

Japan Association of Self-Access Learning (JASAL) Forum: Dialogue in self-access learning

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Self-access centres provide opportunities for individualised learning and can assist with the promotion of learner autonomy. The success of these goals depends on a number of factors including the quality of social interaction available. The aim of this paper is to examine the role of dialogue in self-access and the ways in which dialogue facilitates learning. Examples are shared from four institutions in Japan that offer support through dialogue with the aim of promoting learner autonomy. This interaction takes the form of peer-to-peer dialogue, learner-to-advisor dialogue (both written and spoken), internal dialogue (the learner's and the advisor's), or a combination of these. After showcasing examples of how learners are supported through dialogue, implications for training and evaluation will be discussed. If a self-access centre truly aims to address individual learners' needs and promote learner autonomy, then these kinds of programmes which have a focus on dialogue are absolutely crucial.

この論文では語学学習者を支援するためのセルフアクセスにおけるダイアログの役割を分析する。ラーナーオートノミーの促進を目的として、ダイアログを通して支援を行っている日本の4つの機関からの実践的な例を共有する。このダイアログとは学生同士、学習者とアドバイザー、そして(学習者やアドバイザー自身の)個人的なダイアログという形をとる。ダイアログを通じてどのようにラーナーオートノミーが促進されているかという事例の紹介の後、トレーニングと評価への影響について論じる。

SELF-ACCESS CENTRES (SACs) have existed since the late 1970s as a way of supporting learners' out-of-class study endeavors. Each centre is unique but may contain the following:

- resources for language learning (such as books, audio/ video materials and websites)
- places for students to study both individually and with others
- opportunities for learners to use the target language
- learner training or development opportunities



The aims of self-access centres are usually ideological, pragmatic, or both (Sheerin, 1997). The ideological goal is to promote learner autonomy and the pragmatic goal is to provide individualised learning opportunities. Unless a programme succeeds in fostering learner autonomy, it is unlikely to succeed in achieving its language learning goals (Sturtridge, 1997).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate ways in which learners can be supported in their self-directed study through different types of dialogue. The authors draw on examples from four institutions in Japan in order to show some ways of facilitating autonomous language learning. Each of the learning contexts stresses the importance of dialogue in the self-directed learning process, which is done through peer-peer dialogue, learner-advisor/teacher dialogue or inner dialogue of the learner and the advisor/teacher.

Although, in general, language educators would agree that the availability of a SAC has great potential for language learning, simply providing learners with access to self-access materials does not mean that they will necessarily know how to use them or become autonomous language learners (Benson, 2001). In addition, Benson writes that SACs are unlikely to be successful at promoting learner autonomy unless there is support for learners from teachers or learning advisors. Learning advisors are trained teachers who, instead of teaching in a traditional sense, guide learners and help them to analyse needs, set goals and implement a course of action. This type of support usually occurs outside the classroom where it is easier to focus on individual needs and differences.

We take the view that learners need to engage in dialogue related to their learning in order become successful independent learners.

Dialogue

Support for learners through dialogue is offered at the following four institutions in the Tokyo area: Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages (KIFL), Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), Soka University and Saitama University. The approach adopted at these institutions draws on constructivism and sociocultural theory. Constructivism is a theory whereby people learn by interacting with others and experiencing new ideas (Fosnot, 1996). The process of making sense of these ideas and the interplay with existing assumptions is where the learning lies. Sociocultural theory is an approach to understanding how individuals learn and stresses the important role that others play in the learning process. The theory assumes that social interaction prompts further internal processes (Vygotsy, 1978). Within this framework, dialogue is seen as a tool for promoting reflection and for raising awareness of the language learning process.

Advising

At the four institutions mentioned above, learning advisors work with individuals or small groups of learners in the SAC. The advising service is entirely optional for the students. Learners are provided with opportunities to reconstruct their understanding of concepts and are assisted in establishing their own goals and tasks rather than being told explicitly what to do. The advisors provide opportunities for reflection, thinking and hypothesis-testing. Furthermore, the advisor connects with a learner through dialogue often uncovering motivating factors, prior beliefs and expectations, individual differences and preferences which help individuals to direct their own learning.

