An analysis of the skills and functions of language learning advisers

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Abstract

This article analyses how the increased importance of self-access centres and independent learning has given rise to a new profession: the language learning adviser. It does this by identifying and examining the distinctive features of advising in relation to teaching and learning, and by comparing the advising model - used at the University of Hull and adopted by other Higher Education institutions (Project SMILE)[1] with the person-centred counselling model. These models utilise dialogue to encourage reflection on learning and understanding of self in relation to language, and to promote self-organised learning (Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1991). We conclude by highlighting the need for further research and development to ensure the professionalisation of this role.

Key words: Advising, Independent Learning, Learner Autonomy, Learning Support, Self-access.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade the education sector has undergone enormous changes in an effort to respond to the challenges posed by developments in the global and national economic, social and political systems. One of the key factors which has stimulated globalisation has been the rapid expansion of information technology which resulted in increased demands for lifelong

1. SMILE (Strategies for Managing an Independent Learning Environment) is a three-year project led by the University of Hull and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Northern Ireland. Further information at: http://www.hull.ac.uk/langinst/smile

learning and labour mobility. Such changes have had implications for higher education. They have affected the nature of the student population (in terms of age, prior knowledge and experience), the type of graduate skills, students' expectations of the facilities and learning modes.

These changes have occurred in higher education parallel to demands for greater cost-effectiveness, and one of the solutions has been increases in class sizes, reduction in class contact time and the proliferation of multimedia environments such as self-access and open learning centres. There is also a developed educational argument (Esch, 1994; Little, 1991; Holec, 1988; Dickinson, 1987; Rogers, 1969) which sees the advantages of more autonomy in learning as a vital component for the future effective functioning of the individual in society, and the need for more varied, open and flexible structures to support this.

Despite the centrality acquired by self-access centres and independent learning, some of the findings resulting from the Teaching and Quality Assessment Exercise —conducted during 1995-1996 in England and Northern Ireland in university language departments— showed that, whilst about 50% of universities enjoy well-resourced language learning centres, in nearly one-third, the facilities of such centres are not fully exploited.

Similar remarks can be found in various studies carried out in different countries (Pemberton et al.,1996; Cotterall,1995). These studies seem to highlight an often misleading, or conveniently assumed perception that learner autonomy —full or partial— can be fostered by the very presence of new learning environments rich in varying degrees of technology and other multimedia resources.

This assumption is also reflected in the numerous conferences and workshops held on the theme of independent learning in relation to the use of CALL and other technologies. The discourse tends to be towards a more self-contained, pre-packed type of learning to ensure maximum flexibility and minimum personnel. Efficiency is often confused with effectiveness. In the case of self-access centres, this is largely achieved by investment in equipment and resources rather than qualified personnel and training. In the case of courses, this is achieved by reducing the number of contact hours and introducing compulsory independent learning components. The latter vary in their shape from portfolio-based activities to computer-based, self-access activities (Bickerton & Gotti, 1999).

By contrast, during the Teaching and Quality Assessment Exercise of 1995-96, the University of Hull was particularly commended for

> its innovative policy of providing an Open Learning Adviser for languages, a facility which is much valued by students who can consult the Adviser for help with study skills specific to language. (Overview Hull Hispanic Studies, para 37: 9)

As a result, the SMILE Project was funded to help disseminate good practice in the area of independent learning and learning resources in 1997.

The project's focus is on learner training and language advising, as strategies to promote, manage and support independent learning.

One striking feature revealed by SMILE's introductory visits to some 20 universities, and through responses to a questionnaire sent to 251 Higher and Further Education institutions in the UK, has been the range of interpretations of what constitutes learner independence, and the methods/solutions sought to encourage it. This author can tentatively divide them into two main strands:

— **independence as a new methodology,** that is, as a subject to be taught to learners. An ability which develops out of the classroom, within prescribed parameters, and contains a dialogic interaction typified by the I(nitiation) - R(esponse) - F(eedback) model described by Sinclair and Brazil (1982). In this notion of independence, new technology and resource-based learning are seen as dominant elements in encouraging independent learning. Within this framework, processes of learning tend to be documented and assessed.

