When Advisors Become Teachers:

Learner-Centered Classroom Practices

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Author Biography

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Abstract

As Japanese higher education increasingly incorporates learner-centered approaches, differentiated instruction has gained attention for its potential to address individual learner needs and promote deeper engagement. However, this approach can be challenging when educators have limited experience in fostering learner development and when institutional curricula constrain course design and assessment. This reflective paper explores how our backgrounds as learning advisors inform and reshape our pedagogical practices within institutional English language classrooms. Drawing upon our experiences at the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies, we examine how an ethos based on dialogue, learner autonomy, and reflective pedagogy influences our current teaching. Our analysis is framed by the Reflective Judgment Model (King & Kitchener, 1994), Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), and learner-centered environment principles (Bransford et al., 2002). We detail classroom-based interventions, such as intentional reflective questioning, dialogic activities, and structured self-evaluation, demonstrating how these activities facilitate cognitive and meta-cognitive growth. Furthermore, we critically touch upon the systemic tensions such as the conflict between standardized assessment and individualized development encountered during implementation. Finally, we argue that our experience as learning advisors can productively coexist with classroom authority, supporting students' development as more reflective, self-directed, and emotionally aware language learners.

日本の高等教育で学習者中心のアプローチが普及する中、個々のニーズに応じ深い関与を促す指導が注目されている。しかし、教育者の経験不足や制度的カリキュラムによる制約下では、その実践は容易ではない。本稿では、著者らのラーニングアドバイザーとしての経験が、制度的枠組みにおける大学英語教育の実践をいかに再構築しているかを検討する。著者らは神田外語大学セルフ・アクセス・ラーニング・センター（SALC）において、対話、学習者オートノミー、省察的教授法を中核とする教育実践に従事した。省察的判断モデル、変容的学習理論、学習者中心の環境の原理を理論的枠組みとし、意図的な省察を促す問いかけ、対話的活動、構造化された自己評価等の実践を提示し、これらが認知的・メタ認知的成長をいかに促進するかを示す。さらに、標準化された評価と個別化された発達との相克についても言及する。アドバイザーの経験は教員の役割と相補的であり、学習者がより省察的、自己主導的かつ情意的に自覚的な学習者へと変容する支援となり得ると論じる。

Keywords: classroom advising, transformative learning, reflective judgment model, learning environments, learner-centered classroom practices

From 2016 to 2022, we worked as learning advisors in the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). There, we supported learners both inside and outside the classroom. As learning advisors, we conducted one-to-one advising sessions, taught self-directed language learning (SDLL) courses and modules, developed advising and learning strategy tools, and created language learning environments that encouraged learners to take ownership of their learning.

Currently, we work at different universities in the Greater Tokyo Area. Both of us teach university-wide English language courses for first- and second-year students with assigned textbooks and institutional curricula. Prior to becoming learning advisors, we also taught in secondary education in Japan.

At the SALC, we were encouraged to engage in group reflection as part of our professional development and have continued to do so. Although we teach in different institutional contexts, it emerged in our reflections that how we structure reflection, how we respond to students' emotions, and how we balance authority and autonomy are rooted in our shared advising background. This realization led us to intentionally meet and compare our practices. We asked how advising lives on in our current practice, and this paper is the result of that collaborative reflection.

In this paper, we discuss how we ground much of our classroom teaching in the experiences and knowledge gained as learning advisors. We outline the theoretical grounding of our practice before describing the pedagogical framework, approach, and activities adapted from advising to classroom contexts, followed by a reflection on challenges.

Literature Review

To better understand and support our students' individual differences in language learning in classroom settings, we apply the concepts of the Reflective Judgment Model, Transformative Learning Theory, and the learner-centered environment within the How People Learn framework, as developed through our ongoing discussions.

Reflective Judgment Model

The Reflective Judgment Model (RJM) describes the stages of epistemological development, focusing on how individuals understand the process of knowing and justify their beliefs when faced with ill-structured problems (King & Kitchener, 1994). The RJM is grounded in Dewey's (1933, 1938) concept of reflective thinking and describes seven stages of epistemological development, categorized into three levels: pre-reflective, quasi-reflective,

and reflective thinking. At the pre-reflective level (Stages 1–3), learners typically assume knowledge is certain and gained through direct observation or authority figures. As they transition to the quasi-reflective level (Stages 4–5), they recognize that knowledge claims regarding ill-structured problems contain elements of uncertainty. During this transition, learners often experience the emotional weight of this uncertainty; they become more independent from authorities but may struggle with their own judgment, which often relies on personal biases. Finally, at the reflective level (Stages 6–7), learners actively construct knowledge, recognizing that conclusions must be evaluated within their generative context and justified by the weight of the evidence across various perspectives.

