

LANGUAGE ADVISERS AND THEIR ROLE IN SELF-ACCESS CENTRES

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ABSTRACT. *The main objective of this paper is to contribute to the research in a field which to date has not received the attention it deserves: the figure of language advisers and the role they play as facilitators of learning in the context of a self-access centre.*

In spite of not being abundant, the literature on the topic offers some information as to the characteristics of good language advisers including features related to the academic and professional requirements as well as to personal traits.

Based on this data a questionnaire was designed with the aim of gaining insight into how advisers themselves perceive the roles they play as well as detecting the strengths and weaknesses of the work they carry out in self-access centres. The results that may be obtained from the application of this questionnaires can prove an extremely valuable feedback for institutions and people in charge of these centres in order to establish whether there is a need for comprehensive training so as to create a centre made up of fully qualified professionals.

1. INTRODUCTION

A self-access centre¹ (SAC) is usually an unfamiliar context for most language learners in which they have to face a novel situation for which the support and guide of an expert will almost certainly be needed. This expert or language

1. The literature offers various definitions of what a SAC is. However, many of them lack an important component: the help (either human or material) learners should encounter in the centre to be able to work in it. Therefore, I propose the following definition: 'A self-access centre should be a space which offers learners all the human and material resources needed so that they are able to assume the responsibility to direct their own learning process'.

adviser consequently plays an essential role in this context where the learner has decided to carry out a self-directed learning process.

The presence of the adviser is also justified if we take into account that the ability to self-direct one's own learning has to be acquired due to the drastic change of role learners assume in taking over the reins of their language learning process.

However, we shouldn't make the mistake of asserting that without the help of an adviser, a learner is incapable of carrying out a learning process in a SAC and that, therefore, it is absolutely essential that all users have this support. In doing so, we would be restricting the freedom of choice of those learners who consider this help unnecessary.

Nonetheless, it is essential that SACs count on language advisers who can guide those learners who freely decide to take advantage of this service. From my viewpoint, centres should go even further by attempting to make learners see that the role of an adviser in a SAC is not a carbon copy of that the teacher plays in the classroom setting. Such a misunderstanding could lead some learners to reject this help for fear of finding a similar situation to that of the classroom which they might have voluntarily abandoned in search of a new context allowing them a higher degree of responsibility for their learning process. In this sense, Gardner and Miller (1999: 185) point out that learners should be encouraged to talk to an adviser and suggest that a way to do so is to arrange an obligatory interview for all learners who want to make use of the centre.

This measure, however, seems somewhat extreme to me as it means forcing the user to do something in a context which is supposed to promote learner autonomy and consequently freedom of choice regarding the various aspects involved in the learning process. Moreover, such a situation might in some way resemble that of a classroom context, which has been usually characterized by the teacher's control over all aspects involved in the learning process. It is a more sensible option to allow learners to go voluntarily in search of help and support because in doing so, it will be easier for them to consider the adviser a facilitator of the process and so avoid any of the negative connotations that obligation may bring about.

2. THE *GOOD* LANGUAGE ADVISER

The literature on the topic offers language advisers some advice about the tasks to be carried out in SACs although, as Gremmo and Riley (1995: 161) state, most of it is not based on data obtained from research but rather on the reflections and /or learning of more experienced language advisers. However, what the literature offers should by no means be rejected because, as I have just mentioned, it mainly comes

from professionals with wide experience as language advisers whose contributions can be of great help when it comes to analysing the figure of the adviser in a SAC.