— **independence as a capacity** to reflect on the learning experience and determine objectives, define content, select the appropriate methods and techniques, monitor and evaluate progress. An ability which needs to be encouraged through reflection, interaction and active participation in the learning process.

Each interpretation has a knock on effect on learners' beliefs and representations of teaching and learning, management and arrangement of the learning space and materials and management of the learning task.

The first interpretation of autonomy tends to result in investment in new resources, technology, standardised systems and tools, with independence as synonymous with individualism. The role of the teacher turns out to be mainly that of the assessor both of the language and the learning process. Activities tend to be prescriptive, directed and teacher-led. The level of initiative is limited to the choice amongst a pre-selected range of activities. The self-access centre becomes the space where independent learning is carried out. The type of personnel employed in the centre tend to be librarians or technicians since the emphasis is on the 'where' and 'when' rather than the 'why' and 'how'.

In the second interpretation, the focus is more on interaction and collaboration, with a tendency to choose tools and approaches which promote and support collaboration and interaction. This approach demands a rethinking of the role of teacher and learner in the classroom and in other learning environments (be they self-access or computer-mediated). It requires staff and learner development, and a different interpretation of self-access centres as dynamic learning environments representing only one of the many opportunities to exercise independent learning. In this second approach, the role

of the language learning advisers appears as an essential component in the self-access centre and they contribute to support and encourage independent learning. They provide formative rather than summative feedback. It is this second approach which is favoured by SMILE.

This article explores the skills and functions used in language advising and examines a range of strategies adopted by advisers to promote and support independent learning in self-access learning. The analysis is based on this author's experience as an adviser at the University of Hull and extends to other experiences gathered from four additional institutions - involved in Project Smile - which recently set up a language learning advisory service following the Hull model. It addresses the issues of implementation and management of the service and looks at the future of the role and its implications for staff development and research.

2. Language advising in practice: setting up and managing a language advisory service

Advising involves reactive and proactive functions within an interactive framework (Mozzon-McPherson, 1996). This section focuses on the organisation and management of an advisory service and examines some of the main functions necessary to perform them effectively. It starts by providing a profile of the users of the service and then looks at some of the tools adopted by advisers in their daily activities. It explores some of the functions performed by the service and concludes by providing some of the evaluation mechanisms introduced to monitor its effectiveness.

2.1. User profile

One of the crucial pre-requisites for fostering the development of an independent learning approach is to know the learners: who are the self-access centre's learners? Why do they come? What do they do? How do they use the centre? What expectations do they have? What assumptions about language learning do they bring? These are some of the questions which have confronted the advisers in Hull and which have been turned into a needs analysis questionnaire adopted during the first session with a learner. The data are then gathered in a database which allows the advisers:

— to draw more generic information about the users' profile
— to contribute to the design of appropriate learner/staff development sessions
— to inform the acquisition of adequate resources, and
— to provide recommendations to departments and the university as a whole.

Some of the tools used to acquire knowledge about the advisory service and the self-access centre's clientele include:

— needs analysis
— learner profiling
— analysis of learning styles
— study plans and learner diaries/portfolios
— resource audits
— provision of learning strategies workshops (listening strategies, reading, mnemonic skills, time management, goal setting, understanding grammar, analysing needs, etc.).

The advisory service at Hull is open to undergraduate or postgraduate students, staff or people from the local business community who want to improve a language they already know, maintain a language they have learnt or start a new language. They may be following a course or they may have chosen to learn in open learning. They may be language specialists or students from other disciplines. The opportunity to learn a language is open to all in the university community, and the advisory service is one of the opportunities available to support, promote and manage independent learning.

