Case 7: Research Questions Answered

Case:

- Six learners and six coaches took part in the pilot. Each learner was paired with a single coach with whom the learner worked one-to-one.

- Each learner-coach pair was asked to undertake 12 coaching sessions.

  Of the six learner-coach pairs, three pairs completed 12 sessions. The other three pairs completed six, four and two sessions respectively.

  Regarding the three pairs who did <u>not</u> complete 12 sessions: in two of the pairs, the coach withdrew from the pilot due to illness, one after completing four sessions, the other after completing six sessions; in the last of the three non-completing pairs, the learner – who was a reluctant participant (see below) – withdrew from the pilot after two sessions, stating that (a) they had achieved their learning objective and (b) pressure of work made it difficult for them to attend coaching sessions (which took place at the learner's place of work, during work hours).

- Sessions typically lasted for 60 minutes, but several learner-coach pairs reported extending sessions to e.g. 90 minutes on occasion. Likewise, sessions might be shorter, e.g. 30-45 minutes, due to pressure of work.

- Two of the learner-coach pairs came directly from the volunteer tutoring scheme and had an established learner-tutor relationship; in the other four pairs, learner and coach were new to each other.

- Language level of learners: estimated at B1-B2 (estimate based on research interviews with learners)

  Note that no formal assessment of language levels was undertaken, but all learners had been referred by their manager for language support related to the communicative demands of their job role, typically related to the intelligibility of their spoken English and the quality of their written English.

  Background information on learners and coaches (as paired in the pilot):
  - Learner 1: Male, Filipino, aged 55-60, qualified nurse, in UK for more than 10 years
    Learning focus: pronunciation

    Coach 1: Female, HR manager involved in co-ordinating the employer's tutoring scheme, recently completed a qualification in non-directive coaching, some limited experience of actual coaching, no language teaching expertise, but speaks English as an additional language herself, no prior relationship with learner

    [2 sessions*]

  - Learner 2: Female, Brazilian, aged in her 40s, support worker, in UK for more than 30 years
    Learning focus: spoken grammar, pronunciation

    Coach 2: Female, experienced workplace basic skills practitioner, prior understanding of coaching, not previously involved with volunteer tutoring scheme, no prior relationship with learner

    [12 sessions]

  - Learner 3: Female, Lithuanian, aged in her 50s, senior administrator, in UK for more than 10 years, qualified as accountant in Lithuania; pre-existing learner-tutor relationship with coach

Learning focus: phone calls, emails; giving directions; spoken word order, pronunciation

Coach 3: Female, retired primary school teacher, no prior coaching experience, no formal training in ESOL teaching; pre-existing learner-tutor relationship with coach

[6 sessions**]

- o Learner 4: Female, Nepalese, aged in her 30s, care worker, in UK for more than five years
  Learning focus: pronunciation, report writing

  Coach 4: Female, retired therapeutic counsellor, limited training in ESOL teaching, prior understanding of coaching, not previously involved with volunteer tutoring scheme, no prior relationship with learner

  [12 sessions]

- o Learner 5: Female, Polish, aged in her 30s, care worker, in UK for more than four years
  Learning focus: report writing, reading

  Coach 5: Female, retired EFL teacher, no prior coaching experience– already involved with volunteer tutoring scheme, but no prior relationship with learner

  [4 sessions**]

- o Learner 6: Female, Italian, aged 50, mental health support worker, in UK for more than 15 years; qualified primary school teacher in Italy; pre-existing learner-tutor relationship with coach
  Learning focus: pronunciation, report writing

  Coach 6: Female, retired EFL teacher, no prior coaching experience; pre-existing learner-tutor relationship with coach

  [12 sessions]

*Sessions stopped due learner withdrawing from pilot
**Sessions stopped due to coach illness

- The coaching sessions were offered to learners referred to the employer's English language tutoring scheme as an experimental approach to improving their English. All learners were willing to try the coaching approach, including Learner 3 and Learner 6, who were already receiving tuition from their coaches. These two learners agreed to trial the coaching approach for 12 sessions instead of receiving their normal tuition.

  Regarding Learner 1, this learner participated only at the insistence of their manager, who had received reports from the learner's colleagues that it was difficult to understand the learner's spoken English due to his pronunciation. The learner himself questioned the validity of these reports and therefore the need for support.

Data collected and analysed:
- Audio recordings of eight coaching sessions
- Written records for 25 coaching sessions
- Ten interviews with six coaches

- Four interviews with four learners on completion of pilot, Learner 2, Learner 4 and Learner 6 (who each completed 12 sessions) and Learner 3 (who completed six sessions only, due to coach withdrawing on account of illness).

Section A. Questions concerning the <u>coach</u>

1. Do the coaches deliver the appropriate, relevant coaching behaviour[1] during the pilot?

Based on sampling from session recordings

- Coach 1 delivered appropriate coaching behaviour, including asking questions and eliciting options to raise awareness and develop responsibility; also following the GROW model to
  - elicit and agree goals from learner
  - invite the learner to reflect on strategies

  Coach 1 also suggested strategies.

- Coach 3 showed evidence of directive coaching behaviour e.g. suggesting options, resources and learning strategies rather than eliciting these from the learner. Recordings of sessions showed evidence of good rapport, affirmative behaviour and building confidence. A significant part of one session was spent on the learner reading aloud which is what the learner chose to do early on in the coaching programme.

