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## **ADVISING IN A MULTILINGUAL SETTING: NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR THE ROLE OF THE ADVISOR**

*Marie-José Gremmo and E. Desirée Castillo*

### ***Introduction***

In the past fifteen years, there has been an increase in the number of self-access centers around the world. By using new technologies that allow access to up-to-date materials in different languages, they have become centers for multilingual learning. Many of these centers are based on a self-directed system, meaning that an advising service is provided.

In the literature on self-directed language learning, the advisor is considered to be the keystone in a self-access center. In 1995, Gremmo set out to define the advisor's role. One of the aspects she mentions is that the advisor can advise in and for different languages without being a specialist in those languages. Thus we are confronted with the "plurilingualism" of the advisor, about which almost no research has been done.

Here, we need to explain an important distinction between the two terms which we will be using. The first is the term "multilingual", which describes an environment or milieu where two or more languages are spoken or expressed. It refers to the nature of the environment, such as a society that uses different languages, learning material presented in different languages, language centers that afford access to different languages, etc. The second is the French term "plurilingual" as it is used by the Council of Europe: "A person who is capable of using advisedly several linguistic varieties" is plurilingual (Riley 2003:13). This distinction is discussed in Riley (2003).

With the purpose of deepening our knowledge of the plurilingualism of the advisor, we investigated the following questions:

1. Does the multilingualism of the technology and materials found in self-access language centers promote a pedagogical plurilingualism?
2. What factors promote plurilingual advising?
3. What training would advisors need to be able to do plurilingual advising in a multilingual setting?
4. What are the advantages to offering plurilingual advising?

The first step toward answering these questions is to recognize the nature of the environment in which an advisor must function competently: that is to say the multilingualism that occurs in a self-access language centre. In this context, multilingualism is present in two different ways:

- First, in the different languages available to be learned as represented by the various materials.

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- Second, in the learners and advisors who may speak one or more languages (independent of the languages they want to learn). In other words, the plurilingual learners and advisors form a multilingual environment for the center.

However, we discovered that the multilingual environment in which advisors may have to work can vary significantly from center to center, as we will show with the following three cases. As a result, the skills required by advisors, and in particular, the extent to which advisors are allowed to use their plurilingualism, can vary significantly depending on what type of center they are working in.

Before we continue, we also need to define two other terms that we will be using. First, we will call 'learning language' the language that is being learned by the learner, the language that is the object of the advice given by an advisor. Second, we will call 'advising language' the language that is used during the advice session to communicate between the advisor and the learner.

#### ***Definition of the role of the advisor***

Our concept of an advisor is that as defined in the work on self-direction carried out at the CRAPEL. As Gremmo (1995) has shown, the advisor is the person who will help the learner to establish a learning program. Because the objective of the advising is to develop in the learner the capacity to learn, the main focus of the advising will be the methodological aspects, instead of the linguistic ones. For that purpose, the language used in the interview is not necessarily the one being learned by the learner. It needs to be a language in which both advisor and learner feel comfortable to talk about the learning language. Therefore, the advisor can be plurilingual in two ways:

- first, in being able to advise for several learning languages, and
- second, in being able to advise in several advising languages.

#### ***Presentation of the organization of each centre***

We interviewed advisors from three centers in three countries: Mexico, France and Luxembourg. In each of these centers, the CRAPEL had previously intervened as an expert in the training of advisors.

##### ***A University in Mexico***

The first self-access center is located in a public university in Mexico.

Users: The Mexican center is part of a range of services offered by the university's language department. The center is open to students and university personnel. Three languages are offered: English, French and German. Portuguese will soon be introduced. The majority of the learners are Mexican, and most of them take regular language courses in the language department.

Advisory structure: In the Mexican center, advising is optional. There are eight advisors, who are teachers from the language department, and each advisor specializes in just one learning language, the one they teach in the classroom: five for English, two for French and one for German. The advising language is Spanish, the mother tongue of the majority of the learners and the advisors.

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Advisors establish their schedule so that no two advisors of the same language are present at the same time, though advisors for different languages may be present. There is a bulletin board showing the schedule, including the names of the advisors and the learning languages.

When the center first opened, only the original French advisors were trained by the CRAPEL.

#### *A University in France*

The second self-access center is located in a public university in France.

