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Jo Mynard, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan

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“Still Sounds Quite a Lot to Me, But Try it And See”. Reflecting on my Non-Directive Advising Stance

Jo Mynard, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan

Context and Background

This reflective observation takes place at the self-access learning center (‘The SALC’) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan. The environment is supportive and there is a one-to-one professional advising service and also courses and modules on self-directed learning that students can take for credit.

The participant in this observation is Emi (pseudonym) who at the time of the observation was a fourth-year (senior) English major. Emi had volunteered to participate in the project and was paid for her time. I knew Emi well as she had taken a class I had taught in her first year and had continued to talk to her either on a casual basis or in advising sessions in the SALC throughout her time at KUIS.

Emi was asked to complete a course of self-directed learning for a five-week period as part of another research project investigating the role of advising on the development of one’s awareness of learning (Mynard, 2017). The self-directed learning process involves setting a plan and implementing it. Each week, learners engage in a reflective cycle of learning which is based on a model by Kolb (1984). The process incorporates reflective dialogue facilitated by the written feedback that learners receive from their learning advisors in addition to the face-to-face meetings. The cycle is shown in Figure 1.

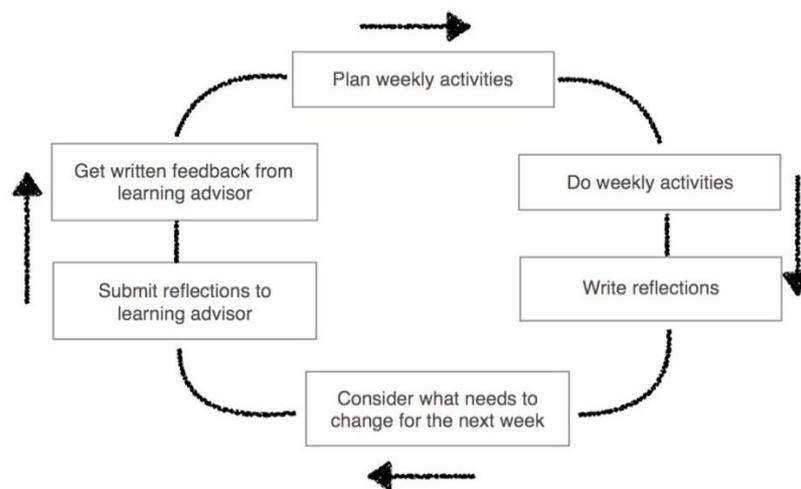


Figure 1. Weekly Cycle for Self-Directed Learning

Emi participated in an initial one-to-one advising session to talk about her goals and get started. She then engaged in self-directed learning each week and submitted her reflections to me electronically and received weekly written feedback (also electronically) from me as her learning advisor. In addition, she attended two online advising sessions using a platform called Moxtra during the five weeks at times convenient for her. A final interview was held in person.

My Role as Researcher

My interpretation is obviously influenced by my knowledge, life experiences, and role in the research (Karlsson, 2012; Miyahara, 2015). I am a language professional who has been engaged in teaching and advising learners on self-directed work and promoting learner autonomy in different countries around the world for 24 years. Emi viewed me simultaneously as both researcher and teacher/learning advisor. Other factors that inevitably affected the advising relationship and the research interpretation are that (1) I am a foreigner in Japan, (2) there is a substantial age gap between me and Emi, (3) I am a native speaker of English - the language that Emi is learning - so considered to be an expert in the domain, (4) I am not a fluent Japanese speaker and the advising sessions and interview took place in English.

The differences between our lives and the clear difference in positioning as well as other factors will naturally affect the interactions and the research. However, as a learning advisor, I made every attempt to reduce the distance during the advising sessions. Emi chose when (and if!) to meet with me and her needs were always the starting point for any session. Emi always led the direction of the session and I helped her to navigate her thoughts and clarify relevant points about her learning processes. From this point of view, although it is far from an equal relationship, it is important to stress that an advisor-learner relationship is completely different from a teacher-learner relationship.

I reflected on the written advising dialogue and the transcripts of the face-to-face advising sessions in order to make observations about my own advising.

