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# Coaching Language Teachers

by Arieh (Ari) Sherris, Center for Applied Linguistics

Language education has become an increasingly complex endeavor in second language, foreign language, and lingua franca settings (Kumaravadivelu, 2003a; McKay & Rubdy, 2009; Sherris, 2009, 2010). For instance, content area teachers in U.S. public schools have become de facto language instructors because of the many students in their classes who are not native speakers of English (Valdés, Bunch, Snow, Lee, & Matos, 2005) or who speak other varieties of English (e.g., East African English or Singapore English) that diverge from the dominant standard and from regional varieties. Teachers who have little preservice preparation for working with English language learners struggle to meet the needs of these students, who drop out of school in disproportionately high numbers. Long-term professional development that includes mentoring, coaching, and peer coaching provides the opportunity for teachers to engage in integrated, structured interactions in which they can discuss the challenges posed by the diverse sociolinguistic conditions in their classrooms and by conflicting micropolitical and cultural agendas and policies in their schools, districts, and sociolinguistic communities.

In this digest, *coaching* is defined as a type of assistance provided to individual teachers and sometimes small groups of teachers that addresses complex challenges to learning, teaching, and assessment of language and opens teachers to exploratory, self-critical, and reflective dimensions of interaction through a process of inquiry that is co-constructed and dialogic (Sherris, 2007, 2010). From the point of view of the coach, coaching includes observing teachers and students interact in classroom settings, collecting data on those interactions, and initiating confidential, private, and sometimes small-group discussions with observed teachers.

The purpose of this digest is to introduce the topic of coaching language teachers in a way that is responsive to the complex, varied, and dynamic landscapes of language classrooms as they are characterized by Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008). This digest describes three dimensions of coaching discourse that can shape dialogues among coaches and language teachers and presents some general advice for coaches. Language teachers and coaches should tinker in intentional ways with the ideas presented here and adapt them to suit their own circumstances.

## Coaching Terms

A *language teaching mentor* is an individual with recognized expertise comprising language teaching experience, knowledge, and skill. In a mentoring relationship with a language teacher, a mentor has more expertise than the teacher. The sharing of expertise is unequal and primarily unidirectional, with more knowledge flowing from the mentor to the teacher than vice versa.

A *peer coach* is a teacher whose knowledge, skill, and experience are at nearly the same level as those of the teacher with whom he or she is in a coaching relationship. The relationship, therefore, is characterized by parity and bidirectionality. That is, each teacher is both a teacher and a coach, making the coaching relationship reciprocal. Each teacher coaches the other. They have the potential to share equal amounts of knowledge with each other, and their discourse may include comparisons of their classrooms and students. Peer coaches are not necessarily close in age but would have similar years of teaching experience.

A *coach* can be either a mentor or a peer. A coach who teaches part-time might play both roles, depending on the language experience, knowledge, and skills of the participating teachers. Throughout this digest, *coach* will be used to refer to both mentors and peer coaches.

There are, of course, hybrid combinations of experience, knowledge, and skills that confound these definitions, such as two teachers who are team teaching and have a similar number of years of experience teaching but different content area backgrounds or specialties. Therefore, adapting role definitions for mentor and peer coach to the circumstances in your environment is important.

## Dimensions of Coaching Discourse

Coaches typically work in cycles with participating teachers. The cycle might begin with the language teacher providing the coach with a lesson plan and continue with an email exchange

to set up a lesson observation schedule, including pre- and post-observation meetings. At the conclusion of a post-observation meeting, the teacher and the coach set a focus for a new lesson. The teacher and coach might co-construct the next lesson, or the coach may wait for it to arrive by email again. A continuous cycle, the coaching discourse begins to take shape when the coach reads the lesson and formulates questions on topics such as lesson sequence, scope, formative assessment, and theme; teacher role and identity; student grouping configurations, motivation, prior knowledge, identity, and needs; and larger issues related to language policy, politics, culture, and language contact that might impact learning and student and teacher identity.

Language coaches and teachers might structure each meeting using a framework involving three discourse dimensions: exploratory, critical, and reflective. In these dimensions, teachers set new agendas that lead to opportunities for thoughtful, intentional experimentation and change in the way they formulate their assumptions and in the way they teach. These dimensions potentially reflect and constitute both an ideological space and an implementational space for teachers to more deeply consider their practice.

