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Abstract

Learning advising can play an important role in scaffolding the development of learner autonomy. While a classroom teacher might give advice to students about what and how to study, a learning advisor aims to help students to identify specific needs and create action plans to meet their goals. The teachers and the learning advisors can work hand-in-hand to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. For this project, a communicative English course at a Japanese university was modified to include in-class advising sessions. Despite having no English majors, there is a well-curated but underutilized Self Access Learning Center (SALC) that includes three learning advisors. Students are required to learn English but often have limited awareness of the language learning process. The project was designed to increase learner awareness toward their individual learning goals, inform the teacher of students' goals, and increase student engagement with the SALC. This paper discusses the details of the course in the specific setting, as well as reactions from students, teachers, and learning advisors. The article also gives options for teachers who hope to encourage learner autonomy but may not have access to learning advisors in their institution.

Keywords: learning advising, curriculum integration, awareness

Context

The focus of this paper is a project conducted at a private, technical university in Kumamoto, Japan, which has no English majors; however, students are required to attend communicative English courses in their first two years. Students in any year or department can utilize the Self Access Learning Center (SALC). The SALC has two main aims: first, to promote autonomous learning; second, to support the English curriculum. To meet these goals, the SALC has numerous resources, including three Learning Advisors (LAs). This project began with a discussion about a collaborative effort between a teacher and an LA to improve language learning for students by offering opportunities to engage with the SALC in class.

In this setting, most students tend to give little consideration to the language learning process and often do not understand the role of the LAs or how they can help them to achieve their goals. They have also reported feeling intimidated by the SALC, which is in line Croker and Ashurova's (2012) idea that such learning can be new to students who have only ever learned "under the direct supervision and control of the teacher" (p. 237).

For teachers, it can be difficult to know if students understand their purpose as language learners. By understanding the needs of each student, teachers can provide lessons and activities that are better aligned with students' goals and interests. However, because of large class sizes and curriculum constraints, there is little opportunity for this dialogue between teachers and students during regular class time.

Curriculum Integration

Learning advising in the classroom

Working in this context, a native speaking English teacher and a Japanese LA had a discussion about improving student engagement with the SALC as a whole, and with learning advising specifically. They also recognized a need for increased communication between all teachers and LAs because the LAs and teachers fulfill different roles, work on different floors, and have few opportunities to collaborate.

The role of advising in language learning has been well documented. For example, Carson and Mynard (2012) stated the central goal of the advisor is "the development of learner autonomy which includes fostering the ability in learners to identify language needs and personalise the learning experience by selecting appropriate resources, planning, monitoring and evaluating ongoing language learning" (p. 14). However, it is unlikely that the majority of Japanese university students have had an advising session in their previous language education.

As such, it may not be easy for students to understand the different roles of language teachers and LAs. Carson (2012) suggests the importance of raising awareness of advising for students. Connecting the classroom and the SALC may improve the cognitive processes of individual learners by offering opportunities for students to reflect. Regarding the pathway of self-directed learning, Kelly (1996)

suggested that learners need to go through a substantial transformation of their beliefs about language and their role as learners to be autonomous. She also emphasized that “this process of reorientation and personal discovery is directly or indirectly an outcome of learning training” (p. 94). Thinking and reflecting on learning can be a helpful initial step for those who have been educated quite receptively. New learning support by an LA in class may increase students’ sense of agency as learners.

Planning of the project

With these ideas in mind, an in-class learning advising project was designed with the aims of increasing learner awareness of their individual learning goals, informing the teacher of students’ goals, and increasing student engagement with learning advising and the SALC. The LA wanted to have a chance to meet and understand students who do not usually attend advising sessions. In addition, the teacher and LA wanted to find ways to bridge communication between the two groups.

The project was conducted in the first semester with first year Aerospace and Life Science students who may not have studied English in a communicative classroom nor had any experience with a SALC. There were 30 students in total—15 males and 15 females.