Emi's Goals

Emi had spent one year abroad working in Australia and felt disappointed that her English fluency had slipped since coming back to Japan. Her goals for the self-

directed project was to work on her speaking skills and develop confidence and fluency again. Her learning plan included the following details:

TARGET: *Having a conversation with my friends in Australia*
BIG GOAL: *Talk or discuss with my friends(mention my opinion logically)*
SMALL GOAL: *Learning vocabularies (academic as well)*
RESOURCES: *Vocabulary book (Yumetan) / TOFEL book at SALC / Using the web page of BBC or CNN*
Movies in English
Ted talk (I could see Ted talk for studying mainly)
STUDY: *I will study 10 vocabularies on the book everyday*
I record my speaking about some topics
USE: *Talk to my friend once a week*
REVIEW: *I review my vocabulary note book once a week and make sure what I learned (Wed.)*
EVALUATE: *I will compare my record which taken the first day of week, and record that I talk same topic on last day of a week.*
I will test all vocabularies that I study a week.

Extract 1. Emi's Learning Plan, Week 1

Here are some excerpts from the written exchange between Emi and me on this plan:

Jo: *Sounds great - you have a nice interesting range of resources! Will you use movies for studying, or just for fun? If they are for studying, what movie(s) will be the most useful ones for your goal?*

Emi: *for fun: anything. for study: no animation, no action*

Jo: *So your main goal is speaking. What kind of topics do you want to talk about? It might be useful to add more details here - especially when you need to study vocabulary.*

Emi: *for discussing social issues with friends*

Extract 2. Written Exchange Between Jo and Emi regarding Emi's Learning Plan

Taking a Non-Directive Stance

As the written exchange on Emi's learning plan shows, I made several comments on her plan in my role as learning advisor and Emi subsequently made some minor changes. I deliberately took a non-directive stance, which is my usual advising style with experienced learners like Emi (Mynard & Thornton, 2012). As Emi was a paid research participant, I took it for granted that Emi would complete the five-week project so this meant I did not push her or focus on the practicalities of the implementation portion of the plan as much as I might have (see Thornton (2010) for

details of a self-directed learning model which includes a focus on ‘implementation’). As I would be working with Emi for five weeks, I took this stance in order to allow her room for experimentation and time to discover for herself which methods were most effective for her goals. The discursive features common to a non-directive stance include making mild suggestions, giving positive feedback, and asking questions that prompt further reflection (Mynard & Thornton, 2012).

Looking back on my approach in the case of Emi’s self-directed study, I wonder if perhaps I could have been slightly more directive at the early stage as there were several problems with the plan that subsequently contributed to Emi not fully achieving her weekly targets. The first is that Emi was focussing mainly on vocabulary study rather than communication. The second was that she only had very vague plans to communicate with others. Thirdly, her choice of resources did not match her goals very well. In fact, throughout the five weeks, Emi never actually practiced much speaking with other people. I feel that my non-directive stance may have directly contributed to Emi not fully achieving her weekly targets. Had I introduced some ideas or asked more searching questions at the learning plan stage, I feel that Emi could have discovered earlier what resources and methods might suit her goals. In addition, an increased focus on the practicalities of the implementation portion (Thornton, 2010) could have ensured that she actually carried out her plan each week.

Two Episodes in Emi’s Story

My non-directive approach did seem to have some benefits however. Through the self-study period, it was clear to me that Emi developed confidence in herself and a deeper sense of self-awareness of how she best learned. For example, during the five weeks, Emi made several personal discoveries and had several noticeable ‘ah-ha moments’ (Kato & Mynard, 2015, p. xxi). These seem to have been facilitated through a combination of my written advising and face-to-face online advising sessions. I will share three episodes by examining the data here.

Episode 1: My advising style allowed Emi to discover ways to learn personally-relevant vocabulary

Emi’s awareness of vocabulary-building strategies grew throughout the self-study period. Initially she planned to make lists of 50 words per week using a

Japanese word book. Through trial and error, she eventually settled on learning expressions and phrases that she could actually use. She did this by listening to TED talks that interested her. Extracts 3 and 4 indicate minimal intervention by me with regards to vocabulary strategies.

Jo: So you want to keep doing TED and vocabulary, but not Yumetan. Is that right? Is your goal still 50 words? that sounds like a lot...

Emi: I thought I can use TED, and Yumetan for taking a train. What do you think, is it a bit much?

Jo: Still sounds quite a lot to me, but try it and see :)

Emi: I totally agree with you, maybe I can learn 30 words!

