The Digitalization of Self-Access and Advising Services in Times of a Global Pandemic

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Abstract

The global pandemic forced educational institutions worldwide to adapt to a new, fully online concept of education and a rapid digitalization to keep providing their services to learners. This paper reports on the digitalization process of the Independent Learning Center (ILC) and the Learning Advisory Program (LAP) unit at Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University (AYBU), Turkey. The interrelated digitalization stories of the two units include the provision of learning resources and activities to learners with digital tools and their responses to the new format. Despite the challenges involved, the ILC has offered a considerably higher number of extracurricular activities than in face-to-face education days and reached a higher number of learners in the 2020-2021 academic year. As for the LAP, the participants' reflections showed how opportunities for offering engaging activities in the LAP created a cascading impact of affordances for both the individual learners and the members of the larger community.

Keywords: self-access language learning, advising in language learning, digitalization

Over a year ago, an unprecedented pandemic hit the world and transformed life into a new reality filled with continuous lockdowns and restrictions. Since the breakout of COVID-19 and the beginning of its global spread, all sectors have found alternative ways to adapt themselves into the distanced, limited, and digitalized forms of operation in their areas of expertise. Clearly, one of the most prominent areas that has influenced communities in this rapid transformation is the provision of formal education at all levels and related educational opportunities. This turned out to be an important issue, particularly within the first few months in most countries since institutions were generally caught unprepared. In time, online became the only medium of education worldwide, and adaptation to this new normal was, therefore, inevitable. Self-access centers and advising services experienced similar processes of transformations to adapt to the online delivery of services. The aim of this paper is to provide an account of the digitalization processes of the services, resources, and activities of the Independent Learning Center (ILC) and Learning Advisory Program (LAP) at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Turkey.

Self-Access Centers, Advising Services, and the Global Pandemic

Self-access centers are out-of-class spaces where learners engage in language learning and, at the same time, develop a sense of awareness and control over their learning (Mynard, 2019). In line with this definition, self-access centers are generally associated with the promotion of learner autonomy (Dofs & Hobbs, 2011; Mynard, 2012) or independent learning (Sheerin, 1997). However, considering that such centers naturally and automatically turn all their users into autonomous learners would be a fallacy. As several studies have indicated, self-access centers do not necessarily ensure independent learning or learner autonomy (Benson, 2011; Nasöz, 2015; Sheerin, 1997; Uzun, 2014). Learners might need additional support if they are expected to manage their own learning effectively. Advising services are of critical importance in this regard. Advising in language learning (ALL) refers to the "process and practice of helping students to direct their own paths to become more effective and more autonomous language learners" (Carson & Mynard, 2012, p. 4). Therefore, advising services should be considered a critical part of the discussion if we discuss fostering autonomous learning.

The ongoing pandemic forced educational institutions worldwide to adapt to the new fully online education concept and rapid digitalization. Self-access centers and advising services provided in such institutions were no exceptions at all to such a transformation. Self-access centers around the world reacted to this global crisis in different ways, such as providing their resources and activities via electronic platforms (Anas et al., 2020; Schneider, 2020) and maintaining their advising and support services (Davies et al., 2020; Ohara & Ishimura, 2020; Ruiz-Guerrero, 2020). (See SISAL Journal Special Issue on Self-Access and the Coronavirus Pandemic, September 2020, for further insights.)

Self-Access and Advising Services at AYBU: The Independent Learning Center (ILC)

As a self-access center celebrating its 10th anniversary, the ILC is based in the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) at AYBU. It offers a lively and learner-centered environment in its physical space (see Figure 1), mainly serving English preparatory year students at the university. Its physical space houses computers with an internet connection, a small library section, a reading corner, comfort zones, and overall, a comfortable study space. At the ILC, we aim to foster out-of-class independent learning and create a learning community among users.

Figure 1

The ILC at AYBU

Learners are offered print and digital learning resources, as well as extracurricular activities. Print resources are the books in the library section, worksheets on all four language skills as well as grammar, reading, and vocabulary worksheets, effective learning and strategy pamphlets, guidebooks for learners (proficiency exam guidebook, writing guidebook), and second language survival guides in Russian, Chinese, and Arabic. At the ILC, learners were also offered regular face to face extracurricular activities such as speaking sessions (big or small group, one-on-one), cultural and social gatherings, movie club sessions, and workshops.

