# Written advising strategies in self-directed learning modules and the effect on learning

# Written Advising Strategies in Self-Directed Learning Modules and the Effect on Learning

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**Abstract**

Learners at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan have the opportunity to take optional, self-directed learning modules through the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC). Participating students are assigned a learning advisor who works closely with them both in person and also through written communication on the learner's work. The purpose of the modules is to facilitate the development of language learner autonomy and to provide individualised language learning opportunities. Comments provided to learners are intended to promote a deeper level of awareness of the language learning process and to focus on cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective factors. This paper summarises a two-year study where (1) written comments made to twenty-four learners by seven learning advisors were analysed over a one-semester period and (2) the learners' reactions to the comments and effects that the comments had on actual cognitive and metacognitive development were investigated.

## I. Literature Review

With an increased interest in supporting learners outside of class and in fostering learner autonomy and life-long learning skills comes the need for additional support mechanisms for independent language learners. If promoting autonomy is to be successful, then support for the development of cognitive and metacognitive growth outside scheduled class time needs to be available to learners. Cognitive awareness is the knowledge that a learner has about strategies

and processes involved in learning a language. These approaches are often learned from peers informally, introduced in a language class formally, or acquired from experience in other ways. For example, a learner may have an understanding about how to use a piece of pronunciation software, or know various ways to organize vocabulary items. Metacognitive knowledge is the awareness a learner has about his or her own language learning process. For example, how to reflect on the progress and implement change to a course of self-directed study, or how a particular activity relates to the overall learning goal. Metacognitive awareness is said to incorporate self-awareness, language awareness, cognitive awareness, social awareness and cultural awareness (Ellis, 2000). Promoting metacognitive awareness means that learners will be more able to identify and address areas of weakness and plan courses of independent learning more successfully. Cognitive and metacognitive awareness may be promoted in a language class, but can also be supported outside class through advising programmes, through self-directed learning modules, or by a combination of all of these things. Affective factors are factors related to the emotions, feelings, and attitudes that individuals bring to the learning experience and the role these emotions play in motivation (Dornyei, 2001; Hurd, 2008). Hurd (2008) notes that affective strategies are as important as cognitive and metacognitive factors for successful language learning and are particularly important in independent learning settings.

*Advising in language learning*

Advising in language learning is defined as "the process and practice of helping students to direct their own paths so as to become better, more autonomous language learners" (Carson & Mynard, forthcoming). Advising

practices may vary from institution to institution (Mynard & Navarro, 2010), but most advising in language learning occurs face-to-face either individually or in small groups. The approaches that are used by learning advisors during the process often draws on counselling skills (Kelly, 1996; Mozzon-McPherson, forthcoming) and the direction the session takes, although co-constructed, is normally guided by the learner. Kelly (1996) highlights macro and micro skills that can be useful to draw upon when training new learning advisors or for stimulating reflection in more experienced advisors. Attention to macro skills, such as guiding, modeling and evaluating, and micro skills such as attending, restating, and interpreting is given by learning advisors in order to facilitate reflection on the language learning processes.

*Self-directed learning modules*

Self-directed learning modules are self-paced, stand-alone courses completed by a student without direct supervision from a teacher. Modules may be online or paper-based, optional or voluntary, and may be for credit. Modules are taken by distance students, students based in remote locations, or offered as an alternative to traditional classroom-based courses at a university (Valdivia, McLoughlin & Mynard, forthcoming). Although many self-directed learning modules are focused on delivering content, (for example, Walker, 2009) or have a required language outcome (see Fernández Toro & Truman, 2009), the focus of this paper is on modules designed to provide space and support for a learner to design and implement a course of independent of study, develop an awareness of the language learning process and develop a greater capacity for autonomous learning. Learners are supported throughout the process by language learning advisors rather

than tutors. A "(language) learning advisor is an educator who works with (usually individual) learners on personally relevant aspects of their language learning development" (Carson & Mynard, forthcoming). Learning advisors focus on the process and the development of autonomy, and on cognitive and metacognitive growth and are not as concerned with the development of content knowledge or language fluency or accuracy, unless it is connected with a goal that a learner him/herself has decided.

