

LANGUAGE ADVISING: POSITIVE ACTIONS FOR FOSTERING AUTONOMY, MOTIVATION AND LEARNING STRATEGIES – A CASE STUDY

Kamila S. SANTANA
Universidade Federal do Pará
Bolsista PIBIC/CNPq

RESUMO: Aconselhamento linguageiro é uma área da Língua Aplicada que carece de maior investigação (MOZZON-McPHERSON; VISMANS, 2001). Esta é uma área que ainda não está totalmente definida, contudo é possível afirmar que ela se relaciona com outros construtos pertencentes ao ensino-aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras, como por exemplo: autonomia (BENSON, 2006), motivação (DÖRNYEI, 2011), crenças (BARCELOS, 2007), afetividade (ARNOLD, 1999) etc. O projeto de pesquisa *Aconselhamento linguageiro visando à autonomia e à motivação na aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras*, desenvolvido em uma universidade pública, pretende estudar maneiras de engajar os aprendentes na aprendizagem. Os conselheiros linguageiros ajudam os aprendentes a desenvolverem suas habilidades na língua estrangeira estudada por meio do uso de estratégias apropriadas, as quais condizem com suas preferências e estilos de aprendizagem. Este estudo de caso foi desenvolvido com três aprendentes do curso de Letras (habilitação em língua inglesa). As sessões de aconselhamento linguageiro estão de acordo com o conceito de andaime de Vygotsky, no qual o conselheiro age como o membro mais experiente de uma dupla ou trio de aprendentes. Nas sessões, conselheiro e aconselhados falam sobre assuntos relacionados ao processo de aprendizagem, as dificuldades encontradas, as estratégias utilizadas e como eles podem melhorar tal processo. Crenças impeditivas para aprendizagem são confrontadas para que crenças mais positivas surjam. Em cinco meses de pesquisa, os aconselhados demonstraram um aumento na autoestima. Além disso, eles ganharam mais confiança nas habilidades orais (escuta e fala), melhoraram a pronúncia, tornaram-se menos ansiosos e mais responsáveis pela própria aprendizagem. Logo, acreditamos que o aconselhamento linguageiro é proveitoso para fomentar a autonomia, a motivação e o uso de estratégias de aprendizagem, bem como pode ser útil para ensinar os aprendentes a autorregular a sua aprendizagem.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: aconselhamento linguageiro, autonomia, motivação.

ABSTRACT: *Language advising is a domain in Applied Linguistics which needs to be more explored (MOZZON-McPHERSON; VISMANS, 2001). The area is not strictly defined yet, but it is possible to affirm that it is connected to various constructs pertaining to teaching and learning foreign languages, such as: autonomy (BENSON, 2006), motivation (DÖRNYEI, 2011), beliefs (BARCELOS, 2007), affect (ARNOLD, 1999), etc. The research project *Aconselhamento linguageiro visando à autonomia e à motivação na aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras*, taking place in a public university, intends to study ways to involve participants in learning. The language counselors help students develop their language skills by using appropriate strategies which fit their learning styles and preferences. This case study was developed with three students of Letras (majoring in English as a Foreign Language - FL). The language advising sessions complied with the Vygotskian concept of scaffolding, in which the counselor acts as the expert member of the pair or trio. During the meetings, counselor and advisees talk about issues concerning the participants' FL learning process, the difficulties they are facing, the strategies they are*

using and how they can improve such process. Beliefs likely to inhibit their learning are confronted in order for positive ones to be built. In five months of work, the participants experienced a significant growth in their self esteem. Besides, they gained more confidence in oral skills (speaking and listening), improved pronunciation, became less anxious and more responsible for their own learning. Therefore, we believe that language advising is a fruitful way for fostering autonomy, motivation, and the use of learning strategies. It can be helpful for teaching learners how to self-regulate their learning.

KEYWORDS: *language advising; autonomy; motivation.*

Introduction

Language advisers are a new actor in the teaching and learning of foreign languages field. In this work we discuss a language advising experiment in the context of a public university in Northern Brazil. First, we present issues concerning its theoretical background and show the context in which this investigation took place. Secondly, we show the methodology used in our research. Thirdly, we expose the results and discuss them. Even if results are based on the advising of a few students, they lead to promising ways of promoting learning of the foreign language.

