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“Metamorphosis”: In the Advising Sense

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Context and Background

This one-to-one advising session takes place at the Self-Access Learning Center (the SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan, as part of our one-week intensive Course 1 Getting Started Learning Advisor Training Program as visiting English language instructors from Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University School of Foreign Languages in Turkey.

The purpose was to experiment with the idea of advising following the process suggested in Figure 1, with a KUIS SALC student named H who had volunteered to take part in the exercise, and with whom we had an advising session of more than 35 minutes. H was a freshman student in her first year at university studying Thai as her major and frequently visited the SALC for 15-minute weekly speaking practice sessions with the language instructors and for the resources available.

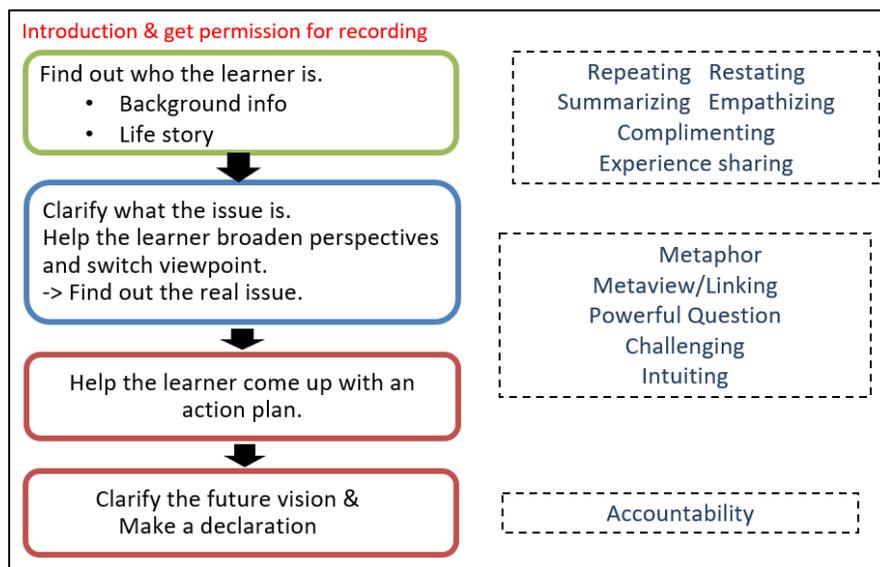


Figure 1. The advising process (Kato & Mynard, 2015)

Experimenting with the Idea of Advising: Focusing on the Learner

Although the list in Figure 1 above included the entire set of 12 advising strategies under focus as part of Course 1 and I wanted to try as many strategies as possible, I specifically focused on the essential elements of a first advising session such as focusing on the learner (not me), becoming a good listener, and subsequently building rapport and trust. I did not want to be in a rush to clarify any issues or help the learner come up with an actionable plan, though some ideas emerged.

I decided to hold on to this strategy in my actual one-to-one session with the SALC student H, following the tough lesson I learnt from our practice, or the so-called relay, session as a team of five advisor trainees with student A. This relay or practice session, which was held prior to our actual one-to-one session, involved the steps of finding out who the learner (here, student A) is, helping the learner broaden perspectives, clarifying the real issue, helping the learner make an actionable plan, and clarifying the future vision described in Figure 1 above. Each advisor trainee on our team was assigned one of the steps in the list as his/her primary role, and kept silent observing the entire process unfold until it was his/her turn to carry on the intentionally structured reflective dialogue with student A.

As a team, we had a hard time eliciting relevant information from A because we were five advisors there trying to build on what had been said before while at the same time focusing on the remaining part and our corresponding responsibilities to keep the conversation going and have an intentionally structured reflective dialogue. A was a quite competent and self-sufficient American student who could efficiently adapt to new environments and thus did not seem to need much outside help. Nevertheless, as we invested more in listening to him, remaining calm and quiet, and asking him fewer but more powerful questions, he eventually revealed issues he had been having with one of his professors at university who had not provided him with detailed feedback on his assignments up till then and he had been having a hard time preparing for his later exams and papers as he did not know much about the quality of work he had produced or whether he needed to improve his work in certain aspects. A's main feedback to us afterwards was that we should have listened to him more, rather than asking him many questions.

