

## From Intention to Contextualised Action: Language Advising as a Negotiation Process

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### Abstract

This article discusses findings from a study that aimed at describing advising 'in action', analysing the complex decisions that specific advisers engaged with specific learners in specific contexts adopt during the advising sessions in order to fulfil the advising aim of 'helping learners to progressively take full charge of their learning'. Advising is shown as a three-level negotiation process: the explicit negotiation that takes place in the verbal interaction between adviser and learner is echoed both in the internal negotiation that learners engage in with themselves during their work sessions, and in the internal negotiation that advisers engage in with themselves while they are advising. Advising is also a contextualised activity based on a progressive adjustment between the adviser's and the learner's subjectivities. The article ends with a discussion of some of the elements that enable advising to create conditions favouring the development of the learner's learning competence and autonomy.

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### Introduction

For some years now, researchers have worked to define the nature of language advising, trying in particular to specify the differences between the adviser's role and the teacher's role. These studies show that one of the main differences between teaching and advising is that the adviser's role is non-decisional. As Holec (1996) described it, the role of the adviser in the advising sessions is to help learners to prepare their learning decisions and to reflect on the decisions they have taken, so as to help them take better-informed decisions. A number of studies on learners' discourse in advising sessions testify that learners gain precision and complexity in their decision criteria for learning and that their learning competence develops. However we still lack information on the 'reality' of the work of advising and on the way advising proceeds in the context of a specific interaction.

This article discusses results from recent research which aimed at describing the characteristics of advising 'in-action'. It tried to understand how advisers try to solve the paradoxical situation of advising, as they have to decide how to let the learner take charge without imposing decisions nor ignoring problems. In other terms, the research aimed at analysing the complex decisions that specific advisers engaged with specific learners in specific contexts adopt during their advising sessions, and at showing what is at stake in the reality of 'advising in action'. We used two types of data which had been collected for a previous study (Ciekanski, 2005). First, all the advising sessions between a number of learners and their advisers were videoed, then the verbal parts of the interactions transcribed: this provided us with what we termed *objective* data on what was going on during the advising sessions. Then, the advisers and the learners concerned were interviewed, with the objective of having them express their own understanding of the nature of the advising relationship. The interviews were also videoed and transcribed and gave us what we saw as *subjective* data. Four

adviser/learner pairs functioning in two different self-directed learning schemes<sup>1</sup> were involved, with an average of seven advising sessions a pair.

### Advising: A Paradoxical Situation

Institutional self-directed language learning schemes (SDLLS) view learners as having full responsibility of both choice and control of their learning process and they centre around the learners' learning activity. On the other hand, SDLLS allow for the development of the learner's autonomy through a supporting device based on human interaction: it is the play between the help given by the supporting 'advising expert' offered by the institution and the activity of learning through direct access to resources which opens the way to the development of the learner's learning competence and self-direction. Several authors<sup>2</sup> have defined the principles of advising for self-directed learning: it is non-decisional, focused on the learning process much more than on the learning contents or results, retro-active, non-programmable and based on the conceptual framework of language didactics. These characteristics define what I will call the *advising intentions* of advisers as they begin an advising relationship with a learner. What becomes of these intentions during the actual advising sessions? How can and do advisers put these intentions into practice through their verbal behaviour?

Advisers find themselves having to constantly solve a paradoxical situation that is inherent to the nature of advising: they have to meet the developmental, more abstract objective of helping learners to progressively take full charge of their learning, while trying to meet the functional, more concrete objective of accompanying learners in their self-directed language learning activity. The existence of the two objectives for the advising session is fundamental to the development of the learner's learning competence, as experience is crucial to the transformation of the learner's conceptions and behaviours. But, as one objective deals with long-term conceptual change and the other with short-term acting, one can immediately sense that they are in a conflicting relationship. Thus, at every moment in their action as advisers, advisers experience the difficulty of solving the tension between helping the learner to learn how to learn, and helping the learner to go about the specific 'bit of learning' he/she is actually performing. For example, advisers have to decide whether to give the methodological help that their expertise can offer a learner who is experiencing problems. If they do, it is with the hope that the time gained will benefit the learner, but they run the risk that the learner remains dependent on their supply of help. Advisers also have to decide whether to accept the learner's accounts of his/her learning activity without discussing them, at the risk that a not-so-competent learner never becomes aware that he/she can become more competent, or whether to discuss the reports using expert criteria, taking the risk that the discussion may seem aggressive, abstruse or futile to the learner. Thus advisers have to constantly navigate between two opposite advising styles:

