

# **REFLECTIONS OF AN ADVISOR : A NEVER-ENDING STORY**

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## **Mots-clés**

Apprentissage autonome, conseil linguistique, rôle de l'enseignant, développement professionnel, pratiques réflexives

## **Keywords**

Autonomous learning, language advising, teacher's role, professional development, reflective practices

## **Résumé**

L'objectif est de discuter le processus de développement professionnel de l'auteure suite à sa décision de conseiller individuellement les étudiants d'un cours d'Anglais Autonome (English Autonomously). De nouvelles pratiques de communication, moins directives, basées sur des rencontres effectives avec les étudiants aussi bien que sur la théorie concernant le conseil linguistique, seront décrites. De même, le texte présentera le changement des pratiques utilisées par l'équipe English Autonomously pour évaluer non seulement le cours mais aussi les entretiens de conseil. Fondées originellement sur un questionnaire d'évaluation standardisé, ces pratiques ont évolué vers un modèle réflexif plus approprié incluant les observations entre pairs.

## **Abstract**

The aim of this text is to discuss the process of professional development that the author experienced since she decided to provide individual advising sessions to students of the 'English Autonomously' course. The introduction of new, less directive communication practices that were grounded in actual encounters with students as well as in the theory of language advising will be described. Similarly, the text will present the change in practices that the English Autonomously team has used to evaluate the course and the advising sessions in particular from standardized course feedback to more appropriate reflective practices including peer observation.

## **Introduction**

Being a foreign language teacher is a multifaceted profession which requires various competences ranging from linguistic and communication skills to interpersonal and organisational skills. Depending on the teaching environment, teacher's personality, students' needs and other factors, the teacher's role may be similar to being a leader, entertainer, or advisor. Yet, the similarity shall not be overrated. In this text, I am going to share my experience with defining the role of advisor that I have been playing in one of our language courses. I believe that this (re-)definition was a very valuable contribution to my professional development both as an advisor and a teacher. I now understand these two roles quite differently, and consider them to be mutually enriching.

First, I am going to explain the concept and structure of the course which gave me an opportunity to become an advisor. Then, I will describe and analyse the individual stages of my transformation from being a teacher giving advice to being an advisor. Besides this transformation, I will also show how the advisor's role was reflected on and evaluated by the course team at each stage and how these practices contributed to the development of this role.

## **1. Background**

In 2013, the Masaryk University Language Centre started a project called English Autonomously. The concept of this project is based on the Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS) that lecturers at the Language Centre of the University of Helsinki have been developing for more than two decades. The initial inspiration as well as a long-term support and guidance from this well-established self-directed language learning scheme was crucial in setting up English Autonomously (EA). The EA course was introduced in 2014 as an elective course and the course structure was designed according to Masaryk University institutional needs. Students can receive two ECTS credit points by completing the course, i.e. by spending 50 hours on language learning activities. The course framework consists of compulsory elements. Students are required to:

- attend 2 opening workshops and complete related self-assessment activities

- choose and participate in 2 modules – meetings of support groups dealing with a certain skill or topic
- write their reflective language log
- attend 3 individual advising sessions.

This article focuses primarily on the individual advising sessions. Each of them serves a different purpose that is linked with a particular phase of the course. The first session, usually taking place a week after the opening workshops, focuses on planning; students set their goals for the course and create their own study plans. The second advising session is devoted to monitoring – in the middle of the semester students check whether they follow their individual study plan or whether it needs to be adapted. The last advising session takes place at the end of the semester and its aim is to evaluate the course activities and students' progress.

Based on its concept and structure, the course aims at giving students a choice of opportunities to improve their language skills and simultaneously to foster their autonomous learning competence. The course wishes to create conditions that Holec outlined as substantial for the development of learner autonomy: "Autonomous learners need to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (1981: 9). Table 1 shows which course components allow students to make the respective decisions mentioned by Holec.

