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Abstract

This article discusses the implementation of a language learning advising service at a self-access (SAC) center in Cambodia. The SAC was opened in 2011 at a language school in Phnom Penh as a way to provide learners with additional English language learning resources and to promote learner autonomy. While it was somewhat successful in meeting these objectives, an evaluation in late 2014 revealed that the SAC's full potential was not being realized. In particular, support for learners was lacking, and interaction in the SAC was limited. After meetings between various stakeholders, it was agreed that a language learning advising service should be implemented. This decision has resulted in a number of ongoing developments: Cambodian English teachers have been designated as advisors; they have received training in language learning advising; and learning plans have been developed. The language learning advising system was trialed for one 10-week term, and the newly trained language learning advisors (LLAs) completed surveys about their advising experience. While the responses to these questionnaires showed that LLAs generally have a positive attitude toward advising, they also revealed a number of important areas for development.

Keywords: language learning advising, self-access centers, Cambodia

Context

The self-access center (SAC) discussed in this paper was opened in 2011 at a language school in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Many of the school's students follow an academic pathway which includes IELTS (International English Language Testing System) proficiency exam preparation. The school also offers some non-academic programs, such as English for young learners, general English and business English.

The SAC was started as a way to promote autonomous learning and to provide students with a space and resources to study out of class. Students in the school's pre-departure training (PDT) program, who have been awarded provisional scholarships to study at universities in Australia and New Zealand, are especially encouraged to make use of the facilities. One reason for the focus on these PDT students is that they have a limited amount of time to achieve required IELTS scores. While the school's student population varies in age, level and focus of

language study, due to space and resource limitations, the use of the SAC is restricted to students in the PDT program and to other students at an intermediate level or higher.

I worked at this branch of the language school as a teacher trainer and course designer from September 2014 to the end of February 2015. While I had no prior experience working in self-access language learning, at that time I was taking a doctoral course in learner autonomy. I became interested in resource-based approaches toward self-directed learning and learner autonomy and so began investigating the SAC. On the positive side, I noted that the SAC was well organized, providing a variety of materials that would appeal to different types of students (see Table 1). However, as I examined the SAC and talked to SAC teachers, I noticed that there were differences between what the literature advocated and the realities of the SAC.

Table 1. List of SAC Resources and Facilities

One SAC teacher on duty, Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm, and Saturday 9am to 1:30pm
30 computers each with around 12 CALL programs installed
Worksheets used with podcasts and IELTS tasks
Hundreds of laminated newspaper articles organized under various topics
Generic reading and vocabulary worksheets to complement study of newspaper articles
Magazines and newspapers
Limited yet varied selection of books, including graded readers and non-fiction titles
Two small speaking rooms separated by glass doors
“Comfy sofas” space for quiet chatting and watching English TV and DVDs
Study desk for individuals
Tables for individual or group study

Benson (2011) states that structure and support are important in promoting effective resource-based language learning. In this SAC, however, very little support was being provided. While the SAC teachers were in the SAC in case questions arose, they mostly used their time to complete various administrative tasks, and there was no system of scheduling

meetings between SAC teachers and students. In recent years, it has become increasingly common for researchers to emphasize the social dimensions in promoting self-directed approaches to language learning (see, e.g., Benson, 2011; Murray, 2014; Oxford, 2011). However, from my observations, the users of the SAC tended to work mostly in isolation.

Considering the gap between what I saw in the SAC and what I was reading in literature, I thought that one effective way to provide more support for the students and add a social dimension to the SAC was to utilize the SAC teachers as language learning advisors (LLAs). The SAC teachers were Cambodian, held bachelor's degrees in TEFL, and worked as English teachers at the language school. I believed that the SAC teachers offered great potential as a source of support, and that an advising service would make the SAC into a more interactive learning space. The school administrators agreed with me that, as successful language learners themselves, the Cambodian SAC teachers could offer more effective support to the students by working as LLAs.

Implementing a Language Learning Advising Service

After the school agreed that the SAC teachers would work as advisors, I worked with the administrators on a number of initiatives. One key challenge was in helping these teachers to understand what an advisor is and how it is different from a language teacher. According to Carson and Mynard (2012), "advising in language learning involves 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). Thus, both the practices and goals of advising are different from that of language teaching. In order to emphasize their new roles, the SAC teachers' titles were changed to *Language Learning Advisors (LLAs)*.

Training sessions related to advising in language learning were also provided. I conducted two 90-minute workshops to support the LLAs in late 2014. These workshops were attended by the LLAs, as well as other Cambodian English teachers who would presumably work as LLAs at other branch schools in the future. The first workshop was a general introduction to learner autonomy. It addressed the what, why and how of learner autonomy, and also gave special attention to various research-based approaches to promoting learner autonomy, including self-access.

