

Outcomes-based learning

Peter Zoeflig recommends authentic, natural and focused coaching methods to increase acquisition of the target language.

Rather than handing out ready-made materials or using textbooks with my clients, I use coaching techniques involving correction, pacing and leading, which are focused on the coachees' own experiences and their emerging insights into language. In this article, I will draw comparisons between coaching and more conventional teaching methods to show that by moving away from teacher-produced materials and towards student-centred experience, with the additional benefit of coaching techniques and some insights provided by Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP), we can promote change and rapid improvement.

Coaching

Coaching is distinct from teaching. It should be collaborative, mainly non-directive, non-judgemental and challenging. It involves authentic use of language, self-observation by the coachee, and the right level of pitch, purpose and performance. It has direction, is explicit in its skills practice and includes varying degrees of preparation, intensity and resting. It places crucial importance on the surfacing of insights (of self and of language), recognition of patterns and the management of performance, as well as being delivered at the right pitch to stretch and challenge the coachee.

Where, in a conventional ELT lesson, the teacher would be aiming at getting the learners to a certain level by preparing a grammar, communication or vocabulary exercise with plenty of instructions but limited or non-existent use of pacing or listening to emerging language, in a coaching lesson based on

outcomes, the coach will be encouraging visualisation, self-listening and repetitive practice of situations and topics largely chosen by the trainee. There will be (self-)challenging language practice and a clear focus on subjective and objective improvements every step of the way. Crucially, both coach and coachee will learn how to read subjective shifts that are occurring naturally, and develop them incrementally.

Outcomes-based coaching

Outcomes-based coaching and skills acquisition, as defined here, is where the coachees define their targets in alliance with a coach, and are engaged positively in the adventure of how to reach them. The coachees learn where they need to be, and what resources are needed to get there. Whatever assistance is given by the coach along the way is not laid down by a textbook, theory or teacher belief, but allows for the discovery of aspects of the linguistic and cultural paradigms of the target language, as well as giving the coachees insights into themselves: all key elements in reaching the goal successfully. Instead of traditional ELT teaching methods based on syllabuses or textbook exercises, we

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use strategies and insights that are well-established in coaching.

This 'outcomes-based' training model represents a re-think of how we address issues of learner-centred models of acquisition, allied with a variety of strategies informed by NLP, and it references Dogme, the Natural Approach and life coaching skills. Key points include how outcomes can be measured in terms of critical shifts of understanding and behaviour in the learner, and the coach's reading of how the inner dialogue develops in the coachee.

NLP and outcomes-based learning

The strength and integrity of NLP insights are that everybody's reality exists within their own world of language and experience. Many teaching methods present situations for the learners to study that do not reflect their immediate or own situation. The various versions of experience provided by a textbook or critical model may provide interesting reading material, but as a means of acquiring language skills, internalising grammar rules or developing performance they have very little to do with the coachees' own experience, and will have little impact on changing their ability to communicate more effectively unless other key factors are in place.

These factors include the ability of the coach to establish rapport with the coachees and to match, pace and lead them. These very specific skills cannot be learnt quickly. However, while the goal of avoiding the main pitfalls does not necessarily require a deep understanding of NLP or of coaching, it is important to know what the methods of NLP coaching are and are not.

NLP is not about forcing change or offering promises of rapid success (though this can, in fact, be achieved). It is about respecting the integrity of the subjective experience. Thus, here, an understanding of coaching assists outcomes-based learning by allowing the learners to learn at their own rate, through sensitive developments, staying with the coachees as they determine these for themselves through discovery, observation, the use of their senses (using models given by those around them, noting, writing and speaking, visualising and re-visualising, framing and re-framing) in their own good time, led forward with a sense of respect, challenge and curiosity by the coach.

Needs and desired outcomes

Learning a new language implies a shift of cultural perspectives and, occasionally, taking a new look at one's identity, resulting in personal change and growth. Coaching supplies answers that teaching a language in the traditional way often does not. Through doing imaginative work of their own choosing and related to their own experience, experimenting with language in a comfortable environment (challenged when necessary, but not pressurised too early to perform), the coachees are given the means to work towards personal goals in clear manageable steps.

The exact way in which the coach can help is a sensitive core element of the change process. The fundamental insight here is that changing the performance aspect so that it is 'better' according to grammar, vocabulary and cultural norms requires giving space

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and time to the person undergoing this experience. It is important to exclude other elements that may tend to confuse, complicate and even damage the process we are trying to engender by overloading the coachee at critical moments. When a person is learning or practising a new language skill, and is being led forward through the technique of reflective listening, emphasising self-correction and being challenged in a productive way, the language output will start to surface naturally.

A natural approach to language skills acquisition

As Stephen Krashen has pointed out, learners do not *acquire* very much from what they *learn*. What is memorised can certainly help when dealing with situations such as a test, and one exercise will help a learner to perform better in another exercise. Learners may

be able to repeat trained and practised scenarios, but there is often little transference from this to the acquisition of real language skills in the real world. When the pressure is on, they just forget what they have 'learnt'.

The central dichotomy (also mentioned by Krashen) is the question of whether we can accelerate acquisition by bringing learners into a classroom. By definition, however, the language classroom focuses on language itself, and is distinct from the real world. Hence, teachers bring examples of ready-made language into the room, and 'give' these to learners. However specific the objectives claim to be, what often happens is that the learners end up working on pre-prepared things that the teacher has selected and this leads to teacher- or school-determined outcomes, not necessarily those desired or needed by the learner.

