

***The Practice of Language Advising at the Faculty of Modern Foreign Languages
(FALEM) at the Federal University of Para (UFPA)***

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Abstract

This work talks about the practice of language advising at the School of Modern Foreign Languages (FALEM) at the Federal University of Para (UFPA). It defines language advising, informs how the practice is done, and who is involved in the procedure.

Studies have shown the importance of language advisers in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language (Gardner & Miller, 1999; Riley, 1997; Mozzon-McPherson, 2007; Carson & Mynard, 2012; Magno e Silva, 2012). One of the goals of language advising is to help students in their learning process by supporting them in finding effective ways to learn the language. Advisers help students to reach their objectives related to the learning process. They offer students alternatives and varied resources; strategies for learning; and provide ways for them to monitor their own progress (Mozzon-McPherson, 2007).

A group of researchers at FALEM, UFPA, has been developing and investigating language advising practices since 2011. This way, students of foreign languages that have difficulties have had a chance of receiving support. They have improved their learning how to learn the language they study, especially by exercising their autonomy and protecting their motivation.

Keywords: Language Advising; Foreign Languages; Autonomy.

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Introduction

My experience as a professor of English as a foreign language in the past few years has shown me the great diversity of students that search for learning this idiom. There has always been a concern the fact that some students are able to perform their learning trajectory successfully, while others are not, even when apparently dedicated to learning.

In 2012, when I started to participate in the research project of Language Advising (LA), coordinated by Professor Dr. Walkyria Magno e Silva, at the Federal University of Para (UFPA), I realized this kind of support for the students of languages could actually help them reach their objectives in the learning how to learn a foreign language. I have been involved with the LA since then. My dissertation for the achievement of a Master's Degree in Languages, carried out in the first semester of 2015, presented a case study of one of my students' advisee (Morhy, S. S., 2015). This study was analyzed through the concept of Complexity Theory, but will not be addressed here.

Our experience as professors and researchers has demonstrated that, when students studying for a degree in Languages initiate their courses, they bring with them – with rare exceptions – a very superficial knowledge of the language that they will become teachers. This leads to certain difficulties in the initial stages. These students arrive at the campus with some beliefs that can interfere in their learning trajectories. For instance, they think they will not be capable of becoming proficient in the language, and that the university will not be able to provide them with enough learning of the idiom. Others, when facing difficulties, think of abandoning the course or even changing courses.

After more than two years doing research on LA, I see the advisers' effort to make the language students become more linguistically competent. During these years, we have tried to make students with difficulties become more self-confident. Nevertheless, we still need to investigate how far LA has been able to help them.

What is language advising?

Even though some areas that deal with human relations frequently use the word 'advising', in applied linguistics the term still needs more definitions. This may happen due to the relatively new use of the word to the field of teaching and learning of languages, and so it demands more investigation and study (Magno e Silva, 2012).

Though a few authors may overlap themselves in their operational definitions of 'advising', when we check for these definitions' main characteristics, it is possible to identify three main categories. The first one describes 'advising' as a dialog between subjects; the other one places 'advising' as a provider of help and support; and the third one emphasizes that 'advising' aims at making the learners more autonomous. We will now show these categories in detail.

The first idea of 'advising' defines the term as a dialogue or a relationship between two people, the adviser and the advisee (Kelly, 1996; Gremmo, 2007, 2009; Reinders, 2008, 2012; Karlsson, 2012). Kelly (1996, p. 94) says that it "is essentially a form of

therapeutic dialogue that enables an individual to manage a problem". This dialogue is particularly effective when certain personal choices are determined and when one needs to reframe his pre-established beliefs about himself and the world. For Gremmo (2009, p. 159) "advising is a one-to-one relationship where the two participants have equal status". She thinks the advisor's image should not cause anxiety to the student, as the advisor's role is not that of someone who will give grades or judge students. Reinders (2012) refers to the language adviser as a facilitator-teacher and defines 'advising' as "a truly learner-centred approach to language education where the needs of the individual learner determine the interaction between a facilitator-teacher and the student" (Reinders, 2012, p. 170). Karlsson (2012, p.185) understands that advising is "a way of practicing reflexive autobiographical pedagogy". He says this because during the dialogue between the advisor and the student opportunities arise for the interaction, and consequently, the exchange of stories between them; either through written narratives or simple conversations.