Feedback to a learner from an advisor is crucial in any course of independent study and written interaction is likely to be the main form of communication between the learner and the learning advisor (Mynard & Navarro, 2010; Noguchi & McCarthy, 2010). The advisor comments are important for maintaining motivation and for supporting the learning processes (Hurd & Fernández Toro, 2009). Although written feedback on module work is recognized as a crucial component of the learning process, the comments written by the learning advisors may be driven by intuition rather than based on research.

*Feedback*

Effective written feedback is crucial for all learners, but is particularly critical for learners working independently not only to provide guidance to improve their performance, but also to support, encourage and motivate them (White, 2003; Hurd & Fernández Toro, 2009). Feedback should take account of cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective factors. Cognitive feedback focuses on strategy use, metcognitive feedback ensures that the learners know how to build on what they have already done and how to improve their performance, social feedback encourages learners to seek out other people to help them with their course of

study. Wion (2008) notes that in distance education, there is also a particular need for affective feedback as emotion is a natural factor in learning. Providing feedback in written form gives the opportunity for learners to receive developmental feedback which is individualised and appropriate to the stage they are at. Hurd and Fernándo Toro (2009) investigated cognitive, metacognitive and affective factors involved in successful independent study. Citing one study with distance learners of Spanish at the Open University, UK, Hurd and Fernández Toro (2009) described how tutor comments were analysed according to four factors:

1. Goal relevance. This was concerned with whether a learner's goal matched the aims of the course.
2. Knowledge. This included cognitive and metacognitive knowledge.
3. Roles (responsibilities, identity, locus of control).
4. Self-confidence (self-efficacy, self-esteem and other concepts).

The results of the study, which included interviews with 20 learners, enabled the researchers to suggest that all four concepts were important and there should be a balance of all four in tutor comments.

## II. Background to the Study

This study takes place at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan which has a self-access centre employing ten learning advisors. There are around 3800 students in the university, all majoring in languages and international studies. The self-access centre, in addition to providing other advising services, offers optional, self-directed learning modules for freshman and sophomore

students. The modules also aim to provide a framework for learners to activate deeper cognitive and metacognitive processes and develop autonomous learning habits. The modules provide students with opportunities to supplement the work that they do in class and individualise their learning. All of the work is completed in English, the target language. All of the modules are optional, but students can earn a small amount of credit (a maximum of ten points) which is added onto the students' overall associated English class grade.

The module being studied in this paper lasts for eight weeks. The learners work with their advisor to create a learning plan which they implement over the course of the module period. Each week the students study independently while working towards the goals they set at the start of the module. Each week, they submit written reflections on their activities, materials and progress and submit the module to their learning advisor. The learners also set goals for the following week based on these ongoing reflections following a PLAN-DO-REFLECT cyclical model. The learning advisors provide weekly comments and feedback to the learners, also in written form. Learning advisors also meet with the learners once or twice during this process. At the end of the eight-week period, learners have a final interview with their learning advisor to discuss their overall progress on the module. After the interview, the learners submit a two page written report reflecting on their work, their completed module pack, and copies of all their work. This work is given a grade and the learner is given some final feedback. For a fuller description of the modules, see Noguchi and McCarthy (2010) and Mynard (2010).

## III. The Present Study

The modules have been offered since 2004, but little systematic research has

been conducted related to them. Individual learning advisors notice how the learners develop the ability to effectively plan and reflect deeply on their learning over time, but this has not been formally researched. Feedback from learners via post-module questionnaires has always been extremely positive and many students choose to do additional self-directed learning modules. For example, in the first semester (starting April 2011), 280 freshman students participated in self-directed learning modules. In semester 2 (starting September 2011) almost 180 students took a self-directed learning module.

Although there is evidence that learners do develop autonomous learning skills by working on a self-directed learning module (Crowe & Kato, 2008; Crowe, 2010), no research has been conducted on the kind of feedback that learning advisors give and how this affects the independent learning process. The aim of the present research study is in two parts and is designed to understand more about the complex processes involved in completing a course of independent study, and in particular, whether the advisor feedback promotes cognitive and metacognitive thought processes.