The teacher and LA decided to conduct group advising sessions in Japanese during class time, but out of the classroom. Group advising allowed students the chance to learn from each other while the use of students’ L1 (Japanese) was allowed to reduce the stress of performing in English. Also, group sessions were chosen to limit the amount of class time required. The intention was to enhance the students’ language learning experience without missing any important parts of the required curriculum. As a result, the following plan of in-class activities was devised. (See Table 1).

Table 1. Timeline and Plan

Time	Activity
Early April	Exploring Beliefs
Mid-April	First Group Advising Session and Reflection
Early June	Second Group Advising Session and Reflection
End of July	Self-Assessment Report

Exploring beliefs. In the first class of the semester, the LA visited the classroom to introduce the project. Each student explored their own thoughts about learning English by drawing a mind map in class, in English or Japanese. Students were asked to write ‘Learning English’ in the center of the page, and then encouraged to connect any thoughts they had in regards to this topic. (See Appendix A). They were encouraged to think of the past, present, and future, and to expand on any thoughts by answering ‘Why?’ The teacher and LA gave no other direction in an effort to avoid limiting or driving students’ ideas. These were reviewed by the LA before the first group advising session.

First group advising session. After reviewing the mind maps, the LA devised three questions intended to get students to reflect on their own learning in new ways: What does learning English mean for you? Do you think learning English may influence your future, and if so, why? What do you want to learn in your class? These questions were posed to students in groups of three or four in group advising sessions that lasted about 12 minutes. The LA attempted not to guide students’ answers in line with the self-determination theory (Vallerand, 1997), encouraging students to transition from their roles as receptive learners and to take responsibility for their own learning.

One week later, students completed a post-session reflection in class. Students were not explicitly told what to write, but were encouraged to think further about what had been discussed. They were also asked to identify one English learning goal, in or out of the classroom, which was simple and easy to maintain, and to think of an action plan and the materials required to achieve it, as well as to evaluate their behavior over the previous week. The LA did not give any specific instructions or deadlines regarding the action plan.

Second group advising session. A second session with the same members was conducted four weeks after the first session. During the session, *My Learning Plan Sheet* (Appendix 2.) was distributed and students were asked to review their own goal, action plan, and learning materials. The LA asked some questions to encourage deeper thinking and further discussion. Next, students were asked to reflect on their comments and to briefly summarize the session on the sheet.

Self-assessment report. Finally, students wrote a self-report in Japanese at the end of the semester. The *Self-Assessment Report* took the place of sit-down, group advising sessions. This report allowed students to focus on their individual goals and also required less class time than group sessions. The report comprised a few identifying questions, followed by four open-ended items. The questions were as follows (translated from Japanese):

1. Do you think your awareness has changed as a result of the advising sessions? Why or why not?
2. Do you think your learning behaviors have changed as a result of the advising sessions? Why or why not?
3. Do you want to continue advising sessions in the second semester? Why or why not?
4. Which do you prefer, group sessions or individual sessions? Why?

Reaction

Student reactions

The students' comments from the self-assessment report were compiled for analysis. Twenty-eight out of thirty students reported that their awareness had changed. First, students were able to reflect on their learning and see the value of learning advising. As an example, one student responded "Reflecting by writing and talking can clarify my thoughts and goals and has raised my awareness." Another stated, "I have studied receptively but through the advising session, I could reflect on my everyday learning and felt learning is much closer to me. I was motivated to learn English." Students had studied English before, but they started to become aware of the importance of learning English for themselves by setting their own goals and reflecting on their behaviors. In fact, 25 students reported that their learning behaviors had improved to a degree through the advising sessions.

After examining their learning plan sheets, the LA and the teacher determined that 22 students were able to set specific, achievable goals. Along with big picture goals such as being a fluent English speaker, students were able to identify and set smaller goals. For example, some aspired to complete the homework regularly, to focus on TOEIC vocabulary or to use only English while in the classroom. These smaller, short-term goals can be stepping-stones to more specific and personalized long-term goals.