Another conception of the term places 'advising' as a kind of support and help to the student (Stickler, 2001; Mozzon-McPherson, 2001; Carson & Mynard, 2012; Reinders; 2012). Stickler (2001) thinks the term 'adviser' can designate various roles, all of which relate to offering some sort of experienced help in a particular area, whether this help is technical or simply empirical knowledge of the world. Mozzon-McPherson (2001) explains 'advising' when talking about the image of the language advisor, which emerges after the shift in language learning from a teacher-led to a more learner-centred approach. This has demanded "a repositioning of the teacher and a reappraisal of the teacher's skills [...] terms such as 'facilitator', 'mentor', 'counsellor', 'adviser', 'helper', 'learner support officer' and 'consultant' have appeared to try to characterise this change" (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001, p.7). Carson & Mynard (2012, p. 4) say that "advising in language learning involves the process and practice of helping students to direct their own paths". Reinders (2008) sees language advising as a way of helping students in the process of teaching and learning, as it "is a form of language support [...] that 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" (Reinders, 2008, p. 13).

A third conception of language advising places itself as a forwarder of autonomy (Kelly, 1996; Carson & Mynard, 2012; Candlin, 2012), as it stimulates the students to reflect upon their own learning and search for ways to facilitate this process. For Kelly (1996, p. 94), language advising "enables an individual to manage a problem". Carson & Maynard (2012, p. 4) say that advising aims at making students "become more effective and more autonomous language learners".

These categories are well distributed: 'dialog' and 'help' are mentioned four times each word; and 'autonomy' is mentioned three times. This less constant category related to 'autonomy', should be part of all definitions, as without the focus in autonomy we can be in risk of having students dependent on the advising. Such cases are likely to happen between the adviser and the advisee, taking both of them to a zone where learning does not move forward.

It is possible to notice here that in their definitions, some authors privilege one or two aspects of each category, but none of them include the three of them to form one single concept. In fact, the most complete definition of the term needs to cover the

three aspects mentioned because advising is a ‘dialogue between two subjects’, that aims at offering ‘help’ and ‘support’ to the student with difficulties, trying to make them more ‘autonomous learners’.

The various aspects mentioned about language advising places itself as a new procedure that aims to contribute to the education of the language student. This recent tool involves autonomy and motivation; two processes that are directly linked to practice and that are difficult to separate.

Candlin (2012, p. 12) cannot define ‘language advising’ without talking about ‘autonomy’. The author thinks both are dynamic processes that cover the interaction between people with stories in a certain time and space. He believes that there are strong motivational components interwoven in the process, as the ways in which the constructs are interpreted, the evaluation of the relationships between the participants and the values that both bring with themselves.

Candlin (2012) adds that advising and autonomy are compromised with one another. In other words, if autonomy is an objective, advising is a means to reaching it. The same way, if advising is an intended pedagogic process, it should be directed and focused. Motivation and autonomy walk hand in hand, especially when we talk about language learning.

The language advising model

The model we use for language advising at the Federal University of Para follows the one proposed by Mynard (2012), inspired in the constructivism and sociocultural theory. It is based in three main aspects: dialog, tools and context. The author believes that: “1) the dialog is crucial in the construction of knowledge; 2) the tools facilitate reflective processes which in turn promote cognitive and metacognitive development; and 3) the learning environment and contextual factors play a role in the learning process” (Mynard, 2012, p. 26).

In his model, Mynard (2012) considers the dialog as the central principal of the advising, the one that moves the practice. It is through the dialog that the adviser uses his skills of questioning, reflecting, orienting and giving assistance to the student. While dialoguing with the advisor, the advisee has the chance to practice his self-reflection; to think and formulate hypothesis about his own learning. While dialoguing, both of them unfold expectations, motivational factors, initial beliefs, individual experiences and differences.