<b>Holec</b>	<b>English Autonomously</b>
determining the objectives	self-assessment, individual study plan and advising session 1
defining the contents and progressions	individual study plan, advising session 1, modules
selecting methods and techniques to be used	advising sessions 1 and 2, modules
monitoring the procedure of acquisition	advising session 2 and log writing

evaluating what has been acquired and evaluating the learning decisions	advising sessions 2 and 3, final reflection

**Table 1.** Holec’s definition of learner autonomy applied in the English Autonomously course structure

The table gives a clear overview of the significance that the advising sessions have for supporting autonomous learning within the course. The three advising sessions contribute to covering all basic areas where decisions about language learning can be made. The table also suggests that both students’ and teachers’ roles in this course are very different from roles typical of traditional teaching situation. In the following text, I am going to illustrate how the teacher’s role has been transformed by the English Autonomously team and how I have gradually been developing from a teacher to an advisor while being involved in the advising sessions of the course.

Inspired by the ALMS, the English Autonomously team started to use the terms “counsellor” and “counselee” to refer to persons participating at the individual sessions. However, when considering and starting the project, an understanding of these roles had to be negotiated and the teachers had to familiarize themselves with various concepts of counselling and language advising. In Czech educational context, individual sessions between an educator and a student are not common, if they ever appear, they are usually focused on students’ behavioural issues or career choices. The practice of the English Autonomously course should be established on the same principles as the ALMS individual sessions. As defined by Gremmo, the sessions should be:

- a) *focused on the learning process much more than on the learning content,*
- b) *non-decisional, and not founded on a power relationship,*
- c) *retro-active, negotiative, non-programmable and not programmed,*
- d) *dealing with a specific coherent conceptual framework, that of language didactics (2009: 147).*

Therefore, it needs to be emphasized that although the word “counselling” is used in the course original description and the actors involved are still referred to as a “counsellor” and a “counselee”, the practices of running those sessions are mainly based on principles of language advising as defined by Gremmo (2009), Carson and Mynard (2012). The sessions were designed to be:

*one-to-one communicative situation between a learner and an advisor which rests on the assumption that through a discussion about their learning procedures, learners will be able to a) transform the conceptions which underlie decisions they make about learning a language, and b) to increase the methodological repertoire at their disposal when they actually work on learning the language. (Gremmo, 2009: 161-162).*

Consequently, when discussing my role in the individual sessions’, its function and communicative discourse, I am going to use the terms “advisor” and “language advising”.

While trying to design the advising sessions as a part of an environment that would support learner autonomy, the English Autonomously team could not rely on their own experience of receiving such support. The English Autonomously team had very limited personal experience in the area of language advising or with counselling in other contexts. As for me, I had never participated at any form of counselling, I had been only given some basic language advising by my own teachers and I had not received any training in the area of language advising. Therefore, it proved to be challenging to transform the principles of language advising into concrete actions. However, the whole team understood the benefits of individual sessions and was motivated to learn more about the related issues. Looking back, establishing the course, defining its components and roles has been an exciting and extremely enriching experience.

## **2. From teaching to advising**

### **2.1. The innocent years of a teacher**

This section is going to describe the starting point of my path as an advisor in the English Autonomously course and to reflect on how it resembled the traditional teacher’s role. During the first two semesters, English Autonomously was quite a small course, at that time I was only providing individual sessions for 6-8 students, most of them coming from my home faculty, the Faculty of Arts. My understanding of the advisor’s role was (due to the lack of other influences as explained before)

primarily based on my training and experience as a teacher. I considered the sessions as an additional opportunity to share my expertise with students, an opportunity that was different from normal classes in its one-to-one conversational format, yet quite similar in its function. In retrospect, I realized that the way responsibilities were distributed and interaction was managed during those sessions was rather similar to the traditional teacher- student model.

