Action-oriented Language Learning Advising: A new approach to promote independent language learning

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Abstract

The Self-access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) offers a unique language advisory service provided by professional Learning Advisors. This service has grown out of the increasing interest in autonomous language learning at the university level education. In general, counseling skills are often used in language learning advising sessions as the skills required in counseling and advising are relatively similar. This research investigates the potential of Action-oriented Language Learning Advising (ALLA) to encourage learners to take action and deepen their understanding of their learning process. Through examining reflective diaries and interviews conducted with SALC self-access course takers, this study investigates 1) Does ALLA promote learners' reflection at a deeper level? and 2)Does ALLA induce action on advisee's language learning?

Self-access Learning Center at KUIS

Language centers with the state-of-the art self-study facilities are becoming more common in institutions around the world. Self-access centers are being built with the aim that the centers will become one of the environments in which learner autonomy can be promoted and supported. Benson (1997) suggests that such centers

can become places where learners can 1) develop skills and techniques to learn a language effectively outside the educational framework of an institution and without the intervention of a teacher, 2) develop skills to determine the objectives of one's learning, define the contents, select the methods and the resources, and monitor progress and evaluate outcomes, and 3) develop skills to have full control over content of learning and processes. In order to attain the above objectives, to develop learner autonomy, the existence of advisor who can give advice to students about ways to use the center for their learning needs is crucial (McPherson & Vismans, 2001; Miller & Rogerson-Revell, 1993).

The Self-access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) was established in 2001, for learners, to promote self-directed and autonomous language learning. As of today, the SALC is one of the biggest language learning centers in Asia and served as a model for many universities and institutions in Japan because of its dynamic, innovative, and progressive educational environment.

The SALC offers a language advisory service to help learners solve their learning problems. Eight dedicated full-time Learning Advisors (LAs) with a broad range of experience and international backgrounds work in the SALC. LAs have a Master's Degree in TESOL, TFL, or Applied Linguistics, and some are working on their Doctorate degrees. Currently, we have LA from Australia, Ireland, Jamaica, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

One of the important objectives of language learning advising is to raise learners' general awareness of the learning process and their knowledge of cognitive and affective strategies. Therefore, the role of LA is not to give learners the right answers but to advise, guide, encourage, and facilitate learners' learning and let the learners become more aware of their learning goals, needs, strategies and to promote the skills to manage their learning by themselves.

Learning Advisors in the SALC

Language advisors' existence in an institution was fairly new in the mid-1990's, but is still now considered as a new, mysterious profession for many of the language teachers. It is a relatively new field which grew rapidly with the establishment of self-access centers. For example, at KUIS, some language teachers are not sure what learning advisors actually do and of the skills required to do the job. Indeed, the role of the language advisor is still emerging and advisors in different contexts take on different roles. Also, since the profession is still not uniformly established, different institutions employ different names for language advisors including, *facilitator, mentor, counselor, helper, consultant, learner support officer.* A common mission for the advisors is to help the learners' transition from classroom to independent learning environment and accordingly to help the students attain the skills to become autonomous learners (McPherson, 2001). At the authors' institution, LAs are mainly responsible for developing and implementing learner autonomy courses, helping learners develop language learning awareness through individual and group advising sessions, holding workshops on learning strategies, conducting hands-on-sessions, selecting and purchasing new resources, and creating leaflets and study guides. Thus, advisors spend most of their time in the SALC communicating with learners via face-to-face advising sessions, casual talk, e-mails, and through SALC self-access courses. Having such a variety of roles, advisors need to be knowledgeable about the resources available in the SALC. Also, having good advising skills is crucial to foster learner autonomy in learners. As a newly emerging profession, the exact training and skills it demands from the advisor are not concrete. However, there are some frameworks and theories to work from on how advisors can interact with students.

