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# **Knowing (them) is half the battle: Binding learning and life through linking and metaphor in language advising**

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## **Abstract**

In this short reflective paper, taking a narrative approach I explore my development as a trainee advisor within one practice advising session. In particular, I focus on my utilization of two advising strategies (metaphor and metaview/linking) through the examination of transcribed excerpts of our dialogue. In addition to reflecting on my performance in the advisor role, I discuss how integrating these strategies with information from a learner's personal history may lead to opportunities for deep reflection, perspective switching, and rapport building between advisor and advisee.

*Keywords:* reflective advising, professional development, learner histories, metaphor, narrative inquiry,

My new journey across the professional spheres of teaching and advising has already heightened my awareness of how our 'life baggage' - previous experiences, assumptions, relationships, values, and beliefs - can shape how we construct our current perceptions of a situation or challenge. Language learners are also shaped by these antecedent conditions as their "past-projected identities form a motivational component of the present, influencing their goal-directed behaviors of effort, persistence, and strategy use for achieving goals" (Fukada et al., 2011, p. 337). In this paper, I analyze one 40-minute online (via Zoom) advising session that I participated in with Kenta, a former student of mine, as a partial requirement of an advising course I was enrolled in. I made the decision to enter the advising course as I had seen firsthand in the institution where I was working the positive impact that intentional reflective dialogue had on autonomy-supportive pedagogy and fostering learner self-directedness in self-access environments. In one advising session, through the use of linking and metaphor tied to key events in their life, I attempted to help a learner to reflect deeply on their current learning goals and encourage them in their ongoing language learning journey.

### **Advisee profile**

Kenta (pseudonym) was a third-year university student at the time of the advising session majoring in English. He moved from Tamasaki (pseudonym), a rural area of Japan, when he entered the university and was an extremely driven and inquisitive student in a previous class I had taught. He was a frequent user of the university's self-access center (SAC) and had already studied abroad in North America. Kenta had a number of difficult experiences in secondary education that forced him to leave school prematurely. Due to the support of those around him and his considerable willpower and positive attitude, Kenta was able to recover from this and set a number of physical and educational challenges for himself. He was consequently able to achieve remarkable weight loss, become physically fit, and managed to secure entry to his current university. Kenta had shared various stories about his life journey with me and others in conversations in the SALC and via an online self-help video series he created. He continues to be an extremely driven and popular young man with a powerful desire to improve his English proficiency.

### **Metaview/linking and metaphor**

I did not explicitly plan the selection or implementation of the advising strategies before the session began as I did not want the session to feel contrived or that I was steering my advising in predetermined directions. Furthermore, I felt that if I was going into the session with pre-selected options in mind, it would mean that it was me (rather than the advisee) that was 'leading' the session.

I selected the strategies of metaview/linking and metaphor to focus on in the analysis of our advising session because I noticed that they allowed me to draw upon our existing relationship and our shared knowledge of each other, thus creating greater rapport and deeper reflective dialogue. Kato and Mynard (2016) state that metaview/linking can be used to help an advisee to consider their learning as part of a "bigger picture" (p. 23). This was an important consideration for me during the session as I already had a broad idea of how Kenta's language learning was connected to his more general beliefs and his past experiences based on a number of casual conversations in the SAC. Furthermore, in our dialogue I felt that the function of metaphor as a means of visualizing a learner's journey complemented the metaview/linking strategy effectively. Metaphor in advising is used to encourage learners to "visualize and express their thoughts and feelings in different ways" (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 24). In conjunction with metaview/linking, utilizing metaphor may catalyze a deeper sense of awareness and self-reflection in advisees who may have slipped into autopilot and need to

step back to evaluate their learning journey from a new perspective. In the case of this session, metaphor allowed me to construct a vivid and meaningful image for Kenta that he could then relate to the specific language issue we were discussing at that time.

### **Session excerpts and discussion**

Around 15 minutes into the session, Kenta told me that learning English was kind of a “hobby” for him but that he also had an ongoing goal to “to get close to English that native speakers speak” - at this point in our dialogue, the (English) word “challenge” stuck in my mind. I realized that this could be a chance to use metaview/linking to bridge his current challenge with the others he had taken on in the past as well as giving him a confidence boost by reminding him of past successes in his life.

Daniel (advisor): “Well, obviously like, I, I know you pretty well, I think. So, you told me about all of your different challenges you set for yourself. Like, you rode your bike to the tip of Tamasaki and...”

Kenta (advisee): “Oh, you remembered! (laughs)”

D: “Of course man!”

K: “(laughs)”

D: “Yeah, yeah, yeah. And, you know, you told me about your English teacher as well. Like, you know, you would go up the mountain and stuff like that on your bike and obviously physically, like you have this really intense kind of weight loss and like you, you got really strong and yeah... So, like, is this kind of your next challenge in a way?”

K: “Yeah. Yeah, the reason why I, you know, got here, I could get here. Some, some of my friends says, my friend said like you, your English is cool and I want to speak English like you do.”

D: “That must feel great.”

At this point in the session, I thought that I could perhaps use this personally relevant theme of challenges as the basis for narrowing the focus of the dialogue so as to maybe move towards a concrete issue or plan of action later in the session.

D: “Okay, well let's, let's think about your, your next challenge then. Like, you know, improving your vocabulary, expressing yourself, you know, becoming closer to that native speaker target.”

