

Outcomes-based language coaching

Peter Zoeflig looks at how coaches can work with language learners.

As I stated in my first article (ETp Issue 81), coaching is different from traditional teaching methods which use pre-prepared coursebook or syllabus-based material. It is, instead, a collaborative approach, which develops self-observation, makes use of the students' own resources and focuses on emerging patterns and opportunities for insights.

A skilled coach has an awareness of the internal processes of surfacing language, and uses rapport, pacing and leading techniques to move the coachees towards their own desired outcomes. Employing a combination of appropriate questioning methods, essential feedback on emerging skills, consolidation time and repeated focus on areas that need attention, the coach begins from the starting point of the coachees' own values and encourages them to come to an enhanced awareness of changes in their own performance. Since the focus is on creating better outcomes, we cannot separate these from the processes involved in creating them.

The coaching of language

Using a coaching approach in language teaching enables us to make use of powerful techniques, valuable insights and deeply challenging methods in order to bring out the best in our learners – but how do these fit in with students who are still learning the language being coached, and which techniques are strictly language and communication-oriented?

Language coaching accelerates the processing of language, especially memorisation, auditory digital processing¹ and performance. These

features are brought to the fore through questioning techniques focusing on any 'mistakes' that express themselves in deletions, distortions and generalisations (often borrowed from another language). We emphasise action and performing real tasks rather than theory or textbook exercises, which have little place here.

The coaching of learners

A coach helps to draw out the coachees' own way of thinking and talking, at the same time as developing their language ability in order to produce better outcomes. This is not the same as therapy or the use of coaching

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techniques in order to solve problems in other areas often covered by coaches and counsellors (such as stress, phobia, addictions or time management issues). For language coaches, the goal is to 'shift'² the coachees' language awareness (and self-image within the language framework), but not to deal with other aspects of their lives by using therapy or employing theoretical models (though these other, more personal aspects may be influenced in the process).

A coach does not need to be liked, to make a difference in every session, to

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psychoanalyse or to be responsible for the results. A coach doesn't have to share the coachees' problems, doesn't need to know very much about the specifics of their business and doesn't need to have control or to direct. If anything, it is the coachee who has control of the outcomes. There is no control (although there can be confrontation at times) but there will be very important outcomes and shifts of awareness.

Modelling

A teacher can at times serve as a model, but there may be other or better models for the learner to follow. Generally, teachers should talk less – especially about their own language models – and, by creating rapport and drawing back in order to learn more about the learners' world, allow the learners to develop their own models. Rather than setting up a 'parent-child' scenario, coaches use a non-directive, non-judgemental approach. The aim is to lead, using 'L+' formulations (using a variety of contexts) that encourage greater self-awareness in the learners.

The coach draws out conversation from the coachee by creating rapport through matching in a sympathetic way and mirroring both body language and verbalisation. The coachee can then begin modelling language utterances by the use of reflective listening and guided reformulation. A key idea from NLP – the realisation that the student's own mental map is in a process of formation and change – helps to understand why this is likely to be effective.

Drilling and questioning

Drilling and other reinforcement methods will be familiar to many teachers. In outcomes-based learning, I am advocating a change in the teachers' usual framework towards enhancing the learner's (coachee's) *own* view of what is possible. Here, organisations may use activities which are part of the marketed product on offer and which their customers have willingly bought into, but the coachees first need to be engaged in real communication and brought to an enhanced state of

awareness and openness with regard to their own language. Once this has been achieved, repetition, preparation and question-and-answer methods may be used to deepen and anchor the coachees' desired outcomes.

These methods can be more or less sophisticated, and some, such as initiation-response-feedback (IRF), are helpful, so long as they start with the coachees' intended statements and work with them towards the outcome they were aiming at, rather than merely imposing a 'correct' outcome. When coachees attempt to describe their thoughts about something, begin to use

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different tenses and consult a dictionary or some other resource to find the words that express what they want to say, the coach needs to listen actively and may then start to intervene to correct mistakes in tenses, sentence structure, pronunciation or choice of words. Through a question-and-answer process the coach can help the coachees to locate, retrieve, process, compose and rephrase their thoughts more correctly. This process is designed to open doors in the coachees' memories and to encourage visualisation and internal echoing of the language so that the aspects being led out suddenly 'click' in their understanding. This can be done by progressively shifting between visual, auditory and physical response techniques.

Possible methods

Teachers are supposed to be experts in understanding and aiding communication, so it is ironic that so many just tell their students what they 'should' say – or talk over them rather than building deeper rapport and getting the students to where they know they would like to be but can't quite manage

yet. Beginning with the coachee's own words is important, followed by a supportive and reflective leading approach. Repeating, regenerating, reformulating and regularly revisiting the same language, over and over, once the goal has been identified will draw out deeper insights. This same principle applies to coaching someone to produce the perfect golf swing, dance step or management technique – endless repetition, with slight variations along the way until perfection is reached. Clearly, this is very different from the techniques applied in much language teaching where, each lesson, the teacher moves on to yet another discrete learning point different from the one before (often as a requirement of the syllabus), or where a student brings up a point only to be told that it is 'not relevant at this stage' or 'will be considered later at a higher level', etc.