One example of when dialogue with a learning advisor is particularly useful is in the case of first year university students. A common situation which arises is that these students want

to focus on *every* aspect of language learning and often feel overwhelmed. One approach is for a learning advisor to work with students and help them to pinpoint which need is the most important and break down the seemingly enormous task into manageable stages by setting realistic goals. At Soka University, the advisors describe the process as “cooperative negotiation” where ultimately, the students decide what to study. At KIFL and Saitama University the aim of the dialogue is to nurture students’ metacognitive and cognitive strategies.

Advisor-learner dialogue (written)

Written dialogue between learning advisors and learners offers a unique mode of interaction which stimulates and enhances learner self-reflection and self-management in a way that spoken dialogue cannot always achieve. At KUIS, the majority of communication between learning advisors and learners takes place through written dialogue supported by self-study modules (courses). Self-study modules are tools which are used to introduce learners to concepts such as needs analysis, goal setting, and learning strategies, in order to help them become better self-directed learners. Students complete one unit a week, working through a series of activities and writing a reflection on the week’s study. It is these weekly written reflections, which learning advisors read and respond to, that help form an ongoing correspondence or “dialogue”. Written reflections help generate reflective thinking and inquiry in the writer, investigate deeper levels of cognition, and stimulate awareness of the learning process (Suttanu, 2001).

Learners, using the L2 to explore the language learning process and the often unfamiliar concepts associated with individualised learning, are afforded time to consider the questions and challenges presented by learning advisors. Equally, advisors have more time to consider how to respond to the learners in light of learners’ previous contributions. Learning advisors have

time to analyse and select areas that learners could address in an effort to become more effective independent learners.

The added time and space offered through written interaction helps both advisors and learners unfold disordered or confused ideas, which leads to richer and more precise insights about individualised language learning.

Finally, an interesting consequence of written correspondence is that the more reticent or less confident learners are given an opportunity to show the strength of their ideas and reflections. For some learners, the quality of their thoughts and opinions are more easily expressed in written form.

Advisor-learner (face-to-face)

Face-to-face dialogue between advisors and learners is a key component in the development of successful self-directed learning. Advisors at all four institutions use face-to-face advising sessions for a variety of reasons including to help learners reflect on and explore aspects of personal language learning experiences, negotiate meaning and reconstruct their understanding of concepts, and create effective individualised learning plans.

Language counselling skills such as initiating, questioning, active listening, evaluating, and guiding help to facilitate and manage this challenging mode of interaction. The advisor-learner dialogue makes use of these and many other skills as learners embark on a path of significant reorientation and personal discovery (Kelly, 1996). The underlying pattern of discourse strives to have the learner doing most of the speaking and problem-solving, and the learning advisor actively listening and supporting. This discourse pattern provides the optimal opportunity for learner reflection and discovery.

Face-to-face interaction is one of the most challenging tasks facing advisors and learners as both parties are sharing and processing a host of complex information under significant time

and linguistic constraints. It is a dialogue where both advisor and learner are negotiating meaning through the immediacy of the moment, and it is never the same experience twice.

The question of which language to employ while advising learners raises many important issues. Unfortunately very little research has been conducted in this area. Unlike the topic of L1 use in the L2 classroom, which is enveloped in discussion and controversy, (Brooks & Donato, 1994; Van Lier 1995; Macaro, 2005) literature on L1/ L2 language advising is almost non-existent. The fact that all four institutions approach this subject in different ways is testament to its uncertainty and inconclusiveness. Language advising at KIFL is offered to learners in both English and Japanese but according to the statistics a vast majority of sessions are conducted in the L1 (Japanese). Advising at KUIS is offered in English only, although recently there has been work and discussion about offering some Japanese language advising sessions on request. Both Soka and Saitama Universities use Japanese only during advising sessions.

Each institution has reasons supporting the language it employs for advising. Considerations have been made regarding institutional policy on language use in the SAC, the proficiency level of learners, the L1 of the advisors, as well as the needs and wants of learners. Until more research and dialogue is conducted on this interesting question and a clearer consensus of what is most effective is reached, the matter of which language to advise in will remain debatable.