Users: The French center is oriented primarily toward the students of the university, whether or not they are language specialists. It is also open to the teachers and administrative personnel of the university. The center offers eleven languages for study (Arabic, Danish, English, French as a Foreign Language, German, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish), the materials for each language differ in quantity and quality. The majority of the learners are French, who principally learn English. The center is also used by foreign students.

Advisory structure: The advising service is provided by three advisors. The use of the service is optional for the students. One of the advisors is a university teacher, and the two others are PhD students who volunteer their time. The availability of the advisors is posted, and there is no schedule overlap. Learners are encouraged to make an appointment, though impromptu sessions are accepted.

The French center was set up by the CRAPEL in the 70's, and as was mentioned before, the advisory structure is based on the "plurilingual" understanding of the advisor's role as defined by the CRAPEL, i.e., that advisors can advise for several languages. As a result, there is no information posted concerning which languages an advisor can advise for or advise in. The only moment when the learning language is mentioned is when the learner makes an appointment, at which time the learner indicates the language (s)he is learning. With this information, the advisor can review in advance the material that the center has for the language chosen by the learner. As for the advising language, it is negotiated by the learner and the advisor during the first meeting.

#### *A Language center in Luxembourg*

The third self-access center is located in a language school.

Users: The Luxembourg center opened one year ago. It is in an experimental stage, so the number of languages and learners is limited. The center offers five languages: English, French, German, Italian and Luxembourgish and its users are adults in continuing education. The learners can choose just to use the self-access center, just to take language courses, or to combine the two to deepen what is learned in the classroom.

Advisory structure: There are four advisors, and all of them were trained by the CRAPEL. They have developed a structure for 'plurilingual advising,' which is explained to the learners. The advisors indicate which languages they are willing to advise in (the advising languages) and advise for (the learning languages), as seen in the following table.

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**Table 1: Advising structure**

Advisor	Advising language	Learning language
L1	French Italian English Portuguese	French Italian English
L2	German French Luxembourgish English	German French Luxembourgish
L3	German French English Luxembourgish	German French English
L4	French English	French English German

A learner meets with the same advisor for each session. The learner and the advisor decide during the first meeting which will be the advising language or languages. The advising language can change during the meetings. Furthermore, advisors accept to advise in the learning language, so that the learners will have more opportunity to practice the language. On this aspect, this procedure differs from the practices advocated by the CRAPEL.

As we can see, the three self-access centers experience and manage the plurilingualism of the advisors in different ways:

- In the Mexican center, there is no acknowledgement of the plurilingualism of the advisors. Rather, a culture of virtual ‘monolingualism’ pervades: all advisors advise almost exclusively in Spanish, and they advise for just one language, the language they teach in class.
- In the French center, advisors are assumed to be plurilingual: they can advise for different languages, and they can give advice in different languages.
- In the Luxembourg center, the advisors have decided to stipulate and control the degree of their plurilingualism, by specifying the learning languages and the advising languages for each advisor.

### ***Methodology***

Interviews were chosen as the primary means of obtaining data, because it allowed us to get more insights in a research area where there is little data as yet. In particular we felt that individual interviews would furnish us with valuable clues to the following:

- the way advisors are likely to organise their practice in a multilingual center
- the way in which the advisors’ specific contexts influence the way they conceive their role

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- the way in which innovative aspects brought about by technology (i.e., grouping together materials and learners of various languages) may cause pedagogical relationships to evolve.

We developed a three-part questioning guide. The first section was designed to collect information about the setting in which advisors and learners work. The second section was designed to explore the advisor's personal experience with plurilingualism. The third part was designed to investigate the training they had had. The average length of the interviews was 35 minutes.

For our research, we interviewed ten advisors:

- four advisors at the Mexican university. (At the time of the interview, just one of them is working in the center. The three others were advisors in the self-access center who had recently left: one is studying for her master's degree, one is directing another self-access center, and the third has taken on a management position in the university language department.)
- two advisors at the French center (the two volunteers) and
- all four advisors at the Luxembourg center.

### *The reality of plurilingual advising*

We would now like to highlight, with extracts from our interviews with advisors, some of the most important issues we explored.

#### *Advising for a language in which advisors are not specialists*

Most of the advisors spoke at least two languages. For some advisors, it was normal to advise for languages in which they are not specialized. We also noticed that even where they were not specialists of a learning language, they had some knowledge of it. Thus, nobody had to advise for a language that was completely unknown to him/her. The most extreme case is that of an advisor from the French center who advised for Italian, a language that she did not know at all, but she said that it was not a problem for her because of her knowledge of Spanish and French.

