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In-Between the Process and the Outcome in Advising in Language Learning: Reflecting on my Very First Advising Session

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Context and Background

This paper contains the reflections of a novice advisor who had the opportunity to attend a thoroughly comprehensive four phase-training program, the first of which had the purpose of teaching the basics of advising (philosophy, strategies, knowledge, etc.) with hands-on practice. As for the practice, the trainees were assigned to have a practice session with a student near the end of the first phase at the Self-Access Learning Center ('The SALC') at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan, where the training itself took place.

The SALC environment is suitable for any type of academic engagement. Particularly the interior sections which are separated by brick walls from each other and provide the privacy that advising sessions require. This was not only because it was where actual advising sessions took place, but its being surrounded by concrete walls, thus creating a cosy atmosphere. This was the reason for me as a novice advisor to pick this spot to have our practice advising session. Plus, the decoration of the advising spot was so simple with just a table and two chairs, so that one could do nothing but to concentrate on the session when inside. In this respect, having a table between the advisee and the advisor may have some effects on the session, a negative one could be that it symbolises the distance between the advisee and the advisor, whereas a positive one could be the fact that a table is the correct place to discuss matters. As Murray and Fujishima suggest, people transform "spaces" into "places" by carrying out actions or activities there. And these places develop "a spirit of reciprocity" where people help each other, by sharing ideas and information which enhances their autonomy (Murray & Fujishima, 2016). And there is a need for a table between two parties to come to a mutual understanding while using a tool or sharing their ideas. Plus, the table positively shapes the formality of the dialogue which should be far from too casual during the advising session. Therefore, the environment in which the session was conducted had more positive influences than negative ones. Therefore, the environment in which the session was conducted had both positive and negative influences.

The participant advisee of the practice advising session was Nao (pseudonym) whose major was International Communications. She ironically mentioned her difficulty in communication. Both the advisee and the novice language advisor had no clues about one another until the moment they were told to have a session together at KUIS. The fact that they had never met each other before might have had some effects on the session.

My Role as a Learning Advisor

From the novice advisor's, i.e. my perspective, the purpose of the session was likely to "create a moment", if possible, to make the advisee realize any aspect(s) to improve the process of her learning in addition to getting to know her and making her get to know herself as a learner. Through this process, I had the purpose of focusing on the advisee and building rapport and trust with the help of intentional listening.

Reflection, focusing on and making the notion of "experience" clear regarding the "self" in relation to the self and the world, is a crucial skill of a language learner in order for him/her to learn effectively (Boyd & Fales, 1983; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Kato & Mynard, 2015). On attending the Learning Advisor Training, I, having been teaching more than 17 years, found myself a guide who may have used some of the basic strategies of reflection unconsciously. However, I still needed to explore the effects of using advising strategies on improving my awareness, and developing control and intentional use of them to help the advisee. From this point of view, it is important to stress that it is an undeniable fact that the theory of Intentional Reflective Dialogue (IRD) (Kato & Mynard, 2015) is tangible and the practice of it is multi-dimensional. Therefore, it needs a solid amount of experience to put this plausible theory into practice and counterbalance the unpredictability of the IRD. Experience through practice is what I needed to attain as a novice advisor in order to put the theory into practice skillfully.

Apart from the basic skills like repeating, mirroring, restating, summarising and complimenting (Kato & Mynard, 2015), I feel myself courageous enough to ask powerful questions and make intuitions in my sessions easily, yet it could cause a misunderstanding to make intuitions before building trust in the early phase of the session.

In this paper, I reflect on the recorded advising dialogue, the transcripts of it, and the transcript of the post-reflection session with another advisor to reflect on and make observations about my own advising.

Attempts to Build Rapport

In order to communicate understanding and empathy to a learner, there are four strategies likely to be used for building rapport and trust in the very first phase of the advising session. These strategies are repeating, mirroring, restating and summarizing (Kato & Mynard, 2015) Summarizing refers to the advisor's choice of the key words rather than random ones. Mirroring helps to create a level of similarity in order to make both the advisee and the advisor feel relaxed. When it comes to restating and summarizing, these strategies help the advisee understand the situation better when exposed to some other ways of expressing her issue.

Here are some excerpts from the exchange between Nao and me in this session. In these extracts, especially the second and the third one, while restating and summarising, I could get the first signals of the issue that her anxiety has hindered her communication with others since someone made fun of her in her childhood:

Extract 1

(...)

NAO: *Recently I try to talk with some international students.*

LA: *Do you?*

NAO: *That place where many internationals students are hanging on.. so.. I usually sit on the seat and find an international student and try to talk with them..*

LA: *Oh Wow! You mean you are looking for some ways to interact with internaitonal students? (restating)*

NAO: *(Laughing) Yes..*

(...)

Extract 2

(...)