During the course of the first semester 1998/99, the advisory team has supported over 125 self-study plans. On average the advisers oversee 200 independent learning programmes a year. Of these, several were organised as group advising sessions, with up to four students, followed by individual sessions as and when necessary. The languages were: English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Arabic, Dutch, Greek, Japanese and Norwegian.

2.2. Organisation of the service

The advising team works on an appointment system both for individual or group sessions. Choice and self-selection is a feature of the service. It is not a compulsory component of a course but a service which is available as, and when, a student perceives the need to use it. There are cases in which teaching staff refer students in need to improve specific skills. It is nevertheless up to the student to take up this recommendation, or to use other sources to address the identified problem. Other institutions which offer an advisory service, have adopted a more directive approach (Pemberton, 1999) and require their students to attend three to five advising sessions. In other cases only the first introductory session is compulsory. However, the latter two systems are possible if the advisory service is only limited to a specific audience (e.g., students of modern languages degrees, EFL groups, a specific language group) and number of students.

The first session generally lasts up to one hour and involves a preliminary needs analysis, an introduction to the relevant resources and facilities and the negotiation of a study plan. Subsequent sessions are negotiated as appropriate. We have not prescribed a number of sessions to respect the needs of the individual advisee. Sessions take place partly in the adviser's office and may then continue in the self-access centre and/or on-line, once needs and/or

problems have been discussed. We know of centres which operate an 'on-the-spot' advisory service. This tends to happen in an open area positioned in the centre. This solution has advantages in that it compels students to visit the centre. Amongst the disadvantages is the lack of privacy. At Hull we provide a 'help-desk' service which mainly focuses on practical questions about locating resources and services and accessing equipment. For specific advice students are then referred to the advisory service. We work in close cooperation with the help-desk receptionist who contributes to the dissemination of the service.

2.3. Feedback mechanisms

The advising team at Hull uses a series of mechanisms to evaluate the validity of the service and to assess and improve both the self-access environment and the service. To assess the uses of the service we have devised a questionnaire which students using the centre complete. This questionnaire is handed in regularly to users by the receptionist and the advisers. The questionnaire aims to assess the extent to which the self-access environment is catering for its users. For example, Saturday morning openings (9.30-12.30), radio recordings in different languages, changes in the uses of space and workshops on the uses of the World Wide Web were introduced as a result of requests from our users as expressed through the questionnaire. A strength of our environment lies in the fact that students can inform changes which mirror changes in their needs. We also run on-the-spot surveys where we observe and ask students what they are doing and why. Other, more quantitative checks are carried out by counting the number of students who entered the centre, since users enter with their university card via an electronic turn-stall.

More difficult is to measure the impact which advising sessions have on students' learning. Can we prove that learners who use the service benefit from it? And how? Can the benefits be measured in terms of better linguistic performance? The advisers keep a profile of each learner who accesses the service and regularly update it with relevant notes and observations from the students. We now have a dossier which contains quotes from students and staff who valued the service. We also keep evaluation forms of the learning strategies workshops and other induction/orientation activities we run in the centre throughout the year. Below are a few extracts from the dossier and the workshops' evaluation.

> I feel more confident and positive now
> I have adopted suggested learning strategies to other languages I am studying
> I feel more motivated and languages are now more fun to study
> Thank you very much for showing me all these resources, I wouldn't have ever dared to use them. Now I am not afraid of using them anymore! It will be more fun to learn the language!
> Keep going with the service. It is really useful.

In some cases this better understanding results in improved grades. In one case the improvement was so dramatic that it received the following astonished comment from a member of the teaching staff. "*Warum nicht frueher?* [Why not earlier]?" The student's response to that comment was *"because I did not know about learning what I know now".* She verbally thanked the adviser who followed her in her self-study programme. The latter type of feedback requires further investigation and the advising team at Hull is engaging in a pilot research programme to study this correlation between improved grades and the role played by the advisory service.