We asked advisors how they would feel about advising for a completely unknown language. The answers were not unanimous:

- whereas one advisor from the Mexican center was reluctant, the others were willing, with some reservations:  
“I think that it can be done, but obviously you have to take the attitude that I am not a know-it-all but just a guide, the one who will teach how to do it, but not do it”
- the advisors from the French center were willing to advise for an unknown language, but specified the type of material that the center has to have in order to do this kind of advising
- three advisors from the Luxembourg center did not feel ‘uncomfortable’ with the idea, but they specified that since advising is already a completely new

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experience for them (they had only been advising for one year), they would prefer to start their advising experience with languages they felt they could handle. One of them said she could do it:

For example, Russian I will not say no. I will try, because now I realize from my experience that the advice that we give in this type of teaching, in quotes, is advice of a methodological nature, and that it is really the how and not the what. I realized this during my work. So for Japanese or Russian, yes, that would bother me, but I could at the very least tell people “do it like that for oral comprehension, if this is your objective, then just do it”.

### *Concerns about not being a specialist*

#### a. Disclosing non-specialist status to the learner

Advisors were divided over whether to tell learners that they were advising for non-specialist languages.

As we have already said, advising for a non-specialist language was considered ‘normal’ by some advisors. Since it was a part of their role to give priority to the language learning process and methodology, they did not feel forced to say that they were not specialists, unless they were in an extreme situation, such as when they were confronted with specific terms or with completely unknown languages:

“That has happened when they asked me a question that I found too specific on languages “oh you know, it’s not my speciality” that has happened to me, but otherwise I never tell them up front”

“It seems to me that for Italian I told him that I had never done Italian (...) perhaps I was afraid of that expectation of someone who was a specialist in the language, even if we didn’t deal with grammatical stuff but (...) everything [in the materials] was in Italian, so (...) it was more difficult for me to understand, and yes, perhaps I needed to say “excuse me, I am taking more time to understand what it’s about, as I do not speak that language””

For others, disclosing their status was an issue of ‘professional ethics’, that is an imperative not to lie to the learners:

“You have to be frank. You have to be honest one hundred percent. That’s what counts”

In the Mexican center, where the organization was based on separation of languages, advisors would specify their speciality:

“Of course (...) ‘cartes sur table’, the cards on the table, so there is no cheating, no cheating. [And then, we can work with the learner] as far as possible, and on whatever possible, then it works, of course.”

Consequently, in the Mexican center, three of the advisors used to minimize their advising role with learners who were not in their speciality. At the first meeting, they would give a minimum of advice and then tell the learners to meet with the appropriate colleague for the next meeting. In contrast, the fourth advisor would

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continue to advise the learners, but she felt that her initiative caused her problems with her colleagues.

b. Learners' reactions to the advisor not being a specialist

It seems that when a center does not specify the advising languages, as in the French center, learners never asked for the speciality of the advisor:

“I think that the people who come to the center think that the advisors know all the languages. That seems more or less to be their representation”

The case of the Mexican center is interesting in this aspect. At first, the Mexican center did not have a precise advising ‘schedule’, and it seems that at that time the learners did not expect to have a specialist in the language. Indeed, for some learners, the speciality of the advisors was not a concern and they kept working with the non-specialist advisor:

“Yes, I have had to give advice to the same English student, yes of course [even though it is not my speciality]”

When the new schedule was set up, advisors were only supposed to advise for their speciality language. Nonetheless, learners often had to seek advice from a non-specialist advisor, because no specialist was available. Yet a remarkable change occurred in the attitude of the learners. If they discovered that they were being advised by a non-specialist, they would immediately want to switch, believing that a specialist would give them better advice, since the center seemed to focus on the importance of specialist-only advising. It was then up to the advisors to convince the learner that they were capable of advising for another language:

“Perhaps they thought that therefore it couldn't be done. I mean, I remember vividly occasions when to say “I am from the French section” would get a response, a reaction of “ah, well, then I'll leave” (...) and then you tell him “no, no, there's no problem, there's no problem. I know the French section, but of course we can talk about your difficulties or whatever you want about your English learning. There's no problem.””

c. Colleagues' reaction to non-specialist advisors

When the advising languages are strictly assigned, as in the Mexican center, it seems that those advisors who just advise in their speciality language are surprised by the fact that some colleagues do plurilingual advising. In some cases, advisors actually disapproved of their colleagues doing plurilingual advising.

