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Abstract

Advising in language learning (ALL) is an effective way to support English language learners. More and more universities offer an advising service in Japan. In order to improve quality of an advising service, ongoing training of language learning advisors is necessary. In this paper, which is a summary of a study, a series of professional development programs for language learning advisors are introduced. Eight advisors participated in the research which involved completing reflection reports about the training and participating in semi-structured interviews. The implications of the research are discussed which are to develop a more effective professional development program for advisors.

Keywords: Advising; learning advisors; professional development; advisor training

Advising in Language Learning and Background of the Study

Advising in language learning (ALL) is considered to be one effective way to support students' English language learning. ALL is different from teaching or counseling. Carson and Mynard (2012) define ALL as "the process and practice of helping students to direct their own paths so as to become more effective and more autonomous language learners (p. 4)". Therefore, advisors do not tell students what they should do, but rather they support students to find their own way through dialogues. In order to achieve this goal, advisors need to have communication skills and suggest options which are suitable for students' interests and learning preferences.

The university where this study was conducted has an ALL program as part of its learning commons. The main goal of the ALL program is to assist students to be more autonomous learners. Advisors assist students to set a goal, choose materials, or plan their own learning. Seven English language teachers and three students were working as advisors. This is a paid job for student advisors. Student advisors were recruited based on a short essay and an interview. Student advisors need to have experience of using the facilities of language learning in the learning commons, high English proficiency, and communication skills. Teacher advisors were assigned by the university as part of their regular duties. The program offers 45 sessions per week. One of the advisors did not speak Japanese, so the advisor offered sessions in English, but the other sessions were conducted in Japanese. Neither teachers nor students had been trained as advisors before they started working. ALL is

relatively a new approach in Japanese institutions, so there are not many studies on training or professional development (PD) of advisors. Kato (2012) stated the importance of ongoing PD and introduced the example of reflective dialogue as an effective way to facilitate PD. Kato and Mynard (2016) outlined the role of an advisor in a book which can be used as a guide for new advisors. In their book, practical exercises that can be used in a training program are also demonstrated. The author of this paper has worked as a language learning advisor also a coordinator of the program and in charge of organizing the training sessions. This study was conducted to find out the needs of advisors to develop more effective PD. This is a summary of the study which includes contents of the PD for advisors and examines how advisors reacted to it. The participant advisors wrote several reflective reports and participated in a semi-structured interview. Based on the data, implications for advisors PD are indicated.

Professional Development

The number of visitors using the advising service has been increasing since the program established in 2006. With the increase in student users, the program has faced some challenges. Monthly training sessions were offered to cope with them. One of the challenges was that the definition of the word “autonomy” was different among advisors. Therefore, the level of commitment varied depending on the advisors. For example, one of the advisors assumed that lower level students need more intervention, so the advisor tended to decide plans and materials for the learners. Another advisor thought autonomy could be developed regardless of students’ levels. Thus, students received different amounts of assistance. Another challenge was that advisors needed to know many things related to English language learning such as details of exams, materials, or strategies. The schedule and the contents of PD in 2016 are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Contents of PD for Advisors in 2016

Month	Contents	Purpose
April	Guidance, role playing,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To introduce goals of the program and roles of advisors • To practice advising skills
May	Discussion and case study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To reflect their sessions • To improve advising skills

June	Test-oriented training, Peer observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To gain knowledge about the IELTS exam• To give/receive direct feedback on the sessions
July	Reflection paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To reflect their sessions and seek points to improve the program
October	Case study, workshop by an experienced advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To learn theories of learner differences and improve advising skills
November	Peer observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To give/receive direct feedback on their sessions
December	Reflection meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To reflect and seek points to improve the program

Roleplay was used in the initial training for advisors. At first, experienced advisors demonstrated a session and asked other advisors to analyze their session. After that, all advisors worked in groups and did roleplays. In the roleplay, advisors played the role of the student, advisor, or observer. All groups shared how they approached the case and shared opinions.

Case 1: A student who wants to get over 800 in TOEIC visited. The student's latest TOEIC score is about 350, but the student wants to achieve the goal within 3 months. The student belongs to a brass band and practices three times a week after school.

In this case, two approaches emerged during the training. The first approach tried to have the student become aware of the reality and make a more manageable plan with the student. When the student asked, “can I achieve this goal within 3 months?” the advisors did not guarantee that, instead they spent time for planning and making short-term goals. The other group of advisors encouraged them by saying “You can do it”. This phrase was often said by new advisors. This cheerleading approach can be problematic because student might become demotivated if they cannot achieve their goal, and advisors cannot be responsible for it. On the other hand, encouraging phrases may be able to motivate students. As a coordinator, I suggest new advisors to focus on achievable goals and encourage students to plan their own learning along with the goal. There is no right approach in advising, so the important thing for advisors is to be open to different perspectives. Through roleplay and discussion, advisors could be exposed to different ways to deal with various cases.

