**On the Road to Developing a Learning Advisory Program (LAP)**

Tarık Uzun, Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey

Hatice Karaaslan, Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey

Mümin Şen, Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey

Corresponding author: uzuntarik@yahoo.com

**To cite this article**

**To link to this article**

# On the Road to Developing a Learning Advisory Program (LAP)

Tarık Uzun, Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey
Hatice Karaaslan, Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey
Mümin Şen Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey

**Abstract**

Learning Advisory Program (LAP) was launched at Yıldırım Beyazıt University School of Foreign Languages in the 2015-2016 academic year. The LAP, under the guidance of the instructors and advisors at the Independent Learning Centre (ILC), was planned to be used initially with students of a specific profile, composed of low-achieving, unmotivated students – the so-called 'repeat' students. In our case, 'repeat' students pose a challenge in that teachers have difficulty identifying their individual needs, and catering for them. To address this, we enrolled these students in a partially online blended learning program. Students were also informed about the possibility of getting individual support from ILC advisors. In order to facilitate the advising sessions, new materials and tools have been devised or adapted. A few months' experience in advising has given us a better understanding of our students and raised our motivation to turn the LAP into a more functional system.

*Keywords:* Independent Learning Centres (ILC), learner autonomy, advisory programs, 'repeat' students

**The Context**

Yıldırım Beyazıt University was founded as a state university in 2011 in Ankara, Turkey. Most students commence their higher education at the School of Foreign Languages and spend one year in the English preparatory program. The school has more than 1000 students, on average, every year and around 90 instructors are currently employed.

The Independent Learning Centre (ILC) located in the School of Foreign Languages is a popular place for students. The ILC was initially designed as two labs with 40 computers and a library in the middle of the two labs. Students can use reading, grammar, vocabulary and listening worksheets from Starter to Upper-Intermediate level as well as supplementary materials aimed at proficiency exam practice. A variety of extracurricular activities such as Speaking Club, Tea Talk, Culture Days, Movie Club and Workshops are also offered to ILC users. In terms of staffing, ILC is operated by a coordinator and a full-time staff member who are both English Instructors. Every semester, around 10 more instructors are appointed to the ILC to work on materials and activity development. We as Tarik Uzun, ILC Coordinator and a Learning Advisor, Hatice Karaaslan, Online Program Coordinator and Mümin Şen, Director of the School of Foreign Languages are members of the core team for developing the Learning Advisory Program (LAP) described in this paper.

The ILC is a constantly-developing, active learning environment with around a hundred visitors every week. However, two studies conducted at the ILC (Nasöz, 2015; Uzun, 2014) clearly indicated that even the majority of the regular users of the centre were not autonomous in language learning and needed further guidance or training. We anticipated that the overall picture with respect to independent learning behaviour could have been even worse within the wider school population, particularly among the repeat students that are in their second year at the English preparatory program.

In the regular English preparatory program, students are enrolled in different levels based on their initial language scores and they follow the syllabi appropriate for their levels. At the end of each academic year, the proficiency exam is administered and if students cannot attain the required pass score, they are required to study at the English preparatory program again. The number of these 'repeat' students reaches around 250 at the end of the year.

In their second year, these students are offered a blended learning program providing them with online resources to practice the receptive skills and 8-hour tutorials each week on the productive skills. The rationale for this format and content is two-fold: to provide some flexibility in their schedules for their individual needs and to ensure detailed feedback on their performance, which can be enhanced in a collective learning environment.

However, even with alternative programs, these students still pose a challenge in that teachers and coordinators have difficulty in identifying and catering for their individual needs ranging from personal, familial issues to general difficulties in language learning. Without an individual-specific attention that would scaffold their learning process with a consideration of how each can develop his route to linguistic and academic success, they keep failing across most levels, end up suffering for more than a year, and eventually drop out.

Defined as "the process and practice of helping students to direct their own paths to become more effective and autonomous language learners" (Carson & Mynard, 2012, p. 4), advising in language learning was considered a reasonable option to assist our students in their autonomy-building process. This perspective was also confirmed by a survey administered by the ILC in which students of the School of Foreign Languages were given the definition of an advisor and asked whether they would be interested in the provision for such a service. More than two thirds replied 'Yes' to this item. Once the need for advising was recognized, we decided to develop the materials and tools of the Learning Advisory Program (LAP).