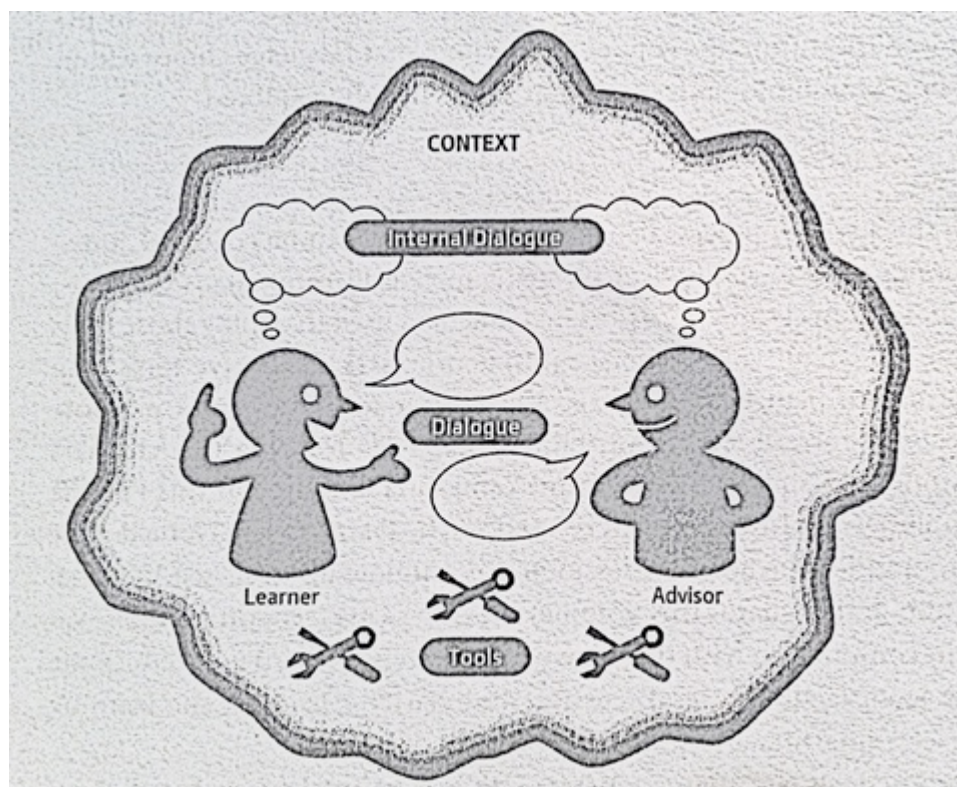
The tools are any tool that may help students’ cognitive processes; those that involve the learning of learning languages, for instance, either the cognitive or the reflexive tools. We will provide examples of tools in the next few paragraphs.

Aspects that deal with personal and physical contexts and contextual practices interfere in the learning process and therefore need to be considered (Mynard, 2012). The personal context can inform the student’s attitude towards the advising, what he brings with him, such as beliefs, expectations and motivation. Once the advisor knows about these matters, he is able to choose the best way to conduct the advising sessions. The physical context has to do with the place where the advising occurs. For instance,

if it is done inside the classroom, or in other places indoors, such as the library, hallways or snack bar; or if it happens outdoors, in the gardens etc; or if it is done via telephone or internet, not face-to-face. The physical context can also determine which resources the advisor can recommend to the student. The context may stimulate or limit the advisor's help to the student.

Contextual practices are those that are discussed together with the group of advisors, and considered acceptable to all involved in the advising process. These practices also refer to the methods, models, procedures, language use, and all the pre-established set known as social practices that define the meeting between the adviser and the student. Mynard's model is represented in figure 1.

Figure 1: The model of dialog, tools and context to LA



Source: Mynard, 2012, p. 33.

In this model the student is the one who is being assisted in a self-directed way. He negotiates with his advisor a few aspects of the learning process, such as the planning, the identifications of needs and goals, and the appropriate resources to reach these goals. In figure 1 it is possible to see, by the drawing of the mouth, how the dialogue between the advisor and advisee happens: the advisee (the student) speaks more than the advisor. This principle is recommended during the advising session, as it allows the student to express and reflect about his discourse. It also allows the advisor to elaborate strategies that aim at conducting the student to choose the learning tools. In general, the student should always be the center of the advising session.

