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MY PLAN: COACHING FOR LESLLA LEARNERS IN THE NETHERLANDS

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ABSTRACT: 'My Plan' is a weekly group conversation used by LESLLA learners for discussing their long-term and weekly goals for learning outside the classroom. The GROW model used in coaching has been adapted for a LESLLA classroom context. The teacher takes on the role of a coach and has a non-directive attitude toward the learners. The coaching teacher asks questions that lead to awareness, responsibility, confidence and ownership by the learner, such as 'Why do you want to learn Dutch?' 'How much time do you want to spend on study and practice?' and 'What do you want to do this week to learn Dutch?' The teacher can gradually withdraw as the leader of the group conversation, so that the learners can coach each other in pairs. Coaching can help learners become more aware of their motivation and goals, develop confidence and take over ownership of their learning.

KEYWORDS: coaching, classroom practices, LESLLA learners, self-directed learning, learner autonomy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As courses for LESLLA² learners in the Netherlands tend to get both shorter and less intensive, the need for learners to study and practice outside the classroom is greater than ever. In order to reach full literacy, learners need to do considerable work on their Dutch in their own time, during and after the course. Fortunately, learners have free access to online learning programs, such as DigLin.eu (Cucchiari et al., 2015: 251-278) and Oefenen.nl (Vaske, 2015: 333-354). For those who do not have a computer at home, public libraries provide computers with internet access throughout the country that can be used free of charge. Furthermore, a large group of Dutch volunteers is willing to support learners during their learning process. So there are several resources in the Netherlands, independent of classroom teaching, that the learners can use to reach their literacy and language learning goals. But how can learners plan and direct their study and practice outside the classroom?

Teachers often report that their non-literate students show little skill in self-evaluating and self-directing their learning. Learners often have a passive attitude, depending heavily on the directions of the teacher (Vanbuel & Bultynck, 2016). Furthermore, learning a second language and also learning, for the first time, how to read and write is a tremendous endeavour, demanding a lot of time and energy. Emerging learners often seem to be unaware of the demands and challenges, since it is the first time they have gone to school to learn how to read and write. Still, in order to become fully literate, it is important that these learners become more autonomous, confident and aware of their motivations, goals and plans. Coaching can help learners to take matters into their own hands. It can raise learner awareness and responsibility and help to build confidence. This article describes an approach in which teachers coach learners and learners coach each other in a classroom context on setting goals for using the language outside the classroom.

2. BACKGROUND

The approach of 'My Plan' is based on coaching. The term "coaching" can refer to many different things, such as mentoring, advising, guiding, or helping. The coaching described in this article is non-directive coaching, as developed by Whitmore (2009).

2.1 PRINCIPLES OF COACHING: THE GROW MODEL

The approach in our experiment was based on coaching as defined by one of the founders of coaching, Sir John Whitmore. In his book, *Coaching for Performance* (2009), Whitmore states that the essence of coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximize their own performance. A coach believes that people are capable of much more than

2. LESLLA stands for Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults. See www.leslla.org

they show and sees them in terms of their potential, not of their past failures. To use coaching successfully, the coach has to adopt a more optimistic view of the dormant capability of the person being coached (the "coachee").

The first key element of coaching is awareness. That awareness leads to skill was discovered in the eighties when this form of coaching was being developed for sports (Whitmore, 2009: 10). Awareness is empowering, because one is able to control that of which one is aware. Responsibility is the second key concept of coaching. Telling someone to be responsible does not make someone feel responsible. This involves choice. When the coachee truly chooses and takes responsibility for his goals, his commitment to them rises, and so does his performance. Third, building self-belief is a major goal of the coach. Experiencing success is the most effective way to build this self-belief. The coachee needs to know that his success is due to his own efforts.

In order to provoke awareness and responsibility, the coach follows a sequence of questions called the GROW model:

Goal setting for the session in both the short and long term

Reality checking to explore the current situation

Options and alternative strategies or courses of action

What is to be done, **When**, by **Whom**, and the **Will** to do it (Whitmore, 2009: 55)

2.2 COACHING IN A LESLLA CONTEXT

Coaching as described above can be problematic in a LESLLA classroom context for several reasons. Individual coaching demands considerable time. Also, the learner needs a high level of L2 proficiency and abstract thinking to be able to follow a classical coaching session. In the reality of a LESLLA classroom, there is often little time for individual learners, as learners have a low L2 proficiency level and are not yet familiar with abstract thinking.