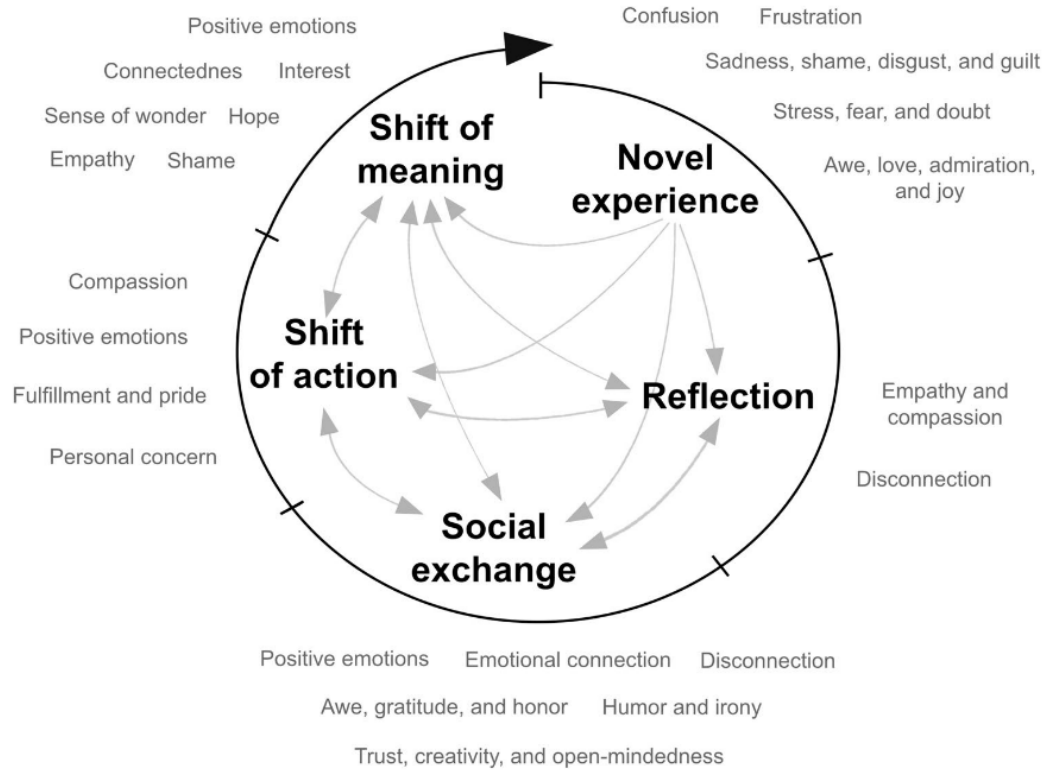
According to King and Kitchener (1994), many university students appear to operate at the quasi-reflective level, still needing appropriate scaffolding from educators while simultaneously expressing uncertainty about effective learning strategies. Given this, the RJM is particularly useful for understanding classroom reflection and metacognitive development.

Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow (2000) describes Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) as a shift from "taken-for-granted frames of reference" to perspectives that are "more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective" (pp. 7-8). Early conceptions of TLT prioritized cognition and rationality over affect and emotion, but based on evidence from neuroscience, Taylor (2001) positioned emotion as integral to TLT, arguing that "without emotions rationality cannot work" (p. 233). More recently, Grund et al. (2024), in a meta-analysis of 20 empirical TLT studies, demonstrate that diverse emotions permeate the process (Figure 1) and that the most relevant phases were novel experience, reflection, shift of action, shift of meaning, and social exchange.

