



## An Action Research on Language Learning Counseling for refugees at the GLT Department of the University of Cologne

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### Abstract

The paper is based on action research with the aim to improve the own practice and tests the language learning counseling in connection with a reading comprehension course for refugees. Here, language learning counseling is offered online in parallel with the course so that individual appointments can be scheduled entirely according to learners' time. The focus is on implementing learning diaries and consultation meetings for language counseling. In particular, the aim was to find out how to encourage learners to recognize their existing potential in order to achieve their learning goals and to learn autonomously. In this sense, learners design their learning process with the help of learning counseling, planning and reflecting on their own learning process. The concept proposed in this study could be a suggestion to offer language learning consultancy in language courses in order to promote autonomous learning.

**Keywords:** Metacognitive strategies, language learning counseling, learning diaries.

## Introduction

Discussions about language learning counseling to promote learner autonomy have been going on for some time in the German-speaking context. It is emphasized that language learning counseling is only a necessity when learners can be systematically encouraged to recognize their already existing potential in order to subsequently use already existing resources to achieve their goals (Claußen, 2009; Kleppin, 2003; Mehlhorn, & Kleppin, 2006). At many German institutions or universities or colleges, the concept of learning counseling is an essential offering, with learning counseling being provided by qualified counselors whenever possible. In its usual, conventional way, learning counseling can be offered -mostly due to lack of time and staff- to a low number of learners. In contrast, most learners rarely take advantage of this counseling or want to avoid the time and travel to counseling (Mehlhorn, & Kleppin, 2006).

The research is conducted in the form of action research with the goal of developing a counseling concept in order to improve the learner's own practice. This action research attempts to set up a concept by not only supporting learners through virtual counseling, but also by providing individual step-by-step counseling in their learning process from the beginning of a course to the end of the course.

Successful language learning does not only depend on measures where learners are obliged to learn the language within certain framework offers, but on a regular diagnosis and



statement of individual needs as well as on incentives that provide a strong motivation for the self-regulated acquisition of language skills. This includes, above all, "the enabling of self-organized (further) work after the end of organized course work" (Schiersmann, Thiel, & Völker, 1984, p. 9). The importance of adult education will continue to increase, provided that the changing expectations and needs of learners are taken into consideration (Siebert, 2003, p. 16). Language learning counseling focuses on the requirements of lifelong and self-organized learning: "Lifelong learning and continuous development are considered the agenda for managing the necessary change processes as successfully as possible" (Eckstein, 2003, p. 11). In the field of language learning consultation, publications on face-to-face consultations, where learners and consultants meet in person or face-to-face, have been predominant until today. The consultations are predominantly offered in the sense that learners decide for themselves how often they participate in the consultation. (Ludwig, 2006; Ludwig, 2018). The individual language learning counseling presented in this action research supports the learners in their autonomous learning processes with the prerequisite of regular planning as well as active participation of the participants and suggests a continuous counseling of the learning process with the help of a recurring reflection phase of the objectives as well as the achieved goals. Metacognitive learning strategies 'planning, implementing and reflecting' as well as individually adapted learning strategies are taught and the learners are encouraged to apply these learning strategies. In accordance with Kaiser, & Kaiser (2018), metacognition accompanies all thought processes that are directed toward the processing of a problem. This is done by means of three metacognitive strategies: planning, monitoring and control. Planning considers the approach to the problem, the first steps in processing a task. Monitoring concerns the regulation of thinking efforts accompanying the processing of the task: for example, the decision to go through solution paths again and, if necessary, to re-plan them. Control checks achieved results so far with a critical view. Control actions confirm previously taken planning and control steps. This procedure must be concretized in practically applicable metacognitive techniques. In essence, they represent the translation of the three metacognitive strategies - planning, monitoring, control - into concrete forms of application. However, there is one condition for the use of these techniques that is not easy to implement at first: they must be integrated organically and permanently into the teaching/learning arrangement (Kaiser, & Kaiser, 2018, p.23). Language learning counseling in this research is thus an offer adapted in accordance with this idea, whereby the framework conditions are designed according to the needs and learning plans of the individual participants.

Based on virtual consultations that I conducted with refugee students as part of my research at the University of Cologne in collaboration with the Department of German as a Foreign Language, I describe and evaluate language learning support with the aim of improving my own practice on language learning support. In conducting this, I function as a researcher who empirically conducts and analyzes her own counseling practice.