There is also the issue of other cultural orientations. Non-directive coaching is a concept that was developed in the Western world. Coaching implies typical Western values, such as the individual being the central point of focus, and self-realization being a noble goal to achieve in life. Also, the way the coach and the coachee communicate is typically Western: The coach asks direct, personal questions, and the coachee is supposed to answer them openly and honestly, without worrying about losing face or hurting anyone's feelings. Rosinski (2003, pp. 54-55) offers a framework for what can help coaches to become more sensitive to other cultural orientations.

2.3 THE ERASMUS+ PROJECT - AUTONOMOUS LITERACY LEARNERS: SUSTAINABLE RESULTS

From 2014 to 2016, six European partners participated in the project Autonomous Literacy Learners: Sustainable Results (ALL-SR), which developed and piloted an approach to self-directed literacy learning. In this European Erasmus+ project, coaching was used to help learners develop their own literacy skills through self-directed learning. The results of the project are available online at www.itta.uva.nl/learnerautonomy.

My Plan is based on similar coaching principles as ALL-SR, but has a different focus and scope. My Plan was used in a classroom setting to allow learners to become more aware of their motivation, goal and plans to practice, while the ALL-SR project focused on developing personal learning strategies through coaching, independent from a classroom setting. Also, the ALL-SR was a much larger project, with coaching pilots in different settings in three countries: UK, in the workplace, the Netherlands, in community settings and in Germany, at schools (Feldmeier, 2016).

3. CONTEXT OF THE COURSE

My Plan was developed and piloted during a ten-week course on Dutch in the Workplace, from January 2016 to April 2016. The group consisted of five learners, all cleaners at a mental health care institute in the Amsterdam area in the Netherlands. The learners were offered a 20-week course on Dutch in the Workplace that was financed by the Dutch trade union for cleaners. The curriculum of the course was already set and focused on using the Dutch language at work. Examples of language goals in the curriculum are: understanding instructions, calling in sick, knowing your rights and duties as an employee, describing tasks, and interacting with patients and colleagues. After 20 weeks, the learners had to take an oral assessment, in which their communication skills at work were tested in several role plays. The goal of the course was to reach level A2 for the practical oral tasks³. Figure 1 shows the background of the five learners.

Learner	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Time in the Netherlands	Years of previous education	Years of experiential learning Dutch in the classroom	Dutch proficiency level reading & writing	Dutch proficiency level speaking & listening
D.	m	48	Ghana	6 years	none	None	0	A1
H.	m	51	Morocco	22 years	5	2	A1	A1
L.	f	38	Spain / Morocco	3	7	None	A1	A1
M.	m	42	Nigeria	4 years	4	None	A1	A1
N.	f	22	Pakistan	4 years	10	1	A1	A1

Figure 1: Background of the Learners.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 A SIMPLIFIED GROW MODEL

The GROW model was adapted by simplifying the sequence of coaching questions to a set of here-and-now questions that came up every week. Less context-rich questions

³ A2 is a proficiency level described in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001).

were left out; e.g., typical coaching questions such as “What steps can you identify, and what is their time frame?” and “What if you knew the answer? What would it be?” All the questions a coach can ask about the goal, reality, options and plan of the coachee were reduced to five questions for long-term goal setting and five questions for short-term goal setting, by and large following the order of the GROW model.

4.2 SETTING LONG-TERM GOALS

The first sessions of My Plan were group conversations about long-term goals. The teacher asked each learner:

1. Why do you want to learn Dutch?
2. What is your plan?
3. How much time do you need to reach your goal?
4. How much time do you want to invest?
5. When do you want to take time to study?

The teacher would invite another member of the group to summarize the plan of the other, and so facilitate understanding each other, listening to each other, and improving the attention span of the learners.

4.3 MAKING A PLAN FOR THE WEEK

In subsequent sessions the coaching took place in pairs and focused on setting a learning goal for the coming week. The questions were:

1. What are you going to do this week to learn Dutch?
2. Where are you going to this?
3. When are you going to this?
4. Who can you ask for help?
5. Can I ask you next week how your plan went?

The learners were able to coach each other without the help of the teacher. Sometimes they would coach differently from the teacher, for example, by asking many questions all at once or by advising their peers (see Figure 2).

D:	When the chicken soup is finished, I'm going out. I go to the house of my friend. Then I'll talk a bit. Then I go back home and look at the Dutch lessons.
M:	At what time are you going to read? And at what time are you going to ask someone if your reading and your talking is good? When can you ask someone for help?
D:	It's difficult with my friends. Nobody speaks Dutch well.
M:	Look, I am telling you this now, look, you're taking Dutch classes now, right? As for me, I used to hang out only with Africans and I only spoke my own language. That was not good for me. Now I look for people I can practice my Dutch with. You should do the same. Look for a man, a woman, it doesn't matter who it is. Not only 'Ghana Ghana Ghana'. That's not good.