Figure 1

Emotions Relevant to Phases of TLT as Portrayed by Grund et al. (2024, p. 315)



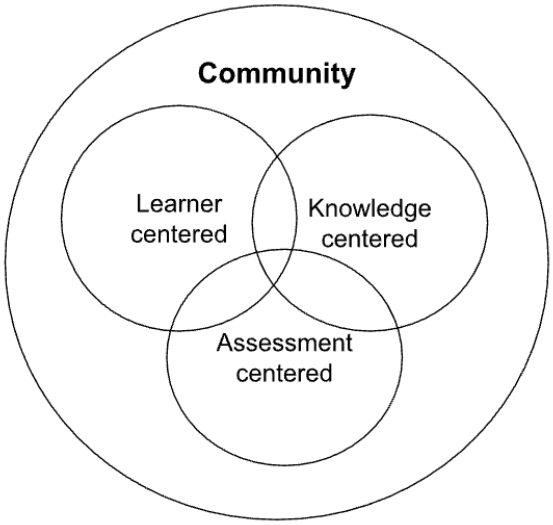
In language classrooms, disorienting dilemmas may emerge when students confront communication breakdowns, unexpected feedback, or alternative learning strategies (Leaver, 2021). Supporting students through these emotional moments becomes central to facilitating transformation.

How People Learn and the Learner-Centered Environment

Classroom learning operates at multiple levels, balancing individual development with institutional and societal expectations. Bransford et al.'s (2002) How People Learn (HPL) framework (Figure 2) conceptualizes effective learning environments as the integration of four interrelated dimensions: knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, and learner-centered, with community encompassing those three dimensions. This provides a useful reference for how to incorporate advising theories and practices beyond institutional requirements into the classroom.

Figure 2

Learner-Centered Environments Within the HPL Framework



Note. Adapted from Bransford et al. (2002, p. 166)

A knowledge-centered environment ensures instruction is organized around core concepts and disciplinary structure rather than isolated facts. Content knowledge is shaped by institutional requirements, but HPL emphasizes coherence and conceptual understanding over coverage. An assessment-centered environment prioritizes formative feedback and metacognitive development. Students learn to monitor their own understanding through reflection, dialogue, peer comparison, and structured feedback. A learner-centered environment utilizes students' prior knowledge, preconceptions, cultural backgrounds, and motivations. This extends beyond content to include attention to emotion, identity, and meaning making. Finally, the community of the classroom cultivates an emotional bond that develops as members invest time, energy, and shared effort. When students experience themselves as legitimate participants in a learning community, engagement and transformation become more likely. While each environment addresses a necessary need, all should be synthesized to create an optimal learning space. Of these four concepts, the learner-centered becomes central to our work as former learning advisors.

Summary

Grounded in RJM, TLT, and a learner-centered environment within the HPL framework, we view classrooms as spaces for epistemological and emotional development.

Students are encouraged to examine what they know, how they know it, and how they feel about what they know, recognizing emotion as integral to navigating uncertainty and growth.

Practices

In this section, we describe our pedagogical framework, the approach we adopted, and the activities we employed to promote learner development.

Pedagogical Framework

As former learning advisors, we draw heavily on Intentional Reflective Dialogue (IRD), as developed by Kato and Mynard (2016), to structure our classroom interactions. IRD is defined as "a conscious discourse with learners with the purpose of engaging them in transformation in learning" (p. 6). Advising in language learning does not simply involve providing advice or learning tips; rather, it aims to help learners critically reflect on their learning through active listening and meaningful questioning. Although one-to-one advising sessions differ substantially from classroom interaction, we strive to communicate with students individually and elicit their thoughts or reflection using basic advising skills such as repeating and summarizing. Within written feedback, we provide reflective questions to connect course content to their own experiences and to provoke further insights and development.

We also incorporate reflective activities and tasks developed through teaching SDLL modules and courses at the SALC. SDLL includes goal setting, using and evaluating strategies and resources, making and implementing a learning plan, and judging their progress (Curry, 2023). Students are encouraged to engage in ongoing self- and peer-reflection through guided reflective questions in journals and discussions. As most of our students are transitioning towards the quasi-reflective level in the RJM, which can be seen in the novel experiences in TLT, we emphasize fostering student ownership of their learning. Furthermore, we intentionally include tasks that allow students to identify and process their emotions during language learning.

Pedagogical Approach

Our classrooms are grounded in structured reflection, guided inquiry, and dialogic interactions in group conversations and written reflections. Both the RJM and TLT frameworks emphasize that development occurs when learners confront uncertainty, evaluate evidence, and reconsider previous beliefs. Accordingly, classroom discussions frequently include questions such as:

- What evidence supports this answer?
- Why do you believe this strategy works?
- Has your view changed over time?
- What emotions do you experience when you are learning English?