### *Exploratory Dimension*

The role of the coach in the exploratory dimension is to facilitate nonjudgmental discourse. In this dimension, teachers have the opportunity to elaborate on the form and content of a lesson, describe the learners, and identify issues surrounding gender, culture, and languages in contact, including political and socioeconomic conditions and language policy as they negotiate meaning. Table 1, though not exhaustive, presents some common questions and topics to trigger discussion.

### *Critical Dimension*

As in the Cognitive Coaching model (Costa & Garmston, 2002), the role of the coach in the critical dimension is to trigger teacher self-critique and teacher critique of language policy, politics, and sociocultural injustices as they impact classroom interaction. The coach refrains from evaluating the aspects of the lesson under discussion and instead initiates the teacher's critical faculties by probing the topics through further questioning or sharing observation notes in a way that helps the teacher reorganize the topics (Table 1). The questions used during the critical dimension of discourse encourage teacher self-critique. The topics encourage teachers to focus their critique and organize their observations. When teachers initiate the critical dimension themselves, the role of the coach is to focus the discussion so that both can seek provisional resolutions that might be implemented in a future lesson.

Together, the dimensions of exploration and critique form a balanced whole. Coaches and teachers might have a tendency toward one or the other dimension. If so, this should be identified, and balance should be sought such that both dimensions are incorporated in each discussion session. By regularly and explicitly conducting a balanced discourse of exploratory and critical dimensions, teachers and coaches can transform their professional identities and reach for greater clarity of expression and self-knowledge as professionals. They also acquire knowledge of themselves as policy makers (Menken & Garcia, 2010).

Additionally, coaches and teachers might gravitate toward a discourse that emphasizes similarities or differences as they explore and critique the sociolinguistic conditions and political agendas that play out in their classrooms. Identifying a predisposition of this sort provides insight into variation and routine in our developing narratives as teachers and coaches (Schiffrin, 2006).

### *Reflective Dimension*

Exploratory and critical dimensions of discourse between coaches and language teachers can come in any order and may even be interwoven in a conversation. However, the reflective dimension of discourse is usually a closing piece, although there may be reflective comments embedded in exploratory or critical discourse. The reflective dimension involves a two-part conversation. The first is a discussion about the coaching conversation. The coach prompts the teacher to identify the strengths and weaknesses in their conversation thus far and then formulates a goal to address the weaknesses in the next conversation. This is a kind of relationship vigilance. In the second part of the reflection, the coach encourages the teacher to focus on ways to address the weaknesses in the lesson discussed earlier and to set other goals toward improving the lesson in the future. If the reflection is conducted before an observation of a lesson, it also includes a discussion of what to look for during the observation and possible ways to efficiently record the observations so that the subsequent discussion is data driven.

## General Coaching Advice

Effective coaches listen actively, strive to continue to improve their observation and record-keeping skills, and develop ways to measure the quality of their coaching. Active listening includes alternately requesting elaboration and paraphrasing teacher discourse. When a teacher does not provide evidence that a paraphrase has hit target, the simple question "Did I get that right?" can often clear up misunderstandings, and the conversation can move forward. When a coach paraphrases or requests elaboration, it's best to use the teacher's lexicon and turn of phrase. If a coach doesn't understand what a teacher means, it's best to politely ask for clarification.

One way to develop strong observation and record-keeping skills is to write a time and sequence narrative of the

*Table 1.* **Exploratory and Critical Dimensions of Coaching Discourse**

| Possible questions in the exploratory dimension | Possible questions in the critical dimension | Possible topics |
|---|---|---|
| How would you describe your lesson?<br>How would you describe the needs of your learners?<br>How many parts comprise your lesson, and what name would you give each part?<br>How does this lesson illustrate your notions about what language learning is?<br>How does this lesson illustrate your notions about what language instruction is?<br>How are you measuring language learning and instruction?<br>Where is your teacher identity expressed in this lesson?<br>Where do learners express their identities in this lesson?<br>What are the political topics that influence classroom climate?<br>Which issues related to gender, culture, and economics influence language learning and how are they being addressed? | What are/were the strengths of this lesson?<br>What are/were the weaknesses of this lesson?<br>How would you rank the parts of this lesson from most meaningful to least meaningful, and why?<br>Which parts of the lesson were most meaningful for the students?<br>Which parts were most meaningful for you?<br>Which parts of the lesson were most aligned with the standards of learning?<br>What was left undeveloped in this lesson?<br>What was left unstated?<br>If you could do the lesson over again, what would you change, and why?<br>What hidden agendas played themselves out in this lesson, why were they hidden, and by whom?<br>What behavior is/was rewarded and what behavior is/was punished by this lesson?<br>Who will be/was challenged and who will not be/was not challenged and why?<br>Which social, political, cultural, or economic arrangements outside the classroom resulted in rewarding or depriving ideas with discussion inside the classroom? | Notion of learning<br>Notion of instruction<br>Notion of language<br>Notion of teacher identity<br>Notion of learners' identities<br>Sequence of tasks<br>Complexity of tasks<br>Planned and incidental language foci<br>Sequence of learner grouping configurations<br>Estimation of time learners listen to teacher talk<br>Estimation of time learners talk to learners<br>Estimation of silent time<br>Estimation of wait-time you provide after a question is posed during whole group discussions<br>Characterization of learners as a group<br>Characterization of learners as subgroups<br>Notions of language contact and dominance<br>Political issues affecting classroom climate<br>Gender issues inside and outside the classroom<br>Creating spaces for learners' home languages<br>Negotiating language policy<br>Effects of restrictive language policy<br>Effects of transitional bilingual education |