Online counseling came about as a result of the current Corona crisis. In the time before the Corona crisis, language learning counseling was offered in the form of a consultation for refugees, whereby learners had to go to the counselor's location by appointment. In a period of about two months, very few refugees took advantage of the offer and came for counseling twice at most. After the courses were offered virtually because of the Corona crisis, I, as the course instructor, suggested in my course that 4 people could receive individual language learning support each week. 10 out of 19 participants took up this offer and attended language counseling regularly. The virtual offer saves the time and the way to the counseling and the learners can participate in the counseling from home via their electronic devices depending on the appointment. Furthermore, individual participants can be regularly supported and accompanied in their learning process over a certain period of time.

***Basics for the implementation of language learning support in the course 'Reading comprehension for refugees'***

Autonomous language learning is a crucial and performance-enhancing factor for promoting motivation to learn (Decke-Cornill, & Küster 2014, p. 209). The targeted promotion of autonomous language learning processes serves to build up control over one's own learning process. Thus, learners have the opportunity to determine their own learning process. This builds up and promotes motivation. During language learning consultation after class, learners' recent experiences are directly addressed, leading to increased self-reflection. This in turn results in encouragement as well as motivation (Hardeland, 2016, p. 108). When teachers provide language learning support to the course, they can reflect together with the participants on how they have experienced the semester, what development potential still exists, which learning strategies are already being used effectively, and in which areas they can possibly be expanded.

The target group is a group of refugee learners from Syria and Iraq, their ages vary between 19 and 45. The group is in my interest because of their previous learning environment in the countries of their origin. According to Al-Marqini (2018), in the learning environment of learners from the Middle East country area including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon etc., the learner is not seen as an active participant in a cognitive teaching situation, but as a passive recipient in a behaviorist teaching approach. The starting point of learning is primarily the importance of subject knowledge. Supra-disciplinary competencies are often underestimated. The result of this teaching culture is that learners become accustomed to a certain learning behavior (Al-Marqini, 2018, p.77). Straßer (2008) explains in his empirical study the effect of this behaviorist learning culture on the learners. Learners who are not familiar with systematically directing, planning, and reflecting on their own learning subsequently encounter difficulties in effective critical reflection on their own learning path, as they often lack conscious experience in promoting self-direction (Straßer, 2008, p.272). Therefore, language counseling for refugee language learners should be particularly characterized by interaction and a clear instruction of autonomous learning strategies, whereby above all motivation and patience should be encouraged so that interest and joy in not only language learning but also



autonomous learning can be built up, which are a prerequisite for sustainable language learning and setting goals for further learning. In the counseling session, the aim is to change the learning behavior of the participants, primarily by taking into consideration the planning of their language goals and the implementing of these goals successfully as well as to reflect them properly.

As mentioned in the introduction, there are currently several counseling concepts in Germany for language learning counseling for refugees. Refugees are supported in the language learning consultations already mentioned and receive professional help to improve their own learning. Learning counseling in its current function is defined as follows: "Learning counseling is a support offer that aims to facilitate (or enable) the learner's own learning, to improve learning outcomes, to promote one's own learning competence and to ensure learning success" (Rohs, & Käßplinger 2004, p.17). Further on, it is pointed out how this learning success can be secured (see *ibid.*):

- preparatory support
- support in the process
- on a professional level to ensure learning progress
- on the level of learning methods to promote one's own learning competence
- on a social level to ensure the ability to work in the group
- on a personal level in relation to individual factors that have a negative impact on learning (family or financial problems, conflicting goals, ...)
- reflection on the learning results at the (preliminary) end of the process.

Accordingly, the purpose of learning counseling is to help learners learn and reflect on the learning process in order to plan, implement and reflect on their learning independently. They should be supported to set their learning goals independently. The redesign of language learning counseling in self-directed learning seems to make sense, because without specific instruction for self-directed learning, counseling mostly remains ineffective in the long run. For Klein/Reutter, the basic assumption of learning counseling as learning process support is that self-organized learning, which will increasingly accompany individuals throughout their lives as a requirement, cannot be assumed without circumstance as a competence, but requires offers accompanying the learning process (Klein, & Reutter 2004, p.76). Visibly describing their learning process to language learners through individual and continuous instructions can improve language learning counseling in its way (Claußen, 2008). In this study, the instruction of self-directed learning is brought to the forefront as an independent learning skill is to be acquired, as is also openly stated in the following quote: "Inherent in the concept of individual learning counseling is the overarching goal of encouraging, enabling, as well as supporting learners in self-directed learning" (Brammerts, Calvert, & Kleppin 2001, p.54).

## Method



The research methodological framework is a 10-week action research, and I used qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. In this section, the concept of integrating language learning counseling in the course 'reading comprehension for refugees' will be presented. To this end, action research will be briefly discussed. Then, the course design with their content and structural composition will be presented. Finally, the presentation of the classroom testing will be explained, with a more detailed explanation of the phases of language learning consultation.