Peer-peer dialogue

Peer-peer dialogue is an important component self-access learning, and there are a number of benefits for learners, including building confidence and self-esteem, and enhancing teamwork skills (Beasley, 1997). At Soka University, students have the opportunity to participate in an “English Forum” in order to

discuss a variety of topics with other learners. The self-access facility employs 30 students who are proficient English users to facilitate the one hour discussion between groups of 6-10 participants. These discussions operate three times a day with as many as 6 simultaneous discussions occurring. In the first part of a discussion, the students share what they already know, and in the second part, participants are encouraged to use their critical thinking skills. Finally, they exchange opinions on the topic. This kind of structure builds confidence in speaking about different topic areas.

At Saitama University, a peer mentoring system operates at the Center for English Educational Development (CEED). Within this system there are opportunities for casual exchanges, workshops and advising sessions which provide opportunities for learners to interact with different people, and to practice using the target language. Students who visit the CEED reflect on their learning experiences and talk about how they are influenced and assisted by their more senior peers. The English Resource Centre was established in 2005 and although it has limited space, students are involved in running the centre and feel that they have a voice. The approach is one where learners are teaching and teachers are also learning. There are opportunities for students to meet other local and international students, to participate in events and workshops, and also to receive technical help.

Internal dialogue

Internal dialogue, according to sociocultural theory, is a form of mediation which facilitates cognitive (i.e. deeper-level thinking) and metacognitive (i.e. thinking about your cognitive processes) thoughts (Vygotsky, 1987). Verbalised speech can be observed when children (and also adults at times) are negotiating a difficult problem. With time, this kind of speech seems to disappear, but it in fact may still exist as “private speech”

as learners are still “ ‘talking themselves through’ problems” silently (Serrano-Lopez & Poehner, 2008, p. 325). Eventually, this speech disappears when the concept being negotiated becomes more automatic. In an L2 advising scenario, lower-level learners will possibly be drawing on their L1 to consider ideas and how to express what they want to say. In addition, learners will be negotiating problems and reconstructing their understanding of concepts based on the types of questions that the advisor poses. Similarly, learning advisors are likely to be engaging in private speech as they consider how best to respond to a learner in order to stimulate reflective processes. Advisors actively listen to the learner and reconstruct their understanding and assumptions of appropriate courses of action based on the learner’s contribution to the dialogue.

Training

For learning advisors

Learning advisors may not have had any formal training in advising before they are appointed. This includes learning advisors with Master’s degrees in applied linguistics or TESOL and experience in teaching English as a foreign language. Educators attracted to the role of learning advisor tend to be people with a particular interest in learner autonomy, self-access learning, motivation or learning strategies, but training is needed in how to support learners in the self-directed learning process and how to facilitate dialogue. At KUIS, relevant material is sent to new learning advisors before they start work so that they begin to understand the aims and the philosophy of the advising programme even before their training begins. Their formal training starts around two weeks before the beginning of the new semester and includes activities such as analysing relevant articles, discussing case studies, participating in practice advising sessions and also being given opportunities to talk to more

experienced advisors and to access samples of recorded advising sessions. At all four institutions, the training is ongoing, and advisors are constantly reflecting on their practice, reading and contributing to the current literature, interacting with peers in the field, and attending conferences. Engaging in conversation with other learning advisors is a crucial part of the informal training process. Learning advisors at KUIS, KIFL and Saitama University periodically record sessions with students (with the student’s permission) in order to continually reflect on their practice. These sessions are often shared informally with peers, giving the opportunity for dialogue and further professional development.

For student facilitators

It is important to train student facilitators/advisors for a number of reasons. Firstly, the model of education that the student facilitators are familiar with may not match the philosophy of the self-access centre. For example, the contexts described in this paper promote a student-centred approach with explicit aims of promoting language learner autonomy. If a student facilitator/advisor has predominantly experienced a more teacher-centred approach, it is possible that they will emulate that more familiar style in a session. Student staff need to be aware of the aims of the programme and of ways that they can facilitate activities appropriately. Secondly, even though student staff may be proficient users of the target language, this does not necessarily mean that they understand the difficulties that a learner is experiencing. At Soka University, student staff are given ongoing support. They attend three staff development sessions per semester and are paid for their time. They can choose any discussion topic, but are given help with structuring their discussions; specifically, the faculty advisors work with the staff to help them to find ways to develop the discussion. These staff development meetings give the staff members the oppor-

tunity to learn from each other. In other programmes at Soka University, there is a formal mentoring system where a senior student staff member helps new members of the team.