The literature seems to reflect a consensus as regards the need for SACs to offer advisory services (Bailly 1995; Gremmo 1995; Riley 1997) made up of expert and qualified personnel who can provide the users a support of a more human nature in order to reach their objectives. The question, nonetheless, is the meaning of *expert* and *qualified* when talking about language advisers in a SAC. It goes without saying that the role of the adviser is going to differ a lot from that played by the teacher in the classroom setting where, among others tasks, the teacher decides the syllabus, selects the material to be used, the activities and the way to carry them out. This situation changes drastically in the context of a SAC and Gardner and Miller (1999: 182) reflect this change very clearly establishing the differences between a teacher and a language adviser. These differences are the following: i) the teacher uses the term *student* and the adviser the term *learner*; ii) teachers are considered leaders of the students and advisers collaborators in the learning process; iii) in the classroom there is a pre-determined syllabus and in the SAC a negotiated and flexible pathway; iv) teachers teach from a prescribed textbook and advisers orientate learners to an array of materials; v) teacher are assessors of students while advisers discuss with learners different forms to self-assess their progress; vi) teachers are instructors/organisers and advisers reflective listeners; vii) teachers use a variety of teaching aids and advisers show learners how to make use of materials and equipments; viii) teachers monitor a whole class looking for common problems and advisers discuss individual problems; ix) teachers give feedback on learning tasks and advisers encourage learners to reflect on the results obtained in those tasks.

As it can be seen, there are varied and remarkable differences between a teacher and a language adviser and it would not be realistic to expect that the change of role the teacher has to assume could take place overnight and without previous training or preparation. This opinion is also shared by authors such as Little (1990), Riley (1997) and Gardner and Miller (1999). Indeed, Little (1990: 11) expounds the situation in a very direct way:

It is not easy for teachers to stop talking: after all, if they stop talking they stop teaching and if they stop teaching their learners might stop learning. And it is not easy for teachers to let learners solve problems by themselves, for that takes time and there is always too much ground to cover. Committing oneself to learner autonomy requires a lot of nerve.

Riley's (1997: 122) opinion to this respect is closely related to the underlying idea in Little's words. For Riley, advisers –as language learners– have their own

representations, values and beliefs which inevitably are going to influence their new relation with the learner.

There is no doubt that teachers need a preparation to help them assume their new role and acquire the skills a good language adviser is supposed to have. From his definition of counselling², Kelly (1996: 94) considers that this activity will never be successful if teachers keep on trusting their learning techniques and classroom management strategies. On the contrary, advisers need to have several skills that help them change their perspective as regards the dialogue that has to be established between adviser and learner, a dialogue which is far from being similar to the traditional dialogue between teacher and student. In this sense, Kelly differentiates between what he calls macro-skills and micro-skills. The first are related to the general support the language adviser should provide regarding the different aspects involved in the learning process such as the statement of objectives, the variety of options available as far as materials and/or activities are concerned, the evaluation, and so on. Micro-skills are of a more personal nature and include, among others, to empathise with the learners' experience, to repeat their words to confirm understanding and to provide them with an individualized attention.

I agree with Kelly in his consideration that the adviser needs to behave not just as an expert in language learning and, to be more precise, in self-directed learning but also as a *person* who tries to establish with learners a dialogue in which mutual confidence and sincerity must predominate. For the establishment of that dialogue to take place, Kelly (undated) points out that the adviser must be aware of the following aspects: i) mutual confidence must exist in order to avoid the anxiety that the relationship can originate; ii) both the learner and the adviser must feel comfortable with the new situation for the advisory sessions to be effective; iii) both the learner and the adviser must be aware of their new roles; iv) the advisory sessions must be regarded as a chance for the exchange of ideas and not for the correction of mistakes; v) the sessions must lead the learner to become more aware of his situation regarding the learning process and the adviser to reflect on the learner's progress.

These skills pointed out by Kelly can be complemented with a more practical one to which Gardner and Miller (1999: 186) also make reference: it is of key importance that an adviser knows the SAC deeply, including all its resources, so that they are in the position to answer any question learners can posit. Indeed, learners will probably place more trust in an adviser who can provide them with

2. 'Counselling is essentially a form of therapeutic dialogue that enables an individual to manage a problem (Kelly 1996: 94).

a wealth of information (equipment, materials, etc.) than in one who shows complete ignorance of the place in which he or she is carrying out the task of facilitator of the users' learning process. This mistrust could take learners to avoid the help of the adviser for certain aspects closely related to their learning process.