The term "action research" was introduced by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947). Lewin describes action research as a method "of analyzing causal relationships and synthesizing scientific constructs. This method of analyzing causal relations can be stated in terms of a number of general propositions about the nature of the conditions of change (Lewin, 1982, p.134/135)." It is a reflection on action, observing the action and describing the changes. In this regard, Paulo Freire emphasizes the connection between reflection and action: "Man's activity consists of action and reflection: it is practice, it is transformation of the world. As practice, it requires a theory that illuminates it" (Freire, 1973, p. 105). Freire asks people to make a self-observation; these observations lead to a change in practice.

This research focuses on understanding and action. The teacher can better understand the participants in their learning context, whereas the participants develop an insight or understanding of their own learning. It is expected that this will result in an understanding of the needs of learners on the part of the teacher as well as the planning and management of their own learning processes on the part of the participants.

I asked the participants to report their difficulties and successes in language learning in the counseling session so that they could identify and improve their learning skills. It was important to me as researcher that they learn to reflect on their learning, share what they have learned, and make decisions about their further learning. I counseled learners regarding their learning by answering individual questions and providing appropriate information. I have seen my task as a lecturer in developing autonomous learning competence of the participants with the help of metacognitive strategies and offered them metacognitive support measures to do so. This involved presenting, monitoring and optimizing the use of metacognitive strategies, such as preparing, planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's own learning process. I supported them in setting goals, planning individual learning steps, finding out the purpose of a learning task, setting up their own learning plan, analyzing their own approach, controlling and observing themselves, learning to evaluate themselves.

The concept is simple. Participants in the reading comprehension course complete a learning diary after each class. At the end of a class, the language learning consultation is offered, with 4 participants registering each time. The language learning consultation takes place individually for each participant, and a time of 20-25 minutes is sufficient. During the consultation, the individual points of the diary are discussed. If necessary, learning problems are discussed and individual learning strategies or tips for learning are conveyed. The learning plans are discussed and individual feedback is provided. The phases of the learning



consultation take place according to individual needs. The person involved can decide for him/herself which learning problems are to be addressed. The counselor acts as an active listener and, where necessary, provides tips for independent planning and implementation of learning. Previous planning and implementation of plans are reflected upon and evaluated together.

### ***Reflection with learning diaries***

In order to be able to reflect on one's own learning processes, a learning diary or direct reflection on the learning process is suitable (Hofer, 2011, p. 122). The teacher is free to create a concept for a learning diary so that it fits his or her teaching concept. Designing one's own template leads the teacher being in line with her own teaching concept: "It is the teachers who have to make the learning journal use 'palatable' to the learners; accordingly, they need convincing arguments for working with learning journals." The teacher himself can best judge in which form he/she will design the learning journal for his/her course or class.

According to Kemper and Klein (1998), the learning diary is a main element of learning guidance and is a proven method for personal reflection, goal setting and review and thus planning of learning and serves as an orienting support for self-directed learning. It unfolds its learning-promoting effect in this concept and is thus not only the basis of superficial assessments. The following goals are pursued with it:

- Promotion of self-observation
- Responsibility for one's own learning
- Introduction of one's own learning interests
- Reflection of learning experiences
- Recording of learning experiences and learning successes
- Recognition of learning problems
- Determination and review of learning goals
- Promotion of self-assessment of learning performance

Through a reflection sheet or the use of a diary, the participants should develop an awareness of their learning (Rampillon, 1995, p.96). The diary I developed consists of reflection questions to be completed after each class. Both individual and content understanding of the reading texts are reflected upon. The assignment and reflection questions are listed individually below:

### ***How do I keep a learning journal?***

At the end of each day of class, you should reflect on what you experienced in class. What experiences did you have? What did you learn? You should make short entries about this every day. The learning diary is used for you to make your own personal and individual entries after each class and after your homework. These questions can help you how to write down your thoughts. You should answer all the questions carefully.

### ***Reflection on the topic***

1. the topic is familiar to me



2. the topic is new for me
3. I have understood following:
4. I haven't really understood that yet:
5. I can understand the text and many details:
6. I can relate the text content to the heading:
7. I can follow the flow in the text and recognize the structure:

### **Text Comprehension**

My Vocabulary:

What conclusion can I draw from what I have learned/ from the text:

Briefly summarize what I learned/the text in my own words:

The learning journals were filled out by the participants after class. I informed the participants about the language learning consultation and the learning diaries at the beginning of the course, but participation in both reflections was voluntary. The reason for this was that there should be no compulsion to write the diaries. Thus, only interested participants took part in the consultation and the answers to the questions were not 'forced'. However, this resulted in shorter and simpler statements being written. In the future, it should therefore be clarified in advance that the statements serve importantly for the reflection of learning weaknesses and learning strengths and should therefore be worked on more intensively.

