

## Research questions answered: Case 4

### Case:

- One coach, a group of learners; special attention and some one-to-one coaching with two individual learners. Course focusing on language learning (L2-learners with no or limited previous education).
- Coach plans pay more attention to learner autonomy in group work. Also, she intends to coach two individual learners while other learners are working teacher independently.
- Coach and learners already know each other. Coach teaches the groups since a few weeks.
- Background info of the learners:
  - The group consists of 16 L2 learners from different countries with low literacy skills and no or limited education in their birth countries. Literacy level in L1 varies from no to limited, literacy level in L2 around A1. Learners learned how to read and write in NL. Oral skills around A2. Most learners need the language to organize their lives and supporting their children and understanding the world in which they live. Some hope for jobs or job training. A few still have to meet their civic integration obligations.
  - Learner 1: Woman, about 28 years old, born in Iraq, in NL since 6 years, no education in birth country. Did a literacy course in the Netherlands, learned a bit of reading and writing. Has difficulties with speaking (around A1). Learner had a volunteer language coach<sup>1</sup> but the coach ended the sessions because of the low language level of the learner. The learner wishes to receive coaching again, but needs the A2 level before the school will mediate in finding a volunteer coach again. Coaching process of coach 1 & learner 1 focuses on supporting the learner in developing her oral skills to an extend that she is entitled to work with a volunteer conversation partner again.
  - Learner 2: Man, 25 years old, Somalian background, born in NL but grew up in Somalia. Did not go to school. Came back to NL at the age of 18. Wishes to go to job training, but has to work on both oral and written skills. Coach decides to offer individual coaching to this learner because he seems motivated and she want to get a clearer picture of his skills.
- The coaching sessions were offered to the learner along the normal weekly group sessions. There have been a limited number of coach conversations with the learner, sometimes only very short in the margin of the classroom teaching.

### Collected and analysed data:

- Observations of one group session and two individual coach session, 2th week of programme;

---

<sup>1</sup> The word *language coach* or *language partner* in NL usually refers to someone to practice conversation with.

- Three face to face conversations with coach; before first session, in 2th week of program and after 6 weeks;
- Two telephone conversations with the coach during the process;
- Interview with coach after 10 sessions.

## Section A. Questions concerning the coach

### 1. Do the coaches deliver the appropriate, relevant coaching behaviour<sup>2</sup> during the pilot?

To some extent. The coach tried out how to implement coaching or how to promote learner autonomy when working with a group. She had a very positive and encouraging attitude towards her learners, who seemed to feel at ease in the group and supported each other. She improved her awareness of her own role regarding the development of learner autonomy in her learners.

From the interview with the coach:

'I always felt that I was a coach rather than an teacher, but noticed, when I started to participate in the pilot, how much I did teach. I feel it would need a huge change of habits in order to really start coaching and it would take time I don't have. Also, the group should not be too big, twelve learners seems maximum. I spoke about this with the manager; she thinks that coaching is work for volunteers. I regret this point of view'.

'One of the thing that went well is, I increased the amount of group work in this group. I made learners work in teams more often. I tried not to answer their questions, but instead coaching them to find an answer with help of other group members. This approach showed learners that there are other ways of learning than trough asking the teacher an getting an answer.'

In the processes with the two individual learners, the coach showed coaching behaviour in the one conversation that was observed by the project team member (asking open questions, addressing the learners' needs and wishes, addressing the learners' approach.) Soon after this conversation, she delegated the individual coaching to volunteer coaches and coached the coaches instead of the learners.

### 2. Did the coach training help the coaches to deliver relevant coach behaviour?

#### a. Which aspects of the training were particularly helpful/unhelpful and why?

The coach felt that the training was helpful and sufficient. She especially liked the role-plays and to practice coaching. The coach had previous experience with coaching, which helped her to understand what we were aiming for. During the process she had a lot of questions about how to promote

learner autonomy in a group. So although the coach did not mention this when asked about the training, the project team may have to pay more attention to the issue of promoting learner autonomy during group work.

The coach said the support she received from the project team during the pilot was very helpful and pleasant.

**b. Which elements of the training are likely to be helpful to prepare coaches for coaching low literate learners in specific settings (i.e. workplace, further education or community settings?)**

This question was not asked.

**3. How do the coaches feel while working with learners in the way the approach requires: do they enjoy it?**

The coach enjoys working this way because she feels it is very important and she doesn't like the thought of learners being dependent on her. She feels encouraged by the steps the learners make. She also notices changes in her own attitude towards the learners, it is easier for her to accept behaviors that she might feel to be ineffective. She does not feel irritated now, but recognizes that it might be part of the learning process.

On the other hand she feels confronted with herself since sometimes she discovers she is teaching rather than coaching, much more than she thought she would. Also, she feels under pressure because of her very tight schedule and she doesn't feel she really can devote the time to the project that she needed.

**Section B. Questions concerning the learner**

**1. Do the learners show increased autonomy in literacy learning?**

**a. What behaviour can be taken as evidence for increased autonomy?**

The coach tells about an incident in which she asked for the attention of all group members. One subgroup did not immediately pay attention to her, and when asked to focus on the central topic, they said: but we are talking about something important too, we are also learning. This indicated that they did (in this moment) not value the work guided by the coach more than the self-directed parts of the learning. The coach about this: there is more equality. She also feels that learners feel more positive about the learning in the group, the contact is more personal, they would more easily share something they have on their mind.

Regarding the learners that received one to one coaching: they seem to feel more 'seen', show more confidence, work harder

**b. Which strategies were attributed to increased autonomy?**

Group work, working in teams. Solving a problem together with teammates rather than asking the teacher.

## 2. Where there was increase in autonomy,...

### a. what role did coaching play?

The coach makes clear what behaviour she expects from the learners:

- by organizing the learning (group work);
- by coaching on how to solve a problem in the learning team (asking questions);
- by encouragement.

### b. did any literacy learning strategies respond to coaching more? (Which ones, evidence)

Group work worked well.

### c. what resources are appropriate to develop autonomous literacy learning behaviour?

The coach tried to introduce the Help Card for vocabulary learning. She feels she did not spend enough time and energy to it to make it work. She still feels that attention to learning strategies might be a good idea in a low literate group like this.

Most useful 'recourses' seem to be both the coach conversation and a lot of reflection on own behaviour.

## 3. What did the learners think about coaching as an approach to develop autonomy? (did they think it works, did they like it)

The coach says:

Response of the learners varies. Not all learners immediately understand that you need to be active in order to learn. The stronger learners, who are able to help others, often seem to feel proud and happy that their skills are acknowledged. Some of the weaker learners may insist on receiving directions of the teacher/coach sometimes.

The incident in which the learners refused to stop their common work in favor of a plenary session (section B, question 1), showed both appreciation for their group work and increased equality in relationship to the teacher / coach.

## 4. Did the background of the coaches influence their approach? i.e. if they were teachers

In this case, the coach was a teacher and the teacher was trained as a coach. Working with the group, the school asked her to 'teach' them language and literacy. In the pilot, she tried to take an approach that would allow the learners to develop learning strategies, confidence and autonomy. So she tried to include coaching and promotion of learner autonomy in classroom teaching. Her background made it easier to understand both roles. Her full time job, the big group and the limited support of the manager made it hard for her to make it fully work.