Emi: Thanks for giving me feedback. Yes, I try to achieve it. That is why I reduced the amounts of the words that I have to memorize. I think I would be satisfied that I can acquire new vocabularies.

Extract 3. The Written Exchange Following Emi's Journal in Week 2

By week 4, Emi more confidently explains her self-study related to vocabulary:

Emi: I think I did learning English and listening to (TED) talk well. I really enjoyed (TED) Talk so much. That is why I had a high motivation while I was doing this activity. I mindfully watched TED and first I saw without the subtitle, and second I saw it with English, and I wrote down some vocabularies that I never knew on notebook. Then I searched the meaning. Lastly, I saw again the clips with English, and enjoyed it.

Emi: I'm going to keep watching TED talk and learn vocabularies. I found it is more useful to study the phrases while presenter are talk to in the presentation. Most of the time the vocabularies are difficult and very academic which couldn't use in daily conversation. So I would like to focus on the phrases or idiom.

Extract 4. Excerpt From Emi's Journal in Week 4

Extract 4 shows that (1) Emi wants to focus on vocabulary useful for daily conversation, (2) she is now focussing on phrases rather than lists of words, and (3) she is focussing on general phrases that the presenter uses rather than the academic words that feature in the actual content of the talk, (4) she does not fix on a number of words to learn each week. This revised approach shows a deep and sophisticated

awareness of vocabulary learning that developed as a result of Emi's experimentation, gently nudged by my encouraging and non-directive advising.

Episode 2: My non-directive advising style helps Emi to realise that she needs to practice using English more

Although Emi was enjoying the activities, I noticed that she was not doing much actual speaking practice. I made non-directive and encouraging attempts to help her to think about how she might build more actual speaking practice into her plan as Extract 5 shows.

Emi: I achieved one goal which was the activity with TED. It was pretty fun for me, so I did just voluntarily. ... I did not make actual opportunity to use those words, though. It was one thing I feel a bit sad.

Jo: I really enjoyed reading about your activities and your reflections this week. Do you feel the activities helped you to achieve your goal? I know you were disappointed not to be able to use the new words. Do you have ideas how you can make sure you can use them every week? Using the words is always hard as you have to make opportunities for yourself.

Emi: I achieve almost of all goals. But I couldn't make time to talk to my friend. I learned new English, but I didn't practice what I learnt.

Emi: I'm a little bit sad that I didn't have an opportunity to talk with someone in English. I was busy in last week until today as usual. I think I have to set the activity that would be achieved.

Jo: It's great that you did so much with the TED talk and got a lot out of it! Did you learn many words and expressions that you would like to use? Maybe it would be good to think of other situations where you can use the new words (emails? In person? Yellow sofas? Blog? Twitter etc)

Extract 5. Excerpt of the Written Exchange Following Emi's Journal in Week 4

Up until this point, Emi only has vague plans to practice speaking English each week which she does not actually follow through on. At the end of week 4 Emi listened to all her recordings of her monologues and of our meetings and noticed several things that helped her to realise of the importance of practicing speaking with others:

... I listened to my all speaking recording including when we talked on Moxtra. Then i found that I spoke slower when I talked to Jo than I record my speaking. It's because I guess I feel tense when I talk to someone. When I was

Australia, I've never cared about my English cuz it was a tool for living in Australia. However, after came back from there, I focused on my English to brush up and improve my English skills. I think this is good things, but sometimes I think I need to have a confidence to talk to anyone without making a mistakes. I'm glad to find this point this time.

Extract 6. Excerpt From Emi's Reflective Journal in Week 5

If I had been more directive with regards to encouraging Emi to practice speaking with others, she may have made this realisation earlier. Unfortunately, she did not make this connection by herself until week 5 and the project was complete.

Episode 3. My style gets more directive and finally uncovers Emi's true feelings

The next episode comes from our face-to-face meeting which took place at the end of week 4. This advising session achieved two things: (1) it consolidated the fact that Emi understands that she needs to practice more speaking, and (2) it uncovers her true feelings related to her reluctance to actually practice speaking.