These prompts shift attention from correctness to reasoning, aligning with RJM's emphasis on justificatory logic.

We also design activities that create mild disorienting dilemmas as described by TLT. For example, when students encounter perspectives that challenge their beliefs about language learning (e.g., whether teachers are necessary for effective study), they are invited to compare viewpoints and examine their own assumptions. Structured dialogue and written reflection help them process the emotional and cognitive tensions that emerge.

Although advising emphasizes non-directivity, classroom teaching requires authority and alignment with institutional goals. We therefore distinguish between structural authority and epistemic authority. Structurally, we maintain grading criteria, curriculum objectives, and assessment standards. Epistemically, however, we decentralize authority by inviting students to evaluate strategies, interpret feedback, and assess their own progress. In this way, autonomy operates beyond defined pedagogical boundaries.

This approach reflects the HPL framework (Bransford et al., 2002): knowledge-centered through curricular coherence, assessment-centered through formative reflection, learner-centered through attention to prior beliefs and emotions, and community-centered through collaborative dialogue with the teacher and with each other.

Pedagogical Activities

These activities were designed to support students in transitioning toward the quasi-reflective stage of the RJM. Elements of TLT and the HPL framework are also incorporated. The participants are students enrolled in compulsory general English classes, with proficiency levels ranging from A1 to B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). Instruction is conducted in both English and Japanese, and each class typically includes approximately 25 students.

This or That Activity

At the beginning of the semester, we intentionally introduce activities that promote metacognitive awareness and create the possibility for TLT disorienting dilemmas, thereby setting the tone for reflective learning. One such activity, developed during our time as learning advisors, invites students to share and examine their beliefs about their learning. In

this “This or That” activity, students respond to statements by physically positioning themselves along an agree-disagree continuum and then sharing their reasoning with others. Statements include “I am a good learner,” “Learning a language is different from learning other subjects,” and “I think it is possible to learn effectively without a teacher.”

This activity serves multiple theoretical purposes. From an RJM perspective, it surfaces students’ epistemic assumptions about knowledge and authority. From a TLT perspective, encountering differing viewpoints often produces mild disorientation, prompting reflection. From a learner-centered perspective, the physical and dialogic format builds early classroom community and signals that diverse perspectives are legitimate.

Resource Evaluation

In SDLL courses and modules at the SALC, one of the key activities aims to enable learners to evaluate their learning resources that suit their goals, interests, and learning preferences. At the SALC, learners try out several resources available in the center and evaluate them using an activity sheet that includes evaluation criteria to scaffold their decision-making. In our classroom settings, as our institutions have fewer physical resources, we provide a list of online resources and ask first-year students to select one to try for a few days as homework. They also record their learning experience with the resource in their reflective journal. Subsequently, they give a short presentation in small groups with a resource recommendation sheet (Figure 3). Throughout the class time, students are encouraged to try out new resources and share with others. They are reminded that it is part of the learning process if their chosen resource proves ineffective when they actually use it.

Figure 3

Resource Evaluation Sheet (Front and Back)


Name: 2025S English Communication I

The name of the resource:_____

Skill(s) I worked on:

What I learned from resource:

My opinion:

My rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

Script（発表原稿）

Today, I will talk about the resource I used. The resource name is _____.
教材名

I practiced _____ with the resource.
学べるスキル（vocabulary, grammar, expressions, listening, reading etc.）

For example, I learned _____
using the resource. 教材を使って実際に学んだ内容

It was useful / not useful because _____.
どちらか選ぶ 理由を書く

Therefore, I give this resource _____ stars.
1〜5で評価する

If you are interested, please try it out!

The activity resonates with Grund et al.’s (2024) TLT cycle by enabling students to experiment with resources, evaluate their effectiveness, engage in social exchange with

classmates, and move toward a shift of action. It also encourages first-year students to develop a sense of ownership over their learning, moving away from authority-dependent thinking from an RJM perspective. Furthermore, the activity aligns with the HPL framework, as it addresses key dimensions such as learner-centered, knowledge-centered, and assessment-centered.