2.4. Advising features

A crucial element in the learner's developmental process is the effective use of learning strategies (Cohen, 1998). At Hull, one activity organised by the language learning adviser is a series of learner development workshops aimed at specific language abilities or resources. Alongside strategies specific to language learning, other more generic strategies are introduced: time management, communication strategies, goal setting, strategies to identify the appropriate resources, or repair strategies, to mention some (Mozzon-McPherson, 1999).

The notion of strategies is associated with an element of consciousness and part of the work carried out in learner development sessions is consciousness raising to empower the learner of his/her own learning process. Strategies are not good or bad in themselves, but they are only as good or bad as the use that is made of them. In whatever case, the objective should always be to use them effectively. Strategies can be observed, analysed, rehearsed, learnt. It is therefore important for an adviser to act in a non-prescriptive way to enable the learner to find his/her best strategy/ies. The adviser may introduce and demonstrate new strategies, but once again the responsibility for the practice is on the learner.

One previous student of this author used to learn entire texts of business French by heart. This particular strategy worked for her for a long time. She was aware it was not helping her, but the positive outcomes (good marks) made her continue to use it. However, she reached a point in her second year at university where the complexity of the texts and the sheer amount of work in all her subjects did not allow her brain to cope with the level of memorization task she had to accomplish regularly to be able to cope in class. She approached the adviser and started a learning strategy programme aimed at analysing the learning task and applying a variety of strategies as required by the complexity of the task. She was introduced to note-taking and mind-mapping, gradually learnt to analyse text, simplify complex concepts in words and re-elaborate these concepts into sentences. The training was intensive but, with the guidance of the adviser and her motivation to find a more intelligent way to learn, she managed to overcome her difficulties and appreciate her second year courses more.

This is an example in which the role of the adviser helped a learner to face her learning barriers and find her best way to deal with the tasks. In so doing, she learnt to take risks, ask questions, grab opportunities to clarify or practise the language, to work with her time more effectively and to consult other resources which could help her solve the learning task. She was developing her independent learning. Her communication strategies developed in the process of explaining to the adviser what her problem was, how she dealt with it and if it worked. Her final marks and the quality of her work also improved.

To understand the student's learning process, it is important for the advisers to be aware of a wide range of strategies and to have undergone a strategy-based programme themselves (Cohen, 1998). This knowledge is a key component in the portfolio of a good language learning adviser.

Another key feature of this service is confidentiality and neutrality. Some learners see an adviser because they have received feedback from their tutor and they need to improve in specific linguistic abilities. The agenda has therefore been dictated by an external factor. In order for the service to work effectively it is essential that the adviser clarifies his/her position of neutrality in relation to assessment of the learner's performance when in an advising session. In these cases of referral, the learners already come with a sense of failure and a high level of demotivation, sometimes frustration and stress. Creating a supportive and positive climate is the first rule for a good adviser. The adviser makes it clear to the learner that she/he has no role in assessing his/her final linguistic performance but will - together with the student's full cooperation - help overcome the existing problem. In other cases, learners see an adviser because the courses they are attending do not satisfy their needs (they are pitched too low or are narrow in focus, etc.), as illustrated with the following words:

> Mainly it's that I've lost my confidence and consequently my coherency [sic] in spoken [...] [name of language], as I only have one hour of [...] [name of language] oral each week in which we discuss esoteric things in a classroom situation I find inhibiting and a little bit intimidating. (Student 1)

Once again, it is not the adviser's role to comment on the course or take a position but only to help the learner understand what is causing this dissatisfaction, and suggest ways to compensate his/her needs. Teaching styles may be incompatible with learners' preferred styles. Helping them realise that learning styles can affect their performance and participation is an important first step. The quotes below illustrate such difficulties.

> we also feel that [...] staff should accept that students have different ways of learning e.g. making notes, self-study etc. and are perhaps sacrificing Gramex and Gramdef [two compulsory software programmes] work for this. Also that these forms of self-study can be used to fill in the logbook. (Student 2)

> it seems that the only way to learn [...] [language X] grammar is trans-
> lation. I find it boring and after a while I lose interest. (Student 3)

> we are always asked to work in groups or pairs but there are times
> when I would rather work on my own. (Student 4)

The language adviser would assist the above learners to identify suitable strategies to adjust to different teaching and learning approaches.