The second workshop focused on ways of improving the school's SAC. There were three core sections in this session: explaining the role of advisors; introducing learning plan documents; and role playing as advisors and students with the learning plans. Prior to the workshops, I had developed learning plans to help with goal setting, selecting materials, scheduling study time, and recording and evaluating one's work. These were based on models I had seen in the literature (Thornton, 2010) and at a Japanese university's self-access center.

I believed that these learning plans were a key component in the advising process. Mynard (2012) classifies learning plans as cognitive tools. As such, they can facilitate dialogue in advising sessions (Yamashita & Kato, 2012). By using learning plans, advisors can help also learners to develop their metacognitive awareness. This includes "information that learners acquire about learning" and "general skills through which learners manage, direct, regulate [and] guide their own learning" (Wenden, 1998, p. 195). With higher metacognitive awareness, students become better able to self-direct their own learning.

While my workshops did not explore advising in great depth, one of my doctoral professors, who was visiting Cambodia in early 2015, delivered a 90-minute training session for the school. It was attended by SAC teachers as well as foreign EFL teachers and a few administrators. This workshop was helpful in a couple of important ways. First, the speaker explained how advising is different from teaching, including the aims, practices, strategies, discourse and locations. As Esch (1997) notes, while knowledge of "teaching and learning theories and methodologies are fundamental pre-requisites of a good language adviser . . . they are not enough" (as cited in Mozzon-McPherson, 2003, p. 192). In addition, the presenter focused on one crucial area of advising, which is counseling skills. Kelly (1996) explains that LLAs draw upon the discourses of counseling, utilizing a host of macro and micro skills. The counseling skills covered in this workshop were repeating, mirroring, restating, summarizing and giving positive feedback. In addition to being introduced to these skills, workshop participants practiced using them in role plays.

The advising service was implemented in the second, 10-week academic term of 2015 and more than 100 advising sessions were held during that time. The school decided that meetings between students and advisors could be arranged in three ways: students could approach LLAs in the SAC; LLAs could approach students in the SAC; students could be referred to an advisor, e.g., by a teacher.

I believe that the advising service is a key element in transforming the SAC into a more supportive space for autonomous learning. As this is a new service, however, it is important to ascertain how effective these recent changes have been. The next section will report on an initial effort to evaluate the LLA service.

Evaluation of the Advising Service

In August of 2015 I returned to my former school in Cambodia to conduct four days of teacher training workshops. As eight LLAs were in attendance at the training, I thought the most efficient way to elicit feedback from them was through a questionnaire. While future evaluations could include observations of advising sessions and data collected from students, there was no time to collect such data during this visit.

I did not have any set research questions in mind when I designed the questionnaire (see Appendix). Instead, I wanted to get a general sense of what was going well for the trainers and what they found challenging. In addition to bio-data questions, a variety of closed and open-ended questions were included on the questionnaire. It was hoped that the results from the questionnaire would indicate ways to provide further support for the LLAs.

Eight LLAs (four men and four women, aged 24 to 30) completed the questionnaires. As all of the respondents have a high level of English proficiency, the questionnaire was written in English. The results from the survey are discussed below.

Positive responses about advising

Part B of the questionnaire includes closed questions on the LLAs' opinions about the advising system. Overall, the results indicated that the advisors are positive about their role as LLAs. They mostly enjoy working as LLAs, and they expressed a positive view of the advising service, indicating that it is useful for students and promotes learner autonomy. Also, in response to the open-ended questions in Part D, all of the LLAs had positive things to report about their experiences as LLAs. Some commented on the progress they see students making and others reflected on their own development as more effective communicators.

Criticism of the administrative side of the advising service

One general criticism of the advising service was in relation to its administration. For various reasons, the LLAs said that they do not always feel ready to advise students. For

example, some advisors felt it was tiring to advise students right after teaching a class. Others found the scheduling of advising appointments to be problematic. For example, one LLA said there were times when many students arrived for advising at the same time, and another one complained that advisors were not always informed in advance of advising appointments.

Advising high level students

Another issue mentioned by the LLAs was the difficulty of advising high level students. The LLAs teach few high level or academic English courses and they reported having trouble recommending materials or strategies for students enrolled in these kinds of courses. Two of the advisors mentioned difficulties in helping students with questions related to the IELTS examination. For instance, one LLA explained:

When it comes to giving advice regarding IELTS writing . . . I myself also find it challenging.

Similarly, another LLA commented:

I think some trainings are needed to give LLA techniques in how to give advice to students, especially high level and IELTS students.

