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Language Advising as Psychosocial Intervention for First Time Self-Access Language Learners in the Time of COVID-19: Lessons From the Philippines

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has dramatically transformed the education system all over the globe. The Philippines is one of the countries in Southeast Asia that continues the battle with over 50,000 cases as of writing. The country's education system which remained exclusively traditional and classroom-based has since been forced to adopt more modern approaches, either synchronous or asynchronous. The sudden shift in learning mode on top of the rising apprehension of the situation prompted the need for an intervention. Ten student volunteers of A1 level Italian classes in the University of the Philippines, who have transitioned from face-to-face instruction to self-access language learning, participated in the advising sessions. The implementation of Advising in Language Learning (ALL) as an intervention has a three-point objective: to foster psychosocial support, to identify learner needs, and to track the students' learning progress. Two advising sessions were conducted within the duration of the semester in which the students reported mainly personal, technical, and economic problems, the difficulty of learning a language remotely as compared to other subjects, and a combination of positive and negative feedback from the previous session that will greatly aid in the succeeding implementation of language advising in the Philippines.

Keywords: language advising, self-access learning, psychosocial support, foreign language learning, Philippines

The year 2020 continuously proves to be a challenging year as the world struggles to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Originating from Wuhan, China, the virus has reached virtually all parts of the globe, with over 12 million cases and 557,000 deaths as of writing (Worldometer, 2020). In Southeast Asia, the Philippines remains at the top of the list of countries with the highest number of cases currently at 50,000 as of July 2020 (Worldometer, 2020). Since the detection of the virus in the country, efforts have been made in an attempt to contain its spread including but not limited to creating ad hoc administrative committees, implementing health guidelines and social distancing measures, placing the entire country in quarantine, and enacting lockdowns which resulted to establishments' temporary closures. The educational system was also severely affected due to the government's decision to implement localized school closures in mid-March to curb the spread of the coronavirus disease (Education International, 2020). This closure resulted to many schools either temporary halting operations or

shifting into new and less familiar modes of learning. Following a directive issued by the Commission on Higher Education which allowed schools to exercise academic freedom in decision-making regarding pandemic measures and modes of learning (Republic of the Philippines, 2020), some educational institutions hastily took action to sustain their students' learning by migrating to online learning management systems alongside synchronous discussion platforms such as Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, etc. This abrupt change in the mode of learning, the lack of general awareness on the usage of said platforms, and a shortage in preparation time caused tremendous amounts of stress to teachers, parents, and students.

The University of the Philippines (UP) faced the same predicament in the initial days following the government directive. Its language classes were heavily affected as the strength of its basic language programs relies heavily on the interaction between the faculty and students in classroom-based instruction. Despite the difficulty, the UP remained consistent in its efforts to provide quality education to its students by promoting distance and autonomous learning, and providing the necessary resources to all its constituents (UPOU, 2020).

The University Context in the Midst of the Pandemic

The teaching of foreign languages at the basic and intermediate level within the university has always employed traditional, face-to-face classroom instruction. Course materials such as syllabus, books, and supplementary notes and handouts are given to the students within the first weeks or during the course of the semester. Audio and video materials are usually not made accessible to students as these are utilized as spontaneous didactic materials. However, the mandate of the national government regarding class suspensions and school closures constrained the university to shift from its traditional face-to-face instruction to remote learning options using a variety of online and self-access materials within a very short span of time. While some faculty members have had experience in blended learning, the majority of the teachers had yet to familiarize themselves with the complete workings of the synchronous or asynchronous modes of instruction. Therefore, following appeals from both students and faculty members alike, the university decided to suspend its online classes to consider time for materials preparation, program and course redesigns, to resolve technical issues within the university, and to alleviate further stressors on the side of the students who have little to no internet connectivity (UP, 2020). This memorandum, however, explicitly stated that while online activities were temporarily

suspended, learning was expected to continue regardless of the less than conducive environment (UP, 2020). While the university currently has no self-access center for language learning, students were given their copies of the class syllabus and the materials along with supplementary resources such as authentic texts, audio materials, and videos from the learning management systems crafted by their professors prior to the class suspensions. Hence, the students currently enrolled in language classes were then expected to completely transition to self-access, autonomous language learning for the first time without any supervision in the middle of the semester.

