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Through an English Teacher’s Eyes: Self-Directed Learning and Advising in Language Education E-Conference

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Abstract

In this review, I aim to convey my ideas on the Self-Directed and Advising in Language Education Conference from an English teacher’s point of view. I watched both plenary sessions and some of the concurrent sessions in which I learned a lot. I will briefly mention the topics in the plenary sessions and concurrent sessions, my related ideas, and the implications I drew. I attended the conference as an English teacher seeking solutions for learners’ language learning issues and the specific problems that I personally faced during distance education times. This event encouraged me to reflect more deeply about education during post-COVID times, which, I believe, underlines the importance of self-directed learning and advising in language learning.

Keywords: learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, self-directed learning, advising in language learning, teacher reflections

As a teacher who has taught English in almost all K12 grades, I have had the opportunity to observe students’ learning styles from various grade levels. It is interesting that some students show signs of taking responsibility for their own learning while others are confused and lost in their foreign language learning paths. Within the last decade of my teaching career, I have begun to read more about learner autonomy and felt the necessity to explore the terms advising and self-directed learning further. I have realized that these concepts could help me in guiding my students to become more autonomous learners if I know more about these terms.

The world has faced a huge change in all parts of life, including education, within the last two years due to the pandemic. Consequently, a very quick and immediate transition from face-to-face to distance education became compulsory all over the world. These recent obligatory changes in educational systems made it much more urgent for teachers to adapt personally and, at the same time, help their students to engage in this new distance education context more actively. The necessity to adapt to distance education also required students to be more autonomous learners, and therefore, teachers had the responsibility to help them on this path as well. In this respect, it was my observation that learners need advising and personalized support more than ever as many of them get easily lost and do not know where

to start or what to do to move forward. I was thinking over these questions more seriously in my mind when I came across the Self-Directed Learning and Advising in Language Education Conference.

While waiting for the conference, I decided to learn more about advising and saw an advertisement for a course on basic advising strategies using reflective dialogue as a tool. I took the chance to attend it. The course was great and provided me with practical ideas and tips about some basic advising strategies that I could apply to my teaching practice. I even thought that I could apply these strategies to my everyday life as well. Having attended this course, I felt more prepared to attend the conference since I had a clearer understanding of the concept of advising in language learning.

The conference was held online with participants from all over the world on April 24, 2021. I wish the event were face-to-face so that we could meet the speakers and experience the joy of learning together. The event was fully online, and I can say that it was very well-organized. Before the conference, I looked through the abstracts booklet and selected some of the sessions based on my interests. I attended one session in each concurrent session time slot and, of course, watched both plenary sessions. In the following sections of this paper, I will be presenting my reflections on the plenary talks, concurrent sessions, and the poster sessions and how they contributed to my professional development as an English teacher.

Informative Plenary Talks

All the sessions contained informative and insightful elements for me. The first plenary speech was presented by Jo Mynard of Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). Mynard's presentation included some highly informative perspectives on advising and self-directed learning. Even though I had taken a course on basic strategies on advising before the conference, I learned more about these two areas of study by attending this plenary talk. The tools that she showed as examples made my ideas on advising more concrete. She provided further insights into advising with good examples that I would use in my dialogues with my students, and I decided that I would dive deeper into this area. Also, the pictures of their self-access learning center at KUIS were amazing. They made me question if it would be a dream to adapt some aspects or ideas related to self-directed learning and advising in action to the state schools where I work. I think state schools in Turkey cannot promote self-directed and autonomous learning sufficiently within their current conditions due to many factors. Some of the students are interested in nothing more than getting high scores in

centralized exams. They think that the exams are a matter of life and death, and I cannot blame them. It is very important to get high scores in such exams in order to get a job in the future. This stress and commitment to only one specific goal do not let them develop an awareness of their learning processes. This includes several other outcomes. They are not aware of their learning objectives. They simply memorize most content, and the one who has the best memory gets the highest scores. Through the conference, even though the given examples were from a university context, I thought the ideas were applicable for young learner classrooms as well. I am pretty sure that the self-access facilities in Mynard's presentation would make younger students much more enthusiastic learners too. I think, with the ideas from the conference in my mind, I will read more on self-directed and autonomous learning, specifically aiming for young learners.

In the second plenary session, Christian Ludwig and Lawrie Moore-Walter started their presentation with a handout that asked participants to type in a goal for the following month in the chat box. Then, the participants were requested to rethink if their goals were SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound). I typically use this technique with my students in my lessons. This first activity made me recall my own experiences as a learner, and thus I looked at the process of learning from their perspective. In the other session handouts, the presenters shared some samples of actual implementations from classrooms. It was highly practical to exchange several good ideas with colleagues in the breakout rooms as well. I think, in Ludwig and Moore-Walter's session, the most useful part was the learners' ideas on self-directed learning. They asked their students about the self-directed implementations carried out as in and out-of-class activities. That part gave me practical ideas to use while assigning tasks in my classes. I also reconsidered the amount of guidance I should provide for out-of-class activities or tasks. As far as I can infer from students' comments, giving them too much freedom while they are dealing with some tasks might make them feel alone. They need assistance to a certain extent, even when they are free to choose their own content.

