Book Review: *Reflective Dialogue: Advising in Language Learning*

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Learner autonomy as a concept and as a desired outcome within the context of English language teaching has continued to rise to the forefront of research and practice over the past two decades, and has a place of prominence in nearly any university course description linked to education and/or language learning/teaching. A number of books and academic papers over the years have centred on theoretical perspectives and how the capacity for autonomous learning might be fostered in language learners (Victori, 2000; Smith, 2008). However, despite contributions which focus on the teacher’s role in encouraging out-of-class learning activities to promote autonomy (see Nunan & Richards, 2015), a concrete role for pedagogy, in particular, that of the language instructor or other practitioners of TESOL in the development of this capacity, has been less clearly defined and can be difficult to conceptualise in terms of systematic engagement (Lamb, 2008; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012).

Kato and Mynard address this gap through an in-depth look at what may be considered one of the more powerful tools to foster autonomy, one which takes into account individual learner differences, involves capable, well-trained practitioners (advisors) and which is led and developed by the learners themselves. *Reflective Dialogue: Advising in Language Learning* (2016) provides a practical and research-based, book-length ‘road-map’ to the practice of advising in language learning. Authored by two of the leading names in
this emerging field, this body of work is based on Kato and Mynard’s extensive professional experience as practitioners and researchers. Having developed a growing programme at Kanda University of International Studies (Japan), Kato and Mynard have become pioneers in the field of Advising in Language Learning. In addition to this achievement, Mynard is a leading researcher in the field, and editor for the journal, ‘Studies in Self Access Learning’ (SiSAL), published through the same university. Both writers have published extensively in this area and have been instrumental in the ongoing development of this emerging strand of applied linguistics.

Central to the approach to Advising in Language Learning outlined here is what the authors have called, “Intentional Reflective Dialogue” (IRD). This is considered to be one of the keys to unlocking the potential for a transformational shift in metacognitive awareness, aiding language learners to develop the capacity for sustained and self-regulated autonomy. The nature of IRD and the processes involved are described in detail throughout the book. The reader is taken up close, enabling them to ‘peer into’ these processes through a number of fictional case studies (based on the authors’ own advising experiences). These case studies help to illustrate the points made in the interlinking sections on advisor training, and introduce a range of strategies and field-tested tools used in advising to facilitate this transformation through reflective dialogue. While this book will interest a range of ELT professionals, it was written principally with the aim of providing a practical, researched-
based guide for those with an interest in exploring the potential of reflective dialogue in advising to bring about change, and strengthen the capacity for self-regulated learning.

The objective of this book, as stated in the preface, is to “provide ideas for the structure of initial training and ongoing professional development for language educators taking on an advisory role” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. xiii). The inspiration for this book, and the materials included, was due to what was perceived as a lack of available resources by the two authors while involved in the training and development of advisors at the growing Self-Access Learning Centre where they work, and which they continue to run. Their response to these circumstances was to create and write their own materials. The aim of this book, as they explain, is to “provide theoretically grounded practical guidelines and examples for educators who are developing and researching their practice” (p. xiii).

The content of this book is divided into four main chapters. The introduction situates Advising in Language Learning within the broader field of applied linguistics, and offers an overview to the aims the authors had in writing and publishing this body of work. Finally, the characters and persons (including the two authors) used throughout the text to help illustrate the points made are introduced, and the reader is asked to consider the first of many ‘reflective questions’ interspersed throughout the different sections of the book. These act to initialise a personalised Intentional Reflective Dialogue between the reader and the authors.
The opening paragraph begins by contextualising the authors’ views of advising, which delineates their stance within the broader theoretical framework discussed. The reader is provided with an overview of the field and to facilitate clarity, key terms are defined. The concept of ‘reflection’ as applied to advising is explored in detail here, as is what is meant by ‘Transformational Advising’. These concepts are central to the way in which Advising in Language Learning is believed to act as a catalyst in fostering the awareness and capacity necessary for successful self-regulated learning to develop, and for autonomy to flourish.

The first chapter, entitled “From Research to Implications: Introducing Advising”, places the concept of Advising in Language Learning within the wider theoretical underpinnings from which it is drawn. Ways in which this is differentiated from the more common understanding we may have of advising in other fields, such as commerce or a more traditional, expert-novice paradigm often found in educational pedagogy, is also explored. Advising in Language Learning is initially unpacked here by demonstrating the need for it to be more concerned with engineering a “shift” in awareness and understanding of how one feels (authors’ italics pp. xvi) about one’s learning, rather than a focus on work done or other tangible products of language learning. This underpins the emphasis placed on reflective dialogue, and how a well-managed series of these can lead to a transformation in a learner’s self-approach to learning. This transformation is described as a process whereby an awareness of how to take control of learning is developed, which in turn leads
the learner to uncover a greater capacity for successful life-long learning through taking ownership of the necessary cycles of reflection-to-action-to-change (Kato & Mynard, 2016, pp. 14, 231). The point is made that the Intentional Reflective Dialogue (IRD) used in Advising in Language Learning is different in many ways from the dialogues we may have with others in our normal lives. It is theorised that by being both intentional and reflective implies that this dialogue can or should be structured internally (which is the role of the advisor through the use of tools to foster reflection) (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 6). The IRD is used to promote the deep reflection necessary to lead the learner into the desired transformational learning/awareness process.

