

## **Which way is the right way? Is there a right way? Discovering pathways to independence**

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### **Introduction**

This paper records a little of the journey that both learners and advisors, in the independent learning centre of Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT), have been taking over the past few years. It traces the development of the centre from a self-access centre offering a large number of resources, but limited support and assistance, to an independent learning centre with a strong advisory service. In this journey, many lessons have been learnt. We outline some of our challenges and the approaches we have taken to create new opportunities for the learning and success for our learners. The journey is not over and we are eager to continue growing and developing along with the learners who share the path with us.

### **Institutional background**

Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) has a high number of part-time students. The total number of students enrolled in 2002 was over 24 000, but there were only 8 405 equivalent full-time students. Our institution sits in the middle of an ethnically and economically diverse city within the Auckland Region. It began life as a polytechnic but now has a wide range of certificate, diploma and degree courses. It also offers some postgraduate options and has partnerships with the University of Auckland and Southern Cross University. The largest department, Further Education, includes the School of English and Foundation Studies. The former has both international students and those who are permanent residents in New Zealand. Foundation Studies offers bridging courses to bring students to university entrance level.

The Language Support Centre (LSC) was established in 1997 as a self-access centre, which is centrally funded but reports to the Head of Department of Further Education. Its brief was to provide English language support to mainstream students as a pathway to independence. The centre was for all MIT students and staff, but particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The centre began with a manager and one part-time staff member. Basic pathways or documents, providing suggestions for accessing and using resources at every level of English, were developed and available in both paper and electronic form. Students could use these in conjunction with learner contracts and goal-setting guides. Students were encouraged to check back with LSC staff after using the pathways, but in practice this rarely happened. Learners were also able to approach staff in the centre for support in accessing relevant resources and developing language learning strategies, but this was on an ad-hoc basis and not timetabled or widely advertised. This meant that there were often competing priorities for the time spent with students. Classes, which were timetabled to use the centre, also needed support. Time spent with one student often meant that other students were denied valuable input from staff. Speaking was one skill students often expressed a need to develop, especially in communicative contexts. Therefore, in 1999 we began to offer conversation groups to support this need.

### **Early challenges**

It was soon apparent that there was a need to create new pathways and strengthen existing links between the learners and the centre. Despite the fact that first-year students, from all courses, were brought to the centre for an orientation and students from the School of English came more regularly in class time, some students were still not aware of the role of the LSC, or its potential usefulness to them. Initially, only a small number of teachers saw the importance of linking the classroom and the Language Support Centre. Over the years we have approached this challenge in a number of ways, which include:

- networking with teaching staff
- participating in staff meetings
- conducting specific staff development sessions to raise and discuss issues concerning independent learning and the role of the centre
- meeting with individual staff

The challenge continues!

We also noticed that many students were accessing the same materials time after time, or using them inefficiently. One example is the student who selects a book and tape set designed to improve listening skills. The learner selects a level that reflects where they think their listening should be rather than where it actually is, finds the exercises too difficult and, instead of choosing a set at a lower level, listens to the tape while reading the transcript at the back. This student seems to lack the planning, self-monitoring and reflection strategies that are a vital part of the metacognitive learning strategies necessary to utilise the material at hand and enhance learning. Table 1 (Brown 2000: 125-6 from O'Malley 1985) lists metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies used in language learning.

Over a period of time, students repeatedly expressed the need for more support in evaluating and developing language learning strategies eg: identifying their own learning styles and goals, identifying their level of ability, evaluating, building on and reflecting on language gains and accessing resources to meet their needs. They also requested assistance with self-assessment. We tried to assist on an ad-hoc basis but quickly found that competing demands on time and the sheer number of students often prevented us from giving students the amount of support or undivided attention they needed. Many learners would not approach us because they felt we were too busy. We also worried that many students experienced language or cultural barriers in expressing their own opinion to teachers because they did not know how to ask or did not dare to ask for help. Students continually expressed their satisfaction with the centre in written evaluations done every semester but other responses to questions raised the issue of how effectively students were using their time in the Language Support Centre. Many students spent long hours in the centre but did not show any deep analysis of the effectiveness of their strategies in the responses they gave. It was time to consider other methods of support to help students develop the skills and strategies necessary for academic success.