Evaluation

Evaluating the quality of dialogue and popularity of various services can be approached in a number of ways. Firstly, it may be useful to count the number of advising sessions taking place and monitor them over time. For example in the original system at KIFL there were 10 advising sessions per semester. From May to November 2009 there were 120 sessions which is a very useful measure of success as all of the sessions are voluntary and optional. This success is attributed to the opening of a new centre, the hiring of a trained, experienced chief learning advisor, increased orientation sessions for students during class time, and more effective advertising about the service. There are now six learning advisors working at KIFL to cope with this increased student demand.

At Soka University, in addition to logging the numbers of users (which has increased), the staff monitor the number of repeat users. This is a good indication that students found the service useful and want to continue to work with a learning advisor. However, Soka University (until recently) only employed one full time learning advisor and her schedule was almost always completely full. It was not possible to see how many students had tried unsuccessfully to make an appointment via the online booking system. The university has now hired two additional learning advisors to cope with the student demand for the service.

It is also useful to monitor the number of participants attending events or availing themselves of other services such as workshops, conversation groups and optional self-study courses. At Soka University, there were over 5,000 separate visits

to the English Forum in one semester. At KUIS, an increased number of students each year register to take one of the Self Access Learning Centre's (SALC) optional modules. In April 2009, over 500 students applied to take the First Steps Module and a record number of students applied to take the follow-up module in September 2009. The modules help students to develop awareness of the language learning process and plan their own self-directed learning. The number of full-time learning advisors has increased steadily in order to meet the student demand. In 2001, the SALC at KUIS employed two learning advisors. In 2010, there are ten full-time learning advisors.

In addition, it is important to evaluate the quality of the service given to learners. At KUIS, learning advisors (and teachers) are required to satisfy the requirements of a rigorous evaluation programme in order to apply for their contracts to be renewed after two years. This evaluation requires advisors to record and reflect on three separate advising sessions and to share these with a member of management. Students are also asked to give feedback on the self-study modules they take and the quality of the advising service they received at the end of each module.

Finally, research into the types of students availing of the services and recording details of the sessions themselves can inform practice and materials design. For example, research at KIFL revealed that 30% of students signing up for appointments with learning advisors did not know what they needed to study. This information was useful for planning workshops and writing new materials. Staff at Soka University have noticed that most of the students who use the advising service are intermediate learners. Those with an advanced level feel they do not need extra help.

Each of the four institutions featured in this paper constantly reviews its programme from the point of view of the student users and refine it. For example, the advising programme at Soka University is now in its third phase. The first phase took a

strategy approach where the learning advisor gave suggestions for which strategies to apply. No follow-up was required during this phase, and students did not tend to make repeat visits, so it was difficult to gauge the level of uptake or success. In its second phase, the advisor set tasks which required follow-up. This approach was more successful, but it was felt that the learners needed to assume more responsibility for their learning. Based on feedback from colleagues in the field, the team at Soka University are now trialling a dialogue approach which involves negotiation and discussion. The learners are encouraged to make their own short-term goals.

Conclusions

This paper has provided an explanation along with various examples of how dialogue is essential for supporting learners in self-directed learning. Self-access centres are facilities which provide not only materials and study space, but also opportunities for interaction with peers and learning advisors/teachers. Learners need to be able to choose and utilise the available resources effectively and be engaged in a lifelong learning process and this is facilitated through dialogue.

From a practical perspective, establishing an advising programme should start with a needs analysis. In addition, a formal proposal is usually needed in order to provide senior administrators with justification in order to secure funding and other support. An institution needs to decide on important factors such as what kinds of services to provide, where the activities should take place, which language(s) to operate in and how the programme will be managed. Once a system has been established and learning advisors or peer facilitators have been recruited, there is an ongoing process of promotion, awareness-raising, materials development and training. The rewards for establishing such services will be worth the investment of time and money as the examples in this paper have attempted to

illustrate. All of the programmes described here have grown since their inception and have managed to address individual learners' needs in ways that regular language classes and access to a resource library cannot.

Bio data

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