In the first part of the study, I analysed the feedback and comments given by learning advisors on the students' work. In the second part of the study, I focused on learners' perceptions of the comments and feedback and the effect the comments and feedback had on learning. I anticipate that the results of the study will provide some guidelines for learning advisors about the most effective types of written feedback and advice to give to students taking the self-directed learning modules.

*Research methodology*

I adopted an interpretative methodology for the research. I draw on a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998) in order for important factors to emerge from the data.

*Research questions*

There were three research questions in the study:

(1) What types of written comments do learning advisors give to learners?

(2) What are learners' reactions to the written comments from their learning advisors?

(3) What affect, if any, do the comments have on the development of cognitive and metacognitive awareness?

## IV. Results

### Research question 1: A summary

(1) What types of written comments do learning advisors give to learners?

The findings related to research question will only be briefly summarized here. See Mynard (2010) for a full description of the data collection, analysis and results.

After analyzing the data qualitatively using HYPERresearch emergent categories were collated by running frequency reports. The next step, in line with grounded theory techniques, was to make connections between the categories which resulted in the emergence of six broader themes which are summarized in the table below (Figure 1). The percentage figures for each theme were rounded up or down to the nearest whole number for convenience. The themes are shown as a chart in figure 2.

| **Theme 1: Probing** | | |
|---|---|---|
| questioning | 552 | |
| short question | 80 | |
| will and future questions | 58 | |
| indirect question | 11 | |
| **Total** | **701** | **34%** |

| **Theme 2: Commenting** | | |
|---|---|---|
| giving feedback | 302 | |
| justification | 39 | |
| giving an opinion | 2 | |
| **Total** | **343** | **17%** |

| **Theme 3: Attending** | | |
|---|---|---|
| acknowledging | 57 | |
| restating | 102 | |
| intuiting | 69 | |
| contradicting | 47 | |
| agreeing | 30 | |
| **Total** | **305** | **15%** |

| **Theme 4: Giving input** | | |
|---|---|---|
| suggestion | 111 | |
| telling | 89 | |
| requesting | 46 | |
| giving an example | 43 | |
| hypothetical advice | 16 | |
| **Total** | **305** | **15%** |

| **Theme 5: Connecting** | | |
|---|---|---|
| encouragement | 214 | |
| small talk | 53 | |
| empathising | 16 | |
| inviting learner to ask for help | 7 | |
| **Total** | **290** | **14%** |

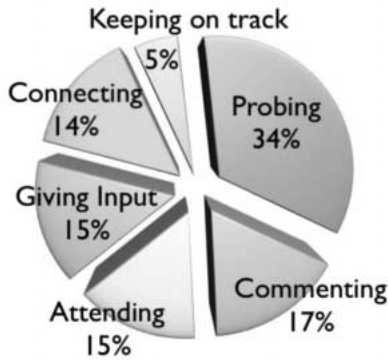| **Theme 6: Keeping on track** | | |
|---|---|---|
| reminding | 53 | |
| module information | 46 | |
| assigning responsibility | 5 | |
| **Total** | **104** | **5%** |

**Figure 1: Emergent themes**

**Figure 2: Emergent themes shown as percentages**

There were some limitations (see Mynard, 2010), for example, although my coding frame was a deemed to be a reliable instrument, one of the categories, "questioning" was very large and constituted 27% of total comments, and could have been further categorized more specifically by interviewing the learning advisors. The study also highlighted inevitable differences in the style, approach or language used by individual learning advisors and this was not represented in my coding.

Establishing that comments made by learning advisors on self-directed learning modules fall into six themes is a useful starting point for the next stage of the study. For research questions 2 and 3, I investigated how meaningful and useful the comments are perceived to be by the learners who receive them and whether the comments have any impact on learning.

**Research question 2: Summary**

(2) What are learners' reactions to the written comments from their learning

advisors?

*Methods*

In order to investigate this question, it was necessary to interview learners. Potential participants were contacted at the end of the semester after the module was complete and the pack had been returned along with final feedback and grades from their learning advisors. Potential participants were all freshman students who had completed two modules with the same learning advisor. Six students responded and were interviewed and paid for their participation in the study. The interviews lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. The students were given a choice whether to have the interview in English or in Japanese via a translator and all six participants were comfortable with the researcher conducting the interview in English and recording it.