The information that emerges from the literature suggests that a *good language adviser* must have such a great amount of characteristics as to make us deduce that it is necessary for teachers to receive a training to guide and help them assume their new role. However, as Harding and Tealby (1981) point out, it must be taken into account that the advisory sessions have to be relevant for learners, whose needs can continuously change, and therefore this activity cannot be considered a "static technique that can be learned and then applied" (Gardner and Miller 1999: 189), but rather as a continuing process. In this sense, and in order to provide support to teachers, Gardner and Miller (1999: 189-193) suggest carrying out a program of workshops involving the following aspects: i) orientation, where advisers face typical questions made by users to check their capacity to answer; ii) dealing with technical problems, where advisers are presented with problems of a technical nature to see if they are able to solve them; iii) developing advisory skills, where, among other aspects, the differences between a teacher and an adviser are dealt with; iv) what makes a good adviser, where personality issues would be treated; v) conversations with learners where advisers are encouraged to reflect on the conversations kept with learners; vi) dealing with general problems, where advisers can be presented with any kind of situation they may face in the SAC.

Riley (1997: 128-29) also makes reference to the need for the language adviser to receive a training in three different areas. First of all he talks about the *academic* matter, as he considers that an adviser must have a specialized knowledge in the field of language and in the field of language learning. This opinion is shared by Bosch (1996: 70) who adds that when selecting language advisers something that must be taken into consideration is the interest they show on topics related to learner autonomy.

Secondly, Riley considers that advisers need a *practical* training to help them familiarise with the SAC and, in contrast to the suggestions made by Dickinson (1987) and Gardner and Miller (1999), he considers that this training can only be acquired with practice or with the help of more experienced colleagues. We coincide with Riley in that experience is a fundamental factor to form qualified language advisers but, in my opinion, workshops and other activities of the kind are of great help to promote reflection and the exchange of ideas between the different advisers.

Finally, a part of the training must be devoted to develop useful advisory skills. With that purpose in mind, Riley (1997: 129-30) offers a series of techniques. For example, he suggests attending sessions carried out by other peers and similarly he considers that undergoing the same experience the learner does, that is to say, to become a self-directed learner, will give a more realistic and reliable perspective of the situation. Discussions with peers can also be of great help as well as recording advisory sessions for later analysis.

It would be the objective of another paper to carry out an analysis of different advisory sessions, paying attention to all the above mentioned aspects, in order to be in the position to judge their efficacy. However, what the literature offers does help us extract some basic requirements that have to be met if SACs intend to count on qualified advisers.

3. THE ROLE OF THE LANGUAGE ADVISER IN A SAC: A QUESTIONNAIRE

As it was pointed out above, the literature on the topic shows some necessary requirements that language advisers working in a SAC should meet. With this in mind, a questionnaire was designed (Navarro-Coy 2003) that can be used by the people in charge of SACs as a feedback to detect the weak points of those advisers working in their institution and, given the case, to implement the corresponding work lines for improvement. This questionnaire was used in a study (Navarro-Coy 2003) in which three SACs were analysed. One part of the analysis consisted of the distribution of the questionnaires among the language advisers of the centres. In the next point, its aims as well as the different parts of the questionnaire will be presented.

Needless to say, the questionnaire has to be validated, but it can hopefully serve a double purpose: firstly, to make people in charge of SACs aware of the need to count on prepared personnel to work as language advisers and secondly, to help them have a professional view of the language advisers working in their centres and on the situation of these centres as regards the running of the language advisory system.

3.1. STRUCTURE OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire is divided into four sections (A, B, C and D) and they differ from each other both in format and in the objectives they pursue. The first section (see section A in appendix 1) consists of three questions related to professional

issues about the advisers in order to check their experience and preparation as far as their academic training is concerned.