Digitalizing ILC Resources and Activities

As of March 2020, universities were closed due to the COVID-19 breakout in Turkey, in line with many other countries. This sudden shift to online education forced us to search for alternative ways to keep providing ILC resources and activities. Our instant response was to enrich the video content in our YouTube channel. Until the end of the 2019-2020 academic year and in the summer months, new videos on language skills and strategies were prepared by the instructors of AYBU SFL and uploaded to the channel.

During summer, our preparations for the new academic year mainly focused on digitalizing the ILC resources and setting up an online platform to present resources to learners. Also, we searched for alternative ways to make ILC activities accessible to learners in the upcoming academic year. As part of the digitalization process of ILC resources, all worksheets, booklets as well as skills and strategy pamphlets were put into digital formats. In coordination with the other units at AYBU SFL, an ILC Moodle class was created, and all

registered students as of the 2020-2021 academic year were assigned as members of this class (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Views from ILC Moodle Class
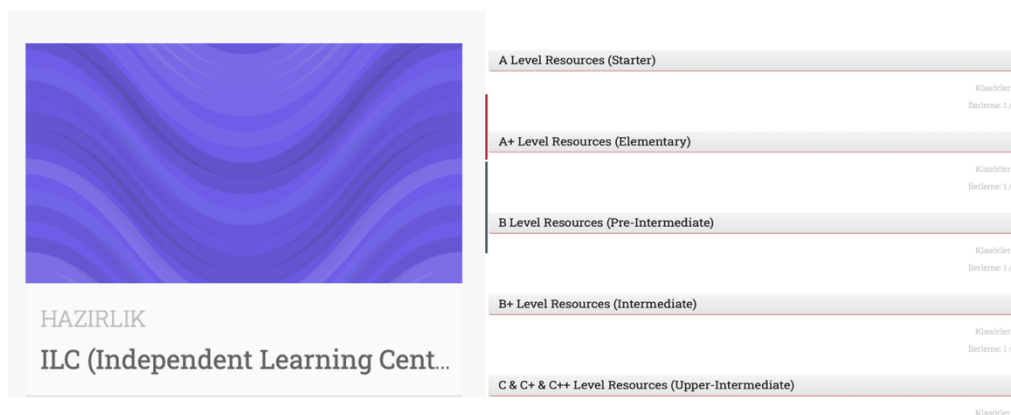
At the online ILC class, another tab was created with 10 integrated live class links for live sessions and skills activities (see Figure 3). In addition to Big Blue Button classes integrated into Moodle, other platforms were also used in some other activities from time to time, including MS Teams and Zoom.

Figure 3

ILC Live Classes

The Learning Support Zone, another tab in the online ILC class, contained skills and strategy pamphlets, a writing pack with several worksheets, and PDF versions of the slides used in various workshops conducted throughout the academic year. Besides these, another

tab titled ILC Bulletin Board was used to announce weekly ILC activity schedules and general-purpose or special event posters for upcoming events. New ILC schedules for upcoming events were also announced via ILC social media accounts.

ILC activities were offered to learners on a regular basis throughout the 2020-2021 academic year. These activities were speaking club sessions, learner-led speaking activities, informative workshops, and writing club sessions. Some activity types offered in times of face-to-face education were not considered practical in an online setting. For example, one-on-one speaking activities, also known as Let's Talk sessions or movie club sessions, were conducted online. Instead, new activity types were offered to learners in this period. For example, in Learner Stories, former prep school students who were active users of the ILC were invited to meet present students to share their experiences, stories, and current positions in their faculties or jobs. Led by learners only, in Share'n Learn, a specific topic was announced (e.g., useful resources in listening), and learners were encouraged to share what worked well for them in their studies.

Learners' Reactions

Learners' reactions to the resources and activities provided online by the ILC were analyzed via Moodle reports, the overall number of activities organized and the number of students who attended them over three periods (21 weeks)[1]. Learners' reflections and feedback were also collected via a mini survey that contained open-ended questions. The numbers of organized events and participants were compared with the records of the 2018-2019 academic year (conducted fully face-to-face) to get a better understanding of the role of online delivery of activities and learners' interests in them.