<b>LEARNING STRATEGY</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>Metacognitive strategies</b>	
Advance organisers:	Making a general but comprehensive preview of the organising concept or principle in an anticipated learning activity
Directed attention:	Deciding in advance to attend in general to a learning task and to ignore irrelevant distracters
Selective attention:	Deciding in advance to attend to specific aspects of language input or situational details that will cue the retention of language input
Functional planning:	Planning for and rehearsing linguistic components necessary to carry out an upcoming language task
Self-monitoring:	Correcting one's speech or writing for accuracy in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary or for appropriateness related to the setting, the people who are present or the intended reader
Delayed production:	Consciously deciding to postpone speaking or writing in order to learn initially through listening or reading comprehension
Self-evaluation:	Checking the outcomes of one's own language learning against an internal measure of completeness and accuracy
<b>Cognitive strategies</b>	
Repetition:	Imitating a language model, including overt practice and silent rehearsal
Resourcing:	Using the target language reference materials
Translation:	Using the first language as a base for understanding and/or producing the second language
Grouping:	Re-ordering or reclassifying, and perhaps labelling, the material to be learned based on common attributes
Note-taking:	Writing down the main idea, important points, outline or summary of information presented orally or in writing
<b>Cognitive strategies</b>	
Deduction:	Consciously applying rules to produce or understand the second language
Recombination:	Constructing a meaningful sentence or larger language sequence by combining known elements in a new way
Imagery:	Relating new information to visual concepts in memory via familiar, easily retrievable visualisations, phrases or locations
Auditory representation:	Retention of the sound or a similar sound for a word, phrase or longer language sequence
Keyword:	Remembering a new word in the second language by (1) identifying a familiar word in the first language that resembles the new word and (2) generating easily recalled images of some relationship between the new word and the familiar word
Contextualisation:	Placing a word or phrase in a meaningful language sequence
Elaboration:	Relating new information to other concepts in memory
Transfer:	Using previously acquired linguistic and/or conceptual knowledge to facilitate a new language learning task
Inferencing:	Using available information to guess meanings of new items, predict outcomes or fill in missing information
<b>Socio-affective strategies</b>	
Cooperation:	Working with one or more peers to obtain feedback, pool information or model a language activity
Questioning for clarification:	Asking a teacher or other native speaker for repetition, paraphrasing, explanation and/or examples

**Table 1: Strategies used in language learning (Brown 2000: 125-6 from O'Malley 1985)**

### **Development of the language advisory service**

The centre has been fortunate in the support it receives from senior management at both executive level and within the Further Education Department. In 2002, we received funding for two additional part-

time academic staff to work in an advisory role and for formalised advisory sessions. Having examined models and considered the practicalities within our own context, we settled on half-hour sessions at various times of the day and also set up fortnightly advisory team meetings of half-an-hour when the manager and three advisors could:

- reflect on what was happening
- discuss issues arising from reading relevant literature
- reassess the advisory role
- support each other
- identify useful resources or strategies
- enjoy each other's company

In July 2002 two of the advisors attended a presentation by David Crabbe and Sara Cotterall at the CLESOL Conference in Wellington entitled *Learning from learners' experiences*. This session was inspirational and reflected what we had found in our involvement with students.

### Language advisory sessions – process

Our sessions involve an initial talk with the learners to get to know them and their background, or to recap on a previous appointment before we try to elicit the learners' perceived difficulties. This part of the session often takes the longest time and can be difficult for the learners because it requires some self-reflection and self-evaluation, which may not come easily. We then move into a negotiating phase where the learners, who are often looking for easy answers from the *expert*, are encouraged to think about their current practice, its strengths and weaknesses and other strategies that can be adopted to deal with the difficulty. This phase is often difficult for the learners because they are not aware of their own perceptions or knowledge about the best step forward. It is also difficult for advisors who have so much knowledge about language learning to share and are tempted to provide answers a little too quickly.