Extract 7 begins with Emi explaining what she enjoyed most about the TED talks and how she used them to study vocabulary. Then, around mid way through the excerpt, Emi demonstrates that she is aware that she needs to actually practice speaking. As we saw in previous extracts, this awareness had been developing over several weeks, but this time we talk about practical ways she can actually implement speaking activities. Finally, for the first time, Emi takes a risk with me and admits that she is nervous to take the next step to practice speaking with strangers. The reason for admitting to nervousness at this moment was likely due to my unusually direct question in the final line of the dialogue "*Is it a time issue? Or is it because you are nervous?*". I normally avoid such direct questions in advising sessions, but as Emi only has one more week to implement her plan, I am also taking a risk in the advising session. In fact, looking back, this final session includes more examples of confronting, challenging and suggestion-making than all the previous sessions. It was successful because a level of trust had developed between Emi and I over the preceding weeks allowing true feelings to surface.

Jo: *So what did you learn most from this process?*

Emi: *Process? You mean like what I was doing?*

Jo: *Yeah, what was the most significant thing you learned?*

Emi: *Um.... I found if I know the vocabulary I can understand what they are saying and also maybe I felt you have to get used to hearing*

English and then I can catch the English even when they are talking very fast. Mm. Yeah, so as I watched the TV many times, I understand deeply because I saw the subtitles - Japanese subtitles as well – so could understand little by little so it was really good for me and really fun.

Jo: *That's good. Do you remember what your original goals were? Do you remember? When we had our first meeting?*

Emi: *Talking to people. Maybe in daily conversation.*

Jo: *Yeah, daily conversation, and I remember you told me that you wanted to feel fluent again like you were thinking in English and express yourself well.*

Emi: *Yeah.*

Jo: *How do you feel you are doing now with that?*

Emi: *Um no....recently I cannot use English so much even though I'm taking two courses.*

Jo: *Do you have much chance to talk to your Australian friends?*

Emi: *No*

Jo: *That's a shame*

Emi: *Maybe .. learning vocabulary from TED talk is very good, but after that maybe I have to practice like talking with new vocabulary or something. Then maybe I can learn vocabulary or conjunctions.*

Jo: *So, actually use it, to help you learn it? Is there a way for you to make time in your schedule to practice with your Australian friends or someone else?*

Emi: *No. Is there a speaking booth in the SALC?*

Jo: *Yes, also the Practice Center. Teachers are available all day every day.*

Emi: *Ah really?*

Jo: *Have you ever used the Practice Center? (gives explanation). I'll send you the link later and you can make a reservation if you want*

Emi: *Maybe I have to use practice center or talk to learning advisors.*

[discussion about ways to practice speaking / how Emi does not have time]

Jo: *In your final week, is there anything special you would like to make sure you do?*

Emi: *Not really. Nothing*

Jo: *More TED talks?*

Emi: *TED talks, yes. And when I have time I will try to book the Practice Center I am kind of nervous to first meet someone. So, when I have time I would like to reserve.*

Jo: *Is it a time issue? Or is it because you are nervous?*

Emi: *(laughs) Nervous.*

Extract 7. Abridged Transcription of the Advising Session Held at the End of Week 4

Discussion

The examination of the data suggests that my non-directive advising approach in the earlier advising sessions had a role to play in helping Emi to develop an

awareness of the learning process. My approach also allowed a trust relationship to develop so that when I became more directive in the final advising session, this uncovered true feelings. Through the analysis of this data, I gained a deeper awareness of my advising approach through reflecting on my contribution to the dialogue. As a result of this examination of my advising, I would like to pay more attention to how directive I am in my advising approach. There may be times where I could take a more directive stance in order to save the learner time. However, as we saw in a previous study (Mynard & Thornton, 2012), navigating a continuum depending on the needs and awareness levels of the learners is important. In Emi's case, taking mainly an encouraging yet non-directive stance early gave her room for self-discovery. On the other hand, a more directive intervention in the early stages may have helped her to make certain realisations sooner and achieve her goals. Taking a more directive stance later was appropriate and effective in helping real feelings to emerge. Unfortunately, the process ended one week later and there was no chance to continue helping Emi to confront her nervousness, but I feel I will be more aware and ready to take risks with my advising stance in future sessions.

Notes on the contributor

Jo Mynard is the Director of the Self-Access Learning Center at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan. She has an EdD in TEFL from the University of Exeter (UK) and an M.Phil in applied linguistics from Trinity College, University of Dublin (Ireland).

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