

CHAPTER 9

Advising in context: towards pedagogical and institutional integration

Hayo Reinders

It is common for schools and universities to offer language support options and in larger organisations these may be a mix of compulsory language courses, voluntary language classes, self-access facilities, workshops, institutional language tests and diagnostic assessments. There is also an increasingly broader focus on the role of (academic) language in the curriculum. The latter can consist of content and language integrated learning (CLIL; Dalton-Puffer, 2007), or approaches such as writing or languages across the curriculum (Grenfell, 2002). Despite the merits of the individual language support elements, it is often unclear how they work together to offer students the most seamless language learning experience and the best available support, and to what extent the support takes into account the increasingly widely accessible learning opportunities outside the formal school context (Allford and Pachler, 2007; Conacher and Kelly-Holmes, 2007).

Advising in language learning (ALL) is one of these many support elements. It is a truly learner-centred approach to language education where the needs of the individual learner determine the interaction between a facilitator-teacher and the student, and where the student's life-long learning needs come first. In other words, ALL is about preparing learners for their future learning, and about supporting them in the process of becoming autonomous learners. Often organisationally situated in a self-access centre, ALL has obvious and crucial pedagogic ties with all the other

language support facilities mentioned above. I will argue here that ALL can perform a key role in implementing and solidifying the language support structure that integrates the existing support. This is important, not only to ensure *efficiency* and to avoid overlap with other support providers, but also to enhance the *effectiveness* of the advisory sessions themselves (see Birch and Cuthbert (1981) for a discussion of the distinction between efficiency and effectiveness). Despite the enormous potential of advisory sessions to realise a learner-centred approach to language education, they are not, in practice, always an efficient and effective means of achieving this goal. Some of the reasons for this are related to the pedagogical challenges inherent to ALL, and others are related to issues with the implementation of advising at the institutional level. Below I will briefly review some of the more common problems in ALL.

The challenges of advising in language learning

There are a number of potential problems related to ALL that may affect its success. Voller, Martyn and Pickard (1999) argue that, often, advisory sessions lack clear objectives and fail to provide learners with an opportunity to acquire appropriate study techniques. According to Fu:

The approach [language counselling] may [. . .] seem vague and flexible to the users when we say, for example, that the counsellors can “give recommendations on language learning strategies for improving English” or “can help users design their personalised Language Improvement Plan”. In other words, to these users what really is a “strategy” or what does “design” really mean? It may all seem rather confusing and appear to be just a lot of hard work.

(Fu, 1999, p. 108)

Assessing the outcomes of ALL can also be problematic (cf. Champagne, *et al.*, 2001; Morrison, 1999). If the goals of advising sessions are described in terms like “develop autonomy”, “increase awareness”, and “become more strategic”, then the quality of the assessment of the advising can only ever be as good as the quality of the processes involved and the instruments used to “measure” these outcomes; and currently such measures are in many cases not available or are under-developed. Some attempts have been made, however, for example by using instruments such as portfolio assessment, peer-feedback and self-assessment. Interesting developments have been made in these areas but it is probably safe to say that these still lack the

validity and reliability of the instruments commonly used to measure improvements in language proficiency.

Another issue with assessing the outcomes of an advising programme is that the students are encouraged to set their own goals and determine their own course of action. This makes it difficult for the advisor to determine *what* is to be assessed. In addition, many students do not make use of the advising sessions on a regular basis. Many “dip in and out” of the available support, based on their needs and time available, and staff often do not know if and when students will return. This makes it hard to select an appropriate time for assessment; a student may have just returned from several weeks of not studying at the centre. Even if an appropriate form of assessment is available it is unclear if learners improve because of the sessions and their subsequent self-study or if those learners who come to advising sessions are more motivated or able to learn independently to begin with.

Another issue is the fact that many studies on advisory programmes (where students were encouraged to meet with an advisor more than once) report disappointing uptake figures, and even more disappointing attrition rates (Voller, Martyn, and Pickard, 1999; Mak and Turnbull, 1999; Pemberton, Ho, Lam and Toogood, 1999; Reinders, 2005). A study by Reinders (2005) concluded by emphasising the need for further integration of language advising sessions into the broader institutional context.