To create a natural and authentic environment for acquisition, the very thing the classroom does not need is imposition of content or method. It is unnatural to assume that the learners don't know what they need or want in terms of outcomes, whether in terms of performance, grammar or critical understanding. While this may be true of some young learners, it is generally not the case with highly experienced and skilful professional adults, and so a certain kind of presentation skill, negotiation technique or critical business analysis could be a natural area for training. Coachees are often very familiar with soft skills development. Working *on* some kind of task and engaging personally *in* a task are very different, and this difference can be exploited positively to increase acquisition.

Resources and correction

Anything that is authentic and natural is good for acquisition. Anything that is unnatural – tasks that don't directly reflect needs, or saying 'today we are learning the past perfect because you need it' without questioning how to handle it in a real professional situation – will not help towards positive language acquisition and, indeed, may lead to negative feelings about the value of the experience, creating affective filters.

While a supply of prepared texts, to reinforce certain training objectives (when requested by the coachees), may

Outcomes-based learning

be helpful (eg to use in the development of specific skills), the main resource will be model sentences and phrases that are generated together with the coachee, from the coachee's own experience and practised and returned to continually through storytelling, roleplay and other critical thinking approaches.

Grammar books, general and specialised dictionaries and a range of other resources should be everywhere available in the training centre for reference, but the centre should not be especially 'school-like' and should, rather, provide opportunities for real interaction.

It is completely natural for coaches to correct coachees in an environment where there is trust in the skills of the coach and this correction is handled skilfully. The aim of correction, when done in a 'leading' method, is to input as much as possible in the way of example and of opportunity for practising outcomes, but it should not be value-laden. By using sensitive peer-correction, too, much may be achieved, depending on the rapport that has been developed. Coachees who are experienced, widely-travelled, sometimes very important people in their industries, must be accepted in their entirety as autonomous learners; such is the nature of our relationship. Correction using coaching methods, showing up mistakes and looking at them together, drawing attention to corrective practice and doing this repeatedly, viewing a skills task or communication task from a large number of perspectives, using reading, roleplay and discussion, is totally congruent with the idea of training towards better outcomes.

Methods

Let's return to the question of coaching methods and the structure of the experience. Since, in an outcomes-based approach, there must be absolute respect for the coachee's own processes, in every way and at every moment, flexibility is paramount. Pacing, listening to and staying with the coachee in the real and authentic environment that they have elected to experience is what creates outcomes,

A timetable of activities that is flexible, tailored to the learners' stated needs and objectives, that actively promotes the natural process of acquisition and leads the coachees effectively, avoiding book-based theoretical or directive models is entirely possible. It will involve having clearly understood outcomes that evolve and surface, allowing the coachees to talk about their experiences, dreams and plans, which can flower, change, grow and live authentically in the coaching centre itself.

The key element is *how* the coach engages with coachees – how we talk is what we are. In the minds of others, what we believe and how we act are drawn together in how we talk and what

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we talk about; these are then connected to physical aspects such as body language and our general appearance to create their interpretation of who we are and how we think.

What goes on in the coachees' minds may be seen in terms of an inner dialogue, involving their desired outcomes and the way they adjust their brain processes to lead towards these outcomes – and the coachees' own awareness of their inner dialogue is crucial. The coach must learn how to hear, interpret and guide the coachees' inner dialogue, by using correction and self-correction rather than *telling* them what to learn. I have seen very rapid changes in the process, progress, level of skills and quality of favoured outcomes taking place, using rigorous 'question and answer' leading techniques.

However, whilst a lot of coaching talk is useful, it shouldn't intrude on the natural experience of acquisition, which may also require regular silent periods. Above all, we must learn to ask the right questions and to listen more deeply.



In outcomes-based learning, the coachees are encouraged to try to use their own resources and to look

inwardly and outwardly for themselves, not wait for the coach to provide 'answers'. By accessing and reframing the experience of the new language, the coach paces the coachees and works alongside them at their own rhythm. Indeed, by trying to speed things up in order to reach a prescribed point in a scheme of work, a teacher may simply be removing the learners' opportunity to learn by themselves.

As mentioned above, the work of the coach (and of the institution where the coaching is taking place) is to create a fundamentally secure environment where the coachees are able to benefit from this challenge and where the learning process does not fall back into being a prescribed series of imposed learning objectives, syllabuses, core texts and programmes. The coachees' own values and identity must be paramount, and the coach must act as a skilled catalyst, using an approach that is completely clean of presuppositions, but involves challenge and leading techniques.

The more time and effort is given to these practices, through skill and sensitivity to the question of dealing with surfacing language, and to leading the coachees, the better the outcomes will be.

I hope in this article I have shown that coaching presents a pragmatic and often simple approach to the acquisition of language skills; that it carries with it an attitude of fascination – every client is unique, we want to know how they do what they do and how they can do it better; that good coaches have a deep appreciation of how goals and skills interact; and that good rapport and trust are prerequisites of the coaching experience.

In a future article, I will address how the coach works with the inner dialogue of a single coachee or group, reflecting key elements of this processing in order to lead to the outcomes desired. **ETP**



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