Kelly's macro- and micro-skills

One of the most widely known advising skills approaches derives from counseling skills. Kelly (1996) describes the communication between language counselor and a learner as a "form of therapeutic dialogue that enables an individual to manage a problem" (p.94). She brings in the theory from person-centered counseling into language education contexts. Person-centered counseling, a theory provided by Rogers (1951), describes the core conditions for a relationship between counselor and client as empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness. Kelly employs some of the humanistic values of person-centered counseling into her two sets of skills for language counseling: macro-and micro-skills. Macro-skills are skills that language counselor can use to facilitate learner self-management of a self-access project. Such skills include *initiating, goal-setting, guiding, modeling, supporting, giving feedback,* evaluating, linking, and concluding. The other set of skills, micro-skills are component behaviors that can come into play in a variable way during any interaction with a learner. Those skills include *attending, restating, paraphrasing, summarizing, questioning, interpreting, reflecting feelings, empathizing, and confronting.*

During the advising session, advisors have many opportunities to use Kelly's macro- and micro-skills. For example, advisors often encounter learners who lose sight of their original goals and become confused, learners who cannot manage time well, or those who lose their motivation. In such cases, learners need encouragement from advisors and also learn how they can manage such unexpected and difficult situations. Restating, paraphrasing, summarizing, and reflecting feelings are reflective listening skills that counselors use to communicate understanding and empathy, establish trust, and allow the learner to explore their situation in more depth (Stickler, 2001). Through counseling sessions, language counselors can make

learners think about themselves as language learners, about their most effective learning strategies, about the language that they are studying, and about how they can manage their affective aspects of learning while trying to avoid being directive and prescriptive. As such, by using language counseling skills, counselor "can illuminate aspects of personal experience that, without dialogue, may not become conscious or meaningful" (Kelly, 1996, p.105).

Egan's Model

Gerard Egan's model (1990) goes beyond Kelly's idea of the development of autonomy and self-reflection, and takes learners further towards action-planning. His model offers a framework for supporting students to set, achieve, and evaluate their own goals. In the first stage, an advisor helps learners pinpoint the exact problem areas and clarify the scope and nature of intended improvements. In the second stage, *developing a preferred scenario,* the advisor helps and supports the learner to imagine an improved situation and plan concrete steps to achieve this. During this stage, the advisor gives the learner a *miracle question* where the learner is asked to imagine and describe a world in which the problems have disappeared. From this ideal world, the learner is guided back to identify the concrete differences between this world and the current state of affairs and to develop strategies to achieve every little step that can lead to this changed situation. In the third stage, *planning action,* a selection of different strategies for action is developed, then they are weighed against each other considering the positives and negatives, the most appropriate or most promising action is chosen, and then the chosen action will finally be implemented. Implementation of action is up to the learner and feedback on achieved results comes into place in follow-up sessions. In Egan's model, it is important that the advisor establishes a relationship with a learner using counseling concepts such as empathy,

unconditional positive regard, and genuineness. The advisor needs to keep in mind that the aim is never to influence learners but to help them work out for themselves what the particular benefits or disadvantages might be for them.

Self-access Courses in the SALC

One of the reasons for the continuing success of the SALC at KUIS is considered to be the existence of self-access courses run by LAs. The SALC self-access courses are designed to promote students' awareness toward their language learning and to have students acquire study skills to become independent and autonomous language learner.

Currently, there are three types of SALC self-access courses: 1) First Steps Module (FSM), 2) Learning How to Learn Module (LHL), and 3) Sophomore Module (SM). The focus of the modules is placed not on "learning a language" but on "learning how to learn a language." By taking these modules, students are encouraged to learn the skills to manage, monitor, and assess their language learning by completing self-access activities. In the first module, students will learn some basic study skills such as needs analysis, goal-setting, time-management, learning styles, and a study model which is called "SURE +E (Study, Use, Review, Enjoy + Evaluation)" which are the core skills used in the following two modules (LHL and SM).

Throughout these courses, LAs communicate with students through written diaries and face-to-face interviews. All the courses offered by the SALC are all on voluntary basis. However, students can earn up to 20 extra points toward their Freshman English or Sophomore English classes by completing the SALC modules and this is also considered as part of the reason why students are motivated to take the courses.

Sophomore Module

A self-access study course, Sophomore Module (SM), is offered to sophomore students who have completed the FSM or LHL. Students study throughout the semester to attain the goals that they set at the beginning of the semester. At the end of the eight-week module, LAs conduct final interviews to all the students enrolled in the module. The final interview lasts between 20 to 30 minutes and LA asks questions that will help students reflect on the work they did throughout the semester. In the past semesters, advisors asked a series of questions to the students:

・ What was most successful/least successful about your learning experience and why?

・ What was your study goal for this module?

・ What would you change about your plan if you could do the module again?

・ Overall, how do you feel about your learning process that you've accomplished in this module?

・ Do you have any future study plans?