NAO: *My level of judgement is ... aa.. the person .. is kidding me ... is .. my judgement ..*

LA: *Kidding? (repeating)*

NAO: *Yes ..*

LA: *You mean .. making fun of.. (restating)*

NAO: Yes.. kidding is not ... aa... I feel that.. aa .. kidding is.. uncomfortable .. aa ...and that.. I cannot trust that person.

*LA: Hmm.. so.. when **the person starts kidding you.. you don't feel good..(restating)***

NAO: I-hi.. I can't trust him.

(...)

Extract 3

(...)

NAO: When I was an elementary school student, that situation was.. no.. junior high school student.. someone kidding me .. a not junior high school student .. someone kidding me .. and I found a friend I can trust..

LA: A-ha (nodding) so somebody was kidding you and you didn't want to touch him or her but you found a not-kidding person. This was more comfortable. (restating / summarising)

NAO: Yes.

(...)

It is crucial to mention that, the use of these four strategies is to show that you are listening to the advisee and understand her situation, but the timing of making use of them matters most to build rapport and trust. Otherwise, the advisee may not feel the connection that the advisor should create within the first minutes of the session. Below is the extract from the session with Nao about her ideas on our session. Here one may clearly see her failure in defining communication, which was another signal of her issue.

Extract 4

(...)

LA: So how do you define communication?

NAO: Aa.. Communication (starts thinking deeply) .. is... talking oor .. aaa..

LA: Talking..

NAO: .. or.. aa talking .. aa..

LA: Talking .. Is it enough?

NAO: (starts giggling) .. yes talking.. but it's not.. hmm..

LA: (silent)..

NAO: Hmm..

LA: Hmm (repeating the tone) ..

NAO: It is difficult to explain .. (laughing)

LA: (laughing and they laugh together) yeah.. Is it enough to talk? I mean, are we communicating right now?

NAO: Hmm..

LA: Do you understand my question? Is this a communication?

NAO: Yes..

LA: Yes (repeating)

NAO: Kind of.. (giggles)

LA: (shows her surprise and giggles together) What is missing in this communication? What is the problem?

NAO: I dont know about ..aa.. you .. and what you are.. thinking about .. me.. (giggles)..

LA: A-ha.. (nods deeply)

NAO: Yes..

LA: So you feel I don't know you and you don't know me, so we can't communicate?

NAO: No..

LA: Aa..

NAO: But ..hmm.. talking is communication.. aa .. what is communication?(as if talking to herself)

LA: (starts laughing) Your major, eh?

NAO: Yes, communication but..

LA: What is communication anyway?(repeating her words and tone) Are you a freshman or..?

NAO: Yes, I'm a freshman ..

LA: *Maybe you'll learn more and more deeply when you get better..*

NAO: *Yes.*

(...)

On reflecting about the practice session in a session with another learning advisor colleague of mine, I found myself having a monologue about the session. Below is an extract from the post reflection session where I implied my frustration about the session several times. However, this extract shows how disappointed I felt and told this explicitly, which was a kind of relief to put the real feeling into words:

Extract 5

ME: *And even I asked, you know, in some case.. I said, "OK, do you think it's a communication?" I said "This.." she said "Kind of.." (laughing) .. so this was really ironic for me to ask her such personal questions and all trying to poke her to be going deeper .. and .. not communicating in her case, in her mind.. this was really disappointing for me to hear this.. I mean, that is miraculous for a person to say in the very 10 mins of the very first meeting.. saying .. a-ha.. how good communication we are having.. no I wasn't expecting this.. so, what was I expecting I don't know ..*

STEPHANIE: *What were you expecting?*

ME: *I don't know, OK, she was just good at nailing the issue indeed... (laughing) but what I felt was.. I hope I didn't invent a problem in your words.. but she was really having some issues, I mean, with communicating with people because she said, you can hear it in the recording that even a good, ideal communication she couldn't even go to a cafe or have some casual talks or go deeper or go and see a movie with a person that she had talked ten times or so.. after ten times or so she just start being a friend with that person ..*

In this respect I was far from being satisfied as an advisor during and after the session. Although I obviously attempted to, I felt like I was unable to build rapport and make the advisee trust me in such a way that she thought it was not our first but one of our weekly sessions. The reason for this could have been not only my too deep questions (in the very first session) for a low level English user like her to answer, but also my being too focused on my "false" target which was asking more and more questions instead of listening more intentionally.

Empathising and Complimenting

I have always found showing empathy the best way to reach a person even in my daily life. Therefore, in any of my advising sessions it is one of my favourite skills for building rapport and trust. It was a relief to get a bigger smile whenever I did so in the advising session with Nao which was like a confirmation of my preference through the process.

Empathising in this sense, one of the most powerful tools in building trust in the relationship between the advisor and the advisee, has been defined as the ability to put yourself in others' shoes and see the world the way they do (Kato & Mynard, 2015). Plus, feeling the support of the advisor makes the advisee feel noticed and valued.

