

Learner Development SIG 2011 Grant Awardees LD SIG2011年度助成金受給者

Lessons from the *Advising for Language Learner Autonomy Conference*

アドバイジング・フォー・ランゲージ・ラーナー・オートノミー 神田外語大学大会からの学び

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As a head teacher at a small private language school, more commonly referred to in Japan as an 'Eikaiwa' school, I probably came to the Advising for Language Learner Autonomy Conference at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) from a different view-point than most of the other participants who were coming from a university teaching background.



I find that it is useful to think of an Eikaiwa school as a kind of fitness gym for developing English, where each student comes to the school with different ability levels and also with a range of goals, such as becoming able to communicate in a professional environment or simply for personal interest. In addition, as a service industry, there is strong pressure to provide customer satisfaction as the customer's desire to stay at the school is directly linked to the satisfaction they feel from the service provided. However, accommodating all of these different ability levels and goals can be very demanding on teachers who struggle to prepare materials to satisfy their student's needs and expectations.

This was the case for me in the early years of

teaching at an Eikaiwa school. The sheer volume of work in constructing personalized materials for each of my 40+ students was often overwhelming and would frequently result in classes that not only failed to satisfy my student's needs but also failed to provide a motivating teaching experience for myself as a teacher. However, after starting a Master's degree in TEFL/TESL, I was introduced to ideas such as learner-centered teaching, learner autonomy, discovery learning, advising, self-access learning, etc. This has allowed me to develop and implement open-ended syllabi which put me in the role of a learning advisor and passed control of the student's learning progress into their own hands. In this way, I was able to help my students to develop their own teaching programs and create their own materials, tailored to their personal needs. This has not only helped to reduce the burden of creating materials on my shoulders, but, more importantly, it has allowed my students to develop into more responsible, motivated and independent learners, as well as creating a much more positive learning environment at my school (Hurrell, 2010).

It was with this background that I came to this conference, with a view to finding out how others have been applying the ideas of advising and learner autonomy in their own teaching situations and how I might be able to apply them to my situation in the Eikaiwa industry.

The day before the conference, I was lucky enough to go on a tour of Kanda's Self Access Learning Center (SALC). It was illuminating to see how KUIS had implemented the concept of learner autonomy and advising into their center through full-time learning advisors, independent learning programs, private multi-purpose language learning rooms, and a lounge area where students could come and chat in English in a relaxed and comfortable environment. We also had a chance to observe an advanced writing class where the students worked collaboratively to investigate topics of their choosing using the internet and a variety of other sources and write their own research papers. It was clear that the idea of learner autonomy runs deep in the core philosophy of KUIS, which made it the perfect setting for this conference.

The next day, I was impressed to see the number of people who had come from all over Japan and also internationally to attend the conference. After taking part in the enlightening seminars and chatting with the participants between sessions, it seemed clear that conference presenters and participants shared a number of common issues with developing the ideas of advising, learner autonomy and self access learning in ELT.

The first and biggest issue was naturally the question of how should we introduce the ideas of advising and learner autonomy to students. These ideas are still in their relative infancy and, while the literature provides a lot of evidence to show how autonomous learners are more successful, there is still little information on how teachers can actively help students make the transition from being passive learners to independent learners who are in control of their own progress.

Many of the seminars focused on how we might address this issue. Howard Doyle from Kochi University and Michael Parrish from Kwansai Gakuin University presented their study on the methods that their learners use to improve their English outside of class. This is something that my students often ask me about so I was interested to hear their findings. I was amused by some of the more ingenious methods their students had come up with, such as switching the language of their iPhones from Japanese to English. At this point, their study seemed to be mainly concerned with identifying the various methods that their students preferred to use, but I think it would also be very useful for language advisors to have more information about which methods are more successful in improving the learner's communicative ability. This could be the subject of a follow-up study.

John Adamson and Naoki Fujimoto-Adamson from the University of Niigata Prefecture presented their work on the role of trans-languaging (alternating between the learners L1 and L2) during mentoring sessions. This is a subject that is of great interest to me as I have often experienced resistance to native speaker instructors using Japanese in their lessons at Eikaiwa schools. I believe that this is primarily because of the perception that an English-only policy will create an immersion environment and will aid learning by pushing the students to speak more English. While this idea may have some merit, I feel this policy greatly limits the types of ideas that can be introduced, especially with lower level students,

as language has to be kept within the learner's L2 ability range. In my classes, I have been able to get positive results by mentoring my students using Japanese where necessary and students have reported greater satisfaction with their classes. Over time, the management of my school has gradually become more comfortable with the judicious use of Japanese in my classes. Nonetheless, this is still an issue that I grapple with on a daily basis in my teaching. Just how much of the student's L1 should be used during teaching sessions? It was interesting to hear the stories of how other instructors dealt with this issue in their classes. One teacher commented that he only used Japanese when he got the "blank stare", an experience that I think many of us have had at least one time in our teaching careers. However, from the range of opinions that were expressed, I think it is fair to say that the use of trans-languaging is very much left to personal intuition at this time. It would be very useful for the development of language advising to see more work done in this area to create a set of guidelines so that instructors can be better informed about appropriate use of trans-languaging when advising.