Typical responses LAs received from the students were, for example,*" I learned how to write five-paragraph essay."" I was able to learn 100 new words."" The most successful thing about my learning is that I could confirm my weak points."*

The conversations students and LAs had during the final interview were quite different from the other advising sessions in that final interviews were basically question and answer format, rather than open conversation format. Furthermore, as students' written final reflective reports and notes that LAs took during the final interviews indicate that the students' responses were not surprising to either of the parties; both knew what the answers would be before the interviews started. In addition, the reflection students did using the above questions often limit the students to say their success or failure in terms of their language improvement. These prompts

have not made students to think beyond their language skills. Accordingly, their future plan was usually something like "I will continue this plan and learn 20 words a week."

Looking at the original goal for offering this module - to foster more awareness of themselves as language learners – the authors realized that the final interview process was not meeting the goal. LAs should assist students to reflect deeper about themselves as language learners. The final interview needed some changes so that LAs can "illuminate aspects of personal experience that, without dialogue, may not become conscious or meaningful" (Kelly, 1996, p.105). The LAs had a need to interact with students in a different way so that students could develop more awareness of themselves as language learners.

Incorporating Coaching Skills into Language Learning
Advising *Definitions of coaching*

The authors took a series of courses on co-active coaching organized by the Coaches Training Institute (CTI) to get new ideas from other fields. Headquartered in the San Francisco Bay Area, CTI is said to be the largest in-person coach training school, which is one of the first educational institutions to develop and offer coach training. The CTI uses the term "co-active coaching," which refers to the fundamental nature of a collaborative relationship of the coach and client. While the authors attended the co-active coaching courses, we realized the skills used in coaching are similar to those of what we already use at the SALC. However, we also found some skills used in coaching which could be applied in language learning advising.

Coaching skills are not a set of innovative skills that have suddenly appeared. The idea of coaching has been imported into the organizational world from sports

Table 1: Distinction between Coaching and Therapy

Coaching	Therapy
Focus on learning and developing potential	Focus on healing and restoring function
Designing their future, learning new skills, and seeking more balance	Dealing with old issues, emotional pain, or traumas; seeking resolution and healing.
Primary focus on actions and future	Primary focus on feelings and history
Oriented toward solving problems through action	Oriented toward exploring the psychic roots of problems
Main tools: accountability, inquiry, requesting, goal-setting, strategic planning, etc.	Main tools: listening, reflecting, confrontation, interpretation, etc.
Assist the client in identifying, prioritizing, and implementing choices	Assist the client in untangling unconscious conflicts which interfere with choice

Adapted from Hayden & Whitworth (1995)

(Cunningham, Dawes, Bennett, 2001) and it is only in the last decade or so that coaching was accepted as a professional service. In general, the concept of coaching can be explained well when it is compared with traditional therapy or counseling. According to Tobias (1996), the term "coaching" was first used to substitute "counseling" in order to make it seem less threatening and remedial. However, in the late 1990s, "coaching" started to develop its own field.

It is said that therapy and professional coaching have several aspects in common. However, Hayden & Whitworth (1995) pointed out that the primary focus of therapy is put on a person's "past". Moreover, therapy mainly focuses on healing clients' emotional pain or conflict. Whereas, the primary focus of coaching is put on a person's "present" in order to act toward the future. In other words, the emphasis in coaching is on action, accountability, and on selecting strategies for achieving

specific goals.

Grant (2003) defines coaching as a means of exploring key metacognitive factors involved as individuals move towards goal attainment;

> "Life coaching can be broadly defined as a collaborative solution-focused, result-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience and goal attainment in the personal and/or professional life of normal, nonclinical clients."

The International Coach Federation (ICF), founded in 1992, defines coaching as "a thought-provoking and creative process" that inspires clients to focus on the skills and actions needed to successfully produce their personally relevant results. Moreover, the ICF states that "coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, business or organizations." Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance and enhance their quality of life (ICF, 2005, Code of Ethics)". The ICF also states that coaching is an interactive, action-oriented, goal setting process that helps both individuals and organizations more fully develop.

Common to most of the definitions of coaching in the literature is that both coach and client build a relationship and share the client's interest to develop the client's goals and motivation. In other words:

- ・Coaching focuses on attainable goals and possibilities.
- ・Focuses on "how" and "what" but not to much on "why".
- ・Deepens client's learning. Sets concrete and well-defined goals.
- ・Helps the client to identify the challenge and holds the client accountable to reach desired goals.

