



ISSN 2185-3762

Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal

<http://sisaljournal.org>

Supporting Learners and Advisors: An Advising Interview Protocol for Intensive Language Programs

Donald P. Harootian, Monterey, CA

Erin N. O'Reilly, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL

Corresponding author: donald.p.harootian@dliflc.edu

Publication date: March, 2015.

To cite this article

Harootian, D. P., & O'Reilly, E. N. (2015). Supporting learners and advisors: An advising interview protocol for intensive language programs. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 6(1), 86-96.

To link to this article

http://sisaljournal.org/archives/mar15/harootian_oreilly

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Please contact the authors for permission to re-print elsewhere.

Scroll down for article

Supporting Learners and Advisors: An Advising Interview Protocol for Intensive Language Programs

Donald P. Harootian, Monterey, CA

Erin N. O'Reilly, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL

Abstract

In this paper, we present an 8-step interview process developed in response to the unique needs of learners and advisors in an intensive language program. Designed as a tool to provide additional support for new language advisors, this protocol has been used successfully for a period of over four years in an intensive language program's self-access center. The protocol reflects an established advising method and includes rationale and discussion to adapt the tool to other language advising contexts.

Keywords: advising in language learning, ALL, language advising, language advisors, intensive language program

Advising in language learning (ALL) (also called language counselling) can take on many forms, but is frequently co-located as an ancillary service in self-access language learning centers (Reinders, 2008). The existing literature on ALL emphasizes that the role of the language advisor is one of guide, or coach, helping the learner develop his or her self-regulation and autonomy outside of the language classroom. This typically happens through a negotiated dialogue between the learner and the advisor, with the learner responsible for developing a plan of action or deciding on appropriate next steps (Mynard & Carson, 2012; Reinders, 2008; Tassinari, 2012). Each learner's capacity to self-regulate varies, however, with action plans from more experienced or self-aware learners likely to differ greatly from newer learners. This discrepancy highlights the argument in the literature over the degree of direction or non-direction the advisor assumes (Mynard, 2012). For advisors working in intensive, high-stakes language programs, we argue that a direct approach is needed both for the learner and the advisor.

Intensive language programs differ from the typical foreign or second language program in that the course pace and demands often exceed the self-regulatory capacities of learners. In the current context, learners attend 30 hours of academic foreign language

class per week and typically have two or more hours of homework nightly. While the goal remains to have the language learner think of his/her own strategies, the majority of learners in this program arrive at advising sessions feeling overwhelmed. Therefore, the focus on advising in the current context is on identifying each learner's area of critical need and providing strategies and resources to help the learner immediately in order to keep up with the pace of the course. Advisors must also be equipped to offer a sympathetic demeanor through active listening as well as concrete strategies and structured support during and after the advising session. This approach differs markedly from more traditional language advising programs (see Mynard & Carson, 2012), and highlights the need to adopt language advising practices to the specific language program.

Parallel to the advisor taking on greater responsibility in recommending learner-specific strategies, is the challenge in training newly hired language advisors to work effectively with the wide range of learner needs present in intensive language programs. Despite the advising program implementing a pre-advising student questionnaire to gather general information about learners' needs, new advisors are often unprepared to navigate a full advising session, frequently reporting the inability to lead the conversation, ask targeted questions to elicit more information, or discuss a range of strategies suitable to a specific learner's situation.

To this end, we offer an 8-step interview process developed in response to the need to assist new language advisors in a self-access center at an intensive foreign language program. As part of a broader and more formalized training process, the interview protocol serves as a scaffold for the new language advisor, helping him or her develop the skills needed to navigate an advising session. Advisors are encouraged to be sympathetic listeners throughout the session, and they are trained to provide referrals and contact information to community and healthcare resources for topics outside the scope of language learning. This 8-step process below, however, focuses on academic (language learning) issues.