The internal dialogue has to do with the internal reflections of each one, the advisor (that tries to find the best way to help the student), and the student (that attempts to reflect about what the adviser spoke to him and its implications to the learning process). It is also possible to see in figure 1 that the internal dialogue is represented by clouds of thoughts over their heads, representing the construction or elaboration of ideas of both of them; ideas that may, or may not, be expressed verbally.

The various tools represent what is used during the advising process to stimulate and motivate the learning of the student, such as the language laboratory, books, methodologies, techniques and so on. We can also include here the practical tools used by the advisor during the advising sessions, such as recordings, notes made in diaries and reports, as well as the system established to the appointment of the sessions.

How is language advising done?

In cognitive behavioral therapy, the initial stage of the therapeutic process involves the evaluation, which represents the patient's entrance door to the treatment. Barros (2012) says that this phase is crucial to therapy, as it is the moment to explain how the process is going to happen and to establish goals. This way, initial bonds with the therapist are formed. The author says that it is common that children and adolescents have difficulties in establishing clear goals and be uncertain of the real motivation for the treatment. To the psychologist, this happens because "perceptions about the problem are limited due to the process of development or because they cannot associate their illnesses to a concrete cause" (Barros, 2012, p.73). In language advising, this is also the first stage of the process; the moment when we establish goals and plan on how to execute them; and the moment to discuss about their individual learning needs.

Barros (2012) also says that once initial data is collected it is possible to have a parameter of the patient's motivation; and, "in case he does not clearly notice it, it is important that a conception of his case is built in a very collaborative manner" (Barros, 2012, p.78). This type of help and support mentioned by the author is common in language advising, as there are moments the advisor needs to clarify to the student the possible reasons that led him to demotivation.

Stickler (2001) says that the techniques she uses in her advising sessions are those inspired in Egan's (1998), who created methods to facilitate the relationship between the doctor and the patient. In his therapy sessions, Egan (1998) uses a method to reach a certain goal. It consists of making a 'miracle' question that leads the patient to imagine a world without a problem and detect which are the main differences between this world and the world the patient is living in. By doing this, strategies are made, step-by-step, to reach a certain change of the situation. After this, plans are made in order to enhance each achievement. This is the phase – which Egan calls 'planned action' – that deals with real situations, not imaginary ones anymore. It is the moment to list strategies that will be developed; to evaluate what is positive and negative; and to choose the most appropriate or promising action to be implemented. For Stickler (2001, p. 46) "Egan's model can serve as a structure for the course of counselling or language advising. The stages do not have to be taken as rigid or unchangeable. Indeed, in the course of counselling, a client would come back to previous stages frequently".

The humanistic schools that have stood out mainly through the work of Carl R. Rogers and his approach centered in the client, relied on the importance of respect for the person as a whole (Amatuzzi, 2010). Rogers revolutionized the practice of psychological support “that basically consists of an unrestricted trust stance on the potential of each to find ways to overcome their difficulties” (Amatuzzi, 2010, p. 11). The psychologist’s work was based in three main aspects: empathy, respect and authenticity. When taken to educational institutions, these characteristics may be seen as Rogers explains:

Genuineness on the part of teachers makes them transparent for the learners as full persons with flaws and weaknesses as well as strengths and expertise. Respect or unconditional positive regard means that the learner will feel accepted in his or her individuality and will not have to ‘perform’ to please the teacher. This, in turn, should lead to greater self-awareness on the part of the learner: if nobody tells the person what to learn, they will have to decide for themselves. Finally, empathy can be used to create and reinforce an understanding between teacher and learner on a personal as well as on a factual level. Listening to students’ responses rather than talking over their heads has always been required in communicative language teaching (as cited in Stickler, 2001, p.44).

Roger’s considerations guide us to an adequate behavior during the act of advising, and suggest ‘how’ the adviser should behave and ‘why’. For Stickler (2001) some simple techniques may help during advising sessions, permitting the student to talk about his needs more deeply. These techniques are called “mirroring, paraphrasing and summarizing” (Stickler, 2001, pp. 44-45).