It is clear that at a practical level there is room for improvement in the delivery of ALL. I will argue below through two case studies from different countries, that one of the most promising ways to do this is by enhancing the integration between ALL and other support programmes, and by giving ALL a more prominent and facilitative role within the institution. One starting point is to look at the ways in which the different stages of the self-directed learning process are supported, and to identify which support provider is responsible for each, in order to identify mismatches and overlap. The table below (Reinders, 2010), which is based on the work of Knowles (1975) lists the different aspects of the self-directed learning process with which learners will need to familiarise themselves. In a completely teacher-directed environment (middle column), the teacher is responsible for all aspects of the learning process. In a completely learner-directed environment (right column), responsibility for the learning is entirely with the learner. ALL is one way of bridging these two environments, and of helping students to move from complete reliance on the teacher to increased recognition of the importance of their own role in the language-learning process.

TABLE 11 Aspects of the self-directed learning process

Identifying needs	Placement tests, teacher feedback.	Learner experiences/difficulties in using the language.
Setting goals	Determined by the course, relatively fixed.	Contextually determined, relatively flexible.
Planning learning	Determined by the teacher. Somewhat flexible.	Contextually determined. Very flexible.
Selecting resources	Provided by teacher.	Self-selection by learners.
Selecting learning strategies	Teacher models and instructions.	Self-selection by learners.
Practice	Exercises and activities provided by teacher.	Implementation (language use) and experimentation.
Monitoring progress	Regular classroom feedback and comments on assignments and tasks.	Self-monitoring, peer-feedback.
Assessment	Tests, curriculum changes.	Self-assessment, reflection.
Reflection and revision	Teacher reflects on and revises curriculum.	Learner reflection and revision of self-directed learning process.

In the following section I will introduce two language programmes that aim to support students at the different stages mentioned in the table above. I will first describe the “student monitoring system” designed at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. This system aims to integrate the different elements of the university’s self-access facilities, and to facilitate the recording and exchange of student information, so as to improve the quality of the advisory sessions. In the next section, I will describe an online self-access system designed at King Mongkut University in Thailand. This system incorporates an advisory service within a virtual learning environment.

Case study 1: advising in language learning as part of Student Monitoring System

There are an estimated 14,000 students at the University of Auckland who have English as an additional language. The majority of them come from East Asia, with sizeable numbers from South Asia, Europe and South America. Previous studies had shown that nearly 70 per cent, or over 10,000, of these students have a level of English that will negatively impact on their

study success. For this reason there is a wide range of different language-learning options at the university, from formal courses offered in different departments, to language workshops, and an increasing attention to the role of (academic) language across the curriculum. An addition to these language-learning options was the establishment of the self-access centre in 2000 and the development of an online learning environment. This gave students the opportunity to engage in self-directed learning, outside the context of language classes, and allowed them to learn flexibly, based on their available time and their language-learning needs. Not long after, the university also established a Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment. This assessment is compulsory for every student who enters the university, regardless of their first language. It consists of two parts. Firstly, students are given a quick screening test to determine whether their level is sufficient to be likely to be successful in an English-language environment. The screening test takes approximately 30 minutes and can be completed online. It is a crude measure of the students' language level and is intended to quickly filter out those students whose English level is clearly high enough. If students do not score above a certain threshold they complete a second diagnostic assessment to determine their specific areas for improvement. In recent years an effort has been made to increase the integration between the diagnostic assessment and the available language support, in particular at the self-access centre, by automatically referring the students to a language-learning advisor and by sharing their information from the diagnostic assessment. Students are not required to see a learning advisor. Instead they are strongly encouraged to do so when they receive the results of their assessment and are sent reminders if they do not. Some departments have now made it compulsory for students to meet with an advisor. The language advisory service is open to all students (and staff) at the university. They do not need to register first or be enrolled in a language programme. Teachers are encouraged to recommend the service to those students who have problems and such students make up about 30 per cent of the total number of users. The remaining 70 per cent are drop-in students who either find out about the service online or by visiting the self-access centre. The advisory sessions are focused on developing skills for self-directed learning. From the first meeting the advisor gives a clear rationale for the sessions and explains what (s)he can and cannot do. Together they then identify specific areas for improvement and develop a learning plan for the student to work with. Students are encouraged to return to show their learning record and discuss their progress or to schedule a new meeting whenever they face a particular problem. The advisors try to gradually encourage the students to complete

the different steps of the self-directed learning process introduced above by themselves. Every aspect of the advisory session aims to develop students' capacity for autonomy.