This presentation made me question to what extent I was autonomous as a learner as well. I am not sure if I am as independent as I should be when I learn something new because I was also educated with more traditional perspectives. When I was a university student in an English Language Teaching (ELT) program as a preservice English teacher, I was mainly attending lectures without considering how self-directed my actions were. Besides this, I do not remember being introduced to any topic related to self-regulated, self-directed, or

autonomous learning in any classes. I do not think that my colleagues working in other state schools have received any courses on these subjects either. It is very important for preservice teachers to develop an awareness of being autonomous learners themselves, and in the long run, this might potentially turn them into autonomy-supportive teachers when they start their careers. In my opinion, this is a very important matter and cannot be left to the personal interests of teachers.

When the issue is learner autonomy or self-directed learning, teacher autonomy should also be taken into consideration. I observe that many factors can affect teacher autonomy. The physical conditions of the schools are one of them. Sometimes, culture does not let teachers act autonomously either. Based on my personal experience, it is not very easy for all of the stakeholders in education (i.e., learners, parents, school admins) to fully understand the rationale behind learner-centered approaches to learning and teaching as they are generally accustomed to more traditional, teacher-centered educational perspectives. I think course books and curricula do not sufficiently allow teachers to make their own decisions in teaching. It has been my observation that teachers only lead the process. However, they do not generally manage the learning process according to the learners' needs. When all those aspects are considered, teachers should be given greater independence and support in their professional decisions and teaching practices.

Lively Concurrent Sessions and Poster Presentations

Before the event, I read the conference program booklet thoroughly and selected one talk in each concurrent session. There were several presentations with practical outcomes on self-directed learning. All the presentations that I attended were very informative, and I found practical solutions and ideas. In this section, I would like to share my reflections on four presentations that I found most effective in terms of their pedagogical and practical outcomes.

As it is clear, the ongoing global pandemic transformed education which made teaching even more difficult for teachers and learning for students. Therefore, the presentation entitled *The Digitalization of Self Access and Advising Services in Times Covid-19* by Tarık Uzun and Gamze Güven-Yalçın was one of the most informative sessions for me. The statistics showing the rise in the number of students attending online self-access activities and advising sessions were very interesting. This talk made me think that the physical restrictions of distance education might be lessened if we can utilize online tools effectively enough to cater to learners' needs.

Some other sessions gave me useful ideas for in-class activities applicable for in-class use. For example, in the session named *You Can and Can't Teach an Old Dog New Tricks* by İnci Keçik and Senem Üstün Kaya, there was a very interesting sample classroom activity that every foreign language teacher might want to use in their lessons. They shared a sample reading lesson designed with a variety of activities and handouts aimed at young learners. The sample lesson involved the active participation of learners and several hands-on activities, which, I thought, could support learners' self-directed learning behavior. Since it was an actual implementation from an actual classroom, the presenter included her recommendations for language teachers. It was a lively and dynamic classroom activity for especially teachers of young learners.

As I mentioned before, I believe that teacher autonomy is another important topic that can hinder or foster self-directed learning on the part of the learners. Elif Meltem Birsöz Özköse's poster presentation entitled *Team Teaching: A Path to Teacher Autonomy* demonstrated how team-teaching practice fosters teacher autonomy and motivation in schools. The presentation included the details of team-teaching practices in an English preparatory school of a private university in Turkey. The observation notes of instructors and student reflections on the implementation of team-teaching were shared by the presenter. I believe this technique is applicable and useful in my context as well due to its potential benefits in promoting teacher autonomy and collaboration among peers.

I also attended some presentations providing ideas about out-of-class activities throughout the conference. In this regard, Tevfik Darıyemez's session named *Learners' Reflections on their Self-Directed Gaming Practices and Language Development* made me think that I could add gaming to my teaching practice as an in or out of class activity. In this presentation, the researcher collected students' ideas on the effects of gaming on their language proficiency. Based on the results, the research suggested that playing video games and integrating game practices into language course contents might motivate language learners and help them become more independent.

In the presentation *A Closer Look at Good Language Learners: Learner Autonomy and Motivation Beyond the Classroom*, Tuba Işık and Ali Dinçer presented a detailed account of two good language learners' success stories. In this research designed with the narrative inquiry method, the researchers conducted interviews with two successful language learners for six months about their experiences in language learning. The researchers used learner autobiographies, learning diaries, and a series of semi-structured interviews throughout the

study. Their findings revealed that these two learners were highly intrinsically motivated learners who were able to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning. Among the results were some good examples of out-of-class learning activities that promote self-directed learning. It was particularly interesting for me to see that both learners were following some specific YouTube channels and YouTubers as a way of improving their language skills in English.

Conclusion and Final Remarks

The plenary, concurrent, and poster presentations in this conference refreshed my theoretical background in self-directed learning. These presentations also encouraged me to read more in the related fields. This experience also contributed to my teaching practices as well as relationships with learners. I questioned my dialogue with learners and decided to focus more on using advising strategies in my dialogues with them. Also, the event reminded me of the fact that self-directed learning should be fostered via in and out-of-class actions and activities. Obviously, teachers have a critical role in guiding learners in terms of such possibilities and their availability.

I believe that in the post-pandemic times, education will be redesigned like everything else, and students will need to be more self-directed and autonomous learners. So, every teacher should be more autonomy-supportive than any time before.

Notes on the Contributor

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