The LLAs apparently feel an obligation to provide learners with content specific advice for certain courses, such as IELTS, but this is more of a tutor-based interpretation of the advisor's role. As Kelly (1996) defines it, language advising is "a form of therapeutic dialogue that enables an individual to manage a problem" (p. 94). Effective advising is not simply about providing students with listening techniques and recommended resources, rather, "an advisor should be a good listener and mediator of meanings by mirroring what the learner says" (Mozzon-McPherson, 2000, p. 122). As Kelly explains, "by helping learners to become reflective and self-aware we are empowering them to make conscious choices and hence to take greater responsibility for their learning" (p. 111). Unlike teachers, "one of the qualities of a good adviser is not to impose or prescribe the best recipe, but ask and trigger replies and solutions, which function best on the learner's own terms, however innovative or traditional

they may be” (Mozzon-McPherson, 2003, p. 184). It is important that this distinction between tutor and advisor be clear.

Confidence with advising skills

The items in Part C of the questionnaire were adapted from Aoki’s (2012) can-do statements for advisors (see Appendix). They were designed to examine the LLA’s perceived levels of confidence for various skills related to advising. Generally, the advisors indicated that they were confident in the 12 skills areas of advising included on the questionnaire.

While these results reflect the advisors’ perceptions, it is doubtful that their advising skills are highly developed, which is understandable. As Morrison and Navarro (2012) explain, “The movement from teaching to advising is a shift requiring reorientation of professional *practice* and *identity* [emphasis original]” (p. 351). Moreover, just as most novice teachers may be unable to effectively evaluate their own teaching abilities, the same can be said for novice advisors. As discussed above, it is likely that the LLAs see themselves more as tutors—a kind of teacher transported to the self-access center—than as advisors. They may be unaware of the importance of advising skills and fall back on their more familiar role as teachers. There are a number of ways in which the roles of teachers and advisors differ. As Gardner and Miller (1999) explain,

the work of language counsellors is complex and goes beyond the type of teacher-student dialogues commonly found even in CLT situations. Counselling requires teachers to make significant shifts in their attitudes and perceptions of the teacher-student relationship, and requires training and guidance. (p. 182)

Being inexperienced, these LLAs may not fully understand the unique skills required for advising.

Use of the learning plans

LLAs had mixed views on the effectiveness of the learning plans that had been developed to facilitate dialogue and to help the students self-direct their own learning. Five out of eight LLAs had positive comments on using them. Overall, though, there were more

criticisms, with six advisors including negative comments. Five LLAs said the learning plans were confusing or that the students did not know how to complete them. One advisor explained:

I don't find the learning plans very useful. I think they are time-consuming and confuse students. I myself also find it confusing. I think it's better if LLAs spend more time to talk with the students to find the real problem they are having.

Due to their design, or perhaps to a lack of training in their use, the learning plans do not seem to make the work of the LLAs easier, or to facilitate self-directed learning for students.

Future Initiatives

The LLAs require more training to better develop their knowledge and skills for advising. Although they indicated being confident in advising skills, their comments on the questionnaire suggest that they may be taking on the role of a tutor more than that of an advisor. Workshops that more clearly define the roles and objectives of advisors are necessary. The LLAs would also benefit from reflective professional development practices. A study by Morrison and Navarro (2012) showed that discussing reflections on advising sessions, "when done with an experienced colleague, led to a clearer understanding of the practice of advising for the [LLAs] involved" (p. 358). While there are no highly experienced advisors at their schools, the LLAs could still benefit from peer discussion of advising practices. Not only would this raise their awareness of their appropriate use of advising skills, it would help them to understand the very kinds of reflection that advisors wish their learners to experience (Kato, 2012).

While I had thought that the learning plans would be helpful for the students and advisors, this has not necessarily been the case. While some LLAs said they were helpful, others reported that they caused confusion. The learning plans and their use therefore need to be re-examined. It needs to be determined why the LLAs and students did not find them helpful and the school should consider revising them. The LLAs could alter the learning plans in a way that makes better sense to them.

Finally, some of the LLAs expressed frustration with the administration of the advising system. The management needs to address scheduling issues so that the LLAs can be more prepared and confident. The school must ensure that advisors are notified in advance of appointments so that they can effectively prepare for advising. Scheduling conflicts need to be avoided so that LLAs do not feel rushed. Better scheduling will allow them to be more relaxed and to focus on the students that they are advising.

The evaluation conducted in this report is a preliminary one and its scope is limited. In the future, additional data need to be collected and analyzed to corroborate these initial findings. Observations of LLA sessions would be useful to better understand the LLAs' advising skills. In addition, interview and questionnaire data from students should be gathered to gain a broader perspective on the effectiveness of the advising service.