**Designing the Learning Advisory Program (LAP)**

The ILC, whose staff has explored ways of creating a more resourceful centre which would incorporate broader engagement with language and stimulate the intellectual, communicative, and affective response of students, seemed to be the ideal place to develop the envisaged customized LAP, driven by the first-hand observations and insights derived from the iterative nature of the 'repeat' groups' program.

We planned to develop the LAP and use it initially with this particular group of low-achieving, unmotivated learners – the so-called 'repeat' students. Our work on the LAP started in June 2015, and, as part of it, we administered two questionnaires to collect information on students' views of their language learning skills and strategies, with a final open-ended question asking for their opinions and suggestions. We ran the study with 34 students who attended the six-week summer course for the students who had not succeeded in passing the proficiency exam called Assessment in General English (AGE) in June despite an eight-month English preparatory program. In total, students with this profile constituted around one fifth of the learners we planned to cater for with the LAP in the following academic year.

For our research, we used the Turkish version of the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) (Cesur & Fer, 2007), developed by Oxford (1990), for assessing the frequency of use of language learning strategies (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). On SILL, participants are asked to indicate their response ranging from 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me) to a strategy description such as "I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English." (See Appendix 1 for sample items). In addition, we developed the Inventory of Language Learning Skills (ILLS) to measure students' views regarding their use of language learning skills, based on the objectives of our school's English curriculum. It is again a 5-point Likert-type scale referring to the same descriptors and requires participants to respond to a skill description such as, "I can understand short, simple texts of around 400-450 words, containing familiar vocabulary." See Appendix 2 for sample items.

This study, which also functioned as a needs analysis, revealed significant information as to the nature of advising that our students needed and shaped our efforts in the development of various materials and tools. Our findings also confirmed the current trend in related research. The students reported to be in need of two types of advising: one concerning language learning and competence, and the other about the affective dimension (Kato & Mynard, 2015).

With an ultimate goal of supporting students to become autonomous language learners who have the capacity to take charge of their own learning (Benson, 2011), we have decided to establish reflective dialogue in our advising sessions in order to get our students to think about and reflect on their own language learning experiences. Kato and Mynard (2015) point out that an advisor is supposed to activate learners' reflective processes in language learning with the help of one-to-one dialogue. According to the researchers, during these dialogues, learners, initially unaware of their learning processes, gradually consider their needs and interests in language learning and the reasons for their struggle under the guidance of their reflections and mediation of ideas with advisors. Thus, we decided to follow this framework as it seemed to offer alternative ways to deal with the problems of 'repeat' students in our case.

Two full-time ILC staff members who are also English Instructors, Tarık Uzun and Stephanie L. Howard have undertaken the role of advisors at the ILC. Their weekly schedules are announced and students visit them in person to attend an advising session. They have had no formal training but have read widely about advising, which could be considered as informal training. With years of language teaching experience in their field, they are now switching their roles from teacher to advisor.

## Initiatives in Action

Advising sessions are held at the ILC in English or Turkish depending on student choice. Students are expected to make an appointment with an advisor and attend the session on the specified date. They are free to request instant assistance as well if there is an advisor available at that time. Some common themes for the sessions are how to cope with the proficiency exam, develop skills and strategies, improve study skills and avoid failure due to high levels of anxiety.

Each session lasts around 20 minutes depending on students' needs and expectations. Advising service is voluntary yet instructors sometimes direct their students to the advisors to get individual assistance.

Our LAP sessions involve all or some of the following steps:

1. Filling in the SILL and ILLS inventories or the related Language Learning Strategy Pamphlets (see below)

2. An individual advising session held by an ILC advisor upon request

3. Directing students to relevant resources or strategies depending on their responses to the inventories, items in the pamphlets or their oral reflections.

In order to address students' skills and strategy development and facilitate LAP sessions, we made various adjustments to the content of the materials in the ILC and developed new ones or adapted existing documents to fit our context.

1) Pamphlets: With a specific title for each, 15 pamphlets are now in use at the ILC. Some of the pamphlets provide learners with ideas to improve their language skills and strategies (e.g. Speaking, How to Learn Vocabulary) or present online or mobile applications (e.g. Dictionary, News Resources). The idea of offering the ILC users such pamphlets was inspired from the SALC at Kanda University of International Studies, Japan. Learning Strategy Pamphlets have also been made available at the ILC and the model presented by Thornton (2011) has been adapted in the making of these.