According to Moodle reports, the top 5 resources accessed in the online ILC class were vocabulary worksheets, second language survival guides, grammar worksheets, ILC strategy pamphlets, and effective learning pamphlets. This result implied that learners needed additional vocabulary and grammar worksheets to lead their independent studies. Also, many users of the ILC class were interested in learning a second foreign language. Learners were also interested in strategy and skills pamphlets which could be related to their interest in pursuing further support in learning.

Comparative figures of the number of activities organized and attendance rates, as presented in Table 1, demonstrate two important results. First, a considerably higher number of group activities were organized and offered to learners. This was mainly because online

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[1] An academic year at AYBU SFL consists of four seven-week periods in two semesters.

sessions are free from physical space considerations and involve no procedures such as registration that was normally a part of the process at the physical ILC. The decreased number of face-to-face classes offered at AYBU SFL in distance education, as well as fewer teaching hours assigned to teachers, opened space for ILC activities. The other important finding was that the number of learners attending these online activities turned out to be much higher than face-to-face activities. Along with the variety of activities offered online and no physical boundaries or limitations involved, a further cause of this increased interest could be that learners were probably not distracted by external factors, and they had more time to dedicate to these extracurricular sessions.

Table 1

Comparative Figures of ILC Activities Organized and Attendance Rates

Time Period	Number of Activities Organized	Number of Participants
2018-2019 Academic Year	108[2]	393
2020-2021 Academic Year	374	2721

Besides these figures, learners' feedback and reflections provided further insights into the effectiveness of ILC activities and resources provided online. Selected comments are presented below:

"It organizes my studies. I can decide what I do thanks to these resources." Murat

"I can learn a new perspective on a new topic every day." Esra

"I like especially speaking clubs because we speak there a lot. We meet other friends and it's important because of socialization. In this process, we could not socialize and we are bored

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[2] In addition to these figures, 229 individual face-to-face speaking sessions were organized in three periods in 2018-2019 academic year and a total of 206 students showed up in these meetings. These figures were not added up to the total numbers as they were considered different in nature from the activities organized online in 2020-2021 in times of COVID-19.

at home but we are good thanks to speaking clubs. There are a lot of teachers who have different accents. That's a good opportunity for us. Thank you :)" Sezen

"I easily learn new things about language." Tolga

"Workshops are very useful. We learn a lot of information about different topics. Moreover, we learn different phrases or collocations by listening from our teacher. Yeah, I can say that I'm happy." Leyla

Based on these comments, learners found ILC activities and resources useful for their studies. More specifically, learners' reflections touched on areas like managing learning, socialization, and the informativeness of activities which could be considered important for the successful implementation of self-access learning even though all the services are provided online.

Administrative Insights into the Challenges and Solutions for the Online ILC

The first and foremost challenge was learners', teachers', and ILC admins' adaptation to self-access learning in distance education. Our solution to this instant transition was to focus on the content provided on our YouTube channel in the first place as other preparations would take longer. In the meantime, we explored possible tools to be used at the ILC the following academic year.

In the 2020-2021 academic year, our major concern was whether we would be able to create a similar ILC community without meeting learners face-to-face. We created supportive videos and visuals on distance learning and resources for learners and shared them through several platforms. In so doing, our goal was to reach out to learners and give them the message that we would be walking alongside them.

Conducting extracurricular activities online and reaching out to learners effectively was another concern for us. To ensure a successful implementation, we took a couple of measures. Online classes were integrated into the online ILC class. Each teacher in charge of such sessions was assigned a specific online class, and these classes were not changed over time so that learners would not get lost or look for rooms for the sessions they were interested in attending. Another measure we took was to enrich the variety and content of activities to attract more interest.

As also mentioned before, some face-to-face activities were not viable for online implementation. To address this problem, new interactive activities were created, and variety was added to speaking activities with debate, impromptu speech, and spoken production sessions.