According to the authors, this process can be facilitated through what they have coined, ‘Transformational Advising’, which might be described as the cornerstone of the approach Kato and Mynard have developed. Defining Transformational Advising, and introducing the expected learning trajectory which a successful learner is likely to follow as the advisory sessions continue, make up the two final sections of chapter 1. These are extremely useful sections, as they outline some of the predicted or typical characteristics of both the learner and the advisor, within the process of change and development throughout the sessions, based on the authors’ extensive experience. Focus areas suggested for effective advising sessions, and an introduction to the tools available to facilitate the desired awareness-raising are included here, as are suggested areas on which to focus when engaging in continual professional development and training (for the advisor).
The remainder of chapter 1 consists of two important appendices. The first of these covers the use of specific advising strategies. As leading a successful IRD might conceivably require any number of strategies, those offered here have been field-tested and found by the authors to be among “the most useful ones to encourage learners to reflect deeply” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 20), and are represented via the concepts of Repeating, Mirroring, Restating and Summarising. It is also here in Appendix 1.1 that we find the first of several notes in which Mynard focuses the reader on potential research projects that could be undertaken to promote further understanding of Advising in Language Learning, and which encourage professional development.

Appendix 1.2 runs for 20 pages and is perhaps the most practical section of the book as it introduces a wide range of tools (a total of 25) believed to facilitate the reflective process and the ensuing shift in self-awareness on the road to autonomy. These are divided into three distinct types of tools; cognitive, theoretical and practical. Personally, I found this to be one of the most useful and exciting sections of the book, as the tools provided are of immense practical value and offer insight into the transformational process. The clarity and immediacy of the activities facilitate imagery of how they might be used with learners to bring about the desired metacognitive awareness, and deepening of their reflective processes.

Chapter 2, entitled “From Implications to Application: advising in practice”, initiates a thorough discussion of the processes involved in advising, including indications of ways in
which the strategies and tools can be used to greater effectiveness. The processes involved are reflected through and represented by 30 distinct dialogue templates. These are mapped to the learning trajectory previously introduced in section V of chapter one, and are subdivided into the areas of “Getting Started”, “Going Deeper”, “Becoming Aware”, and “Transformation”, which represent the cline of the learning trajectory.

These suggested dialogue templates are further illustrated by fictional case studies which bring them to life by embedding them into what are intended to be natural-sounding dialogues. These were written to highlight the potential of IRD to bring about the desired awareness-raising of the learner. It is important to remember that these are based on hundreds of hours of hand-on advisory sessions conducted by the authors themselves, and are accompanied by a note of self-reflection (by each author) which enables the reader to gain a depth of insight into the practice and process of advising, normally only accessible through the trial and error of personal experience. These reflections are particularly welcome as they bring a personal touch to the somewhat voyeuristic experience of peering into the advisory sessions, as it were, from a distant corner of the room, and even more importantly, they allow the authors to use their extensive experience to highlight essential points of guidance which are highly relevant, and directly linked to the themes being developed in the sample case study dialogues.

While the earlier appendices of chapter 1 introduced key strategies and tools for effective advising, this chapter provides an in-depth immersion into what being involved in
ongoing advisory sessions could be like, and ways in which these strategies and tools might be used. The 30 distinct dialogues allow the reader to experience first-hand, “the process of promoting intentional dialogue in advising” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p.68), and move through the various stages representative of the learning trajectory which reflect the authors’ approach to Transformational Advising. The templates follow a pattern of setting out the aims, a description of what is needed in preparation, and a description of the procedures to be followed for each of the 30 dialogues. These are followed by the fictional case-study dialogues and the authors’ reflections on their own experience. This layout is particularly effective in creating a viable training and development experience through reading, in the absence of live, personal trainers.

The second part of chapter 2 is dedicated to the “Training and Development” of learning advisors. It is suggested that this section would be ideal for those who may be involved in setting up a training programme, or equally applicable to novice advisors, as the activities provided can also be used for self-directed development. The need to train advisors in language learning is underpinned by a recognition of the very different skills and approaches needed when comparing to other contexts for advising (as mentioned earlier) or to those typically used by language teachers.