Further successful attempts have been made within the self-access centre to integrate the different support options that are available. These include: access to (online and offline) self-access resources, a drop-in service for quick questions, regular skills-oriented workshops, and the language advisory programme. In order to improve the quality of the advisory services and the overall self-access experience for the students, a system was developed to record and share information about students' needs and learning activities between the different support areas. Figure 12 shows a screenshot of the staff interface of this system, called the Student Monitoring System (SMS). Although the online learning environment is a complicated proprietary system, to extract information from its SQL databases a simple Microsoft Access database is used.

The Student Monitoring System electronically records all the students' information in one centrally accessible place. This information includes several elements. First, it records the students' language needs as identified through the diagnostic English language needs assessment, and as updated later by the student (either with or without the help of a staff member) through the online language-learning software offered through the self-access centre. Second, it also records the students' subsequent learning activities. This includes their attendance at the language workshops, as well

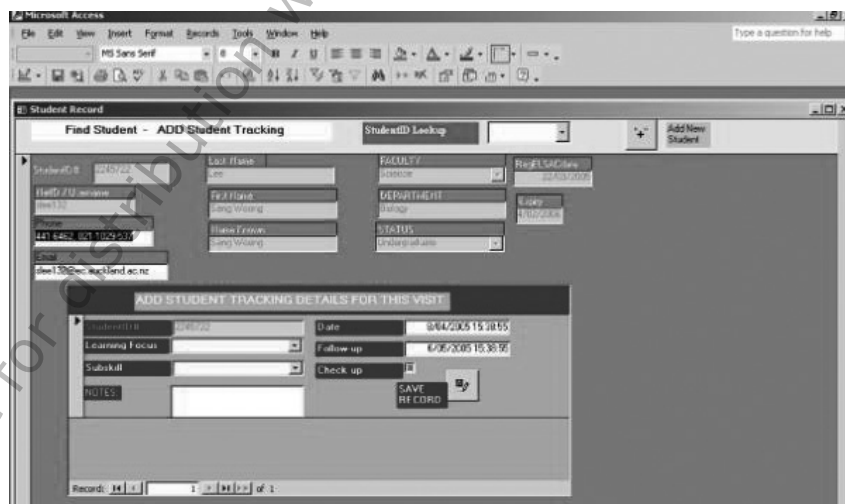


FIGURE 12 Staff interface of the Student Monitoring System

as their visits to the self-access centre. Every time a student visits the centre, the main purpose of their visit is recorded by a staff member. The system also keeps track of the number and types of resources used by the student (either online or offline), and the main skills covered by these resources. Thirdly, the system records the interactive prompts offered by the computer to the students based on their learning needs and previous work (for example, the computer may point out to students that they spend too little time on a particular language skill in relation to their stated goals; (for a description of this part of the system, see Reinders, 2007) and how the students responded to these prompts. Finally, the SMS records participation in the language-learning advisory program.

The use of the SMS means that even during the first meeting, the learning advisor will already have a great deal of information about the student, his or her learning needs, previous language-learning activities, and materials used. This has a pedagogical advantage in that the advisor can give the student more specific and personalised feedback. It also has a practical advantage, in that the advisor can better prepare for the session (see Valdivia, McLoughlin and Mynard (this volume) for a description of an offline portfolio system employed at Universidad Veracruzana in Mexico which has similar benefits).

The advisor records additional information about the student during the session. This includes notes on the content of their meeting, the feedback given to the student (which is available to the student after the meeting), materials and strategies recommended, and suggestions for other language support, such as workshop attendance or enrollment in formal courses. Although generally the aim is to allocate the same advisor to a student for all of their sessions, in practice this is not always feasible. By recording all the necessary information about the previous sessions, another advisor is able to help the student at a future date (see Schoepp and Lydiatt (this volume) for a description of another kind of student tracking system designed to support at-risk students in the United Arab Emirates).

Of course information from the advisory session also helps the other staff in the centre. For example, the workshop organisers can use the SMS to find out their participants' learning needs and previous experiences, based on the latest information available from the advisory sessions; when students and their advisors update that information in a next session, the workshop organiser will see the revised information. They will be able to see if students have attended other workshops, as well as the feedback given to them by their advisors. This will help them to better prepare for the workshops, and to provide more relevant content. Also the facilitators in the

centre can use the information to provide more personalised recommendations. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the students have access to the information. This helps them not only to keep track of their learning activities, and to be able to view their advisors' feedback, but also to see the importance of recording and reflecting on one's learning. In this way, the system encourages the development of learner autonomy.