### **Participants**

In order not to overburden the participants' time with an interview after the conducted online conversations, the participants' opinions were collected by an electronic survey at the end of the action research. This survey was used to gain insights that could be used to further develop or improve the practice. As part of the written surveys, questions were asked to provide a detailed account of the participants' own views of the language learning consultation in relation to the course. Participants were also offered on a voluntary basis to complete a diary after each class, wherein they could record experiences and their own thoughts. The questions in the learning diary were used for self-reflection and were included in the counseling in order to guide and support the learning processes in a more targeted way. The written survey method was well applicable in this study because "it is used [...] to objectify experiences that cannot (yet) be verbalized spontaneously and vis-a-vis. For qualitative social research, written surveys can thus provide access, for example, to processes of "immediate" experiential processing and to experiences at the boundaries of sociality" (Schiek, 2014, p.379). Participants completed the electronic survey within two days. With the assurance of anonymity for the respondents, the advantage arose that more thoughtful or honest answers were given, because thus the pressure on the respondents was removed (Schnell, Hill & Esser, 2008).

### **Findings**



The focus of the written interviews was, among other things, to assess the impact of the language learning counseling and the diaries on the participants as well as to explore their expectations of the language learning counseling. For the survey, a standardized questionnaire was used for all participants, which was written in understandable language due to foreign language limitations and was deliberately kept short. In particular, the following questions were addressed in the survey:

1. What experiences have you had?
2. How did the language learning counseling help you?
3. Were the learning diaries helpful?
4. Were you able to plan your own learning goals?
5. What do you need most in language learning?
6. How often a month should language learning counseling take place?

The answers from the interviews were deliberately written down exactly as they were filled in by the participants. Wording errors have not been corrected. In the first question, participants indicate what their experience has been. Here are 3 comments:

"Language tips helped me to divide the text into same and analyze it."

"Language learning advice helped me in understanding a text and reading it properly."

"I learned many experiences about text production because we read and separated (texts) in the language learning consultation."

For the second question about the effects of language counseling, following statements were given:

"I have heard language counseling first in your course. It was very helpful for me. I learned to plan for learning."

"Yes, I could plan my goals."

"Yes, it was helpful. I could write a summary of every lesson and it helped to revise the information I have learned."

"When you learn, you need strategies. They are helpful."

"For me it was very helpful, I will use the strategies for further learning in other courses."

The third question was about the use of the learning diaries. Only one participant rated the use of diaries as burdensome:

"Learning diaries was not very helpful for me because it takes so much time to write a learning diary. It would be much better if we make that taught in learning counseling."

Other comments are as follows:

"I could understand the text."

"Yes, I need this for review."

"Yes, it was helpful. Because you write a summary or vocabulary at the end of class, and it helps me review the information."





"Yes, I can find a lot of vocabulary with the learning journals..."

The fourth question was a specific question related to planning one's own learning goals. All respondents emphasized with at least a 'yes' that they were able to plan their learning goals. Other comments included the following:

"I find it a bit difficult to plan my own learning goals, but now I can just manage it as Dr. Demirci explained, but it would be better if language learning counseling lasts a few more months..."

"Like a good psychologist, Ms. Demirci knows the root of the problem in advance and then suggests a solution to the problem, and this is very important."

The fifth question was intended to provide information on which of the 6 items consisting of patience, motivation, support, time, language learning counseling, and learning strategies was more important to the participants. The following representation shows the responses to the question 'What do you need most in language learning?'

**Table 1.** Needs of participants in language learning

Patience	6 persons
Motivation	7 persons
Support	6 persons
Time	7 persons
Language learning counseling	7 persons
Learning strategies	6 persons

According to the table, motivation, time and language counseling are of great importance with regard to individual learning success. The answers show the need to build learners' personal competence in language learning by providing various needs of them. This includes above all motivation, which is described as one of the main determinants of learning success and without which learning success cannot be achieved and counseling, in which motivation could be provided by the counseling person. Let us refer to Bimmel (2002): "Motivation to learn is one of the main determinants-if not the main determinant-of success in foreign language learning" (Bimmel:2002, p.5). From the comments, it is clear that motivation is one of the most important elements among the participants. It is only natural that language learning consultation should have the same weight as motivation, since it has been talked about a lot in individual language learning consultations. Besides, language counseling should provide enough motivation to self-regulate one's own learning. Furthermore, the ability to learn in a self-regulated manner must be considered a key skill in today's world and one of the most important tasks of education is to support language learners in developing this ability (Giroto, Andrés, & Arisó, 2021; Landmann et al. 2015).