Figure 2: Fragment of the Transcript of a Conversation between Learners D. and M.

As shown in Figure 3, the learners memorized the coaching questions, sometimes mixing them up, but still staying close to the essence of coaching.

N:	What do you study?
L:	My book, about working in the Netherlands. And also the homework.
N:	What are you going to learn from your book?
L:	I want to learn phrases. It is good for me to repeat them. So, to repeat the phrases. Also, I want to do the homework.
N:	Is this book difficult or easy for you?
L:	The book is fine, but there are days that my head is completely full, then looking at it is really difficult.
N:	Okay, so do you have someone to help you at home?
L:	There are days I ask my daughter. When there are phrases I don't understand, I ask her. I ask her to take a look, if it's correct or not.
N:	Okay, and if your daughter doesn't understand it either, then what?
L:	No, it's fine you know, because my daughter speaks Dutch really well. She learned it at school.
N:	L., do you practice every day?
L:	No, I can't every day.
N:	What times? And which days?
L:	Three or four times a week.
N:	Friday or Saturday? Which day do you practice?
L:	Monday, Wednesday, Thursday also. Not on weekends, then I'm really busy.

Figure 3: Fragment of the Transcript of a Conversation between Learners N. and L.

4.4 LOOKING BACK AT LAST WEEK'S PLAN

Every week the learners asked each other how the plans of the week before had turned out. This step was important, both for cultivating awareness about reality and for building confidence. Often, learners were confronted with unexpected events that made them change their initial plan. They became aware of how hard it was to carry

out a plan when you have so many other responsibilities and tasks. However, they were often successful at carrying out their plans. Every success, however small, was celebrated by the group.

4.5 WEEKLY GROUP DISCUSSION

As shown in Figure 4, My Plan formed a part of the weekly lesson program. The questions were always the same, allowing the learners to memorize them. In the beginning, only the teacher took on the role of the coach and led the group conversation. After the third lesson, the teacher started experimenting with peer coaching. The learners would coach each other in pairs. There were also small group conversations, but the teacher did not direct the conversation as much anymore.

Les 11 Dinsdag 5 april 2016	Translation:
☺ ☺ samen praten mijn plan	Lesson 11 Tuesday April 5, 2016
📖 ✍️ lezen en schrijven	Talking together: <u>My plan</u>
🌐 de bal uitspraak oefenen	Reading and writing
☺ ☺ samen praten: wat heb je gedaan?	Practicing pronunciation: the ball
🏠 → naar huis 15.00 uur	Leaving for home (3 p.m.)

Figure 4: My Plan as Part of the Lesson Program Every Week.

5. RESULTS

The five learners in this case worked with My Plan for only ten weeks, so long-term results cannot yet be reported. However, the learners and the teacher did report an increase of confidence and a rise in awareness and responsibility. Every learner had a long-term goal and an intrinsic motivation for learning Dutch and improving literacy. Some wanted to find a better job, others wanted to communicate better at work. The learners experienced great enjoyment in the coaching and noticed an increase in team spirit and well-being.

When asked about learning activities outside the classroom, the learners reported that they had not managed to do everything they planned to do, but that they did get more done at home. They were proud of that, and at the same time they realized that there was still much to be done to reach their goals.

The teacher found that in comparison to learners in similar language training courses without coaching, these learners were more active outside the classroom. They also developed more realistic ideas of what it takes to learn Dutch and were more aware of their motivation and goals. The teacher's most surprising finding was that the learners adopted her coaching attitude. They had carefully observed their teacher and after a few

weeks imitated not only her sentences, but also her tone and even her body language when coaching. This brings into mind the research of Rogoff et al. (2003: 175-203), that describes how keen observation and listening-in are valued and used in some cultural communities in which children are part of mature community activities. Observing and imitating the teacher as a coach may well be a way of learning that suits the cultural orientations and learning styles of the learners.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER USE

Coaching for LESLLA learners can be applied in various other contexts than the one described here. The non-directive coaching approach can be integrated into classroom settings, in informal learning with the help of non-professionals, or in support groups of refugees. Some recommendations for further use of My Plan are presented below.

6.1 NEED FOR GOOD COACHING TRAINING

The most important condition is having a teacher who is well trained as a coach. Teachers who want to use coaching in their classroom will have to invest time and energy to become familiar with the principles and practice of coaching, through self-study or training. This will take some effort, since coaching is not a trick or a simple technique. Coaching demands a non-directive attitude of the teacher, and it might take some time for teachers to get used to this. Asking the right coaching questions in simple language is not easy: It needs a lot practice and includes trial and error.