Learning Advisory Program (LAP)

In learner autonomy, students are expected to take on their own learning responsibilities, to be able to set their goals and to evaluate learning outcomes and achievements by managing their learning processes. Knowing that students should be educated about effectively managing their own learning and should be guided when needed, a Learning Advisory Program (LAP) was established within the ILC at AYBU SFL to meet this requirement. The unit became an individual and customized unit following a research project funded by the university, within which participating instructors received a skills-based, independent learning advisory education at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), Japan, in 2018.[3]

Since the academic year of 2018-2019, the LAP unit has been conducting face-to-face and online synchronous and asynchronous advising sessions for individual learners and groups of learners, developing tools to be used in advising services, enabling learners to support each other through peer advising, and training new learning advisors, and delivering workshops for interested instructors from other institutions.

Digitalizing Advising Services and Resources

With the pandemic outbreak in March 2020, we, as the LAP Unit, had to adapt to the immediate shift to the unprecedented distance education environment. We started our adaptation by creating a dedicated YouTube channel for the LAP Unit with the intention to cater to the instructors and the students of AYBU SFL. The channel was also aimed at providing our instructors with videos on some helpful tips to address learners' needs and expectations in online environments in line with advising strategies. This YouTube channel turned out to be an online archive of both public and unlisted videos that were created by our unit for PD purposes in time. Unlike the concerns about the feasibility of one-to-one advising services, within the adaptability and metacognition levels of learners, we went on conducting

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[3] A good example of collaborative ethnography was provided by our advisors who shared their experience of completing this professional language advising course and the implications of this "journey" on our professional identities and changing professional practices in our institution in Turkey (Şen et al., 2018).

appointed, one-to-one, synchronous advising sessions and asynchronous advising emailing/texting until the end of 2019-2020 academic year and in summer months.

As for the digitalization phase of the LAP unit, we started our preparations for the new academic year, mainly focusing on seeking alternative ways to address more learners and instructors' needs of building rapport with learners in the academic year of 2020-2021. Initially in this digitalization process, all LAP tools were put into digital formats. In coordination with the other units at AYBU SFL, an LAP Moodle class was created, and all registered students as of the 2020-2021 academic year were assigned as members of this class. All tools, the website content of the unit, and an orientation video for this new academic year were placed into the online LAP class under clearly designated tabs in English and Turkish (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

The Tab for LAP Tools at LAP Moodle Class
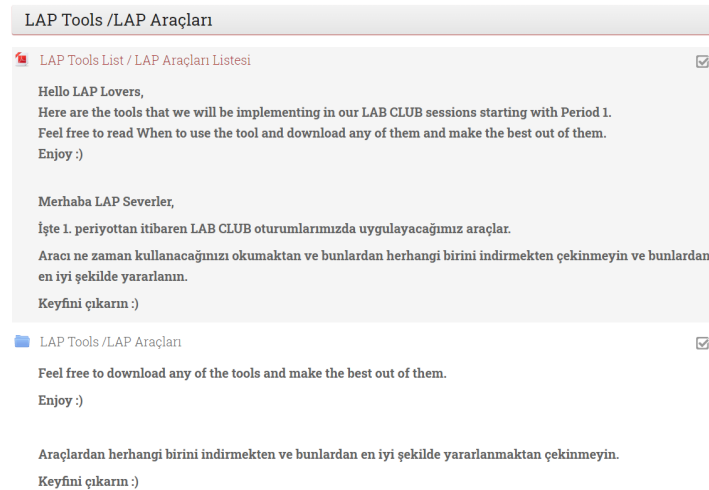
Digitalized tools without the know-how would be of no use for the learners. In order to help learners make use of those tools, the moderation or facilitation of an advisor/peer was the basic requirement. Considering that it was impossible to help them implement tools through one-to-one sessions, we created a social learning environment called the LAP CLUBs in which our learners could voluntarily participate in general terms. We also had an experimental attempt to integrate our sessions into one portfolio task for some groups in the last academic period. Our aim was to promote learners' level of metacognition for taking control of their learning while helping them socialize and feel affectively ready for their self-studies. For each LAP CLUB session, we created content with some colorful slides and

engaging tool implementations for learners to taste the reflective and fun nature of advising. To address learners in a more structured way, the LAP CLUB sessions, as an extracurricular program, were conducted synchronously and fully online in the framework of a model, the LAP Club model (Guven-Yalcin, 2021 [this issue]), which was developed on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and PERMA Model of well-being (Seligman, 2012). This program aims to help learners' lead their learning efforts, assist them in managing their cognitive and affective states, shift learners to the center of the learning process by empowering them to become self-determined individuals.