To confirm this assumption, I made a small survey among the first group of students that I provided advising sessions to, 7 students participated. From the following list, students were asked to choose 3 options that describe the advisor's role best for them. Table 2 shows how many times each option was selected:

The advisor	
1. gives tips	5
2. listens	1
3. recommends tools and sources	4
4. takes notes	5
5. asks questions	2
6. plans the activities	0
7. learns	0
8. searches for the best method	0
9. analyses language skills	1
10.monitors the progress	5
11.considers possibilities	2
12.shares experience	1

**Table 2.** Students' perception of the English Autonomously advisor's role - autumn 2015

There were three options that the majority of students chose: gives tips (5 students), monitors the progress (5 students) and recommends tools and sources (4 students). These answers correspond to how I believe I played the role in the advising sessions at that time – I was mainly reproducing my practice as a teacher. At this stage, my role as an advisor was primarily defined by my training and experience as a language teacher and I considered providing recommendations and monitoring progress to be my responsibilities. The interaction between me as an advisor and the students was based on a traditional class module and my approach was rather directive. The sessions' form enabled that the communication with a student gained an individualised character, but I was facing the dilemma of non-directive and directive approaches mentioned by Carson and Mynard:

*On the one hand, the aim of ALL [advising in language learning] is to promote learner autonomy and encourage learners to solve their own language-related issues. On the other hand, a learning advisor is a trained expert in language learning and has a wealth of experience related to resources, activities and strategies that could be of great benefit to the learners (2012: 9).*

Only after I had been playing the role of an advisor for a couple of semesters, I was able to reflect on the degree of directiveness that I employed in the sessions and to rethink and refine my beliefs about teaching and learning languages as well as about language advising.

Similarly, developing reflective practices for evaluation of the English Autonomously project was not an easy process. In the first semesters of the course, the English Autonomously team only relied on the traditional way of evaluating courses at the university and used standardized university feedback forms. The results showed students' general satisfaction with the course, its teachers and methods, but the forms provided teachers only with very general feedback information on the course. Some of the criteria used across the institution were not applicable or relevant and the form did not reflect the specific concept and structure of the English Autonomously course. In addition, the standard university feedback suffers from low response rates; only 21 out of 88 EA students submitted their feedback through the standard forms. Thus, the English Autonomously team tried to gain a more suitable feedback during the last advising sessions by asking the students to evaluate the course. The notes taken during these sessions were shared

among the advisors and used for reflection. At this stage, there were three advisors, all of them new to this role. After each advisor reflected on students' feedback and evaluation individually, the whole team met together. However, the team reflection only took a form of a rather unstructured and informal discussion as we were still unsure of what practices to apply to evaluate the course and its components.

The main aim of the feedback and its reflection in the first semesters (2013-14) was to check whether the course structure was appropriate and well designed for our institutional context. We were also interested to find out whether the students believed that there was a good balance between guidance and autonomy within the course. We agreed to ask students for example the following questions: "Do you like the course structure?", "Did the course provide you enough support for your learning?" Regarding those two issues, we received mostly affirmative responses from the students. The sample statements below were recorded during the last advising sessions:

*"It was a good experience – I had my own choice what needs to be improved."*

*"It was really "up to us", but I wouldn't do it myself."*

*"It was a new experience of active approach towards learning a language for me."*

The statements show that students liked the course concept and structure. Based on the students' answers, the team agreed that the course structure could be confirmed. Furthermore, the English Autonomously team reflected on students' suggestions and introduced some minor changes to the organization of the course such as different scheduling of modules. Thanks to the team reflection, some of the course criteria were refined too, e.g. all advisors agreed that students can compensate for the originally planned activities, that such compensations are discussed with advisors and that it needs to be students who decide how they want to compensate.

The positive feedback ensured us that the students approved of this approach to learning, which was innovative in our educational context. Nevertheless, when observing the diversity of comments collected in this unstructured feedback and reflection, the team realized that it was necessary to introduce appropriate feedback practices and to plan the reflection phase better to be able to evaluate specific features of the course and its elements. The still not precisely defined role of advisors was one of the issues that we decided to address by designing more detailed and focused feedback that will be described later.