Table 1 summarizes who the participants were, their focus areas during the module and who their learning advisor (LA) was. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the paper. In addition, the gender of the LAs has been removed to retain anonymity.

| LA | Student name | Male/Female | Goals |
|----|--------------|-------------|-------|
| LA 3 | Emi | Female | Speaking, Vocabulary |
| LA 2 | Kiku | Female | Reading, Vocabulary |
| LA 1 | Mina | Female | Speaking, Vocabulary |
| LA 1 | Riko | Female | TOEFL Reading, Vocabulary |
| LA 3 | Sayuri | Female | Speaking, Vocabulary |
| LA 2 | Shizuka | Female | Speaking, Grammar |

**Table 1: Information about the participants**

The interviews were individual and semi-structured. My aim was for the interviews to be as relaxed and as participant-led as possible. The first few minutes were for rapport-building and for some general questions about the module experience. Once the participant seemed comfortable and relaxed, I turned to the main focus of the interview; on the LA's comments and which ones (if any) had been helpful for the learner. I had made two copies of each learner's module pack in advance - one for me to refer to, and the other for the learner to use. I placed three highlighter pens on the desk in front of the participants in each interview and asked them to use the pink pen to highlight comments that they thought were "very good"; yellow pen if they thought the comments were "quite good"; and green pen if they felt that the comments were "not so good". I was careful to use the same wording for each participant, giving no indication of what a "good" comment was. A printed sheet showing this was placed on the desk throughout the process. The participants were free to take their time and re-read their own comments and those of their LA and highlight as many or as few LA comments as they liked. Most participants started at the beginning with the learning plan, but some went to a point in the middle of the module. I interrupted the learners after around five minutes, or when they had finished highlighting one section of the module pack, and asked them to tell me about the comments they had highlighted. None of the interviews lasted longer than 45 minutes as I was conscious of not causing participant fatigue. I transcribed all of the interviews and sent them to the participants by e-mail to check, giving them the opportunity to make any additions or comments. Additional comments were minimal.

*Data analysis*

Several instruments were used:

(1) The Module pack detailing eight weeks of independent study including a learning plan, a weekly reflective learning journal, examples of independent work, and detailed weekly written comments from the LA.

(2) Interviews with six module-takers

(3) The final written reflective report

(4) Follow-up interviews with LAs

In order to write a summary of each participant's experience, I focused on the comments that the participants had identified as "good" ones either by highlighting them in pink or mentioning them during the interview. I began by coding each comment according to the previously established coding frame (Appendix 1). I then analysed the learner's experience according to research questions 2 and 3. I summarized, using the learners' actual words where possible, why the learner had chosen those particular comments. I cross-referenced what the learner said in the interview with the actual module pack. In particular, I looked for further information surrounding the episodes the participants had described. For example, if a participant explained that a particular LA comment had caused a change in some aspect of learning, I looked for evidence of this in subsequent learning journal entries.

In some cases, I was able to explore all of the comments that had been highlighted, but in other cases, there was not sufficient time, so I asked the participant to choose which comments to discuss. In two cases (Kiku and Sayuri), the participants had highlighted only a few comments, so I asked them what they

thought about some of the others either on the same page or at random with the time that was remaining.

In addition to exploring why the participants highlighted particular LA comments, I also noted which comments had been selected and looked for patterns across the six participants.

*Results*

I looked at the range of comments that the participants had selected and found that they had all highlighted (in pink) a range of comment types. I have only included themes that were raised by the participants (rather than me as the interviewer) and I have not included other highlighted comments that were not discussed in the interview. As such, this table only shows a snapshot of the comments that the participants felt were good ones and a richer analysis will be seen through the qualitative data. Nevertheless, the results do suggest two things: (1) that all of the comment types (apart from theme 6) were seen by the participants to be good ones; and (2) the participants thought that being asked questions by their LAs was beneficial. The breakdown is shown by theme in Table 2 and by comment type in Table 3.

| Student name | Theme 1 Probing | Theme 2 Commenting | Theme 3 Attending | Theme 4 Giving input | Theme 5 Connecting | Theme 6 keeping on track |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Emi | 3 | | 2 | 2 | 2 | |
| Kiku | 1 | | | 2 | | |
| Mina | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 4 | |
| Riko | | | 1 | 2 | 2 | |
| Sayuri | 3 | 1 | | | | |
| Shizuka | 3 | 3 | 2 | | | |
| | 11 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 0 |