In a more conventional teaching approach, using input, elicitation, production, controlled practice, freer practice and feedback, one element that is often overlooked is generative or 'cybernetic' system modelling. A teacher who instantly feeds back the 'correct' forms overlooks the aspects of student-driven quality that come from matching the language practice to the values and current vision of the students themselves. Thus, whatever approach is used must be in full congruence with the coachees' developing inner dialogues and move them gradually into new zones, if necessary challenging them to leave their comfort zones by *confronting* lazy use of language or lack of attention to embedded bad habits.

The importance of shifts

The key to outcomes-based learning is *shifts*, by which I mean shifts in behaviour, understanding, the experience of learning, the speed of change and in the coachees' internal dialogue. Shifts and sudden 'clicks' of realisation are commonly experienced by those who acquire a language by living in and embedding themselves in the culture of a country. These sudden realisations occur when they consult their own inner map of the language emerging and compare it with that of the experts they meet and know.

This immersion experience can, to a certain extent, be achieved in the language classroom, but this requires

that the communication that takes place there must be authentic at all times, and not reliant on pre-prepared materials – unless these have been chosen in unison with the learners and reflect very closely their own map of the world. Most importantly, at all times the learners' vision of their own language learning experience must be paramount.

The coach must learn how to identify from what the learners are saying the processes that are taking place in their minds. In a large class this may be difficult, so it will be necessary to explain to the learners that they need to challenge and develop their own insights. All the participants can be encouraged to reflect on what another person was trying to say. This is akin to placing members of a football team into positions for which they are currently only partly suited but which they wish to aspire to. Thus, a natural centre-forward might be put in midfield for a spell (if this is also their understanding of how they can better understand the game) in order to help them to be a better attacker in future. Everyone learns from one another in the coaching context.

Giving feedback

Very specific feedback is important, too. Not just saying 'well done' or 'better use of tenses today', but listening deeply to what each learner is saying and, from that, developing a clear image of that learner's own mental map of the language, in all its meandering ways, and then discussing with the learner how this map seems to them, in what ways it is useful at the current time and how they themselves feel it needs to be developed. This can perhaps be done with beginners and with very elementary students in their mother tongue or by using a pictorial approach. In a group, this kind of listening to each other – as well as commenting on the emergence of language in other learners – is very valuable as it helps speed the process of discovery about the language.

Calibrating improvements

It goes without saying that the outcomes from the learning experience must be measurable, tangible and as clear to the coachees as they are to the coach. The coachees need to have the sense that they have made a significant

step by themselves – not because they have been handed a list, a worksheet, an exercise, etc. but because they have actually used the language intelligently and seen a difference in how they have done it compared with previous occasions. This is where skilful language-oriented question-and-answer methods come in.

I would argue very strongly for a written outcome that is produced voluntarily by the learners and done in a relaxed way. I personally favour written 'model' sentences or phrases that will be used for memorisation practice and generative work during the following

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lesson, and involve the coachee doing, organising, practising or preparing something – though other kinds of didactic 'learning to learn' workshops or talks about business skills, etc may have validity in another context). Above all, each session should aim to generate a clear outcome for the inner dialogue of the coachee. This means that everything in the coaching session must be very sensitively worked with to lead the coachees towards a better experience of using the language, including objective and subjective experiences.



A coach is a leader and, therefore, has to develop a very strong sense of alliance with the coachees. Coaches thus have great responsibility and should be professional. The subject matter of the coaching sessions must be agreed and shared: this is *not* an opportunity for an intrusive discussion or chat about the coachees' lives. The focus should be on language. The pace of the lesson should be relaxed, focused on the experience and the emerging *outcome* (not *input* from the coach) and it should always be leading to more performance-oriented outcomes.

The coach should match the coachees' language by repeating and rephrasing words and sentences that they have started, and will then lead the coachees to a deeper language awareness and improved performance.

The coach should sensitively guide the coachees away from any incorrect structuring or expression of the chosen sentences, by querying the way in which they have been formed. It is essential that plenty of time be given for reflection. In this kind of coaching, a reframing technique can be used or a further analysis of the students' own language can be carried out.

It is important to understand that *quality* is the key element, not *quantity* (this is the essence of good pacing). Giving feedback to the coachees on what they have said or written, is very beneficial, enabling them to make corrections themselves, but – importantly – allowing them to access their own value model or vision in order to do this, not simply acting as a commentary! Correction need not be given immediately or until, first, the coachees have assessed for themselves what the problems are, since an overload of spot-corrections can easily be forgotten.

To sum up, then, the model to follow is of *pacing and leading* through a logical reconstruction of the desired outcome in the mind of the coachee, followed by a search for the required or possible tools that will contribute to such an outcome, followed by creative exploration of the ways of expressing this outcome. **ETP**

1 'Auditory digital processing' is an NLP term which refers to the turning of information from the senses into language.

2 By 'shift', I mean the creation of a new awareness or understanding by taking a new perspective, experiencing a powerfully changed feeling or removing a blockage.



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