In the administration phase of the program, in order to inform students about the content and purpose of the program and the consent protocol, we coordinated and conducted orientation sessions for each SFL class within the first three weeks of the academic year. At the end of each orientation session, we received the reflections and expectations of the participants as part of a needs analysis. Afterwards, LAP CLUB sessions were offered to learners at a rate of 12 sessions per week on a regular basis throughout the 2020-2021 academic year.

During the LAP CLUB sessions, voluntary participants were provided with "access" to theoretical information and assisted to "voice" their own experiences and ideas. In the light of this information, they were on board for the "action" within the target tools of the sessions in pairs or small groups, and finally, they "bridged to the future" by discussing the ways of transforming the application into practice in their own learning environment. Throughout all of the steps, the crucial advising tool of Intentional Reflective Dialogue (Kato & Mynard, 2016), within a sociocultural framework, was used as a mediate of thinking and learning by the trained advisors.

Knowing that learning can potentially take place in any kind of environment from an ecological perspective, we did our best to provide learners with both synchronous and asynchronous environments for learner engagement. Therefore, we created forum discussions in our Moodle class about the LAP CLUB sessions where the participants could reflect on their experiences with the tools and club sessions asynchronously (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Asynchronous engagement at LAP Moodle Class
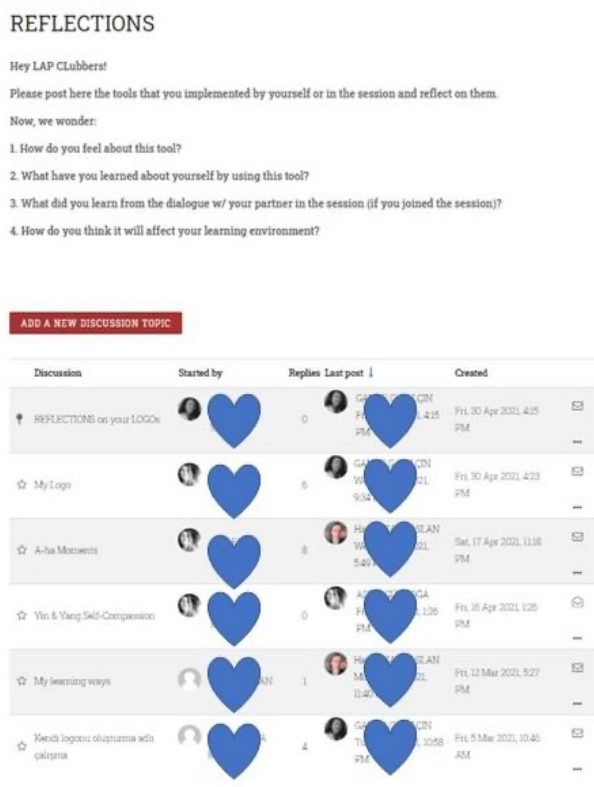
As for the program's platform, the sessions took place at Big Blue Button classes integrated into the Moodle class within the first two academic periods. Due to the limited number of break-out session spaces at Big Blue Button, MS Teams platform was used in the following periods.

When it comes to the digitalization phase of other advising services, learners were offered to get appointments for one-to-one synchronous advising sessions or asynchronous advising correspondences via an online scheduling system whenever they felt in need of personalized support in their learning environments. Zoom and MS Teams platforms were used for synchronous advising sessions, which were recorded. Consent was obtained from the advisees before each session. Emailing and texting via MS Teams and/or WhatsApp were used for written advising.

We were pleased to witness some positive outcomes of our autonomy-supportive environments within our own context. This was possible with the learner-oriented "Butterfly Talks" sessions of the LAP CLUB sessions, in which one advisee voluntarily shared their learning journey, referring to one-to-one and/or LAP CLUB experiences. An advisor

moderated these sessions, and all the participants had the opportunity to interact with each other. This session turned out to be a favorite stage for any advisee who is eager to help create a sharing-and-caring environment within the group advising context of our institution.