When using the mirroring technique, the advisor repeats the main words that the student uses, and by doing so he demonstrates that he has heard and understood what has been said to him. The advisor also uses this technic to show support and understanding of the enunciation’s meaning, which is manifested by non-verbal hints, such as the tone of voice, body posture etc. In this case, the advisor speaks what was said through another form of language.

The summarizing technic highlights important information mentioned by the advisee. By doing this, the adviser makes evident that he has been attentive during the whole session and has stored in memory the essential data the student has told him in order to comment later. In case there is any gap in this comprehension, the student may do corrections and value certain facts more than others. This technic is often used twice in a session. First, in the beginning of the session, when the advisor reports the previous meeting with the student. Second, after the advising session finishes, to evaluate what has happened in that meeting.

Some aspects mentioned by Egan (1988) and Rogers, are mentioned by Kelly (1996) when suggesting that language advisers should develop macro and micro skills for a better advising.

Figure 2: The macro skills of the language advisor

Skills	Description	Purpose
Initiating	Introducing new directions and options	To promote learner focus and reduce uncertainty
Goal-setting	Helping the learner to formulate specific goals and objectives	To enable the learner to focus on a manageable goal
Guiding	Offering advice and information, direction and ideas; suggesting	To help the learner develop alternative strategies
Modelling	Demonstrating target behaviour	To provide examples of knowledge and skills that the learner desires
Supporting	Providing encouragement and reinforcement	To help the learner persist; create trust; acknowledge and encourage effort
Giving feedback	Expressing a constructive reaction to the learner's efforts	To assist the learner's self-awareness and capacity for self-appraisal
Evaluating	Appraising the learner's process and achievement	To acknowledge the significance of the learner's effort and achievement
Linking	Connecting the learner's goals and tasks to wider issues	To help establish the relevance and value of the learner's project
Concluding	Bringing a sequence of work to a conclusion	To help the learner establish boundaries and define achievement

Fonte: Kelly, 1996, p. 95.

Figure 2 shows the macro skills that every language advisor should have or develop. Although these skills are also expected for a regular teacher or professor to have, they are fundamental for a language advisor in order to make advising successful. During the project meetings, when advisers discuss issues related to our practices, we talk about the importance of using these skills during the sessions with the advisees. We all agree that we ought to be attentive and not let ourselves become distant from these skills.

The chart with the micro skills suggested by Kelly (1996) has some similarities to the technics used by Stickler (2001) in her advising sessions, as we show in figure 3.

Figure 3: The micro skills of the language advisor

Skills	Description	Purpose
Attending	Giving the learner your undivided attention	To show respect and interest; to focus on the person
Restating	Repeating in your own words what the learner says	To check your understanding and to confirm the learner's meaning
Paraphrasing	Simplifying the learner's statements by focusing on the essence of the message	To clarify the message and to sort out conflicting or confused meanings
Summarizing	Bringing together the main elements of a message	To create focus and direction
Questioning	Using open questions to encourage self-exploration	To elicit and to stimulate learner disclosure and self-definition
Interpreting	Offering explanations for learner experiences	To provide new perspectives; to help self-understanding
Reflecting feelings	Surfacing the emotional content of learner statements	To show that the whole person has been understood
Empathizing	Identifying with the learner's experience and perception	To create a bond of shared understanding
Confronting	Surfacing discrepancies and contradictions in the learner's communication	To deepen self-awareness, particularly of self-defeating behaviour

Fonte: Kelly, 1996, p. 96.

These micro skills are more specific and reveal how an advisor should be careful during the sessions with the student. It is not easy to have control over all of the skills, which means that an advisor should try to develop the ones he considers he is less competent.

Aoki (2012) suggests some simple behavior during advising sessions that are similar to the micro and macro skills recommended by Kelly (1996). According to Aoki, some skills are essential for a language advisor to have or develop. She professor thinks that every language advisor should: 1) have the ability to establish rapport and empathy; 2) think positively and refrain from judgments; 3) show willingness to help; 4) know how to control a conversation; 5) learn to ask questions; 6) know how to hear; 7) have the ability of observation and interpretation; 8) know when to suggest

alternatives; and 9) be able to explain some of the causes of learning problems (Aoki, 2012, pp. 155-159).