It goes without saying that creating autonomous learners was a major issue of the conference, but another issue of equal importance was encouraging institutions themselves to promote the ideas of learner autonomy and advising. It was clear to see that KUIS had made a considerable investment in creating their SALC, and many of the participants who I talked with had come with the aim of starting similar facilities at their own universities. However, in these tough economic times, competition for resources is fierce between various departments, and convincing university decision-making bodies to commit these scarce resources to creating a center and employing full-time advisors is a tough prospect. This is especially the case when there is currently little concrete evidence to prove that such centers would be significantly more effective in improving a student's communicative ability than conventional teaching.

This point was clearly illustrated by the presentation made by Marjo Mitsutomi and Mariko Sakurada from Akita University, which has also recently opened a self-access center. They talked about their difficulties in fighting for resources and trying to get students through the doors. As I listened to their presentation, a lot of the problems they were talking about reminded me of discussions from my days as a

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business major, such as the need to create a coherent business model for the center and to market the center effectively within the student body. Therefore, it seems that if we promote the widespread development of such centers, especially in a commercial industry such as Eikaiwa, then a sound theoretical underpinning alone will not be sufficient. We also need a strong business rationale.

This brings me to the final issue raised in the conference, that of using ideas from other fields to aid our research in developing the concept of learner autonomy. We saw how the representatives from Akita University highlighted the need for a clear business rationale. However, there were other presenters who had also taken concepts from other fields. A presentation which greatly impressed me was given by Satoko Kato of Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages. Ms. Kato had conducted research into the various problems that advisors at her institution had in their professional development, for example: understanding their role as a facilitator of language learning rather than a teacher; dealing with the uncertainty of advising where potentially any issue could arise versus the relative certainty provided by teaching with a lesson plan; and adjusting the expectations of both advisor and advisee as to what is to be expected in advising sessions. Ms. Kato used a wheel diagram (Kato & Sugawara, 2008) to plot how advisors and advisees felt about their advising sessions and used the results to discuss with advisors about how they could improve their advising. Neither I nor the people around me had ever seen this kind of technique before. When I approached Ms. Kato to ask her about how she had developed the idea, she informed me that she had adapted the wheel diagram from a technique commonly used in life counseling to help people improve their life. After hearing this, I thought that this technique could also be applied with my students to help them develop as autonomous learners, and I plan to do this in the future.

It became apparent that advising in ELT could greatly benefit from work already done in related fields, and this issue was encapsulated by the final presentation given by the key-note speaker of the conference, Chris Candlin. He presented his research on the techniques used by the professional medical industry to advise patients about health issues and highlighted how health advisors could not explicitly tell patients what they should do, but rather had to employ a number of techniques in order to

guide patients to make the right choices by themselves. Candlin then went on to demonstrate how this basic principle may be applied when advising students to become more autonomous learners. This further reinforced the idea that a lot could be learned from other related fields to develop the idea of advising for language learner autonomy

So, after all this, what lessons could be taken away from this conference? It is clear that there is still a lot of work to do if we are going to convince both students and institutions to commit to the ideals of learner autonomy, advising and self-access learning. This is especially true of the Eikaiwa industry, which is commercially driven and wary of abandoning tried and tested methods. However, if research into the problems raised in the conference can be continued with the help of work already done in related fields, such as business and counseling, I believe that it will be possible to overcome these issues. Conferences such as this one play a great part in exciting people's imaginations to explore ways that we might develop and adapt our own teaching contexts so that we can help learners take greater control of their own learning, and I look forward to making my own contributions in the future.

Ian started his teaching career on the JET program teaching at two senior high schools in Saitama Prefecture, Japan. After three productive years on the JET program, he became head teacher of a private language school in Sapporo, Hokkaido, where he continues to help his students to develop into successful learners of English. Currently, he is about to complete his Masters in TEFL/TESL. His main interests lie in learner autonomy, task-based language teaching and the use of discourse analysis to help learners understand pragmatic meaning in authentic materials.

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