1. Language advising: theory and practice

In this section we discuss briefly what language advising is and describe the research project which works using language advising with students of Letras- majoring in English at Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA) - Campus Belém.

1.1. Language advising

Language advising is a domain in Applied Linguistics which needs to be more explored (MOZZON-McPHERSON; VISMANS, 2001). The area is not strictly defined yet, but it is possible to affirm that it is connected to various constructs pertaining to teaching and learning foreign languages, such as: autonomy (BENSON, 2006), motivation (DÖRNYEI, 2011), beliefs (BARCELOS, 2007), affect (ARNOLD, 1999), etc. By taking these variables into account, language advising demonstrates that in learning, affective factors operate together with cognition. It is in accordance with Arnold (1999) point of view, since she claims that affect and cognition have a bidirectional relation.

Reinders (2008, p. 13) defines language advising as “a form of language support”. He says that “the purpose of advising is to provide guidance to students about their language learning and to encourage the development of learner autonomy”. By reading such definition, we may infer that autonomy is a central aspect in language advising. The definition of autonomy given by Holec (1981 apud BENSON 2006, p. 22) says that it is “the ability of taking charge of one’s own learning”. Taking charge is synonymous with taking responsibility for one’s own learning. However, we know that students are different from one another, some of them are not autonomous, and then these ones may attribute responsibility to the teacher or the institution solely, acting passively against learning. Therefore, for reaching the purpose of language advising is desirable to develop autonomy in learning for supporting students properly.

Reinders (2008) also asserts that the language advising sessions are highly personalized, since they center on learners' goals and needs. He says that some characteristics may appear in most sessions, mainly negotiation among the counselor and advisee. According to the author, the counselor may have questions, suggestions and resources previously chosen by him, but there is no imposition since it would be against autonomy's principles. This way learner is likely to develop autonomy, taking responsibility for his own learning.

1.2. The research project

The Research Project *Aconselhamento linguageiro visando à autonomia e à motivação na aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras*, taking place at Faculdade de Letras Estrangeiras Modernas at Universidade Federal do Pará intends to study ways to involve participants in learning, developing our own abilities as language counselors. We also aim to develop learners' autonomy, and arouse motivation, maintaining and protecting it. The language counselors help students develop their language skills by using appropriate strategies which fit their learning styles and preferences. By doing so, we are acting in conformity with Reinders' statement showed above, that is, the sessions are personalized and take into account learners' goals and needs.

It is also important to mention that in our research project, each counselor works with a limited number of advisees, two or three. Thus, we can be permanently in touch with each advisee, and by means of the individual strategies they use, we may propose guidelines aiming at determine better ways for counseling.

2. Method

In this section, we describe the methodology we used for doing this work, explaining the context, the participants, instruments and the procedures adopted in the research.

Context: Research Project *Aconselhamento linguageiro visando à autonomia e à motivação na aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras*, UFPA, campus Belém, Pará.

Participants: 3 female students of Letras, majoring in English as a Foreign Language (FL). They were in varied stages of the course.

Instruments: In the first session, the counselor asks each advisee to write her learner story and to answer a test in order to identify her learning styles and the most and the least used learning strategies. They talk about the results and together they may draw a plan up for working. Then, they engage in language advising sessions complied with the Vygotskian concept of scaffolding, in which the counselor acts as the expert member of the pair or trio. The sessions take place in various spaces, including virtual environments, such as social media (Facebook) and e-mail. Authentic materials are used to improve learners' practice.

Procedures: counselor and advisees talk about issues concerning the participants' FL learning process, the difficulties they are facing, the strategies they are using and how they can improve such process. Beliefs likely to inhibit their learning are confronted in order for positive ones to be built.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section, we present the results we attained in the first five months of work and discuss them.

A general principle of all sessions was generating empathy with learners. Since empathy is “a factor, perhaps the most important one, in the harmonious coexistence of individuals in society (ARNOLD, 1999, p. 18)”, we try to enforce it from the first contact with the advisees. So, we tried to understand the learners’ feelings and then act according to them. We were certainly aware that there were affective factors and cognition working together in the advisees’ mind, then, we acted respecting them and taking them into account.