Sometimes the needs are developmental in that there is a personal need to improve or develop new skills, as in the case of a student who came to the adviser to find out about new ways of organising vocabulary. She was introduced to mind-mapping and she found this an interesting approach to vocabulary. As she stated:

> I suppose what I needed from you was some reassurance that I was going in
> the right direction and some idea of other ways to approach the same task which
> I may not be aware of but may make my study more efficient. I find that look-
> ing at other methods makes learning a language more exciting. (Student 5)

Other cultural differences may affect the learning process and adjustments are necessary to reach alignment with different learning environments. Such cultural differences are related to anything which is seen as 'foreign' by the learner. On occasions, social reasons, such as group pressure, motivate or hinder the learning process in and out of the classroom.

In all cases the interaction with an adviser consists of a sequence of contracts and commitments which define the conditions, roles and expectations of the parties involved. The learner has to feel at ease, the adviser has to show interest and respect and focus attention on the individual needs/problems of the student. For the sequence to work successfully, the adviser has to use language as a vehicle of learning. Through repetition, paraphrasing, questions and other techniques (indicated below) specific to this profession, the adviser helps the learner deconstruct the problem and find appropriate solutions. These skills which are peculiar to language advising are also used in the person-centred counselling model as described by Bolton (1987) and Egan (1986), and discussed further below. The next section will analyse the concept of advising in second language learning, with a particular focus on the skills involved during a session.

3. Advising and the counselling model

Both advising and teaching in second language learning (as in other disciplines) depend on dialogue, but despite this central fact hardly any research to date starts from actual samples of dialogues. Dialogue is here intended as the medium through which we engage in communication and learning. It is dialogue which is at the core of the person-centred counselling model and this

makes us look at the parallel between advising and counselling 'practice' (as applied in psychology).

Warden Ferrara (1994) argues that in the counselling field:

— language and discourse are jointly constructed by the speakers (teacher-learner; adviser-learner; learner-learner) as they each take up portions of the other's speech to link with their own;

— language is interactive and mutually constructed and is more than a simple concatenation of monologues; reality is jointly constructed as bits and pieces of one's own and other's talk are interwoven and extended and produced.

Although she is referring to therapeutic uses of words in counselling, I think there are strong parallels with the way advising sessions are conducted. The main difference between the two models is that, although language learning advisers work on learning processes which may trigger affective and meta-cognitive factors on the way, these will be only relevant as adjuncts to the educational process. In this framework, language can be interpreted both as the method and the medium as it is through careful use of language and pauses that the adviser helps the learner help him/herself. Understanding this distinction may assist language teachers and advisers to be more comfortable with the notion of advising for learning as a counselling-learning approach (La Forge, 1983) and may provide a new insight in the way training for advisers is organised.

As reported in Kelly's classification (1996), a set of macro- and micro-skills intervene when advising. Macro-skills are part of the process stage of learning. Amongst them are:

— introducing new directions and options
— goal-setting
— encouraging
— giving feedback
— connecting the task to other aspects of his/her life (transferability)
— providing guidance and information
— demonstrating new strategies and learning behaviours
— contributing to the evaluation of progress.

Alongside these there are micro-skills. They come into play during any interaction with a learner and constitute an important part of a good advising session. Amongst these are:

— active listening
— providing undivided attention and respect for the learner
— confronting the learner with possible contradictions

— restating
— empathising with the learner's experience
— paraphrasing
— interpreting the learning experience.

The underlying values of this latter set of skills inform the person-centred counselling model.