Here is another excerpt from the session where I tried to do my best to build ourselves a private “space” where Nao could feel safe, understood and listened to without being judged or made fun of unlike her fears:

Extract 6

(...)

NAO: *My experience was.. special when I was a child..*

LA: *What did you experience when you were a child? (Leaning towards, showing more interest)*

NAO: *Aaa.. I went to 3 elementary schools..*

LA: *Aa did you?*

NAO: *I moved out of 3 prefectures..*

LA: *Ohh (nodding) .. This must be difficult .. (Empathising)*

NAO: *Yes.. (smiling).. To find friends .. and communicating with friends was difficult ... but I tried to .. communicate with each.. elementary school.. students..*

LA: *Students.. (repeating) But .. this .. shows .. I mean.. You must be really strong about adaptability (complimenting)..*

NAO: *Yes (laughing) .. yes..*

LA: *You are?*

NAO: *Yes.. the circumstances trained my mental .. (laughing)*

LA: *This is so cool. This shows how strong you are about communication.. (complimenting)*

NAO: *(Smiling) ..*

LA: Is this because .. your communication skill is so high that you picked this department, international relations?

NAO: Yes .. Maybe..

Time to Intuit? Really?

Having a literature background, I have always liked reading between the lines in any exchange of words, not to mention asking the deepest questions even in casual talks. However, this feature may be a drawback in the very first phase of an advising session. Since, asking powerful questions and intuition can be effectively used to be more aware and gain a perspective, only when they are used after building rapport and trust (Kato & Mynard, 2015).

When Nao was even unable to define communication in the forth extract, and mentioned about her anxiety when talking to a stranger I was quite sure that it was not easy for her to trust people and made my first “intuition” as a novice advisor. However, it was not me but the advisee herself that should be the one to come to this realisation and put this feeling into words. Below is the extract that has my words of a huge assumption about Nao, which makes me feel regretful whenever I watch the session. These were the first, and I hope, the last most directive words I would ever have for an advisee.

Extract 7

(...)

LA: Hmm.. so.. when the person starts kidding you.. you don't feel good (restating)

NAO: I-hi.. I can't trust him.

LA: That's why you can't trust him... Ohh.. OK. Of course.. This is something .. I understand you.. (empathising) so this is something that makes a person feel uncomfortable and a stranger as you said. (restating) .. That's a good point .. I got an A-HA point about you.. You are .. I think it's difficult for you to trust other people. (intuiting) ...

NAO: (Pause)

LA: (Pause) A.. what do you think is the reason? Why? .. I mean.. let's turn back to your childhood.. Do you remember anybody kidding you when you were a youngster?

(Metaviewing/linking)

NAO: When I was an elementary school student, that situation was.. no.. junior high school student.. someone kidding me .. a not junior high school student .. someone kidding me .. and I found a friend I can trust..

LA: *A-ha (nodding) so somebody was kidding you and you didn't want to touch him or her but you found a not-kidding person. This was more comfortable. (restating/summarising)*

NAO: *Yes.*

LA: *Aha.. yes we have comfort zones in relationships. We want to feel comfortable to have real communication .. This is so good.. (complimenting) .. this is so normal.. This is so human (empathising) .. Ha?*

NAO: *Him .. (nodding)*

LA: *Everybody needs to have comfort to have a communication like that.. You are so good indeed .. definitely.. (complimenting)*

NAO: *(smiling and nodding)*

LA: *I understand how you want to protect yourself. (empathising).. this is so good about yourself.*

(...)

Extract 8

(...)

NAO: *Yes I want to trust people more..*

LA: *(nodding) a-aha..*

NAO: *When I was a child I wanted to protect me ... but when I grow up I want to communicate with a lot of .. more a lot of ... people.. and I want to trust people more..*

(laughing) (linking)

(...)

While in LA Training, I was advised to draw a fine line between intuiting and making assumptions, because the latter could result in intimidating the learner and putting a distance between the learner and me, which is the last thing to do in an advising session. Maybe I took a big risk in the first session by preferring to have an intuition or a huge assumption about the learner, but having confirmations validated – which can be seen especially in the extract below– made me feel relieved about the session later on.

Extract 9

(...)

LA: *Because your major is international communication, maybe you should think “why can't I start the conversation easily?” or “why can't I trust the person easily in the first place?”*

Because you told me your concerns about Japanese people as well not only with international ones. You may find yourself a little bit intimidated while speaking to Japanese as well .. ha?

