Reflective Dialogue: Advising in Language Learning

by Satoko Kato and Jo Mynard

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Reflective Dialogue: Advising in Language Learning, the fourth title in the Routledge Research and Resources in Language Teaching series, is designed as a comprehensive resource book on advising in language learning, which addresses the needs of teachers, learning advisors, and administrators who intend to develop and research their advising practices. To this end, the book is composed of four chapters written in uncomplicated prose, with each chapter building on the previous one.

The authors, Satoko Kato and Jo Mynard, begin the introduction by drawing reader attention to the fact that the growing field in applied linguistics, of advising in language learning, has emerged in recognition of the need for learners' individual differences to be accommodated in learning environments. Thus, they may develop autonomy and become successful language learners, following their unique paths at their own pace. The authors, building on previous work on advising in language learning, call for a refined perspective in advising: “helping students to direct their own paths to become more effective and autonomous language learners” (Carson & Mynard, 2012, p. 4). They believe autonomy can be achieved when learners become aware of and manage their learning process and transfer that knowledge to different contexts. They then propose that learners can experience this transformation under the guidance of a learning advisor and through a reflective dialogue, which “is different from ordinary dialogue as it draws upon a set of unique and intentional strategies” (p. xiii). In this sense, ‘Intentional Reflective Dialogue (IRD)’ is the core concept around which this entire ‘Transformational Advising’ model has evolved. The model, along with its theoretical underpinnings, contains design features relating to its actors, including their roles and interactional patterns in context, tools, strategies, training modules, observed practices and discourse, and research paradigms. The book aims to equip learning advisors with a working knowledge of necessary skills and strategies to help learners closely observe and analyse their learning processes, set and achieve their goals as language learners, and take charge of their learning. By engaging in this reflective process, learners can gradually improve the quality and depth of their learning as well as increasing their capacity for self-evaluation and decision-making.
Before proceeding with the main chapters, the authors provide some preliminary information on the real and fictional characters appearing in the series of stories which succinctly serve the purpose of illustrating how reflective dialogues are structured between learners and learning advisors.

To help less-experienced advisors, the authors have thoughtfully included a ‘Metaphors and Terminology’ section. One entry that caught my interest is the term ‘learning trajectory.’ This term is frequently used in the book to refer to the direction learning takes as learners develop a deeper awareness of themselves, presenting an innovative perception of the process, unlike the concepts of ‘stage’ or ‘phase.’ Each major body of text – a section, part, or chapter – features a reflection paragraph on the personal experiences of one of the two authors and a set of follow-up reflection questions to help readers relate to the content.

Chapter 1, From Research to Implications: Introducing Advising establishes the theoretical foundations of the book and gives an informative account of how the concept of transformational advising has developed. It draws on strategies and knowledge from a variety of fields, including advising in language learning, counselling, reflective practice, coaching, sociocultural theory, and transformation theory embedded in IRDs. The proposed model is justified with clear references to the related research and sufficient detail is provided in the conceptualization of core elements. The authors highlight the significance of intentionally constructing IRDs in order to promote deeper learner reflection towards transformation. This is further defined as the process through which individuals enlarge their world view and experience a flexible, reflective and holistic paradigm shift. In this model, the authors expect that depth of reflection will increase as learners move along their ‘learning trajectory’: from getting started, going deeper, becoming aware, to transformation. Intended moves can be achieved by the appropriate and efficient use of four different advising approaches: prompting action, broadening perspectives, translating awareness into action, and assisting transformation. It is suggested that learning advisors select an approach or a combination of approaches, depending on the requirements of the specific advising session they are engaged in. Appendices at the end of Chapter 1 present 16 basic advising strategies and 25 tools, with examples and practical tips which help to balance the theoretical load and relate directly to real-life circumstances. One useful tool, described in the appendix, is the Wheel of Language Learning (WLL). This requires learners to indicate graphically their level of satisfaction with six different areas of their learning, such as goal setting or enjoyment in learning, and then reflect on their self-evaluation. An effective advising strategy here would be to use metaphors, as suggested by the authors. Encouraging learners to use metaphors to describe their current situation or ideal future situation helps advisors to enter the learners’ imaginary world and more easily empathize with them. For instance, describing their goal as “something buried deep in the earth” gives important clues to their advisor as to how manageable or challenging they find the task: sometimes metaphors tell more than words.

Chapter 2, From Implications to Application: Advising in Practice is composed of two parts. Part 1, Dialogue in Advising provides a detailed description and discussion of the different types of dialogue that can be constructed while working with advisees. There are 30 sample dialogues, including an introduction, aims, preparation and procedure sections and these are sequenced to follow the ‘learning trajectory.’ For instance, in the dialogue ‘challenging existing values’, advisors are cautioned to make sure they have established adequate rapport with learners, as this type of dialogue may cause them discomfort. The authors give this example: ‘You are using the grammar book which you think is
not appropriate for you now but you are still using it because your teacher recommended the book. What does it mean to follow your teacher’s advice?” (p. 148). Though such a dialogue requires learners to leave their comfort zone, it can effectively guide them to question existing values and discover alternative ones, when used appropriately. Therefore, the authors warn readers about the possible issues that may come up at critical moments and offer well-tried ideas.

**Part 2, Training and Development for Learning Advisors**, on the other hand, presents ideas about how to initiate and continue structured training activities for learning advisors. Similar to the trajectory of the dialogues introduced in Part 1, the training exercises here also follow a learning trajectory, for advisors this time, and aim to help them transform from advisors to mentors eventually. The exercises encourage advisors to utilize different advising strategies in their sessions, and record, transcribe, and reflect on them to discover their ‘best-selves’ as advisors (p. 233).

**Chapter 3, From Application to Implementation: Advising in Context** focuses on the ways advising services can be offered in different settings and contexts. Initially, the concept of 'structured awareness raising' is introduced. It refers to the involvement of learners themselves and their peers, which is different from the idea of learner training. This is an important distinction since in learner training learners are assigned relatively passive roles, simply following the tactics and strategies offered by their advisors. However, in 'structured awareness raising,' IRDs do not consist of fixed patterns or chunks or offer fixed recipes for all possible conditions; on the contrary, they dynamically unfold as advisees and advisors interact. Further details are presented as to the different types and ways of advising, with a consideration of their benefits and limitations. Readers have direct access to the authors’ valuable insights and solid experience in a variety of settings and contexts, with the authors distinguishing between:

1) face-to-face or written
2) individual, group or peer combinations
3) L1 or Target Language advising
4) inside the class, online, in self-access centres or advising centres
5) voluntary or compulsory sessions.

The next section on recruitment, training, and professional development, clearly explains how advising services can be initiated and maintained in an institution. In the final part, ethical issues such as confidentiality and evaluation processes are dealt with.

**Chapter 4, From Implementation to Research: Researching Advising** is an important highlight of the entire book as it underlines the need for embedding research into advising routines and provides practical research ideas and tools to help readers get started. These are introduced in four parts, following the learning trajectory. In each part, in addition to the research ideas and a reference list of previous studies, sample projects are presented to help relatively inexperienced advisors become accustomed to conducting their research and refining their practice, based on such feedback and reflection. The final section is dedicated to some data collection methods that are useful for researching advising.

The end product, which has grown out of a labour-intensive period of more than ten years of research, program development, training, application, implementation and revision, provides a clear, systematic presentation of the critical principles and tools of advising in language learning with their applications in context and thus deserves the highest praise. This volume, also available as an e-book, is an outstanding resource for current and future learning advisors.

"One-off advising is often first aid, whereas continuous advising is holistic care." (p. 109)  
Satoko Kato
Notes on the authors

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References

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