As is clear from the above, the support available within the self-access centre itself is highly integrated. The different elements within the centre work closely together in order to share information relevant in helping to make the language-learning process more personalised. Although this system has been successful, a number of problems remain. Specifically there is the issue of the lack of integration between the self-access support (including the advising programme), and the other language support available within the university. Although a great deal of highly relevant information is gathered in the self-access centre, this is not currently available to language teachers or workshop facilitators elsewhere in the university. Neither is the information that they gather available to the self-access centre, and in particular the advisors. A further complicating factor arose with the subsequent establishment of an alternative advisory programme within the diagnostic assessment programme. Whereas previously students would be referred to an advisor in the self-access centre, now an initial consultation would be done by a member of the assessment team. Students may subsequently be referred to an advisor in the self-access centre, but this transition often does not take place. Ideally, a dedicated language support centre would have been set up to avoid this type of mismatch and to ensure closer collaboration between the different support providers, but this seems unlikely at this point. Additional funding would have to be found to establish the Centre (although in the long term a cost-saving would probably be possible) and political reasons prevent different departments from giving up control over their part of the support.

Case study 2: online advising in language learning as part of the language curriculum

King Mongkut University in Thailand has for many years attempted to raise the English level of its students. It has implemented compulsory language courses for all first year students and is steadily increasing the number of courses taught in English. Despite this, there are still significant issues with students' English proficiency. Part of the reason for this was attributed to the lack of follow-up between the compulsory courses and students' subsequent

study at the University. Students were not encouraged, nor prepared, to continue to improve their language by themselves. Although a language advisory service existed, it was not used often, partly because the sessions were held in only one of the three campuses, and many students indicated that had no time to travel to meet their advisor. There was also a lack of awareness of the availability of this service. To address this problem two measures were taken: firstly an online language support system was developed to allow students to access materials and language-learning activities more easily, in order to encourage self-study, and secondly the advisory services were integrated into this so that students could get support at any time, from any place, including their homes. It was hoped that by introducing the programme during the compulsory language courses, students would continue to use it afterwards.

The screenshot in Figure 13 shows the student interface of this online support programme, which is called "My English" (for a full description of the programme, see Reinders and Darasawang, forthcoming). The programme includes nine modules, each of which supports a different aspect of the language-learning process. For example, there is a language needs analysis to help students identify which aspects of the language they need

FIGURE 13 My English, online self-access and ALL student interface

to improve and to help them prioritise among these. Students are able to use this information to create a personalised learning plan. The system has been designed in such a way that it automatically recommends those resources that are most relevant to the student's level, interests and needs, so that students can get started easily. My English also includes an assessment module. This helps the students to monitor their progress, and to make changes to their learning plan if necessary.

An interesting feature of the programme is its focus on facilitating online student interaction. There are online workspaces where the students can meet, and where facilitators can organise workshops or more informal events. Students are also able to contact a staff member for support. This can be done easily and quickly by submitting a brief query to an online language help desk (through chat, if the helpdesk is open, or by leaving a message if it is not), or by arranging an online language advisory meeting. If an advisor is available at the time of the request a meeting may be established immediately. If not, the student can request a particular date and time, and perhaps a learning advisor, and can inform the learning advisor of any specific questions. Students are also able to send documents, such as examples of written work, or submit audio messages. The latter has been used by advisors to monitor students' improvement in spoken English. The idea behind the online advisory service is similar to its face-to-face counterpart. It is intended to prepare students for and support them in their future learning. The focus in the (online) meetings is thus always less on the language than it is on the process of learning the language. Students are encouraged to identify their own problems by using the tools present in My English, select their own (online) materials and use the online self-assessment tools, but the learning advisor will help with these where necessary.