One of the former French advisors at the Mexican center described the reaction of her new colleagues at one of the university's English-only language centers. Although her English is not very fluent, she successfully advises English language learners, and she is in fact the director of the center:

“I feel that at the beginning there was a reaction of surprise from the advisors, not from the learners but from the rest of the advisors, because first, the director who was before me did not do advising, and she was an English teacher, and second (...) because I was from the French department, how could I dare do advising? So they used to

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make fun of me. I started advising, and all of them were watching what I was doing, and they made fun of me, but now they see it as something really normal”

### *Changing attitudes of advisors*

It seems that when advisors advise for a language which is their speciality, they act more like experts: they know the material the center has, where it can be found, etc. But when advisors are advising for a language in which they are not experts, this knowledge is missing, so they feel that they act on more equal terms, more like partners.

“I mean that those obstacles that I have been talking about for a while can be overcome, they can be overcome, I mean you can be a plurilingual advisor if you adopt the attitude “let’s look together, and I’ll help you””

“It seems that for Italian I told him that I had never done Italian, but between us, we found a way. We looked, for example, at the methods, we reviewed what he wanted to work on, and we found (...) more or less (...) those things he could work on.”

### *The content of advising*

Advisors say that they work above all on the methodological aspect, instead of the linguistic one:

“We try to make the advising not too linguistic but more methodological (...) how to solve this or that problem, how to approach this or that aspect, how to start with this or that”

“I feel really comfortable and I feel I am the same in all languages, because ultimately I feel that the advice that I give to people is of a methodological nature (...) I concentrate on the methodology”

An advisor comments that advising for an unfamiliar language puts the advisor in a situation where the linguistic aspect cannot be addressed, yet...

“it is in that situation where the advisor realizes that (s)he is really an advisor”

### *Characteristics of a “good” plurilingual advisor*

The advisors also discussed some of the characteristics that would help advisors to advise competently.

a. Having a common language with the learner

What advisors from the French center said about plurilingual advising is that the most important factor is to find a language that is common to both advisor and learner:

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“Now I am convinced that there must be a language in which the two are at ease, because I found myself sometimes using English with someone who did not feel at ease. Already you’re talking with someone from another culture. How do you tell him what is our role (...) That’s to say, he has a very specific program, and to be able to tell him, to make him understand why we are asking these questions, and what the process is. It is not obvious if there is no language that we both master”

#### b. Importance of knowing the materials

Most of the advisors highlighted the importance of knowing the materials of the center well:

“One of our functions (...) is to know and know and know and never stop knowing the material that is in our area, that seems essential for me, essential (...) it is part of our function, so in the tiny free moments that we have, we should be reviewing the material so we could know what we have and where we have it, what we have here and there (...) You do not need to know everything, and you cannot do it. So there is always the procedure of searching, but if you already have more precise notions of what you have you can help more rapidly in the search”

Indeed, it is precisely this factor in which advisors feel weak when advising for languages they are not specialized in:

“I realize that (...) I do not know the materials well enough to tell learners “do this or that”. But when it has to do with questions of methodology, I can help them”

#### c. Training as plurilingual advisors

Advising in and for several languages requires a different approach from that which is usually used for the training of language teachers. Rather than focusing on language specialization, training must focus on the methodology, on the didactics of learning languages:

“I realize now that it is finally a whole focus (...) because to be trained to be a plurilingual advisor is something that has to be proposed from the beginning, as an approach to be trained like that.”

### ***Discussion***

Using the information drawn from the analysis of the interviews, we would now like to discuss the issues raised by the questions that were set out at the beginning.

#### ***The importance of a common training***

One of our questions was whether multilingualism begets plurilingualism. The interviews seem to show that it is not the multilingualism of the technology and

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materials found in a center that stimulate plurilingualism, *per se*. Rather, it is the training that the advisors have received that encourages them to work plurilingually. Indeed, the way in which advisors are trained is crucial to how they see their role and how they do their work. Of course, this effect is strongest if all of the advisors, including the director of the center, share the same ideal.

In the Mexican center, the advisors were trained principally by two different institutions, each proposing a different concept for the role of the advisor. We have already mentioned that the French advisors were trained with a plurilingual approach. On the other hand, the advisors for other languages were trained by an institution that gave preference to a 'monolingual' method (that is, advisors should advise for the language of their speciality). When the advisors began to work together, their differing concepts of how the center should be run created a great deal of conflict between them. After a period of negotiation, the monolingual system of advising was adopted.