Aims of the Study

Given the extraordinary circumstances revolving around the pandemic measures and the apparent lack of guidance and preparation regarding learning with the new mode, the researcher decided to implement an intervention program. This aims to provide mainly psychosocial support to ensure the students' well-being, to understand their needs in the unique situation, and to track their progress in their language learning with the sudden shift to self-access, autonomous learning. While there is a blossoming interest in advising in language learning as a method for reinforcing autonomous learning, it has yet to be piloted within the university.

Self-Access Language Learning

Gardner and Miller (2011) define self-access learning as an individualized form of learning wherein the learner is exposed to controlled or uncontrolled learning environments. It is an alternative mode of learning that usually takes place in a self-access center which offers resources for independent study and a framework for guidance either through the provision of answer keys to modular exercises or individual language counseling (Dickinson, 1987). However, self-access learning is not limited to self-access centers alone, as this may also be integrated into classroom taught courses and even in virtual learning environments (Gardner & Miller, 2011). As a form of independent study, self-access language learning bases its beliefs in the efficiency of self-regulation and self-management. It is a move from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach (Papadima-Sophocleous, 2013), working on the principle that students learn better when given the liberty to take charge of their own learning; for instance, deciding on the specific resources to use for their independent study (Klassen et al., 1998). Simply put, self-

access language learning refers to the capacity of the student to be mindful of his own learning by using a variety of materials, possibly with the aid of technology, and without the presence of an actual teacher (Díaz, 2012).

In the SAL literature, there is an emerging paradigm shift from materials and resources to ‘access to the self’ (Everhard, 2012; Murray, 2011) which implies a reorientation from an instructor-centered to a more student-centered base of learning therefore requiring support for self-directed learning (Linard, 2010). Such support may come in the form of study guides, peer learning groups, tutorials, and language advising.

Language Advising

Language advising, more commonly termed advising in language learning (ALL), is a form of language support that allows an adviser to meet with a student individually to discuss the learning process and to provide feedback (Reinders, 2008). The practice of advising varies from one institution to another, and although most sessions are done face-to-face individually or in small units (Mynard, 2012), other forms such as advising in open and distance environments (Hurd, 2001) and electronic environments (Reinders, 2006) are also possible. This form of counseling is targeted specifically to address the needs of the language learner (Mynard et al., 2018) and it aims to incite metacognitive reflection for a deeper understanding of one’s own learning (Carson & Mynard, 2012; Kato & Mynard, 2016). Reinders (2008) outlines the elements of an advisory session and its consequent follow-up session. The initial sessions usually involve explanation of the objectives of the sessions, rapport building, identification of learner needs, development of study plans, and recommendation of supplementary resources. Follow-up sessions, on the other hand, focus more on monitoring learner difficulties and progress, and providing feedback.

The principles of advising are heavily influenced by the holistic, humanistic approach in learning focusing on both cognition and affect (Tassinari & Ciekanski, 2013). While the cognitive aspect of learning is easily supported in classroom-based instruction through a variety of teaching strategies, the same attention is not given to the affective aspect. Dörnyei (2001) states that emotions, feelings, and attitudes all play crucial roles in the learning process and motivation. The lack of attention given to the affective variables in learning can be addressed by some of the important objectives of advising sessions: to alleviate feelings of isolation, to

increase motivation, to guide in the process of language learning, and to develop socio-affective aspects of learner support (Hurd, 2001).

Methodology

The implementation of the language advising pilot program was meant as an action research project in response to the language students' sink-or-swim predicament caused by the sudden shift to self-access learning in light of the COVID-19 preventive measures. Congruent with the objectives of ALL, the program aimed to provide psychosocial support to identify learner needs, and to monitor student progress. The participants were 10 students of an A1 level Italian class coming from diverse degree courses of the University of the Philippines Diliman. Two individual sessions were conducted via the audio call function of Zoom, and data from the sessions were transcribed verbatim. Each session lasted a maximum of 20 minutes in order to accommodate the participants' available schedules. The first session was conducted a month after the suspension of online classes and was dedicated to addressing affective concerns and discussing the process in self-access language learning. The second session was conducted just before the semester formally ended and was solely for feedback and analysis of the first session to further understand the perceived efficacy of the short intervention program. Data were coded using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Following Smith and Osborn's (2008) methods, the following coding procedures were followed: Looking for emerging themes, clustering of themes, creation of theme table, and interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The themes emerging from the first session include mainly personal, technical, and economic problems. With regards monitoring of their learning, the students reported difficulty in pursuing self-access language learning due to lack of confidence in their own abilities, guidance, and feedback.