To conclude this section, the first semesters of the course can be evaluated as well perceived by students and, more importantly, as eye opening for the course teachers. The generally positive feedback received was a crucial motivation for further development of the course. Thanks to the first reflections, the English Autonomously team was able to identify relevant areas for course development. Simultaneously, we became aware of the fact that the specific format and concept of the course needed more complex evaluative practices than the feedback methods used in more traditional courses. Such a move is described as the two first stages of becoming an autonomous teacher by Nakata:

*1<sup>st</sup> stage: Having known what students feel about his/her lessons and having learned from his/her students,*

*2<sup>nd</sup> stage: a teacher starts to reflect on his/her teaching and English [...] (2009: 209)*

Assessing this move on a personal level, involvement in the English Autonomously course and running the individual sessions in particular really accelerated my professional development. I believe that the first stages of playing the role of an advisor in the course changed me into a teacher more interested in learning from students and capable of better reflecting her practices.

## **2.2 The confused years - meeting Martin**

There were many factors that contributed to my further development as an advisor in the English Autonomously course. The following section is going to describe some of the factors and to comment on the change from mainly imitating practices of a teacher when running the advising sessions to gradually introducing and applying new practices based on language advising principles. Starting from its fourth semester, the course, which had always been opened to all Masaryk University students, attracted more participants from a variety of faculties at the university. Among the students attending advising sessions with me, there appeared a student from the Faculty of Information (IT) called Martin<sup>1</sup> and thanks to the individual sessions with him I soon realized that my overall attitude towards my role of an advisor had to be changed.

During the first advising session, as usual, we discussed Martin's language learning history, he finalized his individualized learning plan and I provided him with

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<sup>1</sup> The student's name was changed for sake of anonymity.

some tips and suggestions. As we met for the second advising session, Martin was not happy with his progress. Also, he mentioned that my tips and advice were not working. When I asked him to describe his activities and the ways he had been working, I discovered that Martin's personal learning environment was completely different from mine as well as from most students' of my home faculty. As an IT student, Martin was hardly ever communicating in English face-to-face, he was not exposed to many listening opportunities, the texts he was reading in English were highly technical and informative, the biggest amount of time he spent using English was through video-gaming (I know nothing about), to mention only some of his learning behaviours. It was the extent of dissimilarity between Martin's and my background, that made me realize the need to adapt described by Mynard:

*A skilled learning advisor will consider the student's background during an advising session. The personal context also has an impact on what learners bring with them to the advising session based on their prior experiences with learning, such as beliefs, expectations, motivation, willingness and also cognitive and affective contributions (2012: 35).*

Martin's beliefs and expectations were quite different from mine too. He believed that drilling was the most effective method to learn new vocabulary, he was primarily focusing on accuracy over fluency and he loved his secondary school grammar book. All this was very dissimilar to what I found helpful and beneficial when I had been studying English. Martin's background was so unfamiliar to me that it challenged my previous approach to providing the individual sessions.

I then came to realize that even if my tips and pieces of advice were informed by my teacher's training and experience, they were quite selective and very much based on my own learning preferences. Sharing my personal experience, which had been helpful for some students (especially for students from the Faculty of Arts), was not beneficial for Martin. He still appreciated the open communication during the individual sessions, but my previous approach was not appropriate for him, as there was not much personal advice I could share with him that he would value or find inspiring. Kato and Mynard identify the attitude to sharing personal values as one of the differences between the teacher's and advisor's role:

*The approach of advising is different from teaching. Advisors try not to tell the learner what to do based on their own values but encourage the learner to think and build the ability to think through processes by themselves (2016: 168).*

Therefore, my main task for this stage of my professional development was to redefine my role in the advising sessions, to find less directive and less teacher-centred ways of advising.