A test-oriented training session was offered in June. In the university, more and more students try to take the IELTS exam since universities in the United Kingdom and some other countries require students to submit an IELTS score. However, half of the advisors had not taken IELTS before and had difficulty when they were asked IELTS questions. The IELTS focused training was offered due to the situation and advisors' request. Kato and Mynard (2016) introduced different perspectives of an advisor being an 'expert' of exams. If advisors are not familiar with exams, students may be able to take a more active role in their learning. Advisors must consider how much they initiate student learning since the purpose of advising is to empower students' self-directed learning. PD opportunities should be an opportunity to remind advisors of their role.

In July, the last month of the spring semester, the advisors wrote a reflective report. The report asked five questions as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Questions in the Semester-end Reflective Report

Q1	Reflect on your sessions. Consider what was successful and what could have been done differently?
Q2	Do you feel that your advising skills improved over the semester and how so?
Q3	Do you have any requests or suggestions to improve the ECR?
Q4	How effective were the training sessions? What did you find useful or was there anything you didn't understand?
Q5	Any requests or suggestions for next training session?

In the reflections, most of the advisors claimed that the actual case studies were effective, and the IELTS-focused training was beneficial. In fact, they requested more training on testing-related matters such as introducing learning tools or strategies. This brings us the discussion of how much advisors need to know about the exams due to the matter of learner autonomy. Overall, advisors wanted to have more training sessions. In addition, the answers for Q1 were interesting because advisors' perspectives of what constituted a "successful session" differed. One of them wrote that a successful session was when the advisor could encourage students emotionally toward their goals. Another advisor said when students came back to have another session, the advisor regarded it as successful. One advisor mentioned that the session was successful when the advisor could ask appropriate questions

to understand students' individual difference and offer tailor-made options for them. This question should be considered more to tackle the challenge of the program.

At the beginning of the fall semester, the advisors attended a training workshop offered by an experienced learning advisor. The workshop focused on students' individual preferences and how to deal with the differences. Advisors tended to give advice based on their own experiences or preferences. If an advisor learned new vocabulary well by using flash card, the advisor often recommends students to use it. However, every student has different preferences and advisors cannot judge one method will work for everyone. Moreover, the advisors had a discussion regarding the mission of the program which is to encourage students to be more autonomous. The advisors shared how they regarded the goal and the term 'to be autonomous'. Through these discussions, the advisors developed a clearer idea of the role of being an advisor.

After the workshop, the advisors filled out a reflection form. The comments were positive and they gained knowledge about advising. Furthermore, some of them mentioned they became more confident after the training. One of the advisors stated, "I noticed that I already included many of those factors (introduced in the training) in my session. I confirmed that my session looks alright" (personal communication, October 22, 2016). Another advisor stated, "I have always been feeling worried about whether my advising style is right or wrong. I realized other advisors are also learning by trial and error, and I got more confidence as an advisor (personal communication, October 21, 2016). It was one of positive effects and was not expected.

Implications for Future PD

The study has several implications for establishing future PD in this ALL program; increasing the number of PD sessions, making training sessions more practical, and having more opportunities to discuss the goals and roles of advisors. The advisors mentioned several times in the interview or the reflection paper that they need training session more frequently. Now the program offers training opportunities once a month, but the advisors want to have more chances to discuss actual cases. The second point is offering more practical training sessions such as focusing on exams. As stated above, students can be more autonomous when an advisor is not familiar with the exam, so this matter needs to be considered among the advisors carefully. The third point is to encourage more communication among advisors. According to the reflection paper, each advisor had different opinions toward advising, and

that might be a cause of the difference in their quality of the sessions. As suggested by Kato (2012), having dialogue is an effective method to have better understanding on themselves and other advisors.

Conclusion

The need to improve English proficiency is increasing. ALL has great potential to support students who are struggling to discover their way to achieve their language related goals. However, the number of advisors is still limited, and there is not enough research on the subject. In this summary of the research, advisors agreed with the positive effect of PD programs, yet the contents have to be more developed. A common scenario is one in which a student is nervous and anxious at first, yet becomes more confident through having dialogues with an advisor. That is a crucial point of ALL. In order to support students, development of advisors' skills is necessary. Therefore, further study about advisors' PD is essential.

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