The main aim of section B (see section B in appendix 1) is to check the knowledge advisers have of various general aspects of the SAC such as the timetable, the criteria used for the classification of materials or the working of the equipment. With this purpose in mind, I used a table in which such aspects are reflected on the left side, with the right one offering the options 'YES' and 'NO' for advisers to indicate if they know them. It is important to point out the need for advisers to have a deep knowledge of the SAC in this respect and that is why it was considered more suitable to design this section using only dichotomic questions. Nevertheless, given the case of the ignorance of any of the aspect by the adviser it is possible to complement the information with the answers to question one in section D which attempts to check the training these people have received in order to carry out their tasks as language advisers. An evident lack of this training can lead to the ignorance of certain aspects the SAC involves.

Section C of the questionnaire (see section C in appendix 1) attempts to reflect the extent to which advisers assume their new role and are able to differentiate it from the role they play in the classroom setting. Three divisions (C1, C2 and C3) of this section were designed to try to establish this objective. The first, C1, aims at showing which aspects (both personal and professional) advisers consider to be important in order to carry out their tasks effectively. A Likert scale containing thirteen items was used for this purpose. Each item represents one aspect related to the personal or professional areas and the advisers surveyed must indicate the importance they assign to each on a scale from 0 to 5. In my study, I had a very small sample and this is the reason why I decided to include an even number (six) of grades with the aim of reaching a stronger compromise from the people surveyed. The use of an odd scale always includes a medium grade that can give rise to neutral reactions which may not contribute any significant data (see Del Rincón et al. 1995: 181). However, this last option that includes the medium grade has also been regarded as a way to simplify the task of answering the items in questionnaires.

C2 tries to reveal the differential features between a teacher and an adviser as they are perceived by the latter. To design this part of the questionnaire nine pairs of features were selected each of them containing one which is considered a more characteristic feature of a classroom teacher and the other a more typical aspect of a language adviser. Nonetheless, the questionnaire also offers the possibility of choosing the option *both* which indicates that a specific feature can be attributed to the teacher and to the adviser. I considered it necessary to include this option

as the current trend of many classroom teachers is to act as facilitators of learning, a role which resembles that of the adviser in the SAC.

Using a table adapted from Riley et al. (1989), C3 tries to assess the degree of the learners' self-direction taking into account who makes the different decisions involved in the learning process: the adviser, the learner or both through negotiation.

Finally, the objectives of section D (see section D in appendix 1) are to check, on the one hand, the training advisers have received or consider necessary to receive in order to work in a SAC and, on the other hand, their interest and knowledge on autonomy and what the term involves. This time, the section contains six questions made up in all cases of various open and closed sub-questions. The reason for this design was firstly the need to obtain information of the same nature from all advisers (closed questions) and secondly to give the people surveyed the chance to "express their opinions in depth" (open questions) (Ander-Egg 1997: 275).

4. AN OVERVIEW OF THE RESULTS OBTAINED AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR THE STUDY

As it was mentioned before, SACs should, in my opinion, count on a team of language advisers who can guide and support users throughout their learning process, as the past learning experiences of most of them have probably taken place in a classroom setting with the omnipresent figure of the teacher. Moreover the presence of an adviser can contribute to create a more human learning process avoiding a cool situation in which the learner only interacts with the learning materials of the centre. However, there still seems to be a lack of awareness about the key role played by these professionals in the SACs. As an example, we can talk about one of the centres analysed in the study which, in fact, has no language advisers at all due to the fact (according to the manager) that the enormous amount of students attending the centre would make it have a very large number of advisers, expenses that the centre could not undertake to pay.

This fact led to the distribution of the questionnaires in only two of the centres included in the research. Such centres belong to two different kinds of institutions: one of them is located in a school of languages and the other one in a university.

The SAC of the school of languages has a total of seven language advisers, but only five of them completed the questionnaire. These five advisers have the same academic qualification (a degree in English Philology) and an average of three years' experience as language advisers in this centre.