Different from student A, my student in the real advising session, H, had relatively limited command of English but was highly motivated to study languages. Such input, observation and experience combined, I decided to primarily focus on the essential elements of a

first advising session such as focusing on the learner (not me), becoming a good listener (as advised by student A in the relay session), and subsequently building rapport and trust. Thus, I did rely on the strategies of repeating, restating, summarizing, empathizing, complimenting, linking, and experience sharing to get to know the learner better by learning about her background, life story, and the time she spends at the SALC.

Summarizing, Complimenting, and Experience-Sharing to Build Rapport and Trust

I feel that due to the dominance of my analytical skills which are required in the completion of my other duties as part of my job at university, I am quite motivated to get things done effectively in a short period of time. I would like to experiment with the idea of improving this in new directions, and imagine myself as someone who can occasionally let things go loose and follow their natural pattern, allowing extended periods of time, in an effort to become a more holistic person. This is because I get the feeling that in advising you need to take your time, make the learner experience the state of being listened to, and guide him/her on the road to finding his/her focus. All of this requires patience and persistence on both parts, which can be achieved by intentional listening and building rapport and trust. Therefore, as a novice advisor candidate, I would like to work more on my use of the advising strategies including summarizing, complimenting, and experience sharing.

In the session, I concentrated on these three advising strategies to have my student feel comfortable talking to me on the way to developing rapport and trust and experience the state of being listened to: summarizing, complimenting, and experience-sharing. As for my student, H, she met me with a big smile on her face, which she kept all through the session. I requested her to choose the place where we would have the session, and she preferred the nice, comfy modular leather sofas on the ground floor. She was very positive and was herself a very good listener, and made me feel comfortable as well. I tended to avoid being too much directive in the session which evolved mainly around warm-up questions as to what her name means, where she lives, whether she spends much time on transportation (similar to the student in my relay session), which then lent itself to deeper or more powerful questions about her goals or plans as a student or as a SALC visitor such as what motivated her to study Thai and maybe other languages (Portuguese and Spanish, as she mentioned) or attend speaking sessions at the SALC or how she feels about being there.

Thus, I thought occasionally summarizing what she says briefly would help us stay focused during the initial “getting to know” part and she would experience the state of being listened to (intentional listening). Besides, timely use of complimenting and experience-sharing would help to create a positive atmosphere reflecting on similar interests or funny moments, paving the way toward rapport and trust.

Summarizing

In our mini advising session with one of the learning advisors M at the SALC, she drew our attention to the use of summarizing along with repeating and restating, and how summaries might help to put a learner drifting away from the focus back on track. Thus, in this session, I incorporated summaries to help H stay focused especially in the introductory part where we talked about her background or life story and I thought they worked well.

Complimenting

Thanks to my experience as a teacher and program coordinator at my institution, which involves constantly leading or guiding a group of people as part of my job, I can say everybody needs to get some praise or see appreciation, not only in cases when they have achieved something but sometimes just because they have intentions to take up something new which will require time, effort, and responsibility. Therefore, complimenting is a tool that can be used generously but with caution; it needs to be sincere, timely, and considerate of cultural factors. Especially due to the cultural aspect, I was a bit worried but in the limited time I spent with Japanese people, I got the feeling that they are quite similar to Turkish people and they might welcome compliments. As a result, I intentionally used complimenting a couple of times, for instance, while talking about what her name means or when she told me about the reasons why she wants to learn languages other than English such as Thai, Portuguese, and Spanish. My first compliment was about some features she had, while the second one was about the motivation/goal she held. I thought that these occasions helped her feel comfortable and confident, and created a positive climate.

Experience-sharing

As advised by Kato and Mynard (2015), providing some ideas and experiences that an advisor has can help learners get started as well as building rapport. I wanted to use this strategy not only to motivate H to get started as she was already interested in learning languages and improving her language skills, but to encourage her to hold on to her goals more firmly by providing some external confirmation of how meaningful her motivation to learn languages is. I used it once more to build rapport again when we talked about our funny stories of cooking. I believe in both cases it seemed to work well, but in the limited advising time, I might have stolen the talk to some extent.