Realizing that I was not successful in the advisor's role was frightening at first. Not being able to come up with suitable advice for my students made me uncomfortable. The feelings of incompetence or insufficiency were extremely worrying for me as a language teaching professional. Nakata describes the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of becoming an autonomous teacher in similar terms: he/she "enters a stage of confusion or turmoil, loses self-confidence" (2009: 209). Nevertheless, it was when my lack of confidence and fear of incompetence were questioned and analysed that I could use them to redefine and develop my role as an advisor.

While reflecting on my inability to advise the student, I discovered that he might have actually benefited from the individual sessions in a different way. When Martin admitted that my pieces of advice were not helpful, an important feature of language advising roles was proven. As Gremmo states, the advisor's role is to "make suggestions (that the learners may freely accept or reject)" (2009: 162). Thinking within the constraints of the teacher's role, it would have been difficult to handle this rejection. In contrast, relying on the advising principles, I could say to the student: "I don't know what could work for you. What do you think?" Martin's response including statements such as "maybe the problem is ..." and "I could try ..." confirmed the appropriateness of this approach. Gremmo suggests that an advisor needs to "trigger the explanation process which will lead learners to reflect on aspects of their learning competence they may want to change" (2009: 162). Indeed, Martin became involved in analysing his situation and started to make decisions about his learning.

I started to understand that the attempt to be sincere in giving students their voice and promoting their autonomy includes many issues related to communicative practices used in the advising sessions. In contrast to my previous practices, when I was delivering all students (almost) the same pieces of advice based on my personal preferences, I wanted now to develop an interactive modality by which both me and students could share our experience and learn from it. Benson warns that advisors "tend to be overly directive when giving advice" (2001: 122), thus I was trying to find a good balance between providing information to students and giving them

opportunities to express themselves, e.g. by asking them (good) questions. This balance is crucial for boosting autonomous learning during the individual sessions. Gremmo suggests that students are given “equal interactive status” (2009: 163). Surprisingly for me at this stage, it could be the advisor’s statement “I don’t know” that creates such an equality in the individual session.

As I was trying to change the communication discourse of the individual sessions more consciously, I needed to identify and plan individual steps that I could take towards achieving the big goal that was to activate my students’ learning autonomy, to let them make observations and decisions about their learning. I began to pay more attention to communication and interaction in my advising notes and the reflection on these. For example, I decided to note down which activities were recommended by me and which were chosen by students themselves. When it was possible and approved by students, I also recorded the advising conversations. Based on the notes and recordings I wanted to analyse and improve my advisor’s practices. I was inspired by reading on “action research focusing on the discourse of advising sessions (distribution of turns, quantity of speech, speech acts, etc.) as a means of developing less directive styles” (Benson, 2001: 122). On a smaller scale, I hoped that reflecting on how I was communicating and acting within my advisor’s role would help me to introduce new, more appropriate communicative practices. For example, I observed that giving my students too much advice could be prevented by not answering all their questions. Instead, I learnt to ask students for their suggestions first and to give my answers or suggestions only if the students asked for them again. Gremmo describes this move as: “Learners start to view themselves as the person in charge of the interaction, filling in the silences” (2009: 163). The moment when students start to take a more active part in advising conversations proved to be crucial for individualization of the sessions.

The new approach to running my individual sessions had some immediate positive results. As I let students discover their ways to develop their language competences, I broadened my horizons and enriched my repertoire of possible tips and suggestions. As Mynard observes, I could “share some language-learning strategies used by other students which the advisees might choose to personalize and adopt for themselves” (2012: 31). For example, thanks to Martin, my student from the Faculty of Information, I learnt about multiple ways of using cell phone for

language learning. Similarly to students, I was questioning my strategies and experimenting with new ones – e.g. I started to use my cell phone for taking notes. As a result of the second advising session, Martin came up with a personal way of working with his beloved grammar book. He planned to contrast film subtitles in Czech and English and to use the grammar book to check structures that differed or may have been translated incorrectly. The method proved to be very effective for Martin; during the third session, he stated e.g.: “I understand the differences between some tenses better now.” This incident showed me that not only it was possible to give my students more saying, but also that it led to successful individualized learning that was driven by students’ autonomy. Learning about methods and tips that I would never have been able to suggest also prepared me for providing advice to various types of learners.