- a '*helping*' advising relationship, in which advisers tend to provide help beforehand, as soon as they foresee a problem even if the learner is not aware of it. This can lead the learner to remain dependent on the adviser's action and in turn prevent him/her from developing as an autonomous acting subject,
- an '*opposing*' advising relationship, in which advisers tend to use indirect cues or to differ them in order to bring the learner to find his/her own solutions. This can lead the learner to feel incompetent and discouraged and can in turn inhibit his/her autonomous learning activity.

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<sup>1</sup> Both schemes involved French adult learners learning English. The advisers were all experienced advisers, with a minimum of 10 years of experience. All advising sessions took place in French, which was L1 for all participants.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. in particular Crabbe et al. (2001), Gremmo (1998, 2003), Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans (2001) or Riley (1997).

## **Advising in Action: A Case Study**

Our research aimed to gain insight into how advisers deal with this paradox. To illustrate what we found, I will use a case study concerning an advising pair consisting of a learner, Lorraine, and her adviser, Nancy.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Subjective Data*

My first line of analysis is based on data from the interviews of Lorraine and Nancy.

In her interview, Lorraine seemed to have fully grasped the role of the advising sessions:

The advising session gave me help. Work took place when I was alone at home.<sup>4</sup>

She understood the relationship as an individualised non-expert/expert relationship. Individualisation was a very positive dimension for her as it allowed combining attention to the person and respect for the person's freedom. Lorraine saw Nancy as giving support and advice, but she felt quite a competent learner. She did not think she had improved her learning capacity during the period she was using Nancy's 'advising service':

...the advising sessions helped me but they did not really change my way of working.

Thus Lorraine's subjective report of her advising experience can be judged as rather disappointing in terms of learning awareness.

Nancy seemed to have experienced the relationship with Lorraine with some frustration. She felt that Lorraine had not understood her advising role, and judged that Lorraine had not improved much in her learning competence. On the whole, Nancy felt that she had not been able to advise Lorraine in the way she would have wished for, and in particular, that she had not fully succeeded in the 'learning to learn' objective of her advising role:

...a posteriori, I think that I could have brought her more.

One can see that Nancy's account of how she had experienced the advising relationship is partly in agreement and partly in contradiction with the way Lorraine reported how she had experienced it.

### *The Objective Data*

The objective data from the recordings of the advising sessions gave a very different picture. The extracts I will use here are taken from 3 advising sessions in which work for listening comprehension was discussed.

The second advising session (AS2) began with Lorraine's report of the work she had done. Reporting on RL, a comprehension material she had chosen during the first advising session (AS1), she stated:

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<sup>3</sup> Lorraine was a 24-year-old economy student and had registered in the SDLLS because she planned to apply for a post-graduate program which included an English test. Nancy was a 40-year-old experienced adviser. The advising sessions took place in French, Lorraine's and Nancy's L1.

<sup>4</sup> The quotations have been translated from French and have been cleaned to make reading easier.

I like RL because I had the text. In fact it is very difficult for me to understand the cassette without the text. If I use the cassette only, I only understand a third of it all, my comprehension level is not good enough yet.