Here are some excerpts from the transcript of my advising session with H illustrating the uses and functions of the advising strategies under scrutiny:

(0'00)

LA: So you are welcome to the session, H?

S: Yes...

LA: Okay.. What does your name mean?

S: Mmm...

LA: Do you know that?

S: Maybe... mmm.. strong

LA: Strong?

S: And beautiful

LA: **Wow!...(Both laughing) That's great and it fits you. You're strong. You could be small but you are still strong, and you are very beautiful. [Complimenting]**

S: *(Overlapping)* Thank you. *(Laughing)*

(2'52)

LA: You told me, while we were walking here, you told me you are studying Thai.

S: Yes.

LA: Why did you want to study Thai?

S: Aaa.. Because I want to speak many languages..

LA: Yeah..

S: So.. so it's difficult to choose which language I will learn.. but finally I chose Thai.

LA: Hmm..

S: The reason is maybe.. the reason is my teacher at high school

LA: Hmm..

S: His wife can speak Thai..

LA: Yeah

S: So my teacher, my teacher, he go to Thailand very often, so he told me about Thai many many many time, many time, so I got interested in Thailand.. so

LA: Okay.. so, you developed an interest in Thai, the Thai culture and the country and the language through your high school teacher. [Summarizing]

S: Yes

LA: This is very nice, isn't it?

S: And by the time graduate from this school I want to be able to more languages, Port Portuguese..

LA: Oh.. Portuguese

S: And Spanish..

LA: Spanish?

S: Yes

LA: Okay.. Actually they are similar, ha? To some extent.. Portuguese and Spanish?

S: Hmm..

LA: So, maybe when you learn one of them, you won't, it won't be very difficult to learn the other one, but I don't know those languages, either, so I can't tell you much about the similarity or the difference but, so you're really interested in languages.

S: Yes

LA: Okay.. so, Thai.. Is it similar to.. the spelling, the, you know you have characters in Japanese?

S: Mmm.. Not similar..

LA: Not similar?

S: Yes..

LA: Hmm.. Is it very difficult or completely different?

S: Completely different..

LA: Oovv.. so that's hard work

S: Yes

LA: But you're determined.. I see.. You like it

S: Yes

LA: It's very interesting.. I mean.. **I am also.. When I was in high school, I was also interested in learning languages..[Experience sharing]**

S: Mmm

LA: And that's why I decided to major in English and English language teaching.. and actually while I was studying at university, I also wanted to learn another language, similar to you, and that was French. **..[Experience sharing contd.]**

S: Mmmm

LA: I wanted to learn French, and I wanted to learn for two reasons.. **..[Experience sharing contd.]**

S: Mmm

LA: One is you know French movies.. they are very romantic.. **..[Experience sharing contd.]**

S: Mmm

LA: The songs.. and the lyrics.. the melody.. I find it nice.. and also I thought it would be similar to English.. **[Experience sharing contd.]**

S: Mmm

LA: You know some grammar.. some vocabulary.. so, do you, did you have that kind of a, you know, reason while you were choosing the languages you are studying? [**Experience sharing contd.**]

S: Mmmm.

LA: No I guess..

S: The reason why I chose Thai?

LA: Thai, or now you also want to do Spanish and Portuguese..

S: Aaa..

LA: ..before you graduate, so, you know, are they similar?

S: Maybe Portuguese and Spanish are similar, but Thai is completely different..

LA: Yeah

S: I want to go to.. I want to speak.. talk with all over people, all over the world..

LA: Yeah.. very nice

S: So I want to.. and, but I think if I can speak, if we can speak English, we can talk with these people in English..

LA: Yeah..

S: But I want to speak with these people in not English..

LA: Yeah.. so, what will be the difference? Between talking to these people, for example you want to speak to a Spanish person, and you don't want to speak in English, you want to speak in Spanish. What is the difference for you? Why is it important? Can you tell me about that a bit?