Interview Process

In presenting the advising interview protocol, many of the steps will be familiar to current language advisors, such as building rapport, identifying difficulties, and building

a plan. During the interview, advisors ask questions and practice active listening, so that they can confirm their understanding of the learners' problems (Mozzon-McPherson, 2012). The advisors then engage in an interactive dialogue with the learners to diagnose language learning problem(s) and offer appropriate strategies and/or advice to help advisees succeed. The 8-step advising protocol outlined below typically lasts 30-60 minutes and consists of the following:

1. Greeting and building rapport
2. Communicating the purpose
3. Gathering background information
4. Discussing learner's issues
5. Targeting questions
6. Forming a diagnosis
7. Offering strategies
8. Following up

Each of the steps is discussed further below, including a summary of what an advisor can expect during a particular step as well as guiding prompts to engage the learner.

Greeting and building rapport

While the first step may seem self-explanatory, advisors need to remember that students who come for advising in intensive language programs are almost always struggling in class and are often discouraged. Additionally, students may feel overwhelmed by the demands of their course. Many advisees seek help only once they have failed successive quizzes, exams, or other in-class assessments. In the current context, some learners are required to attend an advising session because of poor academic performance. These students are often less motivated to come and not as open to asking for advice. By offering a warm but professional greeting and by spending a few minutes building rapport with the student, the advisor is preparing for a productive and successful advising session.

Communicating the purpose

Clearly expressing the purpose of the advising session (Step 2) at the outset helps the learner understand the process as well as the expected outcomes (Cotterall, 2012). This includes telling the learner explicitly about the entire advising process, along with what happens following a session. Here are some possible ways to do that:

- I want to help you succeed in learning your foreign language.
- I will be asking some questions, listening, taking a few notes.
- I will try to give you some tips, strategies, advice, resources.
- I will send a formal advising report to you in the next three days and will send a copy to your teacher if you were referred. This report will describe what we discuss today and will include other practical strategies to help you in your language learning.

Gathering background information

Gathering background information (Step 3) serves a dual purpose. First, as an extension to building rapport, learners relax when talking about themselves and their learning processes. Second, learners are asked to share information and reflect on their learning more holistically. Interestingly, many learners in intensive programs will not have engaged in this type of reflective process up until this point because of rigorous course demands. This step should include asking relevant questions that will help the advisor learn about the learner's background. Here are some examples:

- Tell me about your high school/college experience.
- Did you study any other foreign languages in school? How did you do?
- What is your long-term language learning goal?
- Are you aware of your learning style(s)? What are the ways you learn most effectively and/or efficiently?
- How do you feel about your foreign language?
- How did the first few weeks of your course go?
- When did you first begin to struggle with vocabulary retention, listening, etc.?

Discussing learner's issues

In Step 4, the advisor asks the learner what s/he is struggling with. In this advising program, learners are required to provide a general description of problem areas prior to the advising session. At this point, the advisor can refer back to any information provided earlier and use it as a starting point for discussion. Learners are usually eager to share what their perceived language learning problems are, and are often accurate in their assessment. However, on occasion, advisees might see their problem in one area that has its roots in another. Learners who frequently list difficulties in listening, for example, may in reality be struggling with vocabulary retention (e.g., they may be hearing words and phrases that they never learned, or they may not be listening to the words when they study vocabulary).

Targeting questions

By probing with more specific or targeted questions (Step 5), the advisor, together with the learner, can discover the root problem or problems. As mentioned above, students in intensive programs may not have had the opportunity to thoughtfully reflect upon their language learning issues (i.e., why they are doing well in some areas and poorly in others). As a result, there is usually a need for these kinds of questions to pinpoint the underlying issues that need to be addressed. Some examples of probing questions are:

- Tell me how you practice listening at home.
- How exactly do you study vocabulary? Do you preview/review the words?
- Do you read a script when you practice listening?
- What do you do when you encounter a word or phrase you don't know in reading or listening?
- Do you have a speaking partner? Is so, how do you structure your time? In other words, do you have open conversations or do you speak on certain topics?
- What part of your language learning is going well? What are you doing to succeed in that area?