2) Learning Plans: Our observations in advising sessions as well as the oral feedback from students reveal that they need guidance about how to organize their learning. Learning plans assist advising sessions in this regard as the process of preparing one is carried out in a reflective dialogue between the advisor and a student. We have two different learning plans in use. One of them is general purpose while the other is titled 'Proficiency Learning Plan' (See Appendix 3).

3) Proficiency Guidebook: This has been designed as a booklet and given free to the students. Each section of the exam is introduced to the students with suggestions and tips.

**Initial Reflections on Advising**

ILC staff members involved in advising, Stephanie and Tarık share their first impressions of advising:

***Stephanie***

*'Repeat' students who visited us in advising sessions seemed to lack basic language learning strategies and had a low level of competence in terms of language skills. For example, they did not even know where to start, thus, many of them asked for assistance in devising a learning plan. Advising has a real potential for the ILC but something must be done to help students gain necessary skills to take control of their learning from the very beginning.*

***Tarık***

*What I especially try to do in my sessions is to create a good rapport with students to help them express their problems more comfortably. I observe that many of the students have a high anxiety level, which could be related to their*

> *failure. Failing over and over again seems to have affected them negatively*
> *and they have set a barrier between themselves and learning English. Yet, I*
> *have the pleasure to listen to them and guide them to possible solutions.*

These reflections based on their advising experiences provide further support for the necessity of a well-developed advising program at the ILC structured around a learner training curriculum. Its content and format require careful planning with a consideration of the current research in similar institutions with similar concerns.

## Advice and Suggestions

The LAP is still in its early days. In the last few months, we have put our energy mainly into developing the tools of the LAP as well as working on advising in practice.

The feedback received from the two ILC advisors and the online program coordinator who is in close contact with 'repeat' students reveal that advisors need to be trained to serve the students more effectively. Undoubtedly, experience in advising and diving deeper into the advising research can also be expected to aid their development. In addition, classroom-based advising could also be a practical solution in dealing with students' immediate problems. Students with more serious issues could see their advisors at the ILC. And without a doubt, more advisors are needed to establish a well-grounded advising service at the ILC.

The current form of the LAP poses some challenges. Firstly, it is hard to keep track of students and guide them according to the progress they make as some of these students do not attend further sessions. It is also hard to establish good rapport with a student in only one session. Launching a specialised curriculum on autonomous learning, compulsory or optional, could be a valuable effort in the long run in securing the continuity of advising and bringing a more systematic approach to the process. We expect such a curriculum to better address our students' needs as well.

## Conclusion

Overall, the LAP, in its current form seems to be promising in that it can help us approach the 'repeat' students in a more systematic and professional way. However, we, and institutions facing similar cases, need to understand that dealing with the problem requires long-term efforts, time and energy to succeed.

Our future research may include pre- and post- studies into LAP-design. Such an intervention may cover training in language-learning strategies and skills spread over a long period of time presented in a more explicit and overt manner, and offer students a mechanism to evaluate their own progress.

Finally, our plans for the future are to serve a larger and a more diverse population, consisting of students with differing levels of language proficiency, as our participants, until now, were limited in number and quite homogenous in terms of language proficiency. Despite the challenges involved, the efforts we have made so far are quite promising and we feel motivated to keep going.

**Notes on the Contributors**

Tarık Uzun is an Instructor of English and Coordinator of the Independent Learning Centre (ILC) at Yıldırım Beyazıt University School of Foreign Languages in Ankara, Turkey. He has been working as an Instructor of English and Turkish (as a foreign language) for more than 10 years. He is currently a PhD candidate at Ankara University Department of Linguistics Foreign Language Teaching Program. His research interests are learner autonomy, self-access learning, pronunciation, phonology and Turkish Language Teaching.

Hatice Karaaslan is an English Language Instructor and Online Program Coordinator at Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey. She holds an M.A. degree in English Language Teaching and a PhD in Cognitive Science Program from Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara, Turkey. She has been teaching English for fifteen years, and her research interests include learner autonomy, learning strategies, classroom language, reasoning and argumentation. She is the co-author of *Brushing up on Your English for Proficiency* (2007, Çankaya University, Ankara), and the co-editor of *I. Ulusal Hazırlık Sınıfları Sempozyumu Bildiriler Kitabı / The Proceedings of the 1ˢᵗ National Symposium on Preparatory Schools* (2009, Çankaya University, Ankara).