S: I think.. I think.. if we use, so people, their language people using usually, I speak their own language, so we can, maybe we want to know thought of the person directly..

LA: Can you say it again?

S: If, if I use their language, the language is people usually use in their country, if I use the language maybe I think I can know the person's thought directly

LA: Okay.. their thoughts.. their ideas.. oo that's very interesting.. okay so you don't think languages are you know equal.

S: Mmm

LA: The meanings in different languages are not equal, you think, so you want to give the correct meaning when you are speaking.

S: Yes

LA: **That's very interesting.. that's very clever.. I never thought of it that way..**
[**Complimenting**]

Discussion

Unlike our relay or practice session with student A, in my actual one-to-one advising session with student H, I was able to elicit information more efficiently about her background, life story as a student, her motivation behind learning languages and her expectations during her

visits to the SALC, and finally about her favorite hobby, cooking. I used summarizing occasionally to direct the flow of our conversation because this was the first time we met and it would be hard to define where to stop and move on to something else. I guess I could achieve it to some extent. On the other hand, while sharing experiences, which I wanted to rely on in this first session to establish a trust relationship, my part of the talk was occasionally long although subsequently she could open up, reflect on her life as a student and language learning plans, and benefit from the session (e.g. finding a topic for her next speaking session at the SALC). Additionally, while complimenting about her qualities or decisions/motives, I paid attention to look and sound sincere and tried to use my compliments in a timely manner. I was glad to see that my predictions regarding the cultural similarity in this respect proved true considering the session was lively and we had a lot of fun. Overall, I am satisfied with this session, and we are still in touch. (Actually H has become friends with one of my students here in Turkey.)

Nevertheless, although my student H seemed to be fine with it, I guess I would have kept my experience-sharing parts a bit shorter because not all students can be as positive and welcoming as H and might get distracted easily when exposed to such narration. Here, the student's personality and command of English might be quite critical. In addition, I realized that I frequently used some advising tips such as back-channeling, prompting, nodding, eye contact, tone of voice, but have difficulty using mirroring and silence as I did not feel that I can do them naturally. I would like to try them in my future advising sessions. Besides, as I have more advising sessions, I would like to improve my strategies such as asking powerful questions, challenging, and accountability.

Subsequently, in our intentional reflective dialogue with my trainee colleagues, taking on the roles of speaker, listener and observer, to help each other to reflect even more deeply on our recorded one-to-one sessions with the SALC students, we spent around 45 minutes focusing on what went well, what strategies were used, what was the structure of the sessions, what we learnt from the experience as advisor candidates, and what else could be recommended as a follow-up. We had the opportunity to go into more detail about our sessions, focusing specifically on our concerns about rapport-building, intentional listening, and experience sharing. In our experience it turned out that we did not have to spend much time or effort trying to connect with the learner and build rapport as the learners seemed to be quite cooperative and mature students, probably frequent visitors of the SALC. Or our students in our classes often ask for guidance

during our office hours and we already have bonds with them. Therefore, we were curious as to what it would be like if we had students who are complete strangers to us and have not been offered any advising service before. Thus, this activity of sharing our reflections on the recorded sessions with my colleagues made me feel that I am not alone on this long journey from being an instructor/teacher to becoming an advisor, experiencing some form of transformation or metamorphosis. We were all relieved to see we had similar concerns over, for instance, how to incorporate advising strategies such that they look/sound/feel natural. We observed that experienced advisors are using those strategies all the time, in a very natural way, effortlessly. I know some of this is already in one's nature, but I still believe education/training can shape people and we can learn and naturally use these strategies.

Another point we made was about how we, as advisors, need to let things get loose at times. Once we let the advisee get control of the conversation and go on and on about how he/she would feel if he/she could be where he/she would like to be, we can observe more 'aha' moments and the advisee develops a deeper sense of self-awareness as to his/her learning process. When you let the advisee take control, they open up and actually help you get access to the root causes, and make you intentionally listen and leave your assumptions aside. Sometimes it is not about a focus or a goal or a problem to solve, or let's say what you have in your mind; it is just about the FLOW!

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Notes on the Contributor

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