Action-oriented Language Learning Advising (ALLA)

The term "coaching" gradually became popular along with the increasing demands. However, there is a lack of empirical research on coaching skills, especially in language learning. This case-study is designed to explore the possibilities of expanding and widening the advising skills by incorporating coaching skills into the advising service provided by LAs at KUIS.

In this study, among various coaching skills, skills such as *metaview, metaphor, intuiting, powerful questions, challenging, requesting, accountability were* used along with the other advising skills. The following is a brief explanation of each skill adapted from Whitworth, Kimsey-House, K., Kimsey-House, H., & Sandahl (2007). However, authors believe that these skills sometimes overlap with each other in our advising sessions.

Table 2: Examples of coaching skills

Metaview	The big picture or expanded perspective. The coach pulls back (or asks clients to pull back) from clients' immediate issues and reflects back to clients what he or she sees through the clarity of that expanded perspective.
Metaphor	Used to illustrate a point and a verbal picture for the client.
Intuiting	Process of accessing and trusting one's inner knowing. Sometimes the information received through intuiting does not make logical sense to the coach; however, it is usually quite valuable to the client. Intuiting involves taking risks and trusting your gut.
Powerful questions	Evokes clarity, action discovery, insight, or commitment. It creates greater possibility, new learning, or clearer vision. Powerful questions are open-ended questions that do not elicit yes or no response.
Challenging	A request that stretches the client's way beyond their self-imposed limits and shakes up the way they see themselves.

Requesting	The request includes a specified action, conditions of satisfaction, and a date or time for completion, There are three possible responses to a request; yes, no, or a counteroffer.
Accountability	Hold clients accountable for their vision or commitment and ask them to account for the results of their intended actions. Holding clients accountable includes defining new actions to be taken.

Adapted from Whitworth, L., Kimsey-House, K., Kimsey-House, H., & Sandahl, P. (2007)

It is hoped that the use of these additional skills will result in an advisor having advising sessions where students reflect deeper on their language learning and where advisors can induce students to take action to get closer to their goals. In this study, the above mentioned coaching skills are incorporated into language learning advising. The new combination of coaching and advising skills in this study is named as Action-oriented Language Learning Advising (ALLA). Although ALLA is mostly based on the concept of coaching, its focus is on language learning. In other words, the purpose of ALLA is to encourage students to be accountable for their commitment and for the action to be taken in their language learning.

In order to investigate the possibilities of the new set of advising skills "ALLA", the following research questions were examined:

1. Does ALLA promote learners' reflection at a deeper level?
2. Does ALLA induce action on advisee's language learning?

The Study
Participants

Ten Sophomore Module students from the SALC self-access course were chosen as our interviewees for this case-study. As mentioned earlier, all the SALC courses

are designed to promote learner autonomy and these 10 students have taken one or two SALC self-access courses as a prerequisite for the Sophomore Module. In this course, LAs conduct final interviews with all the students enrolled in the module at the end of eight weeks to facilitate students' self-reflection and self-evaluation process. Therefore, during the interview, students are asked to reflect on their work they have done throughout the semester.

The interview questions were formed to promote students' reflection on their learning. However, in order to get students' responses, LAs usually had to ask various questions during the interview. This interview-lead approach forced students to answer the questions meaning that the quality of the interaction was not fully autonomous. In addition, students' reflections were often limited. Students tended to focus on their improvements in language skills only and these prompts have not made students to think beyond that.

Going back to the original goal for offering the self-access courses in the SALC, which is to raise students' awareness toward autonomous language learning, it was relatively obvious that the current format of the interview was not fully appropriate to achieve the goals. As the focus of the interview is preferably on attainable goals, possibilities, and on student's present state in order to design and act toward the future, the ALLA was introduced in the final interviews.

Coaching Tool: Wheel of Language Learning

In coaching sessions, it is said that one of the important elements is to discover clients' current status and how they got where they stand today. The CTI provides a coaching tool called "**Wheel of Life** exercise" which is sometimes used in coaching sessions where the clients need to clarify the situation they are in. When the authors of this study participated in the CTI courses and used this tool, both became

confident that this type of tool would help our students taking SALC self-access courses to deepen their learning process. The "Wheel of Life" is usually used in the initial coaching session to help a client discover the current status he or she is in. It looks like a pie chart which is equally divided into eight categories (e.g. Career, Money, Health, Friends and family, Significant other/ Romance, Personal growth, Fun and recreation). In this activity, clients are asked to analyze the level of their satisfaction in each area and reflect on what is going on inside themselves.

