

The use of macro-skills in giving consultations

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Abstract

Consultations, which are sessions arranged for assisting students to manage the lessons or learning problems, have become a part of the learner-centred classroom. Teachers, especially those who are new to dealing with helping students in this way, would probably feel uneasy about them. This paper reports the results of a study on the use of macro-skills in giving consultations by novice university teachers. It also discusses some practical perspectives that would be applicable and beneficial in counselling.

How is consultation significant in language learning support?

Consultation is regarded as a crucial component of the language class since it is supposed to help support and promote self-directed and self-managed language learning. Johnson and Lozada (2001: 83-85) state that consultation can guide the students to monitor their weaknesses and correct their mistakes. A teacher working as a counsellor will give advice or suggestions to students in order to encourage them to be more engaged in their learning and more aware of their learning needs.

Consultation not only promotes self-directed and self-managed language learning, but it also helps reduce the gap between teachers and students because students are better able to discuss their problems privately with a caring helper (Johnson and Lozada, 2001: 85). So far, it could be seen that consultation is essential to the classroom. A teacher, thus, needs some practical skills to handle it. The next section will introduce the counselling skills that the teacher-counsellor should have in giving consultations.

Counselling skills

In giving consultations, Kelly (1996: 94-97) proposes two major counselling skills that the teacher-counsellor needs: macro- and micro-skills. Macro-skills are a group of counselling skills that consist of initiating, goal-setting, guiding, modelling, supporting, giving feedback, evaluating, linking and concluding. Kelly sees these skills as a framework in the process of giving consultations. In other words, they are skills for a teacher to manage the stages of giving consultations and facilitate learner self-management of a self-access project. Micro-skills are a group of behaviours that a counsellor engages in in various ways during any interaction with a learner. They, in other words, are seen as strategies that help the counsellor effectively communicate with the learner in any stages of giving consultations. The micro-skills in this context are composed of attending, restating, paraphrasing, summarizing, questioning, interpreting, reflecting feelings, empathizing and confronting.

In this study, however, the focus will be on macro-skills only since they are seen as skills that assist teachers to gain insights into the process of giving consultations, which is the basis of what novice teachers should know.

Background and purpose of the study

All first-year students at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) who take LNG 101 (a foundation EAP course for undergraduates) are taught and trained in learning strategies in class. They then have a chance to apply those strategies through the tasks that encourage them to study on their own at KMUTT Self Access Learning Centre and other resources. To do this, they need to fill in their task record forms and keep a record of their work in a portfolio. The students are also encouraged to study grammar points of their own interest or the ones where they made mistakes in writing. The consultations then are arranged on a one-to-one basis outside class time. The students are required to bring the materials they have studied to the consultation sessions. Each student must have two consultations with his/her teacher throughout the semester.

This study, therefore, aims to investigate both the macro-skills of counselling used by teachers who were inexperienced in giving language consultations and the outcomes from the skills used.

Subjects and methodology

The subjects were four pairs of teachers and students of LNG 101. The teachers were participants on KMUTT's masters in applied linguistics; they were teaching this course for the whole semester as a requirement of their teaching practice. In contrast, the students were randomly selected first-year undergraduates who studied and had consultations with the four teachers. Among the four subject teachers, two had had no experience in teaching before taking the teaching practice while the others had been teaching for a few years. However, none of these teachers had had any prior experience in giving language consultations. The two consultation sessions of each pair of teachers and students were recorded and transcribed to identify the types and frequency of macro-skills used. The outcomes were also investigated through the tapescripts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher and student after each consultation to support the results from the tapescripts.

However, in analyzing data or categorizing macro-skills used in giving consultations, some skills and the description proposed by Kelly (1996: *ibid*) were adjusted to suit the situation of the study. The criteria used for data analysis are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories and description of adjusted macro-skills for data analysis

Skills	Description	Purpose
Initiating	Introducing new directions and options	To promote learner focus and reduce uncertainty
Goal-setting	Helping the learner identify problems and solutions or formulate specific goals/objectives	To enable the learner to focus on a manageable goal
Guiding	Offering advice and information, direction and ideas; suggesting; demonstrating or explaining target behaviour	To help the learner develop alternative strategies and gain examples of knowledge and skills that he/she desires

Supporting	Providing encouragement and reinforcement	To help the learner persist; create trust; acknowledge and encourage effort
Following up	Helping the learner report on the task done and reflect on the problems/difficulties encountered	To check the learner's progress and problems/difficulties faced during working, leading to providing solutions
Giving feedback	Expressing a constructive reaction to the learner's effort, performance or task done, including helping the learner to self-evaluate own performance	To acknowledge the significance of the learner's effort and achievement, and assist the learner's self-awareness and capacity for self-appraisal
Linking	Connecting the learner's goals and tasks to wider issues, new issues/problems to the learner's existing knowledge or what the teacher has suggested to new issues	To help establish the relevance and value of the learner's project
Concluding	Bringing a sequence of work/self-study or process of consultation to a conclusion, including assisting the learner to conclude what the teacher has explained/guided, or main points of the topic consulted	To help the learner establish boundaries and define achievement

Findings

The findings of the study are presented under two major points as follows:

Macro-skills used in giving consultations

The findings reveal that the teachers used all types of macro-skills, but the proportion of distribution was different. The skills that were frequently used are 'guiding', 'giving feedback' and 'following up' (22.78%, 22.78% and 20.25%, respectively). 'Supporting', 'linking' and 'concluding' were used at lower frequencies (11.39%, 10.13% and 7.60%). The skills that were used least frequently are 'goal-setting' (3.80%) and 'initiating' (1.27%). The unequal number of the skills used by each novice teacher appears to be affected by:

- the lack of understanding of the nature of giving consultations and the counselling skills of the teacher-counsellors
- the language proficiency level of the students
- the topic selected for consultation
- the requirement for using English (L2) and marks given in consulting
- the way of conducting consultations (on a one-to one basis)

Moreover, it was found that the sequence of macro-skills used by each teacher was also different. It was not linear; for instance, the teachers did not always start the session with 'initiating' and end with 'concluding'. Each skill could be used at almost any time during

the sessions, and it could occur more than once. The sequence of the skills used tended to vary according to the level of language proficiency of the students rather than the teaching experience of the teachers. In addition, it was observed that the occurrence or the use of the macro-skills was often found along with such micro-skills as 'attending', 'questioning' and 'restating'.

Outcomes from the use of macro-skills

Using macro-skills in giving consultations provided positive outcomes for both teachers and students. The students revealed in the interview that they gained more techniques, knowledge and understanding of the topics studied as well as self-study and self-assessment. These might have resulted from the use of 'guiding', 'following up', 'giving feedback' and 'concluding'. With these skills, the teachers offered advice, tactics, or ideas, checked the students' learning progress, helped the students explore their strengths and weaknesses and concluded the main points of the topics discussed and so forth. The students, moreover, developed positive attitudes towards English learning and reported that they had more confidence about knowledge of the topics studied.

As for the teachers, they felt they were more aware of the constraints in giving consultations (e.g. time limitation, language proficiency of students, students' attitudes towards consultations) and their own weaknesses in giving consultations and in classroom teaching (e.g. insufficiently preparing the students for consultations or explaining the subject matter to the students directly during the consultations). In addition, they reported that they enhanced their knowledge and skills in giving consultations and developed better relationships with their students since both parties had chances to interact with each other more personally, particularly because of the use of the 'supporting' skill during the interactions.

In short, both teachers and students received positive outcomes from the use of macro-skills. However, there were some constraints concerning the lack of understanding of the nature of counselling skills, roles of teacher-counsellors and learners and ways of conducting consultations, which would obscure the ultimate outcomes from both parties.

Practical perspectives

The findings of the study suggest the following:

1. Although the different number of the macro-skills used in giving consultations has not proved their effectiveness, the results of the study convince the researchers that arranging a training session for giving consultations for the new teacher-counsellors would lead to more effective and efficient outcomes. This is sustained by Redman's statement (1995: 78) that "the newer you are to counselling, the more practice you need to get".
2. In a training session, there are three main facets that should be considered: macro- and micro-skills of counselling, roles of teacher-counsellors and learners, and ways to conduct consultations.

The teachers, before conducting consultations, should be trained not only in macro-skills but also in micro-skills. This is because, throughout the consultation sessions, the teacher-counsellors used not only macro-skills but also some micro-skills in conjunction with the macro-skills.

Moreover, both teacher-counsellors and learners should be clear about their roles. The teachers should know what a counsellor is required to do and how to perform in a consultation. If not, they would still play the roles of a teacher as they normally do in the classroom. Riley (1997) points out that a classroom teacher and a counsellor have different roles and these roles should be acknowledged to enable the teachers to see the differences between the performances of counsellors and teachers (e.g. giving feedback instead of simply evaluating the students, suggesting instead of selecting materials for them, supporting instead of rewarding or punishing them). In terms of learners' roles, they also need guidance on what to do. The teacher-counsellors should give them suggestions on what issues to raise during the consultations, such as making an appointment with the teacher, bringing the materials studied to the sessions and reporting the problems faced. Above all, both parties should understand that consultations are not one-to-one teaching sessions where the teacher-counsellors explain to the students what they are not clear about.

Finally, alternative ways to conduct consultations (i.e. individual and group sessions as well as those that are a combination of both) should be included in the training session to overcome the time constraint. Individual consultations should be conducted for the learners whose learning problems, needs or topics selected for consultations are different from those of their peers whereas group consultations should be used with the learners who have the same problems, needs or topics.

3. Simulation or role-play (see Gardner and Miller, 1999: 192) should be considered in training the teachers about counselling skills (both macro- and micro-skills) and roles of teacher-counsellors. This is because the training sessions require practical skills rather than theories, and it is insufficient to know and be able to talk about what to do. The counsellors have to be able to use the skills as well (Nelson-Jones, 2000: 83).
4. The conditions in consultations, e.g. giving marks and the use of English (L2) as a medium, should be considered carefully because they could obscure the real objectives of the consultations. Marks can be an incentive but, at the same time, they can be a condition that causes stress and worry for the learners. Riley (1997) ascribes 'marking', or 'grading', to the role of teachers, not counsellors. Similarly, using English in consultations provides a chance for the learners to improve their speaking, but it is not an easy situation for them, especially for the weak ones, to express their ideas or reflect on the problems they face. Some cannot even understand the questions or whatever the teachers say to them.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed the findings of this study of university teachers' use of macro-skills in giving consultations for the first time. It is found that these consultations provided positive outcomes for both teachers and students. However, since consultations are a practical activity, the teacher as a counsellor as well as the learner as a counsellee should recognize their roles in order that both parties can achieve the ultimate goals of every consultation.

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