**Table 2: Comment highlighted by the participants as being "good" (by theme)**

| Theme 1: Probing (11) | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | Questioning | 11 |
| Theme 2: Commenting (6) | | |
| | Giving feedback | 6 |
| Theme 3: Attending (7) | | |
| | Acknowledging | 3 |
| | Intuiting | 1 |
| | Agreeing | 1 |
| | Restating | 2 |
| Theme 4: Giving input (8) | | |
| | Suggesting | 5 |
| | Giving an example | 2 |
| | Telling | 1 |
| Theme 5: Connecting (8) | | |
| | Encouragement | 5 |
| | Small talk | 3 |

**Table 3: Breakdown of categories of "good" comments mentioned by participants**

### Research question 3: A summary

(3)  What affect, if any, did the comments have on the development of cognitive and metacognitive awareness?

A further paper is in preparation which shares more of the qualitative data and looks at learners' development throughout the module, but I have selected some examples to show how particular comments have impacted on the learner's cognitive and/or metacognitive awareness

### Theme 1: Probing (questioning)

All but one participant (Riko) identified examples of questions from their LAs as "good" comments. In some cases, the participants explained how the questions from their LAs made them think more deeply and notice something that they had

not realized before which I have interpreted to show evidence of developing metacognitive awareness. In other cases, the participants discovered more effective strategies for learning and subsequently incorporated them into their plan. I have interpreted these cases as evidence of developing cognitive awareness.

### Example 1: Emi

Emi highlighted this question from her LA in pink: "Did you use 50 words?" and explained during the interview that this question made her think about whether she could actually use the words or not:

"I wrote down 50 words but I just write the words, so (my LA) asks me "did you use all the words?" And I noticed … I and my friends talking about the topic but I couldn't use all the words. And (my LA) asked me so I notice I couldn't use, but sometimes I could use words so some questions are very good for me to notice that how many words I could use."

Emi wrote the following written response for her LA in her module pack:

"I can't use 50 words but I can use most of the words. After talking, I checked how could I use the words from vocabulary note."

I examined the module pack to see if Emi had implemented any changes in subsequent weeks and found that he following week, she had reduced the number of new words to learn from 50 to 25.

### Example 2: Emi

Emi highlighted this comment from her LA in pink: "Were you satisfied with

everything or is there anything you would like to change?"

Emi told me during the interview: "I think this question is good" because it made her think about ("I could notice") how she used her time outside class. She decided that she liked her plan, and although she wanted to change the number of words she learned, she was generally satisfied with it: "the work was a little hard for me….but speak for 30 minutes outside class is very fun for me so didn't want to change." She writes a written response to her learning advisor relying to the question saying that she is "satisfied" with her plan. The following week, she again decided to speak for 30 minutes.

### Theme 2: Commenting (Giving feedback)

Mina highlighted with a pink pen instances where her LA made comments that were subsequently categorized as giving feedback / commenting. For example, when writing about resources and proposed study activities, Mina mentioned two common exams in Japan – the TOEFL and the TOEIC a number of times without really understanding how they might be helpful for her. In her learning plan, Mina highlighted her LA's comments that she found particularly useful, the first one is shown below and focuses around an extract from Mina's learning plan:

| Student's notes in the module under "resources" | LA's comments |
|---|---|
| *Mina: I'll use text (book) for taking good score of TOEFL and its CD, especially. In this few weeks, I'll study focusing important points on improving grammar and vocabulary. Because I think tells me correct, useful and practice grammar and words, it also tells me natural pronunciation for daily conversation. Studying TOEFL different from TOEIC , I may be able to improve skill of English for life in the University. It's useful for me to enjoy campus life and taking in English.* | *LA: TOEFL consists mostly of academic English.*<br>*If your goal is to improve your general conversation skill, it may not be the best material. If your goal is to improve your TOEFL score, then, it's fine.* |

During the interview, Mina talked about why she had highlighted these kinds of LA comments in pink: "TOEFL and TOEIC difference and I don't know which is useful to me and for my future so she tells me TOEFL consists mostly of academic….. and also TOEIC is useful for working for something so it's useful to me." This helped Mina to decide which exam to choose and what the focus of her study should be. For the remainder of he module, Mina focuses on TOEFL skills.