We had the pleasure to address instructors of other higher education institutions and teachers of the Ministry of National Education through our Learning Advising Workshop Series. The first of our workshops was conducted in March 2021, fully online as a half-day event at the end of which the participants were granted certification. It was a truly empowering experience for our unit to implement the skills gained through our advisor educator training and weave them with the knowledge and experience of other instructors and learn with and from them in such a unique context.

Learners' Reactions

Learners' reactions to the online advising services provided by the LAP unit were analyzed via weekly surveys, the overall number of activities organized and the number of students who attended them during four periods (28 weeks). Learners' reflections and feedback were also collected via session-ending reflective discussions with open-ended questions. The numbers of organized events and participants were compared with the records of the 2019-2020 academic year, which was conducted fully face-to-face to better understand the role of online delivery of group/one-to-one advising sessions and learners' interests in them.

According to weekly surveys, the tools that we help learners implement in the LAP Club sessions were found to be easy-to-use, fun and positively effective in learners' learning environments. The synchronous break-out sessions and asynchronous engagements of learners in Moodle class were helpful as they boosted motivation, self-esteem and self-determination, and they helped learners build a sense of belonging to a caring community. These results implied that learners needed social engagement and a better understanding of themselves to attain a higher level of motivation, awareness and determination about themselves and their independent studies to gain control of their learning environment. Also, it is evident that many participants of the LAP services were interested in socializing and learning a foreign language 'in the field'. This finding aligns with learners' interest and participation figures observed in three-week orientation session surveys that were offered by the LAP unit at the beginning of the academic year. Learners were also interested in gaining time-management skills, goal setting and stress and anxiety management, which could be considered as their further needs and expectations in pursuing autonomy in their learning.

Like the ones belonging to the ILC, comparative figures of the number of activities organized and attendance rates of the LAP services for two periods, as presented in Table 2, demonstrated two important results. First, a considerably higher number of group activities were organized and offered to learners. This was because online advising sessions were free from physical space considerations and involved an easy procedure of giving consent online before participating in a session. The other important finding was that the number of learners attending these online advising sessions turned out to be much higher than face-to-face activities. Along with the written form of advising offered online and no physical boundaries or limitations involved in the LAP Club context, a potential cause of this increased interest could be that learners were probably in need of socializing and gaining new perspectives through reflective sessions within a structured extracurricular program which weaves theory of advising together with advising practices.

Table 2

Comparative Figures of LAP Sessions Organized and Attendance Rates

Time Period	Number of Activities Organized	Number of Participants
2019-2020 Academic Year	60 Group Advising + 150 one-to-one advising sessions	68
2020-2021 Academic Year	336 Group Advising + +400 One-to-one Advising Sessions	1840

Besides these figures, learners' feedback and reflections provided further insights into the effectiveness of resources and attending LAP activities online, referring to aspects such as content, delivery, interaction, learning environment. of LAP Club sessions. Selected comments are presented below:

"*I wasn't sure if I was going to pass the AGE* [4]*exam in February. In LAP services, we figured it out with my advisor, and I am so happy for that.*" Tugce

"*Absolutely. It has a spiritual value for me, indeed.*" Abdullah

"*I realized my tendency to learn language. I felt so much better myself.*" Ezgi

"*The fact that it contains encouraging work makes it best.*" Elif

"*I can improve my English and get new learning skills.*" Mert

"*Tools are easy to use, the teachers were helpful.*" Seda

"*I realized that I have to study harder. There are lots of things to learn:)*" Hasan

"*To me, advising is like growing like a tree.*" Gurhan

"*Advising is the best way or method to learn what you don't know.*" Merve

"*To me LAP is like an ocean.*" Yusuf

Based on these comments, it can be stated that learners found LAP Clubs and other online advising services and resources useful for their studies. More specifically, learners' reflections touched on areas like gaining new skills in managing their cognitive and affective states, socialization, and effective reflective activities, which helped them have realizations about themselves as learners and their context. Especially the level of metacognition in the way they expressed themselves, i.e., the metaphors, could be a crucial indicator of a successful implementation of autonomy-supportive, self-determination and well-being promoted learning.