As my previous reference to his bike ride to the coast of Tamasaki had led to such a positive reaction from him and due to my knowledge of the personal significance of the trip to him (he had written a narrative about it for me in class two years before), I thought I would try and fuse that image into a metaphor for his language learning.

D: “Imagine that your learning journey is like your trip to Tamasaki's coast. Right?”

K: “(laughs) Right.”

D: “How close are you now, do you think? Can you see the ending? Can you see the sea yet? Or are you kind of close to home?”

K: (exhales strongly) Wow, that's that's a good question.”

I was actually surprised how quickly he internalized the metaphor and he responded after only four seconds. He stated that he felt he was over halfway to his goal. This then gave me the opportunity to start narrowing down the focus of the session from quite a broad target like “I want to speak like a native speaker” to a more defined plan of action. I also wanted to keep the atmosphere positive in the session and acknowledge the considerable progress he had already made.

K: “I think it's more than half way.”

D: “Okay, you're more than halfway.”

K: “Maybe 65 or... 65.”

D: “Okay.”

K: “70 or 65... Yeah.”

D: “So what do you, what do you think you need to do about the last 30 or 35%?”

K: “35%...”

D: "You've already come a long way. Just a little more."

At this point, we continued discussing how he wanted to increase his vocabulary in order to allow him to express himself more creatively in English conversations. We talked about how he may be able to integrate YouTube (another passion in his life) into his vocabulary learning plan as well as how to seek out opportunities for productive practice of newly learned words. Just after he had come up with a tentative plan of action for the week (he would try to learn three or four new words/expressions per week and try them out at the English Lounge, the SAC's main social language learning space) I realized that we had actually gone over time and wanted to try and close the session in a positive way. I decided to come back once more to the metaphor we had used earlier in the session.

D: "I, I, you know, you have such a high level of motivation and self-awareness..."

K: "(laughs) Ah..."

D: "I'm sure that you're going to work it out. And you'll, you'll reach, reach the coast in Tamasaki soon."

K: "(laughs)"

D: "Even though your butt might hurt from your bike saddle!"

K: "(laughs) You remembered."

D: "Yeah, I remember you telling me about that as well. You guys, your butts hurt because you were on the bikes for so long... Yeah, so, you know, maybe language learning is the same. Sometimes we get a sore butt, but we can still reach our goal."

K: "Yeah."

D: "(laughs)"

K: "(laughs) I'll reach my goal."

D: "Yeah. I'm sure you will, I'm sure you will."

### **Final thoughts**

Upon analyzing the transcription of my session with Kenta, I realized that our advisor/advisee dialogue had both continued and deepened an ongoing co-constructed narrative. Although the time that we had spent together in class and at the English Lounge was, at least superficially, premised on the goal of improving his English proficiency, there was also a deeper interpersonal connection being created. I came to know Kenta's struggles, triumphs, fears, and hopes and how they all converged to form a coherent learner identity.

My experiences as both a language learner and teacher also affected the way I interpreted his story and the interaction of our mutual “experiential profiles” (Miyahara, 2015, p. 26) laid the foundations for our friendly relationship and this advising session. Through the use of metaview/link and metaphor, I felt that rather than our shared understanding and rapport being simply an end in itself, I was able to operationalize it and stimulate Kenta’s self-reflection and awareness raising in regards to his current learning situation. I am therefore confident that Kenta and I both felt the session was valuable and that our bonds grew stronger because of our dialogic reflection.

Despite feeling the session had gone smoothly, I felt like there were, of course, a number of areas that I need to focus on in terms of my future development as an advisor. At times I felt like I was maybe trying to rush things too much. When I had practiced advising strategies with my peers on other occasions, some current learning advisors had remarked that I shouldn’t try to fit everything into one session. They told me that sometimes an advising session doesn’t need to have a clear, discernable conclusion and that a more leisurely pace can help with creating a more comfortable atmosphere while also allowing the advisee space to make their own discoveries. Perhaps at times I was still trying to make sure I had used certain strategies within the time rather than allowing the learner to dictate the pace and direction of the session. I hope that as my experience and confidence increases, this issue will be mitigated somewhat.

That being said, through this session, I was able to appreciate how the focus on the individual that advising in language learning is grounded in allows us to tap into the latent potential of antecedent conditions of the learner. In my view, advising represents a person-centered (Benson, 2017) educational perspective where, by building trust, rapport, and shared knowledge with our advisees, we can gain access to “fully fleshed-out portraits of identifiable individual learners” (Benson, 2017, p. 7). With these textured and evolving portraits of pasts and presents visible to us, we can then adapt the strategies and tools at our disposal to best support learners in sketching out their futures. Intentional reflective dialogue affords advisors or teachers the ability to transform the personal bonds and rapport that we build with our learners into something more far-reaching and transformative. By reflectively and collaboratively interrogating learners’ personal histories and knowledge, we expose them to threads of experience running through their lives that can stimulate both self-efficacy and self-discovery.

### Notes on the contributor

Daniel Hooper is a lecturer in the English Language Institute at Kanda University of International Studies. He has taught in Japan for 14 years, predominantly in secondary education and the English conversation school industry. His research interests include learner and teacher identity, communities of practice, and the eikaiwa industry.

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