“My academics are the last thing on my mind. *Ang daming dapat isipin kasi ako ang may hawak ng quarantine pass kaya ako ang naggrocery, errands and stuff. Hindi po ako makatutok talaga.*” (There are so many other things to worry about because I am the quarantine pass holder so I do the groceries, run errands, and stuff. I simply cannot focus.)

“Matagal na akong hindi nakatira sa family ko, pero napilitan akong umuwi sa province kasi ayaw kong mastranded sa QC mag-isa.” Tensions are running high which make it difficult to focus on studying even at my own pace (I haven’t lived with my family for a while, but I was forced to return to the province for fear of being stranded in the city on my own.)

“I cannot talk to my family about what bothers me, unlike back in my dorm where I had friends who would always listen. This is so hard because there is no emotional support.”

The national government implemented the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) measures in mid-March in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus (GOV.PH, 2020). Following this ordinance, people below 18 and above 65 were banned from leaving residential premises, and only quarantine pass holders were allowed necessary trips outside. Most students went home to be with their families, others even returning to their respective provinces. This caused a huge shift in priorities from academics to family. During the first months of the enforced community lockdowns, stocking up on food supplies and other necessities became extremely difficult in some heavily affected areas. Within the family setting, chaffed relationships became overwhelming distractions for students, as some of them had not lived with their family due to underlying tensions. Others found that the emotional support from friends was not as easily accessible as it used to be.

“Mabagal po talaga ang internet connection namin dati pa. So I.. mahirap po mag-access ng materials kahit sa google classroom kasi hindi nagload yung pages.” (We’ve always had slow internet connection. So I... I have difficulty accessing materials even when they’re available in google classroom because the pages just can’t load.)

“Madami po sa family members ko ngayon, work from home, kaya sabay sabay din yung consumption namin. Sobrang bagal po at laging lag yung connection.” (Most of my family members work from home now, so we have a high consumption rate. This leads to slow and lagging connection.)

Technical problems were also commonplace among the challenges faced by the students, with the top emerging problem being internet connectivity. The Philippines continues to perform poorly on account of internet connection speed and availability of long-term evolution (LTE) connection. The country was ranked 74th of 77 countries surveyed in terms of 4G speed, according to the 2017 State of Report as published by the firm OpenSignal (Marcelo, 2018). It is not surprising therefore that many students face technical issues even when classes were done asynchronously because their very resources were uploaded in online learning management systems due to unforeseen circumstances and a lack of time for general preparation of learning materials. Furthermore, since many companies have adapted a work-from-home scheme due to the enforced lockdown, the distribution of wifi connectivity within Philippine households has also suffered greatly.

“My laptop gave up just before the classes ended so I had to resort to using my smartphone for class activities. *Ang hirap.*” (It’s so difficult.)”

“Airplane mechanic *po yung dad ko* (my dad is an airplane mechanic), but he has been out of work the past three weeks. We’re struggling to make ends meet because we did not foresee this and we are a one-income household.”

A new dimension that students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic was unforeseen economic problems. Some could not afford to replace their old gadgets and had to resort to the use of their smartphones even for accessing class materials. Others faced even graver consequences- some family members lost their jobs because of the severe impact the pandemic had over the economy.

“To be honest *po, hindi ko talaga alam kung tama yung ginagawa ko. Ito po yung unang beses na nag-aral ako ng language at parang hindi ko siya kayang gawin mag-isa.*” (To be honest, I don’t really know what I’m doing. This is the first time I ever learned a language and I feel like I can’t do it on my own.)

“*Ibang-iba po yung language compared sa ibang subjects.* For the others *kasi*, it’s enough that we read and understand. Pero with language, *ang daming factors na dapat yata napractice talaga sa classroom kasi skill-based siya.*” (Language is so different

from the other subjects. For the others, it's enough that we read and understand the material. But with language, there are so many factors that should be practiced in the classroom because it is skill-based.)