lesson while observing it. In the left margin of the paper, a coach will write the time a task is carried out, give the task a name to help remember its function in the lesson, and make any other helpful notes, including selective verbatim of the teacher's utterances or, during small group work, the students' utterances. When observing small group work, it is best to focus on one group if your goal is selective verbatim. If your goal is to listen for examples of academic vocabulary in use and the group work lasts approximately 15 minutes or longer, you may want to set up quick walk-throughs of each group. A walk-through is a 1- or 2-minute observation of each group in a predetermined order. When your time is up with one group, you move to the next group, taking care only to take notes on a group while you're actually observing it. Figure 1 is an example of a tally sheet that can be used for quick walk-throughs during which the focus is on kinds of teacher feedback. It is very useful in identifying patterns in teacher feedback. Alternatively, in highly student-centered classrooms the tally sheet can be used by students to raise their awareness of the feedback they provide to each other, which in turn provides data for rich interaction between coaches and teachers.

Coaches might also observe types of feedback not outlined in Figure 1. For example, teachers might (1) ask a lower-level question, (2) permit another student to provide feedback to a student response, (3) not provide time for a student to respond and instead answer his or her own questions, or (4) accept a student's incomplete thought and move forward (A. Wycoff, personal communication, December 13, 2009). However, there is little to no research on the effects of these types of feedback on second language acquisition. A situated model of observation might very well consider techniques for providing feedback and look for trends in their use. Coaches can discuss them with teachers to determine reasons for providing feedback to students in this manner.

If the coach has written, informed consent to videotape the lesson, the video can help coach and teacher discuss different parts of the lesson and reach a greater understanding of it. Measuring the quality of observation skills can be achieved by asking the teacher or another coach to view the entire recorded lesson and write their own time, sequence, and selective verbatim of the lesson. Then a comparison of the different lesson narratives, with an eye to uncovering the assumptions underlying each narrative, can widen the scope

**Conversational Feedback Tally Sheet**

*Instructions:* Tally teacher feedback to student(s). Do not count teacher initial conversation move, which is usually a question.

**Clarification request** (e.g., What does that mean?)

**Confirmation check** (e.g., Do you mean...?)

**Recast** (reformulates student's response)

**Other repetition** (repeats verbatim response using same intonation that the student used; if repeated with rising intonation, tally it as a confirmation check)

**Elaboration** (expands on response; adds additional information)

**Verbal or gestural back channeling** (e.g., punctuates student response with "uh-huh" or a nod)

***Figure 1.*** **Tally Sheet of Teacher Conversational Feedback to Students**

and breadth of understanding, as well as increase the relative explanatory power of each. Uncovering assumptions held by a coach and a teacher can inform intercultural communication. From this experience, teachers and coaches might even develop a similar communicative activity among language learners, where they could learn about the assumptions and clarify their expectations about each other (Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

## Conclusion

The coaching response to the complexity of language teaching, while generic in nature, is grounded in the belief that communities of practice benefit from exploratory, critical, and reflective dimensions of discourse when they go beyond topics related to technical language teaching assistance and when they stimulate creative responses to sociolinguistic, political, cultural, and economic forces. The healthiest communities of practice function in nonhierarchical structures of interaction while openly recognizing differences in knowledge, experience, and culture among coaches and teachers (Wenger,1998). In this way, coaches and teachers model self-realization and professional growth within the community of students and educators to the benefit of all. When teachers and coaches strive to develop a parity of voice and personal agency in tandem, the coaching-teaching dynamic moves forward, generating rich knowledge for its participants and the community of learners within its language classrooms.

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