At that point, Nancy chose to intervene and asked:

...did you read the comprehension questions before?

and gave a rather lengthy explanation of the reasons for Lorraine's difficulties. She gave her the following advice:

...it could be interesting for you to try not to look at the transcription too quickly, and instead read the questions before, and to listen to the cassette for the answers to the questions, even listening several times, stopping the cassette. You are in a learning phase and you have the right to listen twice, even several times, and listen for comprehension cues.

whereas Lorraine talked about a different solution:

I think that it would be better to start with smaller texts, and with simpler English.

The discussion was closed on the following exchange:

*Nancy:* If you find RL too difficult, you have the freedom to leave it if you want to.

*Lorraine:* Yes I think I'd rather work with something easier.

Thus Nancy reasserted Lorraine's choice and control over her learning activity, and Lorraine seemed to reach the decision to stop working with RL.

The following advising session, AS3, opened with Lorraine reporting:

Well in fact I have a small problem and I would like us to change our method. I have a lot of problems for comprehension and perhaps it would be better if we chose to work on expression, so that I will speak and surely afterwards my comprehension will be better.

As Nancy asked for details, it became obvious that Lorraine, contrary to what she had indicated in AS2, had put Nancy's advice into practice:

I read the questions before now, I try to find what it is about and then I try to note down everything I understand and to answer the questions at the same time. And I stop the cassette quite often!

Thus one can see that when Lorraine set to work on her own away from the adviser's presence, she had renegotiated with herself the decision expressed in AS2. She had recalled the information that Nancy provided her during the session, even if Nancy may have felt that she had not succeeded in negotiating a change in Lorraine's way of working. As Lorraine had worked according to Nancy's suggestion, she was compelled in AS3 to express the way she had understood it and put it into practice. Nancy was then motivated to reformulate her criteria and to re-assert her role as giving advice and respecting Lorraine's free will.

AS4 started with a completely different topic, as Lorraine reported on her work on oral expression: again one feels that Lorraine gave up working with listening comprehension. However, towards the end of AS4, she reported:

I worked with RL again and it is true that I understand better through listening again and again, and also when I know in advance what it deals with. I can fill in the answers better. And so I will keep on with RL.

Thus, our objective data shows evidence that Lorraine did improve her learning competence. As far as listening comprehension work was concerned, she acquired new techniques and transformed the way she conceived and evaluated her comprehension competence.

### **Advising: A Negotiation Process**

The difference found when we compare the two types of data emphasises what is at the heart of advising 'in action'.

First of all, our data demonstrates that advising is efficient because it is a negotiation process between two subjectivities in their full rights. The negotiation, which involves a non-decisional expert and a decisional non-expert, leads to the co-construction of knowledge and competence. It takes place at three different levels: the explicit negotiation that takes place in the verbal interaction between adviser and learner is echoed in the negotiation that the learner engages in with themselves as they are working on their own, and in the negotiation that the adviser engages in with themselves about their advising intentions as they are advising with a specific learner.<sup>5</sup> On one hand, the inter-psychic negotiation that the advising interaction creates is based on an intra-psychic negotiation on the adviser's part as they decide what elements of the advising situation they will focus upon. On the other hand, this inter-psychic negotiation leads to an intra-psychic negotiation on the learner's part about their learning activity, prompting them to reflect on their learning competence as it stands, and to experiment with aspects that may become part of their future learning competence.

Secondly, one sees that advising in action is always dependent on the learning/advising context. Even in the short example discussed above, one can see that each advising session is dependent, not only on what the learner has worked on, but also on what he/she chooses to report. Similarly, each advising session is dependent on the way the adviser chooses to focus on some elements of the learner's account. In that area, our data shows that, away from a totally 'helping' or a totally 'opposing' relationship, experienced advisers engage in a different type of relationship which we call a '*sensitive*' advising relationship, in which they react to the information given by the learner with their expert sense and personal sensitivity. This reaction will depend on how they understand what is going on at a specific time in a specific session with a specific learner. *Sensitive advising* relies on the adviser's authentic involvement: the adviser's action is based on what seems to him/her most adequate for the learner at the stage they have reached. It also confides in the learner's capacity to adapt the adviser's action to their advantage. Thus, the adviser's authenticity allows for 'errors', because the disturbances that authentic and 'spontaneous' advising may generate may have a positive effect on the learner since they are also a sensible and sensitive individual authentically engaged in the relationship. The learner's work period is crucial for the adviser's action to be proven useful. The help the adviser offers cannot be predetermined nor imposed, and has to be validated by the learner to be useful. The