In the French and Luxembourg centers, all of the advisors were trained by the same institution (CRAPEL), which privileged a plurilingual approach. Both centers have developed multilingual systems for advising. It seems that the common training helped to develop a coherent methodology in the workplace, in spite of the different specializations. On the other hand, each center has chosen to manage this multilingualism in a different way, no boundaries at the French center, and clear boundaries and the possibility of using the learning language as the advising language at the Luxembourg center.

### ***The importance of a common training language***

An important aspect in the training concerns the language used during the training. Advisors are usually trained in the language of their speciality, which tends to include a focus on linguistics and also tends to exclude advisors who do not speak that language. But since more and more centers are multilingual, a common training is important, implying training in a common language. This is what the CRAPEL started to do in Luxembourg, where the training for all the advisors was conducted in French. Similarly, at a public university in Colombia, all of the future advisors were trained in a common language, in this case Spanish. As a result, the training privileged a didactic approach instead of the specialization in a particular language. This helped also to develop a common 'vision' of what the self-access center could be.

### ***The importance of the advisor's professional status***

The number of languages spoken by an advisor, the idea of what an advisor is and the professional status of an advisor can have a positive or negative influence at work. At the Mexican center, the advisors were categorized according to their speciality language. As it turned out, the French advisors had notions of other languages (usually English and German), and for them an advisor could advise for different languages. Most of the other advisors only knew the language of their speciality, and

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for them an advisor could only advise in his/her speciality language. It seems that the monolingual advisors may have been opposed to plurilingual advising, because they perceived it as a threat to the control of their “language territory”. They had the feeling that their status was diminished, because while they only felt comfortable advising for their speciality language, the French advisors’ field of action was now extending into their speciality.

On the other hand, in the French and Luxembourg centers, advisors were not considered specialists of a particular language, as all the advisors spoke a number of different languages. The advisor’s role was also perceived as that of an expert more in methodological rather than linguistically aspects. This seems to lead to a greater willingness on the part of the advisors to work together and to help each other.

### ***The importance of external factors***

The sociolinguistic context could be another reason that helps or inhibits plurilingualism. One has to remember that the sociolinguistic makeup of Mexico and Luxembourg may be influencing the system adopted by their respective self-access centers. Mexico is officially a monolingual country (Spanish). This monolingualism may have an influence on an advisor’s willingness to advise for more than one language. In comparison, Luxembourg is multilingual, which has undoubtedly helped advisors to be more willing to advise in and for different languages.

### ***The advantages of a plurilingual approach***

Finally, there are three important advantages of a plurilingual advisory structure:

#### **More flexible scheduling**

In a typical center, there are advisors present for each language at specific and limited times during the week. As a result it is often difficult for learners to match their constrained schedule with that of ‘the’ advisor of their learning language. Indeed, some learners never see an advisor, because their schedules do not match. In contrast with plurilingual advisors, advising can be provided for all languages at almost all times. This is an immense advantage to learners.

#### **Increase of knowledge of resources**

Typically advisors are only familiar with the resources in their speciality language. By advising in several languages, advisors enrich their knowledge of resources, in quantity as well as in quality. In particular, an advisor may discover interesting and useful materials in one language that are not currently used in other languages. Thus the needs of the learners can be better met across all languages.

#### **Greater focus on methodology**

But the most important advantage lies in the nature of the role itself. As was said above, when a plurilingual advisor advises in a non-speciality language, the advisor tends to focus on the methodological aspect of learning. This could be a greater

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advantage to learners, who thus acquire a better understanding of how to learn a language, rather than just learning the linguistic aspects of a specific language.

### ***Conclusion***

Based on our analysis of the three self-access language centers, we find that the multilingualism of the center does not promote, *per se*, a plurilingualism in advising. It is the team of advisors and the type of training that promote a plurilingual approach. It is clear that a team of advisors should not just be a group of language teachers who work side by side but do not really cooperate. Rather the team members should be experts in an overall language learning methodology so that their knowledge and professional know-how are based on language didactics much more than on language studies. With plurilingual advising, we are confronted with an 'ideological' innovation: the cohabitation of languages in a self-access center implicitly brings with it the cohabitation of different didactic currents.

If we do not want self-access centers to remain in a state of segregated multilingualism but rather to develop a plurilingual advisory structure, we need to redefine the notion of 'speciality', moving from a definition based on languages to one that is more transversal and based on language didactics.

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