The use of online communication for ALL is not new. Makin (1994), for example, reports on "telesupport" through email and Hurd (2001) reports on advising in open and distance learning programmes. However, what is interesting is the integration of the different services in one online environment, and the subsequent accessibility of learning-related information. This has greatly helped the self-access staff who are now able to look up the details for any individual student to see their language-learning needs, language-learning activities, as well as their progress. The information has also benefited the students, who have access not only to this information, but also to records of any advice they have received from the self-access staff, or their advisor. Obviously the usefulness of these records depends on the quality of the session, but now at least students are empowered by having access to this information; it is no longer in the domain of the "teacher"

but is shared between student and learning advisor. Last but not least, the programme greatly facilitates the work of the learning advisors. By making all the relevant information centrally available the learning advisor always has the most up-to-date information about the student at his or her disposal.

Perhaps more important is the integration between the language advisory programme and the formal language courses. The university requires all students to take a number of compulsory language courses during their studies. It has also made a commitment to encouraging the development of learner autonomy. As a way of achieving this goal it is using My English to encourage language teachers to support students' out-of-class language learning. Specifically teachers are asked to use the system and to be available to respond to students' queries, and to have regular meetings with them as part of an advisory programme, in order to complement their classes. This integration between language teaching and ALL is very promising, as it has the potential to encourage teachers to take on a more facilitative role, and for students to realise the importance of learning outside the classroom. If advising becomes a part of the course then this may resolve some of the issues with low attendance and continuation reported earlier in this chapter. However, in practice the situation is not quite as developed yet. Although teachers are encouraged to offer an advisory service, many, perhaps most, do not. Also, there are different language providers and departments within the university. At present, not all of them make use of My English, and in one school an alternative advisory service exists. Unfortunately for the students this means that if they move from one school to another their previous learning records may not be accessible to their new advisors. Clearly, a more centralised system would be preferable. In addition, those language teachers who do make use of My English will probably benefit from additional training in the future. In some cases they use the online help desk and advisory sessions as an extension of the classroom, or as a way of supporting students in their homework, rather than as a genuine advisory service to support the development of learner autonomy. Clearly, the real integration of advising and teaching is going to be a long-term process.

Discussion

As mentioned in the introductory part of this chapter, many advisory programmes (and self-access centres in general) face challenges in assisting learners to develop the necessary skills to study independently, and also lack

appropriate systems to assess their progress in becoming more autonomous. The two programmes introduced above go some way towards improving this situation. Both include explicit and implicit mechanisms to encourage students to reflect on their learning and to help them develop independent learning skills. Both integrate advisory services into their immediately surrounding support system which helps to ensure continuity in terms of learning objectives and helps to record learning progress. But it is clear from the above case studies that ALL is also pedagogically strongly connected with all the other elements of the language support context within the wider institution. It is important to ask what role other language support providers within the institution play in supporting the different stages of the self-directed learning process introduced at the start of this chapter, in order to identify potential areas of overlap as well as areas for collaboration.

For example, at the University of Auckland, there is no clear connection between goals in the students' learning plan and the other available language support at the university. In other words, there is a disconnect between the learner-centred approach in the advisory programme, and the generally teacher-directed approach in the rest of the students' language education.

In the second case study similar problems existed. Although in this context the provision of advisory sessions has been partly integrated with the language courses by encouraging language teachers to offer advisory support in addition to their language classes, this has not yet led to any significant change in the way that language education is offered at the university. To some extent this is perhaps because the teachers have not yet been fully trained in their new roles as learning advisors.

It is clear from this example that the pedagogical potential of the language advisory sessions has not yet led to an overall pedagogical change in terms of the delivery of the language programme, although it can be seen as an important step in that direction.

One thing that both case studies share is that the potential benefits of their innovation are limited because of the fact that what is learned from the advisory sessions is not connected to the students' learning outside the context of the programme. Students participate in other courses, programmes and assessments, each of which has its own aims and methods and none of which clearly builds on the work students do elsewhere. In other words both case studies suffer from a lack of integration into the wider institutional support system, which does not enhance their effectiveness (such as when students are given competing goals.)

Institutional integration

The case studies above have shown it is important that the work of the advisors is recognised as an integral part of the language support system at the institution. In practice this means providing sufficient resources in the form of materials, teacher training, and a reliable source of funding, in order to provide easy access to the programme to both students and other support providers. The studies cited above have shown that one of the main issues leading to a lack of uptake of advising is the fact that many students are under a great deal of time pressure because their participation in advisory programmes is not recognised as part of their studies. It is important that such work is credited in some form if the institution is serious about improving language standards. One related solution is to make participation in an advisory programme a compulsory aspect of the learning process, at least for those students who need to improve their language skills. In this way, regular time can be made available within the curriculum.