“Wala po akong naiintindihan sa audio materials kahit paulit-ulit ko siya pine-play. Mas okay po sa akin yung dinisicuss natin sila in class.” (I don't understand the audio materials even when I play them on repeat. I need the discussions we do in class.)

Another dominant theme that emerged from the first session was the difficulty the students encountered with self-access language learning. Most of them reported to be hesitant in continuing with the class despite access to the resources because of the lack of procedural guidance. Others mentioned that self-access language learning was challenging because of the need for feedback which was not as constant as compared to the classroom-based instruction. Furthermore, others felt that the nature of language learning proved to be challenging compared to their other subjects where it was enough to read and digest the material.

ALL focuses on three main areas of learner support: listening to learner narratives, providing relevant materials, and fostering psychosocial support through the course of the language learning process (Carette & Castillo, 2004). It serves as an avenue to cater to the affective dimensions of learning which are otherwise not given substantial attention in classroom-based instruction. Furthermore, it reinforces an interpersonal relationship between the adviser and the student which makes it easier to understand the students' emotions and their consequences to learning (Tassinari, 2016).

From the advisor's perspective, there are three main takeaway points from the implementation of the first advising session. First, it enabled metacognitive reflection to understand the unique nature of language learning and allowed them to acknowledge which approach best aids in their learning. Second, it managed to surface underlying difficulties that would not have been disclosed under other circumstances. This proved to be a fundamental factor towards fostering rapport with the students and also served as a nexus towards a deeper understanding of the students' emotional states. Dörnyei (2001) stresses that emotions, attitudes and motivations play significant roles in the language learning process, and could be determinants of attrition or success. Third, the brief session held with the students allowed them

to be seen and provided an avenue for their feelings to be validated in the midst of all the confusion that the pandemic has caused. This is summarized by one student's statement:

“I'm happy that someone bothered enough to check on students because some professors just left us with requirements for compliance.”

The second advising session focused on feedback from the students regarding the first session. More students found the short session beneficial, although there are a handful who also deemed that it did not help significantly. Some students used the second session to air their grievances with the situation of the university and of the country. Others felt that the session helped in reconnecting them and validating their feelings of isolation in self-access learning in the midst of the pandemic.

“Parang ang hirap lang talaga ng situation ngayon, so nagpapasalamat din ako na UP decided to postpone the online classes. This method of self-study could have been okay kung hindi lang nakakatakot yung balita araw-araw.” (The situation is just too difficult, so I'm thankful that UP decided to postpone the online classes. This method of self-study could have been okay if not for the bad news everyday.)

“Somehow, the session made me feel na hindi ako mag-isa sa process na ito. Madami kaming ganito.” (Somehow, the session made me feel like I'm not alone in this process. We are in this together.)

The more significant content of the second advising session was the resulting awareness of the students' own process in self-access language learning. Some of the responses dealt with the statement of the students' strengths and weaknesses and the knowledge of what works for them and what doesn't.

“I like that we had the.. the counseling session. It helped me be aware of what I'm doing wrong with my studies. *Kasi sanay po talaga ako na nasa classroom kaya wala akong*

idea paano ito gawin on my own.” (I have no idea how to go about this since I’m really used to being in the classroom.)

“Ok naman kasi nalaman ko kung saan ako dapat nagfocus. Kasi weakness ko yung pronunciation.. so what I did.. ano po.. inuulit ulit ko yung audio tapos ginagaya ko. Kaya naman.” (It’s okay since I learned which area I should be focusing on. My weakness is pronunciation so I play the audio repeatedly until I get it. It turned out okay.)

“It made me aware about the process of learning on my own. Nalaman ko (I learned) *what works and what doesn’t. Like, I absolutely cannot watch TV pala while doing my worksheet.”*

Some students, however, felt that the session did little to curb the difficulty of autonomous language learning because of the inconsistencies in the execution of the program. The reasons stated were half-baked implementation of the intervention and improper spacing of the sessions. Additionally, some also recommended possible improvements if the advising sessions were to be continued in the future.