As regards the SAC in the university context, all the advisers (a total of six) answered the questionnaire. As in the first case, they all have a degree in English Philology but their experience as language advisers is very heterogeneous. In fact, three of them have worked as advisers for 9 and 10 years, one of them for 3 years and the other two for 1 year.

In both cases, the questionnaires were distributed in February 2002 by electronic mail, after getting in touch with the manager of the centre to ask for their cooperation. The questionnaires were given back to the author either by e-mail or through the post.

Next, we will try to reflect briefly some important information obtained from the result of the questionnaires once they had been completed by the language advisers of the two SACs.

Nowadays the roles played by the adviser and the teacher are not (and should not be) as different as some people believe, mainly if we consider the evolution that the teacher figure has experimented in the last decades. This situation was reflected in the results obtained in section C2 of the questionnaire. Such results showed how, in general, the advisers of the centres attributed to both roles certain features that have been usually considered more characteristic of a language adviser. Among such features we can highlight the following: cooperation in the learning process, negotiation of the learning objectives, talking with learners about the different ways to self-evaluate their progress or to provide feedback to the learning tasks. It is nonetheless true that in some cases the advisers showed reluctance to allow learners make some decisions on their own within the classroom setting. This is also reflected in section C4 where we found cases in which the advisers considered more appropriate to make the decisions themselves, for example decisions concerning needs analysis, materials to use and evaluation. From my point of view this reluctance may have its origin in the impositions made by the educational institutions as far as learning programmes, objectives and materials are concerned. This situation can make teachers get used to assuming responsibility in all those aspects and find it, therefore, more difficult to abandon it in situations which require it (namely in SACs).

However, if there is any conclusion we can draw from these results, this would make reference to the great similarity that, according to the advisers surveyed, must exist between the roles played in the SAC and in the classroom, then considering that both figures have to act as facilitators in the learning process.

As regards sections B, C1 and D the results obtained were very promising. These sections deal respectively with the knowledge advisers should have about the centres where they work, the characteristics good language advisers must

have and their knowledge and worries about all aspects involved in the question of learner autonomy.

In the first case (section B), most advisers showed a good knowledge of all the aspects mentioned in the questionnaire which were related to the SACs, aspects such as the timetable, the layout, the languages for which material is available or the criteria used for the classification of that material, among others. This way, the information that advisers can provide to the users of the centres will be much more reliable. Secondly, from the results obtained in section C1 we could observe the great importance advisers gave to certain aspects related to personality (to inspire confidence, to be flexible, to show respect and interest for each learner's situation, etc.). These features can undoubtedly contribute to create a more human language advising and to facilitate the dialogue between adviser and learner. Finally, and even though most advisers claimed to be familiar with and to be interested in the question of autonomy, section D of the questionnaires showed explicitly the advisers' perceptions on the need to be provided with a more systematic training to carry out their tasks in the centres in an effective way.

5. CONCLUSION

Having taken the contributions available in the literature as a starting point, we have attempted to offer a global view of different aspects that should be considered important when we talk about the tasks of language advisers in SACs. These aspects, reflected by means of a questionnaire, include different areas, namely personal, professional, technical, etc. neither of which should be rejected when the aim is to analyse the figure of the language adviser.

Once the questionnaires had been answered by the advisers and the results analysed there are some points which can be worth stating:

- a) as it was said before, the contributions available in the literature were taken as the starting point for the design of the questionnaire. However, before distributing them among the advisers, it might be a good idea to rely on the contribution of the centres' managers in order to find some possible important aspects the questionnaire may be missing in either of the sections.
- b) more specifically, as regards section C2, I have to say from the results obtained that the first three aspects mentioned (uses the term learner, uses the term student, is a leader of students) were widely discussed by the advisers surveyed. This is due to the role played by advisers and teachers

which is nowadays considered to be rather similar, and, in fact, nobody accepted a teacher to be *leader of students*. Some advisers made some comments in this respect, even though this part of the questionnaire was not designed with that purpose in mind. Therefore it could be interesting to include a blank space under the heading *comments* so that they can make the observations they consider appropriate. This option could also be useful in other sections of the questionnaire such as B, C1 and C3 in order to obtain a richer feedback from those people who are really involved in the work of advising users of a SAC.