This phase is also the most rewarding because it is all about empowering learners and encouraging them to take charge of the processes of learning and to forge a path ahead for themselves. They can do this by sifting through all the information they have gained from prior experience, from questioning their own actions or from asking others. Our half-hour appointments usually end with an identification of the next steps to be taken and more questioning to find out how the learners are going to evaluate the success of the pathways chosen. Table 2 outlines a framework ((Crabbe, Hoffman and Cotterall 2001 in Dam 2001) which has been a model for developing guidelines.

<b>Dialogue agenda</b>	<b>Monitoring by advisor</b>	<b>Learner outcomes</b>
Unfold the problem	Learner acknowledgement of elements of problem	Expanded representation of problem
Establish goals	Learner statement of goals	Commitment to more specific goals
Explore beliefs	Learner engagement in (explicit) discussion of beliefs	Heightened awareness of own beliefs

**Table 2: Framework for developing guidelines**

Advisor and learners come to sessions with their own set of assumptions, learned experiences and needs and expectations and this has been a process of discovery about ourselves as well as for the learners, as one advisor explains:

*I found myself reflecting on my own teaching practice. As students shared their experiences and their understanding (or lack of understanding) of their teachers' practice or comments, it made me think about my own practice. One student shared with me that one of her teachers seems to have so much energy and enthusiasm. The student said it would take her (the student) a lot of courage to ask a question, and often the topic had moved on before she could even get the words organized. She asked my advice as how to handle this situation. How could she stop herself from*

*being so nervous? How could she respond to such a teacher? We discussed ways to respond to the problem, trying to link strategies to help solve the problem. At the end of the session, the student asked if I wanted to know the name of the teacher. I knew my professional boundaries – and I didn't want to go there. But the student told me anyway. She said it was me! This really made me look at my teaching style and delivery and yes I could see how this could intimidate a learner and be a bit overpowering at times.*

Table 3 outlines the macroskills we employ in advisory sessions. These match the skills outlined by Mozzon-McPherson and Vismans (2001: 62-3). Some of these skills are more challenging for us than others, depending on our individual personalities and beliefs. There is a constant need to reflect on advisory sessions and evaluate how our own assumptions about language learning or the learners themselves are affecting the interaction. This is a journey that will continue as we seek our own pathways to best practice.

Skills	Description	Purpose
Initiating	Introducing new directions and options	To promote learner focus and reduce uncertainty
Goal-setting	Helping the learner to formulate specific goals and objectives	To enable the learner to focus on a manageable goal
Guiding	Offering advice and information, direction and ideas	To help the learner develop alternative strategies
Modelling	Demonstrating target behaviour	To provide examples of knowledge and skills that the learner desires
Supporting	Providing encouragement and reinforcement	To help the learner persist, create trust, acknowledge and encourage effort
Giving feedback	Expressing a constructive reaction to the learner's effort	To assist the learner's self-awareness and capacity for self-appraisal
Evaluating	Appraising the learner's process and achievement	To acknowledge the significance of the learner's effort and achievement
Linking	Connecting the learner's goals and tasks to wider issues	To help establish the relevance and value of the learner's project
Concluding	Bringing a sequence of work to a conclusion	To help the learner establish boundaries and define achievement

**Table 3: Macroskills of language counselling (from Mozzon-McPherson and Vismans 2001:62-3)**

### Further developments

By the end of 2002, over a period of five months, we had seen 213 students in advisory sessions and noticed that learners often came with similar needs at a certain time of the semester. Fairly early in the semester, listening and reading skills and strategies were identified as a need and later, as assignments and tests loomed, writing often became the focus. After some discussion we decided to introduce workshops in 2003 so that we could reach more students at once and introduce them to generic skills and strategies. The workshops began as a pilot but have successfully opened new pathways to learning for the students who have attended. They are now an important part of our service.