6.2 IMPLEMENTING COACHING TECHNIQUES IN A TEAM OF TEACHERS

Coordinators and program developers who would like the teachers in their program to adopt a more coaching attitude are advised to implement coaching in a sensitive manner. It would be somewhat contradictory to introduce coaching top-down in a team, while free choice is at the very essence of coaching. Coaching should be an option, not a mandatory way of working. When a team is enthusiastic about coaching and wants to start a training course, they will need time and opportunity to study and practice. It is recommended that coaching training is embedded in a broader learning environment. For example, after the training, teachers could continue to learn through peer review. To facilitate their own self-directed learning in the longer term, it is conceivable that the teachers will be supported by a coach themselves.

6.3 EXPLAINING COACHING TO THE LEARNER

Not only the teachers, but also the learners may need time to get used to coaching in the classroom, since learners often expect the teacher to direct the learning process, including giving homework and telling the learners what else to do to practice at home. Talking about the reason for coaching with the learners is recommended. This can be

done in simple words, for example, by asking the learners how children learn to walk. When and where do they practice? How often? Is it easy? Do they get help? How long does it take before they can walk really well? Most learners know how children learn to walk: they have seen it around them many times. They will tell their teacher that children practice all the time, that they often fall, but that they do not give up trying, that they use the couch and the coffee table and their older brothers and sisters for support. The teacher can then explain that learning to read and write in a new language is similar. Coming to class a couple of hours a week to practice is not enough to learn the language. Children do not learn how to walk by practicing a couple of hours a week either. However, the learners are adults, not children. This is why learners are invited to make a plan for practicing. It is important to make a plan, because adult learners usually have more to do in a day than just studying. That is an important difference from a small child, who can dedicate all of his/her time to a specific goal. Teachers may discover that learners are very capable of reflecting on the reasons for working with My Plan, as long as the subject is embedded in a context they can relate to, such as the example of the child who learns how to walk.

6.4 THE L2 PROFICIENCY LEVEL

What level of the L2 do the learners need to have to be able to work with coaching? It is preferred not to set a certain minimum proficiency level, since the skill of LESLLA learners is often hard to assess with a standardized test. It takes time and the trust of learners to discover their true ability to communicate in the L2. Naturally, learners need to have a basic vocabulary in the L2 to be able to understand and answer the coaching questions, somewhere between CEFR A1 and A2. Teachers are encouraged to try out coaching and carefully observe how learners react. In our experiment, the learners could follow My Plan at CEFR level A1. They greatly appreciated the interest of the coaching teacher in their goals, lives, and plans, which motivated them make an effort to speak in the L2. When working with the approach of My Plan, the same questions are repeated every session, so emergent learners get time to come to understand the questions over the weeks. They also build vocabulary. One of the learners in our case was mostly listening in the first sessions. He understood, but he couldn't or wouldn't talk. Around the seventh week, he suddenly told the group more about his plan. He had been thinking about it all the time.

The learners described in our case were emergent learners. They all had a proficiency level around CEFR A1. When tested, they wouldn't pass level CEFR A2, because none of these learners was able to speak in more-or-less correct sentences yet. However, they were able to talk about much more than just very familiar topics close to their own world, which is typical for level A1. The reason for this was that their world was quite large, because they all worked. They had to communicate in Dutch in a range of situations at work every day. Learners are often remarkably adept at getting a message across with very limited L2 proficiency. The learners in this case understood each other, but native Dutch speakers who are not used to "foreigner talk" were unable to follow what they were saying. So it is also dependent on the ability of the teacher to understand and translate learner language to standard L2.

Working in a group with various language levels is an advantage. The learners who are more proficient can help learners with a lower level. Learners also learn the L2

through the coaching. Since My Plan is repeated every week, learners build vocabulary by listening to each other and by repeating the questions. Not all the learners understand My Plan the first time, but after a couple of weeks they get the meaning of it.

Also, it is important to realize that learners generally understand much more than they can express in the L2. Furthermore, we are dealing with responsible adults, who are parents, workers, partners, and citizens. The fact that they are low-literate or non-literate does not mean they have a low intelligence.

When working with learners who have hardly any understanding of the L2 yet, the L1 can also be used. This could be especially practical in groups with a shared L1, such as Eritrean or Syrian refugees. In this case, the coaching teacher will need the help of a more advanced student to translate the coaching questions and answers.

For successful coaching in the L2, the language use of the coaching teacher is just as important as the proficiency level of the learners. Much is dependent on the competence of the teacher to speak in correct but simple sentences and to make abstract concepts concrete and real for the learner. Also, a teacher who has clarity himself about what he/she is doing as a coach would logically communicate much more clearly than a teacher who is still trying to figure it out himself.

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