Forming a diagnosis

In Step 6, the advisor tries to form a diagnosis. Depending on the learner's degree of self-awareness, this is certainly something the learner may volunteer through the negotiated dialogue. Our recommendation is for advisors to focus on the student's one or two most significant areas of difficulty. Any more than this can be overwhelming for the student at this point. Here are some ways the advisor might state a diagnosis:

- You are struggling to retain vocabulary because you are not reviewing and recycling the vocabulary you learn.
- You are struggling with listening because you are not retaining the vocabulary.
- You are struggling with listening because you continue to get stuck on unknown words or phrases and you miss the information that follows.
- You are struggling with grammar because it is not presented or explained in the methodical and organized way you prefer.
- You are struggling with speaking because you are afraid to make mistakes in grammar or vocabulary when talking.

The examples above are direct statements. In keeping with the role of active listener, the advisor might state a diagnosis in the following manner "Would you say/agree that your greatest difficulty at this time is retaining vocabulary, and this might be what is causing you to do poorly in listening?" Alternatively, the advisor may frame this as an insight, allowing the learner to negate the statement entirely, for example, "From what you're telling me, it seems like you are struggling with speaking because..." Note that after posing such a question, the advisor should allow the student time to respond by agreeing, disagreeing, and/or choosing to provide yet more information to be taken into consideration. This allows the learner to self-reflect and build awareness, but also to re-direct the dialogue if needed.

Offering strategies

In Step 7, the advisor offers specific learning strategies and resources that the advisee can use to overcome his or her language learning struggle(s) and/or compensate for his or her language learning weaknesses. Step 7 is a critical step in the advising

process for learners in intensive language programs, as learners often seek tangible strategies or action plans they can implement immediately. While some learners will be capable of brainstorming strategies and action plans independently or with the help of strategy lists organized by skill/modality, our experience is that most learners will need significant guidance from the advisor in this process. Example strategies include the following:

- Learn vocabulary in chunks (contextualized phrases) and review these often (that same day while waiting in line for lunch, again that evening, two days later, one week later, etc.)
- Listen to the vocabulary on your iPod. Write words in sentences. Read the sentences aloud.
- Use lower level passages to practice listening while reading the script. Stop the recording at regular intervals. Say aloud what you heard. Rewind and repeat as necessary.
- Purchase a grammar book or grammar guide to supplement the materials you have in class.
- Ask your teacher to help you find a speaking partner/tutor who is studying the same language, but who is a couple months ahead of you in his/her course.

At this point, the advisor checks for buy-in from the learner by asking the learner explicitly if s/he has any questions or concerns about using the strategies discussed during the session. The presentation of the strategies tends to be directive, with the negotiated discussion occurring concurrently as the advisor asks the learner to consider which strategies s/he finds more or less appealing and if the learner has thought of additional strategies during the session that may help. Eliciting information from the learner at this point about strategy feasibility can raise both advisor and learner awareness to possible complications with the strategies discussed; for example, a student may express reluctance in working with a community tutor if s/he has limited access to transportation outside of school. Below are ways to ask for feedback:

- We've discussed several strategies. Which one(s) seems the best fit for you?
- Are there any strategies that will be difficult for you to use?

- Do you have any questions about the strategies we discussed? Do you understand why I recommend these strategies?
- Do you think you will try these strategies? Which one will you use first?

Following up

One of the challenges documented in ALL, is that programs often lack a follow up mechanism for advising sessions (Fu, 1999). This leads to two distinct administrative challenges. First, at the student and program level, there is the matter of gauging an advisor's effectiveness in his or her role. This creates issues with ongoing professional development and program development for both advisor and administrator. Concurrently, without follow up, documenting an advising program's overall efficacy and value for funding purposes is problematic.

Another challenge with regards to follow up is measuring a student's improvement after an advising session, as several confounding factors can coexist. Some of those factors include: student motivation and attitude, curricular changes, less (or more) homework, a new language tutor, and outside distractions (e.g., financial or personal relationship problems).