We run workshops on ways to build vocabulary, reading skills, speed reading, listening, writing and speaking skills and have developed handout material for learners to take away and reflect on. The workshops are well attended (an average of 15 students at each session) and it is noticeable that a percentage of students who attend the workshops have been accessing, and assessing for themselves, recommended resources and strategies. In our *Focus for the Week*, we have also begun highlighting beneficial material which students might find difficult to discover on their own. In May 2003 we began *Speaker's Corner*. Here a volunteer or staff member provides speaking practice for one or two learners who lack fluency and confidence. The Language Support Centre and its programs continue to adapt and develop in the hope of opening many different pathways to successful language learning for our students.

## **Independent language learning – the learner and advisor perspectives**

*Independent learning is fostered by creating the opportunities and experiences which encourage student motivation, curiosity, self-confidence, self-reliance and positive self-concept; it is based on students' understanding of their own interests and a valuing of learning for its own sake* (Educational policy statement on independent learning at <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/policy/cels/e17.html> Chapter 7 Page 1 of 8). This statement points to the empowerment of learners as the aim of language learning advice and reflects our perceptions of the role.

Cognitive, metacognitive, affective, social and cultural factors play a role in our approaches to language learning. Learners are often not aware of the power of adopting learning styles and strategies that suit them. Existing skills and knowledge also come into play, as well as the learners' ability to self-access and reflect on learning. Culture influences our assumptions about teaching and learning, our strategies and focus during the learning process and our attitude to questioning and critical thinking.

Is it possible to introduce learners to new ways of learning and reflection when they are intensely focused on following one path and one path only? We have observed many examples in the past of learner dependency on one resource or one type of resource. In some extreme cases students, who were frequent users of the LSC, memorised a whole book and spent countless hours reciting the scripts. They then sought advice from a language advisor about which book to recite next. Benson (2001: 36-7) talks of personal constructs or views and their role in learning. We form ideas of how things work and interrelate as we try to make sense of what we experience in our lives and these dictate how we attack learning tasks. When new knowledge builds on existing constructs, we happily adopt the knowledge, but when it is contradictory, we have problems and there is some resistance. As advisors, our role is to help learners:

- become more aware of their assumptions about language learning
- acknowledge that there are alternative pathways
- take the appropriate action to enhance learning

Learner E had problems with taking responsibility for her own learning and sought proofreading or teaching assistance at each advisory session, despite multiple attempts by advisors to encourage her to evaluate her methods of learning, plan her next step and use error checklists and grammar resources to support her needs more independently. This learner, who was undertaking a degree course, was not willing to accept that a language advisor did not act as a personal tutor until this message was brought home to her very forcibly. Learner E now wants help accessing the right grammar resources to help her understand feedback given to her in assignments.

Learner X knew that inadequate vocabulary knowledge was hindering his ability to master English. After some questioning, he revealed his method of vocabulary learning was to memorise long lists of words and that he could never remember the words later. He felt that this was the right way to learn since it had worked with his first language. He was encouraged to broaden his word study, limit the number of words learnt, review his learning regularly and report back the next week. He was reluctant to change but came to the next session with a spark in his eye and a spring in his step. He was able to articulate how he had employed the new strategies and why they were successful for him.

Learners need to develop both independence and interdependence in their language learning in order to be successful. As Little (1996: 210) states: *the development of a capacity for reflection and analysis, central to the development of learner autonomy, depends on the development of an internalisation of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions*. Students need help in developing skills such as critical thinking, questioning techniques and self-assessment, and often fail to realise the depth of their own knowledge and skills.