NAO: *.(nodding)..*

LA: *OK.. So maybe next target would be for you considering what to do .. any.. what to do next to feel much better in communication? Ha?*

NAO: *What to do? ... aa..*

LA: *What do you think you should do?(accountability)*

NAO: *(start thinking deeply)... hmmm.... To.. know... aa.. to ..try to know about the person...*

LA: *Himm...mm... (nodding) .. (pausing) .. more and more quickly.. or more deeply?!*

NAO: *Deeply...*

In the session, I concentrated on empathising, accountability, guiding, and intuiting while I was trying to get into what is going on in her inner-self as a learner. In doing this, due to my literature-based background and my irrevocable fondness for indirectness, using metaphors and lexiphanicism, I found the talk in the first phase being too deep for the first session. When it came to casual talks and questions with easier answers, I realised that we had a better flow and I had more data about her, which can be determined to be the clear difference between the two phases of the session. Nevertheless, a more directive intervention of intuiting and metaviewing in the early stages may have helped her to make certain realisations sooner.

Discussion

My expectation about the practice advising session was crystal clear in my words from the reflection session with Stephanie. Here they are:

Extract 10

(...)

STEPHANIE: *What if you had a session with a student that actually didn't need your help, how would you have felt at the end of that session?*

ME: *Nothing.. nothing good at all.. I just would like to see some data maybe .. data that I need to feel that much better... about helping.. I mean.. this is all about .. you know.. feeling that satisfaction when you see that you really helped somebody.. but this is actually impossible for the first session.. and this is my problem..*

STEPHANIE: *Yeah.. but you are actually trying too hard .. if I can use my intuition here: you are trying too hard.*

ME: *Yeah.. most probably.. I shouldn't be an outcome person.. I have ne.. no I shouldn't be saying that I have never been an outcome person.. but I think outcomes are much less important than .. or let's say process is more important than the outcome.. That's what I missed during the session.. I shoudn't come with an action plan .. as I told you.. in the first session.. come on Gamze.. you just started having a chat with a person.. It's impossible to understand her, to make her understand herself, an then pin a problem together and create an awareness on how to get rid of that problem and then.. start to poke her, or let's say pump her the enthusiasm to reach her target right after the session.. come on.. this takes loads of sessions in reality.. so I was expecting so high.. that's why when I watched it sometime later again and again.. I felt.. OK.. Wow.. I even did some intuition in the very first session, OK.. I did some pinning the problem in the first session..OK.. yeah, I just had some unnecessary talk.. I just did some guiding type of covering for my talks.. but this was not bad at all.. from another perspective..*

STEPHANIE: *Yeah.. It sounds to me that you are learning a lot..*

ME: *Yeah, I am.. indeed..*

(...)

Knowing that we would be having one session with Nao, in a way, disturbed my advising dialogue with her. That is to say, it was like starting a dialogue that wouldn't have an ending at all. And this was definitely disturbing to get the chance of having the advisee open her heart and leaving her alone without helping her. And as I highlighted it in the title of my report whether one, as an advisor, should focus on the outcome or the process itself to call it a successful advising session as it was almost impossible to have an advisee trust you, open her heart, realise the issue, help her realise the issue and take action within one session.

Therefore, I, as a novice advisor, tried really hard since it was impossible to have her say her action and get the confirmation from herself about her eagerness till the end of the dialogue.

Therefore, I regretfully became more directive in the phase of taking an action and accountability. Since it is usually the factors of the learner's readiness and the limited time that make us think that there needs to be more directive, I picked "the outcome" when I was in the session and became more directive.

As Littlewood (Littlewood 1999) claims that there's a need to match some various aspects of autonomy with "the characteristics and needs of learners in specific contexts". One should look for some contextual hints and characteristic behaviour on the matters, as an advisee can be in favour of behaving in various ways on different occasions, to support a unique pattern of autonomy. As for taking a directive or less directive stance according to advisees, the process that the advisor finds herself/himself has been described by Horai in a subtle way that "An important point is that we need to know there is no one fit all approach in advising session. We need to focus on each advisee to foster autonomy and give them chance to think cognitively" (Horai, 2018).

There are some experiences in human life that teaches more than anything and that you cannot learn your lesson without actually experiencing it. I bet the first advising sessions are like some stories that make you feel so down while reading them, but give you the best lessons by thinking about them over and over again. My first session as a learning advisor could be defined as not my first but literally one of the best teachers in my advising process. From the beginning till the end I clearly made the biggest mistake of keeping control in my hands instead of giving the wheel to the advisee to lead the flow of the session. Instead, focusing on the outcomes of the one-on-one session undermined the process. On the other hand, asking powerful questions before building rapport created an opportunity for me to find the deeper issue earlier than expected. No matter how much the negative feelings dominated the session, I cannot deny the fact that I, in my very first session, was able to employ the strategies of intuition and metaviewing which helped to pinpoint the issue earlier. This also helped the advisee link her issue with her past experiences, which would potentially give way for her to find her own way of solving her issue in the following sessions, if we had a chance to have some.

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Notes on the contributor

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