Finally, I would like to mention that this paper is only a humble attempt at helping those people either in charge of self-access centres or working in them to become more aware (through the completion and later analysis of the questionnaire) of their needs and lacks for the development of the work of language advisers in the centre of their institutions.

APPENDIX 1: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

SECTION A

1. Academic qualification:
2. Language /s with which you work as an adviser:
3. Time you have worked as a language adviser in the SAC:

SECTION B

Do you know the following aspects of the SAC in which you work as a language adviser?

(Tick the appropriate option)

	YES	NO
Timetable		
Physical layout		
Languages for which material is available		
Criteria used for the classification of material		
All the learning material available in the language in which you are adviser		
Functioning of the equipment (videos, televisions, computers, etc.)		
Possibilities offered by the SAC to carry out other activities such as meeting native speakers, conversation groups, cultural activities, etc.		

SECTION C1

Using a 0 to 5 scale, assess the following aspects according to how important you consider they are in a language adviser (0 = such an aspect is not necessary to be a good adviser; 5 = such an aspect is essential to be a good adviser).

To be patient

0	1	2	3	4	5
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To have a perfect knowledge of the target language grammar

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

To inspire confidence

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

To be flexible

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

To identify with the learners' experiences

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

To be very fluent at the oral level

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

To be very fluent and accurate at the written level

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

To be approachable

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

To have a deep knowledge of the target language phonetics

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

To know the learning material available on the market

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

To be a very experienced teacher

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

To show respect and interest for the situation of every student

0	1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---	---

To have a knowledge of the different methodologies that exist in the field of foreign language learning / teaching

0	1	2	3	4	5
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SECTION C2

Which of the following aspects would you attribute to a teacher, which to a language adviser and which to both of them?

	Teacher	Adviser	Both
Uses the term 'learner'			
Uses the term 'student'			
Is a leader of students			
Cooperates in the learning process			
Negotiates the learning objectives			
Decides the learning objectives			
Decides the syllabus to follow			
Negotiates the syllabus			
Negotiates /orientates learners from a selection of materials			
Decides the materials to be used			
Evaluates the student			
Talks with learners about the different ways to self-assess their progress.			
Is an instructor / organizer			
Is a reflective listener			
Encourages learners to reflect on the results obtained in the language learning tasks			
Gives feedback on learning tasks			
Uses a variety of teaching aids			
Shows learners how to use materials and equipment			

SECTION C3

Who makes de decision	Adviser	Learner	Adviser and Learner
Nature of the decision			
Learning objectives (what to learn)			
Needs analysis			
Learning timetable (when to learn)			
Learning pace (how often)			
Length (for how long)			
Methodology (how to learn)			
Material to use			
Assessment of results			

SECTION D

Please, answer the following questions:

1. Are you receiving or have you received any type of training to work as a language adviser in a SAC?

If this is the case,

- What did the training consist of?
- Where did you receive it?
- Who was in charge of it?

If this is not the case, indicate if, in your opinion, that situation originates any type of problem in carrying out your tasks as a language adviser.

2. Regardless of whether you have received previous training or not, would you consider it useful to have access to some kind of additional training? In which areas? Why?
3. In the course of your professional career, have you acquired any experience on topics related to autonomy in language learning? If this is the case, please indicate how you have acquired such experience (courses, implementation in the classroom setting, etc.).
4. Please, indicate briefly what the term 'autonomy' means for you.
5. If you could choose between being an adviser, a teacher or both simultaneously, which one would you choose? Please, give reasons for your answer.
6. Do you think it is possible to be the teacher and the adviser of the same students / learners? Why / why not?

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