Many factors affect the pathways to independence adopted by language learners. As well as the learning strategies (see Table 1) and learning styles, affective and socio-cultural influences can have a major impact on language learning. We are complex human beings and often do not realise what factors are affecting our ability to interact with a new language. As advisors, we have observed the role affective factors can play in learner perceptions. These include financial concerns, perceived time constraints, pressure from parents or peers, motivation or lack of it, age and confidence levels, the influence of prior experiences and emotional state. Brown (2000) outlines various personality factors

and their effect on language learners. These include self-esteem, inhibition, willingness to take risks, anxiety levels, ability to empathise, the degree of introversion or extroversion and various types of motivation.

Learner D sought assistance because she felt that he was not able to reach her goal of 5.5 in IELTS within the timeframe she had set for herself. She was visibly unhappy and found English boring. When questioned, she revealed that external pressures, ie: the financial drain on her family, was what was driving her to improve her English by a whole IELTS band in three months. She knew that this was unrealistic but felt herself trapped until she realised that she could renegotiate the timeframe and establish a realistic plan for herself. She has begun this journey and is now savouring every interaction in English.

Learner M felt that her English was not improving fast enough. She was doing a degree in communications, as a step towards her goal of becoming a news anchor, and felt that something was hampering her ability to express her ideas clearly and to increase her vocabulary knowledge. She later revealed that she had been criticised for her spoken English in her own country and that she needed to deal with some emotional baggage attached to that situation before she could progress. She has now seen a counsellor and has moved forward in her studies.

Prior experience and knowledge both have a role to play in how learners approach a new language. We attempt to transfer this information to any new and similar learning context. Brown (2000: 94-8) talks of the role of transfer and attempts to generalise in making sense of a new language. These strategies can have either positive or negative effects on our learning. In our centre we have observed the use of strategies, employed successfully by a learner in coming to grips with their first language, hampering efforts to learn English effectively. For example, Learner S has been using a successful L1 strategy and has tried to memorise large chunks of written English, but he is unhappy with his progress in writing. After seeking help from an adviser he has adapted his strategy by building on his vocabulary knowledge in active ways, and writing and analysing his own writing in comparison to model texts. On the other hand, many learners need to be made aware that the skills and strategies that were successful for them when reading in their first language can also work for them in their target language.

Some learners seek advisory support for reasons other than those intended when the service was set up. At times, we grapple as a team with defining the exact role of an advisor. For example, Learner F wanted to improve her speaking and considered an appointment with a native speaking advisor would be one way to get lots of good speaking practice. This is not the role we see as central to our work as advisors. Learner F has now had a number of appointments, has been asked to talk about her needs and how to achieve them, and has been introduced to a number of useful strategies and resources. It has taken some time but she has now sifted through the advice given to her by various people, assessed its usefulness to her situation and identified some possible pathways for herself.

As advisors, we also often debate the difference between advising and teaching. Teachers both advise and teach, depending on the situation and needs of students and so do language advisors. However, teachers come to know learner strengths and weaknesses through class work, whereas the advisor relies on input from the individual. The emphasis becomes one of collaboration and negotiation from the start, whereas the teacher is constrained by curriculum and its specific learning outcomes. The adviser needs to run two distinct, but simultaneous, strands of activity with each learner. The first strand is to counsel, teach and introduce resources appropriate to the learner. The second is to nudge and nurture learners towards reflective habits. This is done by reviewing and analysing their activities and strategies and encouraging them to make judgements about what is most effective for them in terms of language learning. This involves the microskills of counselling which are outlined in Table 4.

<b>Skills</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
Attending	Giving the learner your undivided attention	To show respect and interest To focus on the person
Restating	Repeating in your own words what the learner says	To check your understanding To confirm the learner's meaning
Paraphrasing	Simplifying the learner's statements by focusing on the essence of the message	To clarify the message To sort out conflicting or confusing meanings
Summarising	Bringing together the main	To create focus and direction

	elements of a message	
Questioning	Using open questions to encourage self-exploration	To elicit and to stimulate learner disclosure and self-definition
Interpreting	Offering explanations for learner experiences	To provide new perspectives To help self-understanding
Reflective feelings	Surfacing the emotional content of learner statements	To show that the whole person has been understood
Empathising	Identifying with the learner's experience and perception	To create a bond of shared understanding
Confronting	Surfacing discrepancies and contradictions in the learner's communication	To deepen self-awareness, particularly of self-defeating behaviour

**Table4: Micro-skills of language counselling**

Another major difference is the amount of time that can elapse between advisory sessions as opposed to classes. It is easy to lose the impetus of a learning plan and learners may lose confidence in a strategy or forget the big picture. However there are also benefits in that learners have time to trial new resources or strategies and it is easier to avoid dependency.