At the same time as I was transforming my practice as an advisor, the English Autonomously team was also improving the feedback practice. The team decided to focus more specifically on students’ perception of benefits that the course and its individual elements brought to them. A new, more detailed course feedback form was designed. To ensure more response, students were asked to fill in the feedback form before completing the course and gaining credit points. As a result, 32 out of 54 students participated in the feedback. The form included a section where students evaluated each element of the course with respect to its usefulness for development of individual language skills. The advising sessions achieved a high score of 61.8% of students acknowledging their general positive impact. Even a higher number of students (78% and 65%) considered the impact on speaking and listening skills important. The results proved that students valued the individual communication in English during the advising sessions as a contribution to their language development. Furthermore, in their open comments, students often appreciated the personalized approach to learning and advisors’ openness to share their own experience; those two types of positive statements were also related to advising sessions within the course.

The advisor’s openness is also one of the qualities highly valued by the ALMS team:

*The importance of sharing cannot be emphasized too much. Giving at least something of yourself, for example discussing how you struggled with learning something and how you*

*overcame (or did not overcome) this helps the student to openly discuss potential problems and ways to solve them (Bradley et al., 2016: 96).*

When reflecting on this benefit of advising sessions for students, I recognized an important gain for myself too. The fact that students were valuing teachers' ability to share their personal experience as language learners provided me with new reassurance as a non-native teacher. I realized that being a model of a successful language learner is a significant part of the advisor's role in the English Autonomously course as well as an overall contribution of a non-native language teacher. It was the more detailed and better-prepared feedback that allowed me to get more insight into the functioning of the advising sessions and to make this encouraging observation about my role in it.

### **2.3. The forming years**

This section is going to describe a series of fortunate professional development events that I was able to experience and that helped me to further foster my role as an advisor and (at least partially) overcome the stage of confusion. Thanks to the above-mentioned cooperation with the University of Helsinki and with the ALMS team in particular, Leena Karlsson and Kenneth Kidd lead a highly stimulating workshop at the Language Centres in Higher Education International Conference in Brno in 2015. The English Autonomously team found both the content and form of the sharing session inspiring for their future work, e.g. for structuring the reflection team meetings. Furthermore, the workshop attracted and influenced colleagues from the Masaryk University Language Centre as well as from other Czech universities. Therefore, the concept of promoting learner autonomy became more established in Czech educational environment, the interest in the English Autonomously project grew, and we were able to enlarge our team.

The following year, I could visit our colleagues in Helsinki within our Erasmus exchange scheme. I was very lucky to get a chance to observe Kenneth Kidd's advising sessions and to have peer discussions on issues related to language advising and autonomous language learning with him, Leena Karlsson and other members of the ALMS team. Similarly, my colleagues from the Masaryk University Language Centre who were visiting Helsinki had part of their programme covered

with ALMS-related activities and all the advisors at that time had an opportunity to observe an experienced advisor in Helsinki.

All those activities contributed to our individual growth in the advisor's role. More importantly, an overall "advising ecology" developed at the Language Centre. The team organized its cooperation by using more efficient communication tools, started to meet more often and on a regular basis, the meetings were structured better and started to address more specific issues. Inspired by the Peer Group Mentoring meetings of the ALMS, we wanted our team meetings to "foster critical reflection on both our wellbeing and development as counsellors/advisers as well as to enhance teacher autonomy and reflexivity" (Bradley et al., 2016: 91). For example, the issue of giving students enough space in advising sessions was raised during our group reflection since we shared the concern described by Kato and Mynard:

*Advisors might be tempted to restate the question or introduce another question right away; however, using silence as a strategy will help the learner get into a deep reflective process and possibly come up with new ideas. If so, the silence will be broken by the learners' new insights (2016: 27).*

Based on this observation, a workshop was organized focusing on dealing with silence. Through role-plays and peer mentoring, the advisors gained more insight into diverse functions of silence that according to Kato and Mynard could serve:

1. *to give learners thinking time*
2. *to let students know that you are there for them*
3. *to let learners reflect deeply on a powerful moment*
4. *to let learners take their time until they are ready to respond (2016: 27).*

Furthermore, the team identified that to improve our advising skills we needed training ourselves in asking questions. We decided to invite a colleague, Eva Pěčková, who was the first certified language coach in the Czech Republic, to lead a workshop on supportive and powerful questions. Introduction of advising sessions' observations was another contribution to the "advising ecology" that was based on peer-to-peer cooperation. Mynard observes that "a team of learning advisors working closely together is likely to have developed a set of accepted social practices for the advising process" (2012: 36). The English Autonomously team was working together on redefining guidelines for advising sessions, e.g. by including sample questions and responses. I believe that at this stage the team achieved the 4<sup>th</sup> stage of

becoming autonomous teachers and advisors who, as defined by Nakata “gradually start to internalize what they have discussed with colleagues” (2009: 209). Personally, I benefited from this interaction with my colleagues in multiple ways. I gained reassurance by discovering our common concerns and establishing shared understanding of the advisor’s role. The peer feedback and mentoring also supported me in developing non-directive approach to advising sessions.

### 3. From advising to advising better - the critical years

After more than 8 semesters of providing individual sessions to my students, I believe that I have become a reflective, reasonably confident and cooperative advisor. To confirm this belief, I made a parallel small survey with the latest group of students whom I provided advising sessions for; the group of respondents was of a similar size to the respondents’ group in 2015. From the same list of descriptions, they were asked to choose 3 features that define my role as an advisor in the English Autonomously course best for them. Table 3 shows that the most preferred choices were: gives tips (6 students), recommends tools and sources (5 students).

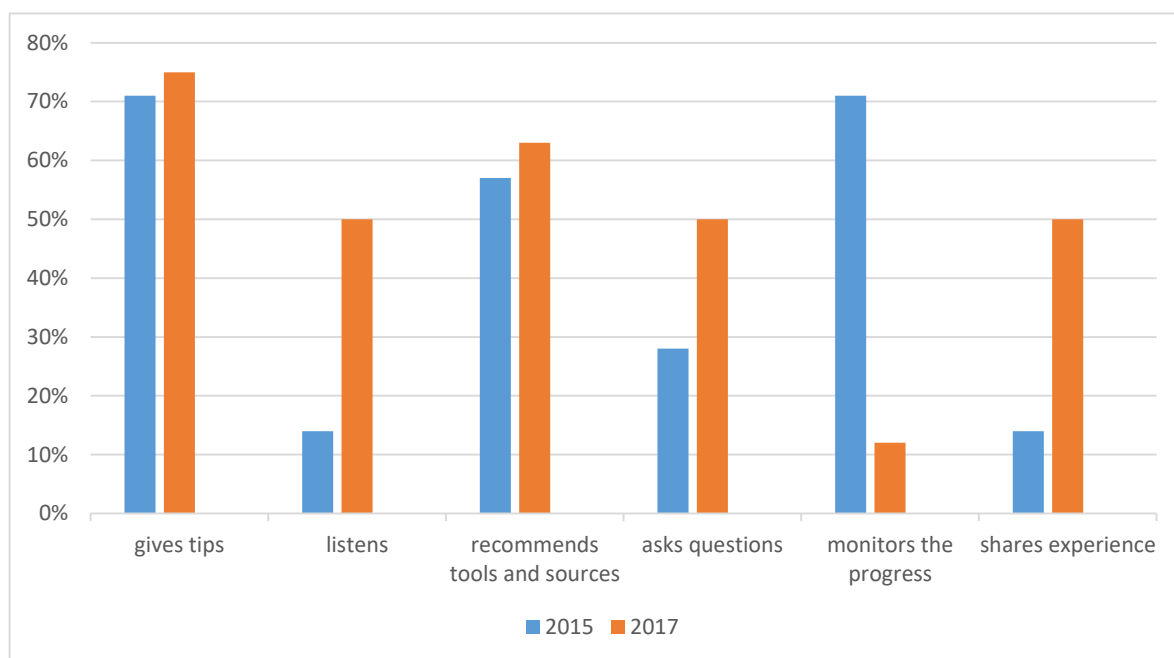
The advisor	
1. gives tips	6
2. listens	4
3. recommends tools and sources	5
4. takes notes	1
5. asks questions	4
6. plans the activities	0
7. learns	0
8. searches for the best method	0
9. analyses language skills	0
10. monitors the progress	1