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<sup>5</sup> The fact that Nancy started an exchange on Lorraine's comprehension techniques at that particular moment of Lorraine's account (as compared to any other moment of the session) is testimony to the adviser's on-going internal negotiation and decision process about when and how to act as an adviser.

adviser is then able to understand and structure his/her advising action a-posteriori. Here is how Nancy described her role:

...as an adviser I can only answer in a partial way, because it is not prepared. At the beginning of an advising session I have no synopsis. The session goes along with the learner's account but it remains coherent because I have an idea of what may occur and I know that at the end we have to agree on what he/she will do during the next working period. Advising is about establishing a link between two work periods and the learner's work gives it coherence.

The third point I will make is that the learner's development can only happen in a holistic way: the adviser's action cannot predict, let alone decide, the way in which the learner will evolve. Our data shows that the adviser's action, although non-decisional in terms of the learner's learning activity, is central for the improvement of the learner's learning competence, even though the adviser and the learner sometimes do not seem to be aware of it.

### Conclusion

The discussion above very clearly shows that the advising relationship is by nature a contextualised activity, and that the learner's development results from a progressive adjustment between the adviser and the learner. The options that the adviser takes during a specific advising session depend on his/her evaluation of the learner's situation at the specific advising moment concerned. They also depend on the interactive advising/learning history that adviser and learner co-build during the various advising sessions. The study helped us to understand some of the conditions without which it seems that advising cannot truly be a helping relationship leading to the development of an autonomous self-directing learner. I will emphasise three points:

- the importance of *an organised alternation of periods of work and advising sessions*: if the objective of advising is to help learners to build and carry out their learning activity, advising can only play its role if it is inserted between two periods of work. In addition, it is because learners know that there are 'reflexive intervals', separate and different from the working periods, that they can gradually see themselves as autonomous subjects, having control over their learning<sup>6</sup>
- the importance of *time*: the advising relationship has developmental objectives which can be only carried out with a certain time framework. It is very important that advising schemes should be organised so that learners will (or even have to) meet the adviser more than once at the beginning: they are thus given time to understand why and how advising sessions can be useful to them. In an advising session, advisers need time to be able to fully advise,<sup>7</sup> otherwise advising may remain nothing more than solving material problems. On the other hand, it is also important that the advising scheme offered to learners should be explicitly set within time limits,<sup>8</sup> so that learners can see it as structurally temporary even though they may not reach 'full' competence;
- the importance of a *relational continuity*: our study has shown how advisers organise their advising 'in action' in differentiated ways according to their understanding of the learner's evolution: the relational continuity between the learner/adviser pair is fundamental to the building of the discursive, formative

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<sup>6</sup> In the two SDLLS of our study, this alternation is made 'compulsory' through the way the scheme is organised.

<sup>7</sup> In the schemes involved in the study, the advising sessions lasted from 45 to 60 minutes.

<sup>8</sup> Both schemes in this study function on a 4-month (term) registration basis. In one of them, learners may also register for a year.

**and relational history that will create the conditions for the development of the learner's learning competence.**

### **The Author**

Marie-José Gremmo is currently Professor of Educational Sciences at Nancy-University, France. Until 2002, she was a member of CRAPEL, which she directed from 1998 to 2002. Her main area of research is self-directed language learning, with specific emphasis on resource centres, learner training, and the role of advisor. Her more recent work has analysed the characteristics of learner/advisor discourse, and she is now involved in a comparative study focusing on the institutionalisation of the role of language advisor in different contexts. She has acted as a self-access and autonomous learning expert in various countries.

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