In order to make this activity more applicable and useful for the language learning advisory service offered at KUIS, we created a new wheel which we can specifically apply to SM students. The new wheel was named "**Wheel of Language Learning**". The new wheel consists of six sections; Goal-setting, Time management, Learning Strategy (SURE+E), Motivation for learning, Growth as a good language learner, Enjoyment in learning. These six areas represent the main skills which students are encouraged to acquire in the SM.

The Wheel of Language Learning activity is simple. In this activity, students are explained that the center of the wheel is considered to be 0 and outer edge is 10. Then, they are asked to rank their level of satisfaction with each area by drawing a curved line. Most of the 10 students in our research showed low satisfaction in the area of time management skills with the average of 5 to 6. On the other hand, students turned out to have high satisfaction for motivation and goal-setting skills with the average of 8 to 9. The wheel helps students to look at the area where they want to improve their level of satisfaction.

After completing the first wheel, students were asked to complete another Wheel of Language Learning which shows their "ideal future" language learning. Figure 1 is an example of wheel which is completed by a student during the interview. The inner circle shows student's current satisfaction for each area and the outer circle

Figure 1: Wheel of Language Learning
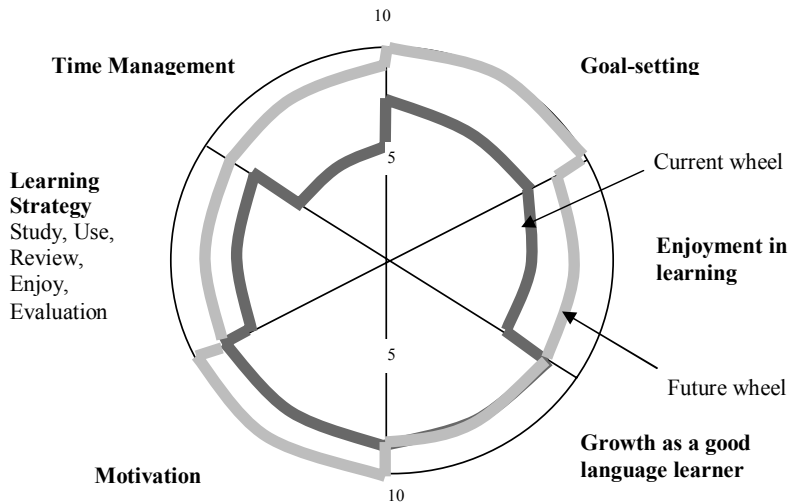
shows student's ideal future wheel. There is often a gap between the current wheel and the future wheel as the example shows.

Interview Procedure

By looking at the two wheels (current and future), students were asked to talk about their levels of satisfaction by reflecting on their learning. Then, students were asked to talk about the area where they want to improve. This is where the ALLA comes in. Skills such as metaview, metaphor, intuiting, powerful questions, challenging, requesting, accountability were used along with the other advising skills.

The followings are examples of questions which LAs asked during the interview.

· **Metaview**

" *When you look at your Wheel as a whole, what does it look like to you?* "

" How is each area connected with each other?"

" If your time management skill improves, how does it influence other areas?"

· **Metaphor**

" If your learning were like climbing up mountains, where are you at now? What do you see from there?"

" If you could describe your learning by using a metaphor, what would it be?"

· **Intuiting**

" I have a hunch that…"" I wonder if…"

· **Powerful questions**

" What does it take to get there?"" What do you need to do?"

" What do you want?"" What's next?"" How will you start?"

· **Challenging**

" Are you really willing to change?"

" If you think you can learn 20 words every week, what about 50?" (expecting counteroffer)

· **Requesting**

" I would like you to decide on the action you will take and promise me that you do it."

· **Accountability**

" When will you have this done?"

" How can I know that you have taken the action? Can you report back to me how you did?"