11. considers possibilities	0
12. shares experience	3

**Table 3.** Students’ perception of the EA advisor’s role - autumn 2017

The results for the two most popular choices were not much different from the group at the beginning of my involvement in the advisor’s role. However, the following graph shows that the option “monitors progress” became less popular (1 student) and that it was replaced by three now more preferred choices: “listens”, “asks questions” and “shares experience” (4 students).



**Table 4.** Students’ perception of the English Autonomously advisor’s role – top choices autumn 2015 and autumn 2017

Due to the low number of students asked, these findings cannot be overgeneralized. However, they were useful for me as a way of monitoring my development. I considered the change in student’s preferences to be a confirmation of a change in my approach. The fact that the students chose also the answers “listens” (4 students) and “asks questions” (5 students) suggests that I was able to develop a communication framework for my advising sessions that is different from a traditional teacher-student interaction. I hope that by paying more attention to asking questions

and listening, I have learnt to give advice using non-directive ways. Thanks to my notes and recordings, I also observed that my students were able to reject my advice if it was not relevant for them. Gremmo identifies that it is the advisor's role "to make sure that the suggestions will be understood as suggestions and not instructions" (2009: 162). Based on this, I have tried to run the individual sessions in an interactive mode. My aim is to give students the right balance of advice and space to analyse, reflect and plan their learning themselves. Therefore, I believe that my practices in the individual sessions have become more informed and influenced by the principles of language advising.

However, the results of my surveys need to be further critically reflected. When I listened to recordings of my last advising sessions, I was only partially satisfied with my role in the interaction. The balance between speaking times of both sides was appropriate, I gave students enough space and I was mainly asking questions and listening which corresponds to the survey's results. On the other hand, I recognized that the quality and typology of my questions is an issue that still needs more attention, e.g. I was asking too many polar questions. This critical insight may suggest that I have achieved the 5<sup>th</sup> stage of autonomy that Nakata describes as ability to "critically grasp the weaknesses and strengths of self" (2009: 209). Based on this, I believe that developing my role of an advisor in the English Autonomously course is going to be a critical, reflective and never-ending process.

## **Conclusion**

This article gives account to my development as an advisor within the English Autonomously course at the Masaryk University Language Centre. I attempted to describe the process as a gradual move from mirroring teaching practices in individual sessions with students to a more complex and less-directive approach informed by principles of language advising and practices of coaching. As individual stages of my personal growth were introduced, diverse challenges and limitations were discussed and possible ways to reflect on the development were suggested. I believe that the crucial aspects of becoming a language advisor who can foster students' autonomy are the advisor's energy to individualize their approach, the ability to reflect and critically perceive the educator's role and the willingness to redefine beliefs about teaching and learning. My experience shows that an advisor needs to be also open to interactive and non-directive modes of communication and

eager to learn and cooperate with both students as well as colleagues. My aim was to share this personal experience of discovering complexity of the advisor's role and its understanding as a continuous process of professional development.

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