Mümin Şen is an Instructor of English and the Director of Yıldırım Beyazıt University School of Foreign Languages in Ankara, Turkey. He has been teaching English for 15 years. He holds an MA degree in Foreign Language Teaching and is currently a PhD candidate at Ankara University Department of Special Education. His research interests include language learning strategies, self-determination, problem solving skills, autism and Individualized Education Plans.

## Acknowledgements

## References

Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonom*y (2nd ed.). Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.

Carson, L., & Mynard, J. (2012). Introduction. In J. Mynard & L. Carson (Eds.), *Advising in language learning: Dialogue, tools and context* (pp. 3-25). Harlow, UK: Longman.

Cesur, M. O., & Fer, S. (2007). What is validity and reliability study of learning strategies survey? *Journal of Yüzüncü Yıl University Faculty of Education, 4*(2)*,* 49-74.

Kato, S., & Mynard, J. (2015). *Reflective dialogue: Advising in language learning*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Nasöz, M. (2015).*Turkish EFL learners' readiness for autonomy and attitudes toward self-access center* [Unpublished master's dissertation]. İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey.

Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know.* Cambridge, MA: Heinle and Heinle.

Oxford, R. L., & Burry-Stock, J. A. (1995). Assessing the use of language learning strategies worldwide with the ESL/EFL version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). *System 23*(1)*,* 1-23. doi:10.1016/0346-251X(94)00047-A

Thornton, K. (2011). Learning strategy sheets: Supporting advisors and learners. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 2*(1), 43-47. Retrieved from http://sisaljournal.org/archives/mar11/thornton/

Uzun, T. (2014). Learning styles of independent learning centre users. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 5*(3), 246-264. Retrieved from http://sisaljournal.org/archives/sep14/uzun/

# Appendix 1

Sample items from Strategy Inventory of Language Learning

| |
|---|
| **Cognitive Strategy** 12. I practice the sounds of English. |
| **Compensation Strategy** 26. I make up new words if I don't know the right ones in English. |
| **Metacognitive Strategy** 30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English. |
| **Affective Strategy** 43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary. |
| **Social Strategy** 49. I ask questions in English. |

# Appendix 2

Sample items from Inventory of Language Learning Skills

| |
|---|
| **Listening Skill** (B+ Level) 19. I can follow a lecture or talk within my own field if the subject matter is familiar and the presentation is clearly structured. |
| **Reading Skill** (B Level) 19. I can recognize author's main ideas and important supporting details . |
| **Speaking Skill** (A+ Level) 25. I can describe plans, future arrangements and alternatives. |
| **Writing Skill** (B Level) 20. I can express my thoughts on abstract or cultural as well as everyday topics (such as music or films). |

**Appendix 3**

Proficiency Learning Plan

# YBU Proficiency Learning Plan

1. PLEASE TAKE ONE OF THESE LEARNING PLANS
2. FILL OUT **PAGE 1**
3. TAKE NOTES ON **PAGE 2**
4. ASK FOR AN APPOINTMENT TO SEE A LEARNING ADVISOR

Student Name: _____          Date: _____

Advisor Name: _____

## Background Information:

On what date did you begin English prep classes at YBU?   _____

What level did you start at?   _____

What level are you at now?   _____

What is your department?   _____

## Previous Proficiency Information:

Have you taken the proficiency test before?   _____ yes   _____ no

If yes, what date did you last take the test? _____

If yes, what scores did you get:

Reading: _____ out of 40 possible points

Writing: _____ out of 25 possible points

Listening: _____ out of 20 possible points

Speaking: _____ out of 15 possible points

## Problems and Difficulties:

Please explain in detail what problems and difficulties do you think you had/will have for each section of the Proficiency test:

**Reading**:-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Writing**:-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Listening**:-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Speaking**:----------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Advisor's Notes:** -------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Recommended Resources:** (List below)

**Recommended Strategies**: ------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Recommended Schedule**

*(List tasks below)*

1 _____     by/every _____

2 _____     by/every _____

3 _____     by/every _____

4 _____     by/every _____

5 _____     by/every _____

**Student's Notes:** -----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Date of the next meeting with your advisor:** _____

---

**A SCANNED & PRINTED COPY OF THIS LEARNING PLAN IS TO BE SAVED IN STUDENT'S FILE AT THE ILC.**

---