The advising service is still new and it is not surprising that there are some issues which need to be addressed. On the positive side, the LLAs generally have a favorable view of the advising system and have already experienced satisfaction in helping students to self-direct their own learning. If the school administration can continue to listen to the advisors and support them with training and better scheduling systems, the LLAs can make a more positive impact on the students who visit the SAC.

Notes on the contributor

Andrew Tweed is a doctoral candidate in the Ed.D. TESOL program at Anaheim University. He has worked as a teacher trainer in Southeast Asia, and currently teaches EFL at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies in Japan. Andrew's research interests include learner autonomy and English language education in East and Southeast Asia.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for Language Learning Advisors

The Language Learning Advising system at the Self-access Center is new and we want to get feedback from you. In general, we would like to know how things are going and if you have suggestions for how we can make it better. Please give *honest* answers to the questions. The data from these questions will be used for a small research project. Your name or personal details will not be included in any research reports.

A. Background information. Please write your answers on the lines.

1. Name: _____
2. Date of birth: _____
3. Gender: _____
4. At which campus have you worked as a LLA? _____
5. How long have you worked as an English language teacher? _____
6. How long have you worked at this school? _____
7. How long have you worked as a LLA? _____
8. About how many LLA sessions have you done? _____

B. Opinions about LLA service. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements. For each one, please *circle* the number which best represents your opinion.

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Somewhat agree
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly agree

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9. I think the LLA service at ACE is useful for students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. I think the students understand the purpose of LLAs. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. I think the LLA service promotes learner autonomy. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. I enjoy working a LLA. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. As a LLA, I have helped some students to become better learners. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. I feel qualified to be a LLA. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. It is difficult being a LLA. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. The LLA system is a waste of time. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. Working as a LLA sometimes makes me feel uncomfortable. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. I would like to have more support to become a more effective LLA. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

C. Think about the following *can-do* statements. For each statement, circle the number that best represents your *confidence* in doing each one as a language learning advisor.

1 = I don't feel confident at all.

2 = I don't feel very confident.

3 = I feel a little confident.

4 = I feel confident.

5 = I feel very confident.

19. I can make learners feel comfortable. 1 2 3 4 5
20. I can empathize with the problems of my learners. 1 2 3 4 5
21. I can give positive comments to the learners. 1 2 3 4 5
22. I can control the conversation when necessary or appropriate. 1 2 3 4 5
23. I can let learners control the conversation when necessary or appropriate. 1 2 3 4 5
24. I can help learners make decisions about their English learning goals. 1 2 3 4 5
25. I can help learners choose appropriate materials for their learning goals. 1 2 3 4 5
26. I can introduce ways of learning to the learners. 1 2 3 4 5
27. I can ask questions which help learners talk about their language learning. 1 2 3 4 5
28. I can wait to give learners enough time to express themselves. 1 2 3 4 5
29. I can interpret learners' facial expressions and gestures. 1 2 3 4 5
30. I can adjust my level of speaking to learners' proficiency levels. 1 2 3 4 5

D. Open-ended questions. Please write your answers to the following questions.

31. Could you describe any positive experiences working as a LLA?

32. Could you describe any negative experiences working as a LLA?

Please continue section D on the next page . . .

D. Open-ended questions. Continued.

33. What difficulties, if any, have you experienced working as LLA?

34. What difficulties have you experienced transitioning from working as a teacher to working as a LLA?

35. In what ways, if any, have you felt uncomfortable working as a LLA?

36. What has been your experience with the learning plans? For example, do you use them? Do you find them helpful? Do students understand how to complete them?

37. How do you think we can make the LLA service better for the language learning advisors?

38. How do you think we can make LLA service better for students?

39. Do you have any suggestions for future training or support for LLAs?

40. Do you have any suggestions for ways to better organize and administer the LLA service?

41. What percentage of the time do you use Khmer during the advising sessions? What do you think about using Khmer during advising sessions?

E. Other comments.

42. Please feel free to write any other comments related to the SAC or LLA service on the lines below.

LLAs: Are you willing to be interviewed? If so, please check the boxes you are available. The interviews may be done in groups or individually. They will be about 15 minutes long.

Tuesday lunch time Tuesday at 3pm
Wednesday lunch time Wednesday 3pm

Thank you very much!

Reference

Aoki, N. (2012). Can-do statements for advisors. In C. Ludwig & J. Mynard (Eds.), *Autonomy in language learning* (pp. 154-163). Canterbury, UK: IATEFL.