Another advantage of the project was the input from other students. Because of the group sessions, students were able to hear the opinions of their classmates in their native language. In the self-assessment report, one student responded, "Listening to other students' learning attitudes encouraged me." Another said, "Instead of continuing on my own, I can hear some other new ideas." They began to think about learning English in a way they never had before.

However, there were some challenges. Eight students struggled to set small achievable goals. It was explained by the LA that they should identify something specific that could become part of their routine, but these eight students failed to do so. For example, they wrote 'improve my speaking ability', just 'TOEIC' without any

targeted score, or just stated ‘listening and speaking communication skills.’ One student wanted to improve their speaking ability and decided to use the SALC. However, this goal was still too big and unclear. The SALC contains many different resources, so, in the second session the LA suggested focusing on which resources would be the best to improve speaking skills to the students who had difficulty choosing own learning materials. However, the session was quite short, so the LA could not discuss this smaller goal in detail. Perhaps with further advising and more opportunity to reflect on their learning, students would improve in this area. Even for those students who could set realistic goals, follow-through was a problem. Another student planned to use a vocabulary study program every day, but quickly fell behind.

Twenty-nine out of thirty students also indicated a desire to continue meeting with an advisor, which implies they saw some value in the project. In the second semester advising was not an in-class activity but it was hoped that students would take control and continue. They were shown how to reserve a session and encouraged to speak with the LA about any questions about language learning. However, students may have been attempting to please the teacher and not completely truthful. In the end, only two students continued outside of the class in their first year. The reason for this is unclear.

Teacher reflections

After this project, the teacher had a better idea of students’ goals and interests. This knowledge allowed the teacher to choose better activities for the classroom. In addition, the reflections provided feedback about classroom activities, which was not an initial goal of the project but was very useful. The teacher was also able to learn information about the students that was easier for them to deliver in their L1. For example, students reported to the LA that they felt they did not know what to say in speaking activities, so the teacher was able to provide more scaffolding for such activities. The regular contact with the LA also provided the teacher with additional support. The LA knew the students well and so could give informed advice to the teacher about problem-solving in the classroom.

There were also some challenges. Students were quite ambitious in their learning plans, and so the teacher had high expectations for students, which could be frustrating when students did not live up to them. For example, all students expressed an interest in speaking only in English while in the classroom, but frequently spoke in Japanese when working in a group. It was also difficult to plan for the group advising sessions, because the class activities needed to be both worthwhile for those in the classroom, but also paced so that students could miss a few minutes for an advising session and not be completely lost. One thing that did work was to set students to do individual or group work that could be done at the pace of each student or group. In this way, missed class time did not result in missed activities.

Learning advisor reflections

Meeting with this group of students allowed the LA to discover insights into attitudes about English learning at this university. Individual students had different beliefs, behaviors, and goals. Many students had a desire to improve their English skills but they did not know how to shift to autonomous learning behaviors. Meeting with an LA could be an initial step for them to consider their learning and to foster autonomy. However, it may be necessary for students to attend multiple advising sessions, without being required to do so, to truly develop autonomous learning skills.

In addition, perhaps shy students did not feel comfortable in the group setting and would have been more forthcoming in an individual session. The LA attempted to get quieter students talking and to allow equal time for all students. Also, using the reflection sheet and “My Learning Plan” sheet allowed all students to make their needs and goals known to the LA without having to speak in front of their peers. The advisor also struggled with her own high expectations of students’ involvement outside of the classroom. She had hoped that students would continue their advising sessions beyond this project. However, as shown above, few students did. Finally, translating students’ L1 responses into English for the teacher was time consuming.

Final Thoughts

Integrating the SALC with the curriculum through in-class learning advising can be one way to raise students' awareness and encourage them to take responsibility as learners. This project was a success in terms of the goals laid out by the teacher and LA. Students had the opportunity to reflect on their own learning, understand the different roles that LAs and teachers play, and become familiar with the facilities available to them. The teacher and LA were able to learn more about their individual students' needs and interests, especially those who might not have utilized advising on their own. The advisor and teacher were able to communicate regularly, sharing ideas about this group of students, as well as building a relationship that led to further collaboration.