It is suggested that this is particularly true when it comes to shifting concepts of “control” and how this nuance is central to the aim of empowering the learner through dialogue (Kato & Mynard, 2016, pp. 203-204). This shift might be described as an
intentional distancing from operating within a more conventional learner-teacher paradigm, where providing learning tips, or imparting strategies for increasing test scores might be more commonly equated to advising, for example. In contrast, through Transformational Advising, the control of the process of developing self-regulation is to be shifted back to the learner though the co-constructed dialogues employed in the advisory sessions. This is made possible by empowering the learner with the tools and confidence needed, through a range of techniques introduced in the IRD (Kato & Mynard, pp. 5, 6, 242).

Kato and Mynard clearly signal here that effective learning advisors will require specific training and opportunities to engage in relevant continuous professional development, as the appropriate skills, approaches and tools needed will be drawn from a far more eclectic background, which include the areas of “counselling, life-coaching, and mentoring” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 204). The training activities included are divided into two areas, concept-based and strategy-based, and lists for further reading are provided in support of these areas. This section is fascinating in that, again, the reader is immersed in the process of self-discovery and reflection, as the training activities are organised to mirror the learning trajectory used to map the journey of the learners’ own transformation. The tasks and activities introduced here in part 2, cover a range of areas from an introduction to the processes and strategies involved in engaging in IRD, to active listening, and harnessing the power of self-reflection. This second chapter ends with a detailed section on becoming a mentor to other advisors. The activities suggested for training and development are
presented in the same format as the dialogues presented earlier in chapter 2, as they include
a brief introduction, aims and suggestions for preparation, preceded by a brief description of
the procedure. These training activities are presented as a crucial part of the process of
becoming a successful advisor. Following each of these are inserts outlining the authors’
reflections on key areas of importance.

Chapter 3 appears to have been written primarily by Mynard. It takes an in-depth
look at the nuances of implementing advising in institutions and is aimed at those in
administrative positions or directorships, drawing on Mynard’s extensive experience and
expertise in the field. With the end goal of Advising in Language Learning being to foster
and empower autonomous language learners, the first section of this chapter looks closely at
ways in which learning can be supported, and ways in which structured awareness-raising
can be utilised to enhance self-directed learning. Different types of advising are explored
(F2F, written, group, peer and combination) and the different advantages of where (and
how) advising services might be held, are discussed. Ongoing training and recruitment are
given a full section and plenty of practical advice is provided for both areas. This section
will be especially useful to those involved in either of these areas. Detailed tables and
figures to illustrate the finer points in these potentially complex and sensitive matters are
included for quick reference.

The need for and the importance of research to continue the advancement of this
growing field, and to foster professional development, is the theme in the fourth and final
chapter of this book. It is aptly recognized that this research can (and should) be carried out through a number of approaches and by advisors at different stages of experience and development. Detailed tables are provided, which map potential approaches onto the learning trajectory, which was developed to follow the transformation of the learner involved in ongoing advisory sessions. These are paired with suggested purposes for the research projects, examples of these, and possible tools which might be used to carry them out. It is pointed out here that due to the sociocultural nature of Advising in Language Learning, the research methodologies employed will certainly depend on the purpose and background of the researcher. However, Kato and Mynard suggest a range of qualitative methodologies which may be appropriate in this humanistic context. A number of concise example projects are outlined, including possible research questions and examples of previous studies of scholars who have undertaken similar inquiry. This final chapter is followed by two appendices which include helpful tables outlining codes developed (Thompson & Mynard, 2012) for written data analysis and descriptors of coded thought units (McCarthy, 2012), which those who undertake qualitative research in this context may find extremely useful.

This book was written with the aim of providing the relatively under-resourced and emergent field of Advising in Language Learning with an in-depth and detailed guide for those either involved, or who wish to be involved, in fostering autonomy in language learners through reflective practice as they begin on the journey of becoming “effective,
aware, and reflective” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. xv) life-long language learners. It certainly makes a strong case for filling the stated gap in training and development resources, and is written in a refreshingly personal style, reflecting the strong focus on the intimacy of dialogue, which is a key element of the approach to advising succinctly explored and promoted here.

However, one slight criticism might be made, which concerns the sample fictional dialogues used in chapter two. While serving the important function of contextualizing IRD within ongoing sessions so that the learner’s and advisor’s experiences can be mapped to the expected learning trajectory, they seemed at times to come across rather scripted and somewhat prescriptive in tone. Obviously, a perfect substitution for authentic dialogue is quite impossible to expect, however, it did require “a leap of faith” at times to situate the words used into the context being constructed.

Nevertheless, while it is clear that further research will continue to develop this exciting new field, Reflective Dialogue fulfils the seminal role of setting the standard for initial and ongoing training and development in Advising in Language Learning, and is certain to be of immense value to this specific area of applied linguistics, as well as to the wider field of learner autonomy.
References