Reflective Journals

Reflective journals function as longitudinal records of both affective experience and epistemic development. Studies on expressive writing show that emotional processing can be traced in language, often moving from immediate emotional reactions toward more integrated and reflective understanding (Pennebaker, 1997). Within TLT, emotional disruption and critical reflection are central to perspective change and are frequently documented through reflective journals (Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2001).

In fulfilling an institutional requirement of our universities for writing, we use reflective journals as an opportunity for students to explore their learning styles and beliefs as well as emotions that affect their learning. Early prompts ("Are you a good learner?" "How did you feel before, during, and after the test? How do emotions affect your concentration?" etc.) ask students to evaluate their study habits, time and energy management, and beliefs about their abilities. Later in the semester, these questions are revisited, allowing students to observe shifts in reasoning and self-perception. Questions are answered as homework, and then are shared and discussed with others, opening several opportunities for repeated reflection.

Test Self-Evaluation

We allocate dedicated self-evaluation time whenever English language tests are returned. During this time, we provide scaffolding by asking students to use a favorite pen to mark questions they believe they would answer correctly if they retook the test and to write advice to their future selves for review and further study. Additionally, we provide reflective questions such as, "If you were the teacher, what advice or feedback would you give yourself?" This borrows from the viewpoint switching activity and sheet, which are designed to encourage learners to see their own situation from different perspectives (Kato & Mynard, 2016). Students can also choose their favorite person such as a historical figure. This activity is particularly effective in helping students distance themselves from immediate negative emotions and allowing them to view their situation more objectively and constructively.

This activity promotes shifts away from reliance on authority from an RJM perspective and helps students evaluate their performance through the HPL framework. This

also aligns with TLT's shift of action through reflection as learners practice internal dialogues utilizing alternative voices.

Our Reflection and Challenges

The theoretical frameworks underpinning our practice, the RJM, TLT, and the learner-centered environment within the HPL framework, emerged through our ongoing collaborative reflections after leaving the SALC. This process proved particularly valuable, as it enabled us to recognize how we each maximize learner development in the current classroom contexts. We then shared how we have implemented learner-centered pedagogical practices in our classrooms.

In classroom settings, while satisfying university standards, we strive to act as facilitators by promoting reflection and providing a safe space for students to engage with their emotions in language learning. For example, some students shift to view their language learning more reflectively, considering their emotions as a driving force. Even though both of us are no longer learning advisors officially, we maximize the essence of advising in classroom settings. While classroom advising and individual advising differ in scale and degree of personalization, the principles of reflection, dialogue, and emotional engagement can be meaningfully adapted to classroom contexts to help bridge the gap between advising and teaching.

While we do our best to develop self-directed learners, we face several challenges. Assessment is the most challenging aspect of classroom teaching. Although we assign tasks such as reflective journals and metacognitive discussions that aim to foster learners' growth, emotional awareness, and self-assessment, we are also required to administer chapter tests and adhere to mandated grading criteria focusing on English proficiency. This creates a dilemma as tasks designed to promote learner development and self-directed growth must also be positioned as assessable components within a formal grading framework. As a result, we must continually negotiate the tension between supporting transformative learning processes and satisfying institutional assessment requirements by providing pedagogical activities rooted in our experiences and beliefs as advisors which we introduce in this paper.

In addition, classes are mandatory, reducing learners' sense of autonomy and intrinsic purpose. Some students engage in reflective tasks primarily to satisfy course requirements, rather than to genuinely reflect on their learning, beliefs, and emotions in meaningful ways. Furthermore, compulsory English courses have complex classroom dynamics, including students with varying levels of language anxiety and uneven motivation. These factors can

limit students' willingness to engage deeply with reflective and emotionally oriented activities and reduce the sense of community necessary for effective learning.

Despite the imposition of these factors, we believe that our approaches are valuable in encouraging students to engage in intentional reflection on their language learning. These reflective tools and strategies offer opportunities for students to think beyond content and approach the classroom in more holistic, emotional ways.

Through ongoing collaborative reflections of our practices, we are able to learn from each other how we utilize our advising skills and learner-centered approaches in our classrooms. This process has also deepened our engagement with the theoretical frameworks that we were not able to explore fully while working as advisors. Additionally, it helps us sustain our motivation and find ways to work within institutional requirements to help learners navigate their learning and emotions. As this paper was developed from discussions between former advisors focusing on classroom-based practices, it is limited to our own experiences, and further research into literature by those with similar backgrounds will further inform our development.

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