Advisors all have their own strengths and weaknesses but we continue to develop as individuals and advisors through a process of self-reflection and by sharing our experiences as a team. The Language Support Centre is stronger because of our different styles, but we also share some key strengths. We share an enthusiasm about learning and openly enjoy sharing new strategies or new *takes* on learning. This can inspire learners bogged down by study. We have expertise and are skilled at analysis and explanations. We can assist learners to accurately diagnose their needs. We take a nurturing approach in that we are confidence and relationship builders. We encourage and empathise and recognise progress. We reflect on learners ideas.

**Where we are now - ongoing challenges**

Over time it has become more and more apparent to us that there must be strong links between what we offer at the centre and the courses within the Institute. Conversations with learners reveal that they do not associate the work they do in the LSC with their classroom objectives and this has been reinforced by comments made by learners in advisory sessions. Many feel that their classwork prepares them for general English and that the centre is the place in which they can focus on preparation for the IELTS or other kinds of English language tests. The perceived need to expose themselves to as much test practice materials as possible often prevents them from building on the knowledge gained in class. Other students see the centre as a place to relax and *be entertained*. Many young male international students watch movies with no learning outcomes in mind. For them it is a time to switch off and let the language wash over them.

Students need some preparation before becoming independent language learners. Learners need to become more aware of their central role in the decision-making process (Gardner and Miller 1999: 11) and a good place to foster this awareness is the classroom. This sometimes requires a change of focus for the classroom teacher. It requires a switch from a *directive* role, as dictated by program constraints and accountability, to a *facilitator* of individual learning opportunities. It also often means a change in focus for the institution as a whole. We see the fostering of the latter approach to be part of our centre's role, by encouraging and supporting lecturers individually, holding workshops for teaching staff, modelling relevant techniques and constantly promoting independent learning in our communication with executive, academic and support staff across the institution.

We are also increasingly aware of the plight of mainstream students ie: those not studying English or Foundation studies. Some of these students have been accepted on courses when they lack some of the necessary language skills. These students have heavy workloads and limited time to spend on developing language skills. They are briefly introduced to our centre on their tour of the campus at the beginning of their studies but the high percentage of part-time students means that this orientation reaches a relatively small number of students. Word-of-mouth is important in any large organization and we are hoping that learners who have received a warm welcome in our centre, and who have benefited from the advisory service or the resources available, will recommend it to other students needing some support. We are also trying to form closer links with other student support services across the campus, meeting with academic advisors in each department, presenting joint workshops

with the Student Learning Centre, keeping in contact with student mentor groups and referring students to literacy support, where relevant.

We realise that being visible to learners and staff across campus is important, as is knowing how our role interacts with that of others within the institution. Students may be more comfortable approaching their lecturer or Learning Centre staff if they are having a language-related difficulty and it is important to keep all the connections open. There are many misconceptions about the role of the Language Support Centre. Some see the centre as providing support only to students from non-English speaking backgrounds or to those who have failed in some way. Others think that the centre offers language courses. We still have many challenges ahead.

There are references in the literature to the differences between self-access and independent learning (see Gardner, Miller and Benson 2001). Learners can access any collection of resources but sometimes the link between what they use and why and how they use it is not made without assistance. We have attempted to create that link for learners with the various initiatives outlined above. It is a journey that is not yet complete but we feel that our centre has moved away from its original label as a *self-access centre* and is further along the pathway to being an independent learning centre, offering a variety of learning opportunities to students.

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