There are many beneficial aspects of the project which could be adapted to any classroom in which the teacher hopes to encourage learner reflection or awareness, even without access to LAs. First, for any students who have never reflected on their English learning, even simple reflective activities could benefit students' awareness. Activities such as mind mapping can allow students to think about studying English in new ways.

In classes with a higher level of English, group discussions can be held about learning in the classroom without specific advising sessions. Also, teachers or LAs could utilize reflective activities such as the *My Learning Plan Sheet* (Appendix B) or *Self-Assessment Report* to encourage students to consider their actions and beliefs.

In any case, more class time should be spent discussing the benefits of learning advising and emphasizing the different roles of the teacher and LA. Students' lack of familiarity with the concept requires that more time be spent explaining the reasons for learning advising (Carson, 2012). Even in learning environments that do not have access to LAs or a SALC, reflective activities in the classroom allow students to think about their learning. These reflections may help students to better understand their motivations, needs, and behaviors. With this knowledge, students may become more autonomous, and as a result, more effective English learners.

Notes on the Contributors

Kayoko Horai is the Director of the Self Access Learning Center at Sojo University. She earned her Ph.D. in English Education Studies at Kumamoto University in 2014. Her research interests include learner autonomy, motivation, and learning advising.

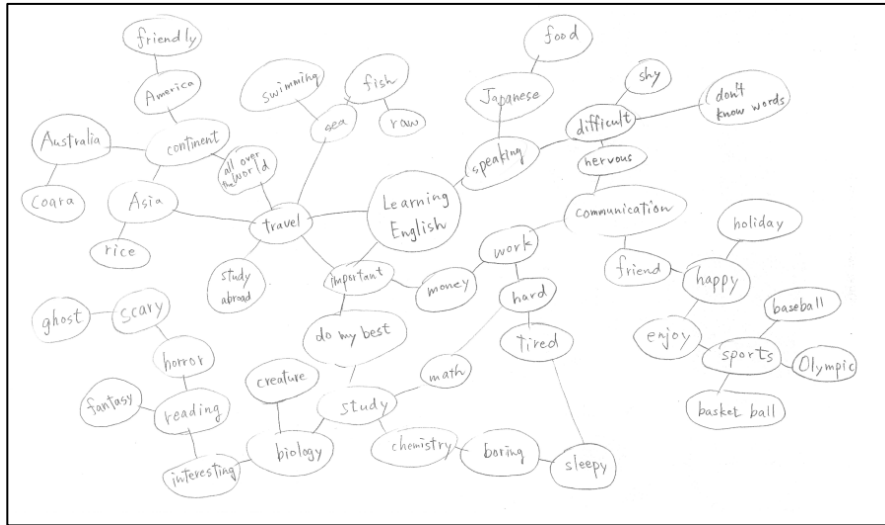
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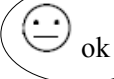

Appendix A: An Example Mind Map

Exploring Beliefs: Mind Mapping (Originally written in English)



Appendix B: An Example Learning Plan (translated from Japanese)

MY LEARNING PLAN

<p>BIG GOAL 大きな目標</p>	<p>Speak English</p>
<p>MATERIALS 使用する教材</p>	<p>Pair work in English class Dictation PraxisEd (Class assignment)</p>
<p>STUDY ACTIVITIES 学習ステップの詳細</p>	<p>Try dictation and quiz more than class goal. Do not neglect PraxisEd. 6 units/week Try not to speak Japanese in conversation. Go to the SALC 10 times. I am not sure whether I'll take the TOEIC but I'll study for it.</p>
<p>EVALUATION 学習活動の評価</p>	<p>  good  ok  not really </p>
<p>REFLECTION 感想</p>	<p>I can't express myself well in a conversation. So I want to choose learning materials to improve my vocabulary for conversation.</p>