**Theme 3: Attending (restating) and Theme 4: Giving input (example)**

Emi highlighted this comment from her LA in week 3 in pink: "you said you checked your vocabulary book after speaking to see which words you used. Some people make a little mark next to the words they used, for example * or ⋆ or ⌡ to show that they used it."

Emi told me during the interview how she had learned a useful new strategy from her LA in week 3: "other students check how many words they did use and write the mark and writing marks,  (my LA) taught me you notice you will notice that's how many words did you use by writing marks. So, next week I tried to write mark."

The following week, Emi implemented the strategy and wrote in her learning journal "I could use most of the words"

During the interview I asked Emi about the strategy:

> *Interviewer:* How did it go? Did the system work for you?
> *Emi:* I could notice how many words I could use. I notice that some words are very used but some words are not used, so writing marks is good.

**Theme 4: Giving input (Suggestion)**

Riko received the following comment from her LA in week 5 and she highlighted the final sentence in yellow:

*LA: I hope you'll remember to work on practice tests sometimes to evaluate your vocabulary skill. It will also help you to get used to using to TOEFL texts, too.*

During week 5, Riko had been focusing on vocabulary study and remembering large numbers of new words. When asked about this comment during the interview, Riko said that she realized that she had not done any evaluation activities: "maybe during this week five, I concentrate to increase vocabulary so I couldn't solve any questions of TOEFL so (my LA's) advice is to try to solve this question."

Riko's learning journal the following week indicates that she focused on reviewing previously learned words, but did not in fact use a practice test like her LA suggested:

*Riko: I chose the same text(book) that I had used last week…. I made and took small vocabulary tests three times. These were contained the same vocabulary which I learned last week and I checked if I could remember or not. First test's score was 14/15, second one was 13/15, last one was 13/15.*

*I noticed that I have to do "Review". I should see the vocabulary which I learn before. I knew that to do "Study", "Review", "Evaluate" and "Enjoy" more constantly is very necessary for me because I am forgetful people*

In week 6, Riko'a LA makes a suggestion:

*LA: For "Evaluation", it may be a good time to try a practice test of "Listening" and*

*"Reading" section*

In week 7, Riko follows the advice of her LA and tries a practice test and makes the following observations in her learning journal:

*Riko: When I solved questions of reading section, I noticed that I took much time to answer. So, I have to practice more, and I will do the same work next time.*

The initial comment from Riko's LA seemed to trigger the awareness that she needed to do more than simply learn more new words in order to achieve her goal, but it was not until her LA repeated the suggestion one week later that she tried a practice test. Trying a practice test made Riko shift her focus the following week as she realized that she needed more practice in order to get quicker at answering the questions. Riko's LA confirmed during the interview that written comments alone had triggered the change and that they had not discussed it during the mid-module meeting.

## Theme 5: Connecting (Encouragement)

In the "feedback from your learning advisor" comment box in week 4, Mina highlighted this comment in pink pen:

*LA: It's okay to change your goal because it's for your self study. You don't have to be sorry! ♪*

This comment was in response to the following comments that Mina had made in part 4 of her weekly reflections:

*Mina: First, I want to tell you I change my plan of this module. I plan to study read-*

*ing section mainly, but I don't have much time in this semester, so I'll focused on improving vocabulary. Also, I study reading section at the long holiday such as holiday of exam or winter vacation. Is it OK? Sorry for changing my learning style every week, but I will not change any more (maybe) because this is the best learning style (my schedule, weak point, goal).*

Mina explained during the interview that she had been anxious about changing her plan and felt reassured by her learning advisor's comments: "I was worrying about changing and so I asked "is it okay?" and she answered me "yes", so I can calm down myself."