➤ Advisee 1

Advisee 1 was almost in the end of the undergraduate course; it was missing only one period (that is, one semester) for finishing it. She reported to face difficulties to think in English, what made her learning process harder. For some moments she thought about quitting her studies, she seemed to be very demotivated and with low self-esteem. Taking such situation into account, the first step we took was telling her not to give up and use the English language as much as she could (in her everyday life, with friends, co-workers and even with her child daughter), to use simple structure and vocabulary. Besides, we suggested that she could try to achieve less complex goals, since learning a foreign language takes a long time; then, she could plan to improve little by little.

After some language advising sessions, we could observe that she became more conscious about her mistakes and observed her potential, her oral production improved; besides she showed confidence in speaking and her self-esteem became higher. An interesting aspect Reinders (2006 apud REINDERS 2008) points out is that advising is useful because learners “are grateful for the help and rate it very highly”. We find such gratitude when advisee 1 says:

“For example, you said to me that I need to practice my English a lot, don’t get afraid and **because of this I feel so comfort to speak more and more.**”

“**I’m in this stage because you give me the opportunity to understand** that I need to improve my English, so it is really nice.”

It is rewarding to see learners improving their language learning, besides knowing they recognize our work.

➤ Advisee 2

Advisee 2 was in the seventh period of the undergraduate course, the ‘problems’ that bothered her were lack of vocabulary and confidence to speak, she needed to improve her oral production, she was also uncertain about the third conditional. Taking these into consideration, we suggested she could start writing a vocabulary notebook, and working with wordwebs or semantic maps. Concerning uncertainty about the third conditional, we used a magazine, a section in which people talk about their problems and ask for solutions,

the advisee 2 was supposed to advise those people. We encouraged her to use English as much as she could. The use of the cell phone for recording her voice was also mentioned.

We cannot claim that she used all the options given in the sessions. However, we may say that, according to our observation, she became conscious about her responsibility in learning, the way Holec (1981 apud BENSON 2006) claims in section 1. She also became more confident and also improved her speaking ability. We may see such results in her speech:

“The activities, **suggestions and advices given by my counselor made me notice that success in learning depends only on me** and for doing so dedication, practice, knowledge of the language and confidence are essential for achieving success.”

We believe that, once more, our work was recognized and useful for the learner.

➤ Advisee 3

Advisee 3 was a freshman; she was in the first months of her studies. She had never studied English before. Her ‘problems’ were anxiety and difficulties concerning listening. She also lacked self-confidence. Considering these, we used the theories of applied linguistics for confronting her beliefs and we tried to show that learning a FL is a long process, in which success is reached at once, but with clear and simple goals. For enhancing her self-confidence, she did activities in which she could use the amount of language she learned until that moment.

After some months of work, we observed that she became less anxious, could better understand listening activities in class and discovered new abilities. Besides, she became more confident and more autonomous. We can say that language advising is very positive for advisee 3; this is evident in her speech:

“The sessions came in a proper time, when I faced difficulties I used to get discouraged and soon I stopped. **After I started the sessions I feel more confident**, I keep on trying the way I can, **I search for other ways of studying**. I learned to not give up. Now **I discovered myself with reading in English. I did not imagine I already knew all of these**, it is being amazing!”

In five months of work, the participants experienced a significant growth in their self esteem. Besides, they gained more confidence in oral skills (speaking and listening), improved pronunciation, became less anxious and more responsible for their own learning. As language counselor, we feel that learners feel happy for knowing that there are people willing to help them.

Conclusion

We cannot attribute every achievement entirely to language advising, it would be naive, since learners are in touch with other people – such as teachers, classmates, their own family – and resources – such as books, websites, and their own beliefs – which influence language learning. Nevertheless, language advising is a possibility for dealing with students’ difficulties and for trying to help them find ways for facing such difficulties. Our results made us believe that it is a fruitful way for fostering autonomy, motivation, and the use of learning strategies. It can be helpful for teaching learners how to self-regulate their learning.

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