Conclusion: advising in language learning as an initiator of change

ALL builds on the long-term needs of the individual. In this way it is different from most language courses that aim to support students only for a shorter period of time and that address learning needs. In this way, it makes sense for ALL to be part of an integrative service that helps students to identify which of the available types of support is most relevant to them, that encourages them throughout their entire studies, and that equips them with the necessary skills to improve themselves. Ideally ALL should take its place at the heart of an institution's language support system and bridge the transition from teacher-directed to student-directed approaches to learning. The examples from the Thai and New Zealand contexts above show this is not yet the case. However, the ways in which both institutions have used technology to facilitate the recording and dissemination of information shows potential for this to happen. In doing so, ALL may eventually fulfill its crucial and facilitative role as the glue that holds all of the language support within an institution together.

References

Allford, D. and Pachler, N. (2007) *Language, autonomy and the new learning environments*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

- Birch, D.W. and Cuthbert, R.E. (1981) *Costing open learning in further education*. London: CET.
- Champagne, M.F., Clayton, T., Dimmitt, N., Laszewski, M., Savage, W., Shaw, J., Sroupe, R., Thien, M.M., and Walter, P. (2001) The assessment of learner autonomy and language learning. *The AILA Review*, 15, 45–55.
- Conacher, J. and Kelly-Holmes, H. (2007) *New learning environments for language learning: Moving beyond the classroom?* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Dalton-Puffer, C. (2007) *Discourse in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) classrooms*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Fu, G. (1999) Guidelines for productive language counselling: Tools for implementing autonomy. In S. Cotterall and D. Crabbe (eds), *Learner autonomy in language learning: Defining the field and effecting change*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 107–11.
- Grenfell, M. (2002) *Modern languages across the curriculum*. London: Routledge.
- Hurd, S. (2001) Managing and supporting language learners in open and distance learning environments. In M. Mozzon-McPherson and R. Vismans (eds), *Beyond language teaching towards language advising*. London: CILT, 135–48.
- Knowles, M.S. (1975) *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.
- Mak, B. and Turnbull, M. (1999) The personalised English programme: Piloting structured language learning support in a university self-access centre. In B. Morrisson (ed.), *Experiments and evaluation in self-access language learning*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Association for Self-Access Learning and Development, 43–59.
- Makin, L. (1994) Learner telesupport: Language advising by e-mail. In E. Esch (ed.) *Self-Access and the adult language learner*. London: CILT, 83–96.
- Morrison, B. (ed.) (1999) *Experiments and evaluation in self-access language learning*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Association for Self-Access Learning and Development.
- Pemberton, R., Ho, S., Lam, J. and Toogood, S. (1999) Developing a self-directed English language-learning programme for postgraduate students. In B. Morrisson (ed.), *Experiments and evaluation in self-access*

language learning. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Association for Self-Access Learning and Development, 1–24.

Reinders, H. (2005) Non-participation in a university language programme. *JALT Journal*, 27(2), 209–26.

Reinders, H. (2007) Big brother is helping you. Supporting self-access language learning with a student monitoring system. *System*, 35(1), 93–111.

Reinders, H. (2010) Towards a classroom pedagogy for learner autonomy: A framework of independent language learning skills. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(5), Article 4. Downloaded from <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol35/iss5/4>.

Reinders, H. and Darasawang, P. (forthcoming). Diversity in Language Support. In G. Stockwell, and M. Thomas (eds), *Diversity in CALL*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schoepp, K. and Lydiatt, S. (2010) The role of advising and a student tracking system in the United Arab Emirates. In J. Mynard and L. Carson (eds), *Advising in language learning: Dialogue, tools and context*. Harlow: Longman, 000–000.

Valdivia, S., McLoughlin, D. and Mynard, J. (2010) The portfolio: A practical tool for advising language learners in a self-access centre in Mexico. In J. Mynard and L. Carson (eds) *Advising in language learning: Dialogue, tools and context*. Harlow: Longman, 000–000.

Voller, P., Martyn, E. and Pickard, V. (1999) One-to-one counselling for autonomous learning in a self-access centre: Final report on an action learning project. In S. Cotterall and D. Crabbe (eds), *Learner autonomy in language learning: Defining the field and effecting change*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 111–28.