When asked how often language learning counseling should take place per month, most participants emphasized that counseling should be offered twice per month. One person did not comment on this. All responses are presented below:

**Table 2.** *Counseling request of participants*

once a month	1 person
twice a month	5 persons
three times a month	1 person
every week	2 persons

The table shows that the majority of participants n (5) want a consultation at least twice a month. This shows us the need for participants to receive a regular counseling parallel to their language learning.

**Summary of the results**

In summary, the interviews with the total of ten participants show that both metacognitive learning strategies and motivational factors are a prerequisite for self-directed learning. Metacognitive learning strategies help participants to independently plan, enforce, and reflect on the learning process so that purposeful self-learning can occur. Motivational factors help learners to continuously reflect on their learning process. In this sense, the use of learning diaries is a motivational factor. Working with learning diaries motivates learners to do so. The survey responses make it clear that language learning support is recognized as an important aspect not only at the course level of this research, but also for other courses.

All respondents unanimously emphasized that learning counseling has a positive effect on their learning processes. The fact that advising should be offered on an ongoing basis was cited by all participants. In this regard, reference is made to the comments that counseling should be offered twice a month. It is stated at this point that language learning counseling is of particular importance to the participants when continuous language learning counseling is provided.

**Conditions for success**

The results presented above show that language teaching brings about changes for teachers and their professional mentality, especially with regard to refugee learners. They need to create a framework in which language learners with a refugee background have the opportunity to learn and develop competencies that make their learning process more comprehensible. From the statements in the individual consultation sessions and the comments of the participants, I as a researcher can clearly see that at least at the beginning of the language training up to a certain level the refugees should be guided with their learning process.

**Conclusion and suggestion for further research**

There is no talk of the effectiveness of language learning consultations until the participants achieve their learning goals. Referring to the above statements of the participants, counseling



sessions are successful if the counselor has succeeded in firstly making the participants reflect successfully on their own learning and secondly in supporting the participants to give a stimulus for self-directed learning. The participants judge the effectiveness of counseling sessions in the fact that learning is made more effective or when a learning problem of the participant is solved. Language learning counseling is primarily used by the participants to plan, carry out and reflect on their own learning, but it also serves to reduce learning anxiety and to increase the participants' motivation to learn. It should be noted here that learners from the B2-C1 level already have strategies for planning their learning processes. The language learning consultation therefore addresses participants in the A1-B2 level range.

The idea that language learning counseling can be used as learning support in foreign language courses is the goal of this action research and it is my endeavor to gain insights about individual learning paths, motivations and expectations of participants in language learning counseling. The integration of language learning support in language courses is a promising measure and enables refugees to reflect on their language learning processes. Language learning counseling aims to promote self-learning, focusing on the individual's own planning and execution as well as reflection on his or her own learning and, with the help of the counseling counselor's instructions, making the learning process more continuous and independent.

In summary, it can be pointed out that the role of the language learning consultant contributed significantly to the support of the planning of one's own learning and experienced a high acceptance on the part of the participants. Because of the prearranged prerequisite of active participation, the language support succeeded with positive results for most participants.

If a teacher is planning to develop a concept to support the competencies of her learners, the concept proposed in this study could be a guideline so that a language learning consultant is successfully used in the classroom. It is only natural that in this concept not all participants can be successfully reached and supported to the same extent, since the participation of them is paramount. As well as the framework is adapted to the needs of the participants, it is possible that a precise and planned implementation is not achievable with all participants. The teaching context is not only influenced by numerous external factors such as time, availability and family conditions, it is also dependent on individual conditions such as a lack of motivation or willingness to participate regularly.

Institutional conditions cannot always make it possible for language learning counseling to be provided by teachers in individual courses. Both time regulations and the resources made available can make it difficult to implement this concept. For this purpose, the solution could be used that the language learning counseling is offered by a responsible person. In this case, language learning counseling is offered parallel to the courses, with each course instructor referring his or her course participants to the language learning counselor. In this way, individual course instructors are relieved and contact is only made with the course instructor in necessary situations in order to discuss the matter in three-way dialogue processes.



With regard to the implementation of language learning counseling parallel to a language course, the following questions still exist:

- 1- How can counseling sessions be effectively linked to courses offered for refugees?
- 2- How can counseling sessions more effectively bring about reflections on one's own learning with refugee learners?
- 3- What long-term effects can continuous counseling conversations have on refugee learners' learning processes?

### **Conflict of interests**

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

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