As mentioned earlier, the most important skill in ALLA is to induce students' action. Therefore, students were asked to give themselves an assignment and think about what action they can take from today or in a week to achieve their goal. The

first action does not have to be a drastic one. However, to make sure that the student move forward, students were asked to take any kind of action that they can start right away. To be more accountable for their action, student were also asked to send an email to LA and report that they have actually started to do what they decided to do. Besides the interview and email, students submitted a 500-word report to reflect on their learning they have done throughout the semester. This study examines whether ALLA promotes students' reflection at a deeper level and whether ALLA induce action on advisee's language learning. Data were collected through the interviews, emails, and reflective reports which the ten SM students have completed. All the interviews were recorded with students' permission and confidentiality was assured. The two authors qualitatively analyzed the recordings by especially focusing on the seven skills used in ALLA and students' responses to the new type of interview. The Language Learning Wheels, which students have completed, were collected and analyzed along with the 500-word reflective report that students were asked to submit. All the emails from students were also included in this data analysis process to examine the action plans which students have created after the interview.

Results

As the recorded interview sessions and LAs' observations indicate, the use of ALLA led the final interview sessions to be quite different from the ones before. First, and most apparent, the dialogue between a student and an LA became longer. The authors noticed that LA's short question and the use of the Wheel of Language Learning led students to take a more active role in the interview. The Wheel activity and LA's short questions connected different aspects of module work into one. This perspective was new to the students and students had to reflect on themselves on the spot. Whereas the former version of the interview did not yield any surprising

outcomes, this version of the interview session became one where both parties did not know where it would go; it was constructed together. Consequently, the dialogue between an LA and a student became lively.

Secondly, the quality of students' reflection improved. For example, in the former version, students focused mainly on linguistic aspects, such as "I could learn 100 words through this Module," or "I learned how to write a five-paragraph essay." However, with the new version, using the Wheel and ALLA, students focused mainly on assessing and reflecting on their skills as language learners. Following are some of the students' reflections from their final interviews:

- *I think Time Management and Motivation connect with each other. What I need to do is to make a good schedule.*
- *Setting a goal is better way to use time effectively than managing time.*
- *Motivation is the most important thing as it is a big factor for improving skills.*

Students showed clearer metalinguistic awareness of themselves as autonomous language learners.

Thirdly, the new version of the final interview also allowed the LAs to induce students' actions. Students were surprised when they were asked to come up with an action they could take from tomorrow or in a week. Nonetheless, they were excited to come up with ideas on actions that they could take to improve their weak areas. In the process, students became realistic in deciding the actions that they would take. The following are the examples of action students proposed to take:

- *To make my future vision come true, I will make a to-do list on post-it every evening (for the next day), and cross out each thing after I complete it.*
- *In order to keep my motivation in the future, I will use my favorite material. I will read Harry Potter every day for 10 minutes before I go bed.*

The actions students proposed were quite different from what students proposed

to do in the question-answer format interview, such as "I will continue this plan and learn 20 words."

In addition, the authors could see the effect of our new approach through the e-mails students sent letting us know if they actually took the action that they said they will:

- *Still, time management is big issue, but I tried to follow my schedule. So I could quite sleep^^.*
- *I will continue to record my shadowing practice and keep up my motivation.*
- *I started to read Harry Potter for 10 minutes before I go to bed every night.*

In this study, the use of the Wheel of Language Learning and some skills from ALLA resulted in a very productive advising session for both the LAs and the students. Comparing the two versions of final interviews, the students' recorded responses and written reflective final report indicate that students had a deeper understanding of themselves as language learners, showed clearer metalinguistic awareness, and became more responsible for their learning. The advising session became a forward-looking action inducing session.

Conclusion & Future Initiatives

The authors were able to come to a conclusion to the two research questions addressed: 1) Does ALLA promote learners' reflection at a deeper level, and 2) Does ALLA induce action on advisee's language learning? The above research findings suggest that new sets of advising skills, Action-oriented Language Learning Advising (ALLA), which incorporate some concepts from the field of coaching, have the potential to encourage learners to take action and deepen their understanding of the learning process. The session between a student and an LA also became much livelier and longer. In addition, using skills such as metaview, metaphor, intuiting,

powerful questions, challenging, requesting, accountability, along with other advising skills in language learning helped students have clearer metalinguistic awareness, and become more responsible for their learning. Consequently, LAs were able to induce students to take action by focusing on personal weaknesses.

The authors acknowledge the limitations of this research. This research was conducted with only 10 students and 2 Learning Advisors. In order to study the benefits and utilization of ALLA, the authors plan to conduct additional research with more students. The authors will also provide training workshops to six other Learning Advisors so that they will be able to conduct sessions using ALLA.   In addition, follow-up longitudinal research with the same student is planned. With more students and more LAs involved in the research, the authors hope to have wide variety of data to analyze the effectiveness and further potential of ALLA.

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