This set of values goes beyond the use of specific techniques (e.g., how to ask questions) but it involves a view of learning which shifts the focus on personal growth and self-responsibility. As Kelly stated, independent learning requires

> language counselling assistance because of the difficult cross-cultural adjustment to a 'foreign' or different learning style. (1996: 98)

During an advising session, both parties are in a learning and teaching role. This form of two-way interaction considers the learner as a whole person and constitutes an essential part of the preparation for advising. The adviser's expertise depends on his/her knowledge about the learner and the trusting relationship they manage to build. The adviser is in a helping role, but the learner is, in effect, helping him/herself and when he/she arrives at a certain negotiated target, the fulfillment is very personal and lasting because of the involvement in the learning process and the sense of empowerment and ownership reached by succeeding.

Below are very short extracts taken from a recorded session[2] which illustrate the application of some macro and micro skills, specifically: goal setting, guiding through questioning, modelling, empathising and encouraging.

Adviser	Ok, ... *(name)*, so tell me how things have gone so far with your …........ *(language)*. Have you started?
Student	I've been doing it now for two weeks and it feels like I've been doing it for six months.
Adviser	Really. *[empathising]*.
Student	Because the amount of work that's been crammed in - it's amazing!
Adviser	Yes *[pause to allow student to continue]*.
Student	I'm finding it really interesting.
Adviser	That's good *[supporting]*.
Student	And quite enjoyable.

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2. It is not the aim of this section to engage in discourse analysis but this author found it particularly useful to record advising sessions to learn to listen to herself and learn to analyse the effects of her dialogues on possible learning outcomes.

Adviser	Oh that's very positive. So what are you doing?. What various skills are you already developing? *[encouraging; questioning]* …......……………
Student	Absolutely. And you also come across vocabulary that you've not used in the lessons so you have to be looking it up.
Adviser	Yes. But that's a good study skill to develop, isn't it? *[giving feedback].*
Student	Absolutely. But I'm still coming to terms with the use of the dictionary again. Especially a foreign dictionary because erm -
Adviser	What do you find difficult about that? *[guiding through questioning].*
Student	You can't simply just look up the word because there's different tenses of the word and different meanings of it and trying to decipher the right meaning is quite difficult.
Adviser	Yes, everybody finds that the hardest bit *[empathising].*

In a session, the tendency to jump to conclusions and provide the learner with what we may consider the best solution is quite tempting. An adviser should be a good listener and mediator of meanings by mirroring what the learner says. On the contrary, pausing and leaving enough time for reflection is one of the difficult skills which an adviser has to learn.

4. Training for the profession: looking ahead

Whilst research in the field of language learning strategies and learner autonomy continues, independent language learning programmes are being devised (e.g., ALMS at Helsinki University Language Centre, CILL at Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore) and advisers are becoming a familiar feature of self-access centres, little attention is paid to the consequences that these changes have on the teaching role in so far as training is concerned. Data collected as part of project SMILE indicate that there are currently about 30 advisers in the UK; this signifies a staggering increase since 1993 when this author's appointment as adviser constituted the second of its kind in self-access centres. In most cases they have a degree in modern languages and teaching experience. Some have further qualifications such as librarianship, new technologies, linguistics, education and psychology. The Hull advisory team includes a linguist with a background in teaching EFL, a linguist who is also a member of a language department for 50% of her time, and a linguist who is full-time in an advising capacity and has a background in sociolinguistics. In other institutions, advisers can be teachers who are timetabled to perform advising in the centre for a couple of hours a week or can be librarians or other technical staff who were originally employed as support staff (at one time the centres mainly consisted of teaching labs) and found themselves expected to

take over this role as time went by. One of the main complaints we receive from these advisers is the sense of inadequacy and the lack of appropriate staff development to allow them to perform this new task effectively. Many confess using this time to mark their 'other work', to provide 'individual tuition' type of service or 'directing the traffic' to resources. These are all considerations one needs to bear in mind when setting up an advisory service.

SMILE focuses on the professionalisation of language learning advisers. To professionalise the role, SMILE is developing and piloting a special programme. The training is delivered:

— mainly on-line through the FirstClass computer-mediated conferencing system;
— through teleconferencing to discuss case studies;
— through face-to-face seminars and workshops.