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[4] AGE: Assessment in General English, the English proficiency exam that preparatory school students have to take and pass to complete their one-year English program at AYBU SFL.

Administrative Insights into the Challenges and Solutions for the Online LAP

The major challenge was all learners', advisors' and LAP coordinator's adaptation to the new-normal of advising services. Our solution to this instant transition was to create a Moodle system to reach all learners and instructors of the institution. In search of alternative ways to support all stakeholders of distance education, we started promoting teacher autonomy by providing our instructors with varied ways of building bonds with their students in online environments. The digitalization of advising tools was another major adaptation for distance advising.

Considering the common context of advising being one-to-one, another major challenge was to access more learners and institutionalize the notion of advising in an online environment as well. We held our orientation sessions for all groups with the intention to let all students know about the process, purpose, and content of group advising sessions. In the second and third academic periods, we conducted our sessions on a voluntary basis completely. Then, we took our first steps towards institutionalizing advising in our context in the fourth period by assigning C+/C++ (i.e., upper intermediate and above) level groups to attend any suggested session(s) and expecting them to submit a speaking portfolio task about that session. We observed that our first attempt of integrating advising into the curriculum had a truly positive impact on the language proficiency of our learners, which could easily be seen in their creative videos. It was also clearly seen that, via our reflective sessions, we were able to promote critical thinking and helped learners gain an increased level of metacognition that they need in their learning environment.

We had concerns about the feasibility of asynchronous advising services during the pandemic. However, the impacts of written advising services were suggested by Karaaslan and Guven-Yalcin (2020), with some insights on how advisors' utilizing motivational resources incorporated in a series of IRD email exchanges/texting had its positive outcomes with respect to advisee engagement and ownership of the process.

Conducting extracurricular activities online and reaching learners effectively was another concern for us. To ensure a successful implementation, we developed a multidimensional model for an extracurricular program, which created a structured autonomy-supportive social environment for learners. As for advising resource management online, it was not only the development of the model that we were able to provide learners with but the session content and many new advising tools within the target content from scratch that helped us gain new insights and much hands-on experience of advising online.

Conclusion

The global pandemic forced educational institutions to change their policies and adapt to the idea of providing their services online as of 2020. Self-access centers and advising units found themselves in the middle of this crisis, and administrative staff looked for effective and creative ways to adapt to the conditions of this new normal that would last for an unforeseen period of time. Undoubtedly, this brand new, fully distant education format came with several negatives. It was challenging at the same time because alternative technological tools were needed for use in self-access centers and advising units in order to effectively reach learners.

We, as the ILC and LAP coordinators at AYBU, went through similar experiences, dilemmas, and challenges in our very own context and looked for solutions to the problems we encountered. It was not always easy to motivate learners who have never been to a university campus or building, let alone to the ILC or an LAP advising meeting room. Amid such chaotic times, we continuously attempted to keep the morale up with lively, interactive activities, warm attitudes, and friendly approaches to learners. This process also taught us that offering self-access and advising services online came with several opportunities and positive outcomes at the same time. Being able to reach a considerably higher number of learners has been encouraging for us in these difficult days. We also observed that learners benefitted from such factors as not being restricted to physical spaces, easy access to instructors, learning advisors, resources and activities from home, and having more free time for self-study and activities.

Hopefully, as we are transitioning to better days ahead, this process has taught us that it is possible to create and maintain learning communities even in online educational settings despite all the challenges and negatives involved.

Notes on the Contributors

Tarik Uzun is an instructor, a learning advisor, and the coordinator of the Independent Learning Center (ILC) at Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University School of Foreign Languages, Turkey. He teaches English and Turkish as foreign languages. He holds a Ph.D. in foreign language teaching. His research focuses on second language pronunciation, learner autonomy, and self-access language learning.

Gamze Guven-Yalcin is an instructor, a learning advisor, an advisor educator, and the co-coordinator of the Learning Advisory Program (LAP) at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University SFL, Turkey. She holds her BA in English Language and Literature and Learning Advising Certificates from KUIS. Her interests include ALL, self-determination, advisor education, well-being, developing advising tools.

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