After we are aware of some of the mostly used technics during the advising process, it is possible to understand the difference there is between a language advisor and a language teacher.

The main objective of a language advisor is that of developing the student's autonomy, which includes stimulating the student to identify his goals and personalize his learning experience, according to his needs (selecting appropriate resources, planning, monitoring and constant evaluation) and respecting the student's time. Although this can be done by a language teacher with a small group of students, in a traditional class, where there are usually many of them, the teacher does not have a chance to offer a quiet and personalized service to each learner. Besides, the language teacher is often stuck to a structured syllabus, sometimes rigid, or to a lesson plan or a schedule (Carson & Mynard, 2012), which means he has little or unavailable time. Flexibility in terms of time, place, and individual needs is what makes advising unique. In most advising sessions, the students are not under pressure for results. As Gardner & Miller (1999) say although designating teachers to work as language advisers may sound like a luxury, the practice allows for diminishing the number of unhappy students.

The sessions

The advising sessions go through specific stages. The first one involves the initial contact between the student and the advisor. It is during the project meetings that advisors get the name, e-mail and telephone number of their advisees.

In his first meeting with the student, the advisor is able to grasp the general impressions about his advisee, as well as the type of learning problem he has, his academic profile and so on. It is also during this first session that the advisor explains how the advising process happens. He discusses certain issues with the student, such as the roles of the advisor and the advisee, and clarifies some doubts the student may bring. In this first stage, the student is asked to bring a written learning narrative, describing in his own words how he started learning a foreign language.

After the first session, advisor and advisee agree on how the next meetings will be, what they will focus on and how the student will accomplish his goals in order to improve his learning of the language. Establishing goals is one of the first stages of the language advising process and it happens in every new cycle of the process. For instance, the student establishes his goals; then, decides how he is going to execute them (even if he needs the advisor's help); and finally, advisor and advisee analyze the results achieved. After this cycle, a new one begins, with the establishment of new goals and other ways and strategies to put them into practice.

The advisor and the advisee often fill in a form together, registering some specific data, such as the student's goals and his plans to accomplish them. This is necessary because while writing, the student establishes a form of commitment, allowing the advisor to ask him for results and to confront the student in moments of reflection, if needed. This form also foresees the student's self-reflection, as he is asked to evaluate

his learning process during a certain period. This is done this way: the student attributes himself a certain “grade”, in a scale of 0 to 5, which corresponds to his idea of progress after the period established to accomplish his goals. For instance, in case he is not happy with his own performance and thinks he should have done better, he attributes himself a 2 or a 3.

Advising sessions generally happen once a week at the university, when both the advisor and the advisee have some time available – usually before a class or after. There are cases that the advisor may adjust his schedule in order to favor the student. There are sessions that last 20 to 30 minutes, but this time is very flexible and it happens according to the student’s need.

Some advisors often use social networks for advising, but this should not replace face sessions, as it is through personal contact that both develop empathy and complicity, and these are two necessary skills for the adviser. Contact via cell phones and e-mails should be complementary to face sessions.

The advisor generally has a personal diary to help him keep track of the sessions. He uses it for note taking of all sorts, such as the things that happen during the sessions, reminders previously elaborated to guide him in future sessions; and other information considered important to him.

The advisee should also have his own personal diary, but the students seldom have one. When this happens, the advisor should ask the advisee to write something down; for instance, a short paragraph expressing the student’s considerations about the advising process, how this has helped him, and what changes in his leaning he may attribute to the advising. This way, the advisor may also evaluate his performance, and try to change something that, perhaps, was not effective.

Final considerations

As a language adviser, I have received some positive influences during the whole process, which have made me reflect about my own attitudes as a language teacher and professor. I have grown as a human being as well, for I have exercised my hearing side, frequently searching for a better way to help and understand my students’ difficulties and needs. I have become reflexive, since this aspect of empowerment follows us all the way through the advising process, and there is not a way to avoid its influence.

I have understood that even having given myself a great deal to advising, this does not guarantee the progress of my students. They are the ones who will determine their own learning paths and progress.

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