Reported below are some reflections on the training from the trainees.

> I have found the case studies very useful. They provide a useful tool for reflecting how you might proceed with a genuine student query and consider the advice which you might offer.

> There are times when the role has seemed somewhat daunting. But as I read more, discuss with other advisers, conduct more advising sessions, receive positive feedback from the students and staff, I have started to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Some of the advisers are also in a teaching capacity for some of the time; the training has been recognised as valuable to their teaching too.

> I find myself thinking about how to ensure that students feel that they have control over their learning and how to encourage them to take more responsibility for it and to set themselves goals which they will actively pursue.

The project has also involved members of the management staff and here are some of the comments on the impact of the role in their institutions.

> SMILE is a logical and welcome complement to a range of independent learning activities already underway in the Department…. Meanwhile the Language Advisory Service has already had a great impact on the development of the department… Clearly there are still issues which have to be resolved at national level. From a management perspective some of these are:
> — the uncertainty over status and salary of an adviser
> — the time-consuming nature of staff training, fundamental to the success of the project
> — the embedding of the SMILE ethos in the long term.

The Hull Team has also established joint collaborations with other pro-grammes overseas, including Australia, Hong Kong and Italy. In Italy we have contributed to the training of over 400 advisers (Poppi & Mozzon-McPherson, 1999). It may also be worth pointing out that there is already an electronic discussion group (PLAN - Professional Language Advisers' Net-work)[3] which tries to keep advisers from all over the world informed of developments in this profession.

The knowledge and experience acquired during project SMILE will be used to form the basis of a qualification for advisers. A module on language advising as part of teacher training programmes has also been proposed. This approach is also gradually being adopted by other disciplines. Finally, the University of Hull's advisory team has recently been involved in a ten-week, cross-disciplinary programme, and similar models of learning support are under consideration in other disciplines.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined 'advising' in relation to learner autonomy and looked at the skills used. It has highlighted that advisers offer support to stu-dents outside classroom, and promote autonomy by helping them to become more aware of their learning. In so doing, this service contributes to bridg-ing an existing gap between the classroom and a variety of learning envi-ronments. One open question remains the impact that this service has on learning. Qualitative rather than quantitative research needs to be carried out to evaluate the extent to which the approach used by advisers is supportive of independent learning. Another open question is the extent to which advis-ing is different from teaching and how the distinctive features of advising should become part of a 'new type of teacher'.

This profession is undergoing the process of establishing its identity and, as in the case of independent learning and self-access, a wide range of inter-pretations are available. This author agrees with Esch (1994) that the change in name has contributed to focusing the attention on the distinctive features of the new role and helped shift the perspective through which we see teach-ing and learning. The other advantage is the importance of having

> new professional functions officially recognised, as this goes along with career paths, professional acceptance, promotion, training opportunities etc. (Esch, 1994: 53)

The emerging profession is attempting to clarify procedures, a code of practice and a staff development scheme. Failure to do this will allow finan-

3. PLAN (http://www.hull.ac.uk/langinst/plan) is an electronic mail discussion list which allows members to share views and experiences with others interested in the field of Lan-guage Advising and related areas.

cial rather than pedagogical decisions to shape the profile of this profession with the net result that unsuitable personnel may be employed. Examples of this scenario have been mentioned in this article and are not without tensions. This could be one of the reasons why self-access centres and the concept of independent learning are popular amongst management (they are cost effective, flexible and convenient) and are still very skeptically received by staff and students.

Finally, more sociolinguistic, sociological and cultural research needs to be conducted. Research on the discourse of advising, comparative studies between classroom discourse and advising, on learners' perceptions and expectations from advisers, on the 'compatibility' of advising with learner autonomy, etc. will be necessary to help us understand the impact of this new set of skills on the learning experience and to prepare appropriate staff development programmes.

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