



# Complex adaptive systems, language advising, and motivation: A longitudinal case study with a Brazilian student of English

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## ABSTRACT

In light of the 'complexity turn' in applied linguistics, language learning is understood as a complex system formed from other subsystems such as motivation and language advising. From this perspective, the language adviser acts as another agent in the language learners' learning system, potentially disturbing and energizing their learning trajectory. This article examines the motivational dynamics in the learning trajectory of a Brazilian university-level student of English as a foreign language in the context of language advising. A longitudinal qualitative case study was carried out to investigate his motivational dynamics over a period of two and a half years. This period encompassed his language learning with and without the support of a language adviser. Taking a systemic view of motivation, data were collected employing a range of research instruments, such as language learning narratives, open-ended questionnaires, field notes, and in-depth interviews derived from different agents, as the advisee, two of his professors, one of his classmates, and the adviser as the researcher. As such, they provide five perspectives on the same learning process at different periods of time. The findings show that language advising is the locus of regulation of language learning motivation that takes place in different learning contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

Since Diane Larsen-Freeman (1997) first explicitly introduced complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) as a metaphor to understand second language acquisition (SLA), researchers have drawn on this theoretical framework to advance various research agendas regarding key issues in the field of applied linguistics, such as motivation, autonomy, identity and self (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, 2011; Dörnyei, MacIntyre & Henry, 2015; Mercer, 2011; Paiva & Braga, 2008; Sade, 2009). This shift, referred to as complexity or dynamical turn, converges on the understanding that language learning and teaching is a complex, "very personal, individual, highly varied [process], and often difficult to predict in its development" (Mercer, 2013, p. 376) due to a constellation of factors, such as context, sociocultural constraints, relations with other learners, teachers, etc. Indeed, each person has an individual learning experience; he/she learns in a different way, has a particular motivation and learning style, employs certain learning strategies, is embedded in a specific context and makes sense of it in their own unique

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way. Such thinking requires a new role from the teacher, the learner and the learning environment, embracing a more individual, personal, relational and holistic view of the language learning and teaching process.

One way of dealing with language learning at a more individual and personal level is through advising in language learning. Tassinari (2016) points out that language advising is a privileged context for addressing cognitive, metacognitive and affective aspects of language learning. Language advising, along with other learning settings such as classrooms and self-access centers, can be seen as a complex dynamic system as the interaction between the adviser and learner may bring changes in that system. These changes in turn may generate new teaching, learning and advising behaviors, as, for example, a more autonomous, motivated and self-regulated learner or an adviser who may be more attentive to learners' individual differences in his/her teaching practices. By considering students holistically with their diverse identities (cf. Ushioda, 2011a), language advising can influence learners' motivation in both the immediate advising context and in a range of learning environments (Castro & Magno e Silva, 2016). In this regard, as in every learning situation, motivation plays a significant role throughout one's learning within the language advising setting.

Research on language advising with a focus on learning trajectories is scarce as the field has primarily focused on the advisors' role and discourse which inform their practice, as well as on advising tools to foster language learning in this particular context (e.g. Kato & Mynard, 2015; Mynard & Carson, 2012). It becomes clear that more in-depth studies on how language learning takes place in language advising are needed, especially if described from a CDST perspective which provides a nonlinear, holistic view of the language learning process. This paper intends to fill this gap by examining how language advising influences a learner's motivation from a CDST perspective. It reports on a student's learning trajectory over a period of two and a half years at a Brazilian university. This period encompassed the participant's language learning with and without the support of a language adviser. Taking a systemic view of motivation (e.g. Dörnyei, MacIntyre & Henry, 2015; Waninge, De Bot, & Dörnyei, 2014), the current paper draws on data from a range of research instruments derived from the advisee, two of his professors, one of his classmates and the adviser as researcher, gathering therefore five lenses on the same learning process in different periods of time.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Advising in language learning as a complex adaptive system

Advising in language learning is an emerging area of interest in language education that has been receiving attention due to its focus on individual language learning trajectories (Kato & Mynard, 2015; Magno e Silva & Borges, 2016; Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans, 2001; Mynard & Carson, 2012). It is usually set in self-access centers and aims to help learners to become more effective, aware and reflective language learners, so they can become more autonomous (Ciekanski, 2007; Kato & Mynard, 2015; Mozzon-McPherson, 2007). It does so by helping them in identifying, focusing, and achieving what is important for them according to their own perceptions of language learning. In other words, language advising is a process-oriented and a person-centered practice that helps someone learn how to learn.

Mynard (2012) and Kato and Mynard (2015) describe advising from the constructivist and sociocultural theory of learning and view the adviser as a mediator of learning. In this way, Mynard (2012) proposes the well-known tripartite model of advising that consists of dialogue, tools and context. According to the author, dialogue is a pivotal component which encompasses a set of skills, such as "questioning, reflecting, guiding, and attending on the part of advisor; providing opportunities for reflection, thinking and hypothesis-testing on the part of the learner" (p. 34). An important characteristic of dialogue highlighted in Mynard's model is its inner nature. It is internal to both learner and adviser, as the former negotiates problems and reconstructs his/her understanding of concepts whereas the latter considers the more appropriate intervention to foster reflection (cf. McCarthy, 2016). The second component of the model refers to the tools, which can be cognitive (e.g., learning plans, journals, or self-evaluation sheets), theoretical (i.e., the theoretical knowledge an adviser is supposed to have to work effectively with a learner, such as autonomy, beliefs, emotions, motivation, and learning strategies and styles) or practical (e.g., the record-keeping or reservation system employed in an institution). Finally, the third component refers to the context, which can be personal (e.g. learner's experience with language learning), physical (e.g., self-access center, classroom, or virtual platforms) or contextual practices (i.e., a set of accepted social practices for the advising process defined by the group of advisers in a certain setting).

In this model, the learner is an active agent, a protagonist, in charge of choosing, planning and evaluating his/her own learning plans with the support of a language adviser, a person who facilitates one's learning process, rather than directs it (Mynard, 2012). As Tassinari (2016) elaborates, an adviser "discusses a learner's learning process with learners, in order to help them to define their needs, formulate learning goals, reflect on strategies for achieving these goals, monitor and evaluate learning outcomes and the learning process, and make decisions for further learning" (p. 77).

Because language advising is a reflection-centered practice, dialogue is key to promote effective language learning (Kato & Mynard, 2015; Mynard, 2012). It is through this intentional reflective dialogue (Kato, 2012) that new learning behaviors may emerge in advisees' trajectories as adviser and advisee can together identify, strengthen or modify beliefs, explore the motivational aspects, reflect on the learning process, set goals and develop action plans. In terms of the complexity perspective, the adviser is another agent in the learners' language learning system that disturbs their trajectories, helping them to find their own voice and enabling them to redirect their own language learning pathways (cf. Castro & Magno e Silva, 2016; Magno e Silva, Matos, & Rabelo, 2015). Hence, perturbation is a pivotal characteristic in the role of a language adviser,

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