Therefore, having five more language advisors in the current team is beyond a positive result, not only because more language learners will be attended to, but also because they found a way of developing as professionals in advising. For example, one of the participants wrote her final undergraduate paper on the effects of the training program in her professional life, another has been conducting master’s degree research on the intersection between advising and learning regulation, and three of them are finalizing a manuscript reporting their experience in the training.

Conclusion

The training program reported in this paper represents the first attempt of a systematic training program for language advisors in Brazil. Although this represents a first step towards the role of language advisor in this particular context, it is important to highlight that this is not an isolated, unique moment for training. Language advisors, whether they are less or more experienced, should continue reflecting on their practices, on what works best for their learners, acknowledging the catalyst nature of their role.

Notes on the Contributors

Walkyria Magno e Silva is a professor of Applied Linguistics at the Federal University of Pará, Brazil, where she teaches doctoral and masters students in the graduate program, and also undergraduate TEFL students. Her research interests include autonomy, motivation, and language advising in foreign language learning. In the last few years she has analyzed these themes under the complexity systems paradigm. She has published in journals and books in her country and abroad.

Eduardo Castro is a teacher of English language and literature at the Federal University of Pará, Brazil, where he also acts as a language advisor at the self-access center of that institution. His research interests include motivation, language advising, and affect in language learning and teaching.

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