Later in the module, Mina deviated from her plan and did not feel that she needed to gain her LA's permission to do this. For example, in week 5, Mina focused on vocabulary, and in week 6 she reviewed her reading comprehension ability. In week 7, she returns to a vocabulary focus, but notes the following in her reflective journal suggesting greater ownership over the direction of her learning:

*Mina: If I am still not good at vocabulary section, I have to continue these work from now on, Although, then I have to change the way of studying, because it means it doesn't fit me.*

Mina's LA's comments were always friendly and encouraging which in turn were empowering for Mina. Mina was not afraid to try new ideas in her weekly study. Mina's LA confirmed during an interview that making changes to the plan had only been discussed through written comments.

To summarise, in the interviews, the participants indicated a range of comments types that they had found particularly useful and explained in the

interview how each comment had impacted on their learning in some way. There was further evidence in the module work to support what the learners mentioned in the interviews and substantial evidence to indicate the comments from learning advisors had a positive effect on learning in terms of cognitive and metacognitive growth in addition to performing a motivational role (see Valdivia, McLoughlin & Mynard, 2011).

## Conclusions

In this paper I have identified and categorized the kinds of comments and feedback that learning advisors provide to learners taking self-directed learning modules. I presented evidence from learner interviews and module work showing that the learners value the comments and use them to positively influence their language learning development. What became evident throughout the second stage of the research was that learners developed a close relationship with their learning advisors and it is not so much the kinds of comments that the LAs write, but on their ability to understand what the learner is working on and to be able to offer individualized comments based on the learners' needs and learning stage. This research will continue, but will examine the interactions over the eight weeks in order to understand more about how an LA decides what to comment on and how much he/she is influenced by the contributions of the learner.

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## Appendix 1 - Coding Frame

| Category code | Description and examples |
|---|---|
| acknowledging | Advisor is noting or responding to something briefly i.e. OK |
| agreeing | Advisor expresses agreement, e.g. I agree / You are right etc. |
| assigning responsibility | Reminding the learner that they are responsible for their work "You should decide", "You are the best person to do this" |
| contradicting | Advisor states that something written is not correct or contra dicts earlier comment e.g. "This is not X" / "You cant' do X" |
| empathising | Showing understanding of how a learner is feeling. e.g. I'm sorry that.... / What a shame that... / I understand... / I know.... |
| encouragement | A comment intended to motivate the learner i.e. That's great / Don't give up / Well done! / Good luck with.... / I'm glad you enjoyed it / thank you for... |
| giving an example | Advisor lists example activities, materials, places or strategies |
| giving an opinion | Advisor writes their own opinion "I think that....." "I like X" |
| giving feedback | Advisor gives feedback on something the learner has done or written. This is a good example of X / Good / Doing X is good / X is clear / X is unclear / X is OK / You are right to do this / |
| hypothetical advice | Advisor speculates how something might go, e.g. "If you do X, then Y" |
| indirect question | Advisor asks indirect or polite question, e.g. I'm interested to know... , I wonder if.... |
| intuiting | Advisor is intuiting based on available evidence, e.g. I sense that... / It seems like.... / It sounds like... |
| inviting learner to ask for help | e.g. "Come and see me if you like" |

| | |
|---|---|
| justification | Advisor explains why something is useful etc. e.g. "This will help you...." / "It's good to do this because..." |
| module information | Comments related to the module, e.g. Make an appointment / Hand in your report.... / |
| questioning | Any general questions which help the learner to think more deeply about the process |
| reminding | Any reminders, e.g. Please remember to / Don't forget to... |
| requesting | Advisor asks the learner to do something e.g. Please can you...... / Please do X / try to... |
| restating | Advisor summarises, paraphrases or repeats what the learner has said or done using different words, e.g. So you think that... / You did X, then Y / You told me that.... |
| short question | Question usually requiring a number, title or length of time, e.g. How much / How many / How long / What's the title? |
| small talk | Questions or comments unrelated to the module for the purpose of connecting personally with the student, e.g. Have a nice week end / I look forward to your next diary entry / Sounds nice! / Interesting! |
| suggestion | Advisor gives some ideas that the learner may not have thought of: Think about doing.... / What about...? / You may want to... / Have a look at / X is probably not a good use of your time |
| telling | Strongly suggesting that a learner does something, e.g. You must.... / You need.... / It's important to... / Make sure that... |
| will and future questions | Questions that ask the learner about something they are going to do in the future e.g. How will you change your plan? / Which book will you use? |