To help mitigate these issues, the last portion of the interview protocol (Step 8) is designed to prime the learner that the advisor will be following up with him or her. First, the advisor actively encourages the advisee to stay in touch and to update the advisor on progress, including inviting the learner to schedule a follow-up appointment. Second, the advisor tells the learner that s/he will receive a formal written report sent electronically within a certain timeframe, in this case within three business days. Based on our experience, many learners will take notes during the advising session and outline the strategies and resources discussed in what is essentially a learner plan. At this step, programs could formalize the learner-developed plan to facilitate the learner's growth and development towards self-regulation. In the current context, the formal written report from the advisor includes the following four elements:

1. Student Observations: A brief summary of how the student describes her/his language learning issue or problem;

2. Advisor's Observations: The advisor's summary of the student's reason for seeking advising, which may or may not be confirmed by what is discussed and discovered during the actual session;
3. Recommendations: Practical, achievable strategies listed in order of importance (or by skill area) so that the student can have a written guide detailing the steps or strategies to try; and
4. Additional Resources: A list of materials that may also help the student, such as Internet links, resource books, and audio or video clips.

Despite the challenges associated with follow-up, the anecdotal responses below provide evidence of the protocol's success:

Student 1: I would like to thank you. The advice you gave me raised my grade exponentially. The night listening helped the most. I now do that every night. Going over dictations helped me remember past vocab. Unfortunately, I was not able to go [out] and do the role play.

Student 2: I thought I would update you on my progress. Your suggestions for listening have been very helpful. At first it was definitely a challenge to stop translating as soon as a listening file started, but now it's a lot easier to simply listen to the whole passage. I listen to my homework sound files again as part of my morning routine. My teacher has noticed a difference in my listening. I also took your advice to find something I enjoy about the language. I read a fashion magazine at the library and checked out a poetry book.

Student 3: I enjoyed our talk on Friday. I would like to sit together and talk some more in the future. I worked over the weekend on some of the suggestions you gave me. I began the top down listening approach, going through the audio two times; 1st for main idea, and 2nd for the [details]. I started making note cards again. I have found that previewing the lesson the day before is a great help.

Conclusion

The academic advising interview protocol described above reflects a typical advising session in an intensive foreign language program. The steps serve as a guide to help new advisors as they take on the task of advising. For most new advisors, once the steps are used in four or five sessions (with supervision and follow-up discussion) over several weeks, the advising session itself becomes a much more natural or comfortable process.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the focus on advising in the current context is on identifying each learner's area of critical need and providing strategies and resources to help the learner immediately in order to keep up with the pace of the course. The directive nature of this protocol arguably varies from non-directive approaches, where the learner may be expected to take on a greater level of responsibility with his/her autonomous learning in terms of identifying appropriate strategies, next steps, and learner plan development. In keeping with the argument that ALL should be context-specific, the interview process above provides a framework, rationale, and discussion which can be adapted to suit programmatic needs.

Notes on the contributors

Donald P. Harootian is an Associate Professor at an intensive foreign language program on the West Coast, USA. His expertise is in academic advising program management and language learner self-regulation.

Erin N. O'Reilly serves as the Director of the Intensive English Institute at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois. Her research interests include faculty and program development, learner autonomy, motivation, and self-regulation.

References

- Cotterall, S. (2012). Chalk and cheese: Language advising in different worlds. In J. Mynard & L. Carson (Eds.), *Advising in language learning: Dialogue, tools and context* (pp. 238-246). New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.

- Fu, G. S. (1999). Guidelines for productive language counselling: Tools for implementing autonomy. In S. Cotterall & D. Crabbe (Eds.), *Learner autonomy in language learning: Defining the field and effecting change* (pp. 107-111). Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang.
- Mozzon-McPherson, M. (2012). The skills of counseling and advising. In J. Mynard & L. Carson (Eds.), *Advising in language learning: Dialogue, tools, and context* (pp. 43-64). New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.
- Mynard, J. (2012). A suggested model for advising in language learning. In J. Mynard & L. Carson (Eds.), *Advising in language learning: Dialogue, tools and context* (pp. 26-40). New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.
- Mynard, J., & Carson, L. (2012). *Advising in language learning: Dialogue, tools and context*. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.
- Reinders, H. (2008). The what, why, and how of language advising. *MexTESOL*, 32(2), 13-22. Retrieved from <http://innovationinteaching.org/language-advising/>
- Tassinari, M. G. (2012). Evaluating learner autonomy: A dynamic model with descriptors. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 3(1), 24-40. Retrieved from <http://sisaljournal.org/archives/march12/tassinari/>