“Hindi ko po masabi kasi parang.. parang bitin. Ang hirap magfeedback. Saka kulang po kasi dahil parang smack in the middle of the sem tayo nag-advising. Parang out of the blue, ganun.” (I cannot say for sure because it feels half-baked. It’s difficult to provide feedback. I think it was incomplete because we did the advising smack in the middle of the semester, like it was completely out of the blue.)

“Mas ok po siguro kung mas mahabang session per student. Kasi last time ang dami ko pa yatang masasabi, pero sobrang binabantayan ko yung time kasi 20 minutes lang.” (It would have been better if we had a longer session per student. I felt like I still had a lot to say last time but I was too conscious of the time allotment.)

“I can’t judge for myself whether it has helped significantly or not, because we only did one session. Maybe if there were more and the sessions were more evenly spaced, it could be better?”

While some students felt satisfied with the implementation of the rather short intervention, some students expressed their opinion on ways to improve the pilot program. The excerpts of the feedback from the first session were mostly constructive and will help inform the decisions for the succeeding research on the topic.

Conclusions

The study was undertaken as a response to guide involuntary, first time self-access learners in the University of the Philippines. Two sessions, each focusing on different agenda, were conducted within strategic time frames during the course of the semester. The purpose of ALL as psychosocial intervention manifested during the first session where three themes emerged. The first is an increased understanding of the nature of language learning through metacognitive reflection of one’s personal learning. Self-access language learning proved to be difficult for students because of the sudden loss of reconnection with the class and the feeling of inadequacy in pursuing the remaining lessons for the semester. The lack of feedback which used to be constant in the previous set-up also proved to be discouraging to some students. The second effect is the disclosure of learner needs and difficulties. While interaction is abundant in traditional instruction, student emotions are actually quite challenging to access because of the lack of opportunity to discuss them. The advising session was the perfect opportunity to listen to student narratives and understand their respective contexts, especially in these rather precarious times. Third, the advising session invoked feelings of validation and being seen.

The second session, which was dedicated solely for student experiences of the first session, revealed both positive and negative feedbacks. The students felt that they had an avenue to air their grievances regarding their current situation, that they were somehow able to reconnect with the class through the advising session, and that they had an increased awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in language learning. On the other hand, some students felt that the advising session was half-completed, was ill-timed, and could improve with adequate preparation.

Evaluation of the Pilot Study and Future Directions

The reported problems and feedback received from this pilot study, particularly from the second session, provide instrumental foundations for improvement of the succeeding language advising sessions. The importance of student feedback regarding advising sessions should be held in high regard, as existing literature states the need for further experimental research which involves students' perceptions of the effectiveness of self-access learning (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001). Perhaps the most important issue to be addressed would be the proper planning and implementation of the sessions. Since the educational implications of the government's directives were unanticipated, inadequate planning and consequently improper implementation of the intervention program occurred. As one student suggested, it would be wise to increase the number of advising sessions, including an initial phase where the student profile will be collected and analyzed for further analysis of their needs. This is especially important considering their different demographics and the technical problems they might be facing, as weak internet connectivity remains on top of the stressors of the current students in the midst of the pandemic (Moawad, 2020). Profiling students helps not only with identifying learner needs, but also in defining their strengths, weaknesses, and in enumerating other factors that could ultimately lead to student dropout (Dreyer et al., 2008). Adequate spacing in between the sessions should also be taken into account. These should be scheduled deliberately in order to focus on the different information needed at certain points during the semester. Furthermore, ample time for each individual session may be deliberated for a more reflective and meaningful personal assessment of learning as some students felt that their individual sessions barely covered the surface of what they wanted to share and discuss with the researcher. Feedback must be consistent especially in the current context; it is a way of assessing performance, assisting the learning process, and boosting the students' morale (White, 2006). Moreover, the study can be replicated with better preparation and implementation time to see if learner experience and consequent feedback will change. Additionally, the installment of a self-access center within the university may be proposed to the administration. This will lead to a better management of student resources, proper training of advising for language counselors, and overall a better context for further research endeavors on the topic.

Since both self-access language learning and language advising have yet to be systematically practiced in the Philippine context, much can be learned from this pilot study. While the world continues to hope for a complete recommencement of the old normal ways, these can become integral components of the temporary COVID-19 learning process, should face-to-face instruction remain implausible for the time being.

Notes on the Contributor

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