- Coach 4 consistently delivered appropriate coaching behaviour, following the GROW model, using questions, silence and active listening to
  - elicit and agree goals from learner
  - give space for learner to take responsibility

  Coach 4 also suggested strategies.

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

The training supported some coaches more. From session recordings it seems that the session record forms were just as helpful in following the GROW model stages.

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

Helpful:
- Working in groups during the training
- Content was enough and the time spent in training was fine
- It was helpful to think of different approaches to autonomous learning
- Trying out questions and thinking of different types of learners
- Specific examples from trainers to say that this approach has worked with people with little education
- Having two trainers and having some experience of a coaching session even if it hadn't gone well
- The role play convinced trainee coaches to try coaching rather than teaching

Would have been useful to have
- something on how to move forward if the coaching process got stuck (e.g. setting realistic goals, getting the learner to work towards the goals)
- more direction on how to start the coaching conversation

- more practice actually doing the coaching and then having some feedback e.g. role-play
- a video or something to see the coaching in action/ examples of coaching
- a longer period of training and practicing role-plays

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?)**

Along with the training, the session record booklets were something the coaches referred to during the session to check what to do next. This resulted in giving structure to the session and also a reminder to follow the stages of the GROW model.

I was converted, reluctantly, to [the coaching] approach. [Coach 5]

I think I needed a bit more guidance at the beginning with how to proceed.

I would have liked to see examples –even set-up examples – of other people coaching. In the beginning it was just words. I read all the words and I sat through the talking, but I wanted to <u>see</u> what it looked like and <u>hear</u> what it looked like. [Coach 3]

[The training] really was interesting and totally alien. For quite a while I thought it really couldn't work, having been trained as a teacher. I thought there was no input. But gradually I began to realise that there was quite a good thing about it and there was some very positive aspects of it. [Coach 6]

The helpful bit was the strategies on how to get started. And all the reminders not to slip back into teaching again – it's so easy for teachers to slip back into teaching. [Coach 2]

I sort of learned as I went - then I began to realise what you'd been getting at, which is that they don't see us very much. They don't see us nearly as much as they do stuff around them. And I started to think, 'I'm only going to be seeing her every fortnight. She's got two weeks in between when she's at home, when she's with clients, when she's working with people.' And that's when it started to make sense. The way that I see it is that it's giving them tools. [Coach 4]

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

Coaches reported enjoying working with the learners within a coaching framework. However, learners expected some 'teaching' to happen and so coaches arrived at an accommodation, e.g. one coach used part of the session to give language-focused (rather than learning-focused) feedback to the learner on language learning tasks the learner had done outside the coaching sessions. Another coach worked at the directive end of the coaching continuum and also 'taught' her learner by giving feedback on her reading aloud.

I've learned more about [my learner] as a person in two coaching sessions than I did in six months of teaching her – and I have so much respect for her as a person! [Coach 3]

We both [i.e. coach and learner] are aware at every session that we're learning [how to make the coaching work]. But this is a way, I can see that. It's good that responsibility comes from the learner. [Coach 3]

My third coaching session is on Friday and I am a bit stumped as how to continue. She is very keen but neither of us know how to go forward. [Coach 6]

There are two main points that stick with me. First, since the coaching model seems to work for most, it is a way forward for the workplace which has other learning and development constraints. Second – the model empowers, engages, involves and respects the learner. [Coach 2]

Section B. Questions concerning the learner

1. **Do the learners show increased autonomy in literacy learning?**
   Session recording indicate that learners in later sessions they expressed their preferences – for learning strategies and resources – more and more confidently. They were able to reflect on their learning more accurately and adjust their goals to more realistic ones. They also began to acknowledge their progress improved proficiency in English more than they did in earlier sessions.

   [The learner's manager] told me that [the learner] has borrowed books to read and is showing great enthusiasm to learn. Initially [the learner] was a bit confused and did not understand the questions (limited vocabulary/ understanding of English), but that changed quickly.   [The learner] has been talking to her colleagues about it and I have had a request from another staff member for coaching. [Coach 4]

   I think towards the end she began to realise there were things she could do and whether she was managing or not managing. She was taking responsibility for it. Various encounters that she had with residents or her peers made her realise that things were slightly better or slightly worse because of what she was trying to do. [Coach 6]

   Last year [I did] manual handling and fire training, but that time I was like a statue, I just listen them and 'okay, yeah, yeah, yeah.' Sometimes I want to ask questions but because of my English I could not ask properly, so I just stay quiet. So this [year] I ask lots of questions to them. Because of [coach] I am able to get confidence and then able to say my own thing. If I cannot exactly word I will say a different word to make them understand, so I am glad. [Learner 4]

   Before I know, but I couldn't tell to my nurse and manager what is main thing, I do know, but I couldn't explain so I just keep quiet. So nothing that was helpful, but I just keep as regular carer, personal carer, that's all. Nowadays I'm able to know their pain, their feeling, my residents, so that is good thing for me and residents as well, they are happy with me. While I'm attending them I start to chat with them, before I don't. They also feel happy 'oh you are here today, oh I am glad' they start to say. [Learner 4]

   a. **What behaviour can be taken as evidence for increased autonomy?**
      Learner 4 repeats a SMART goal – she says she will come back to the coach in 2 weeks with 10 to 12 words she will have learnt to pronounce and spell.
      Learners showed more self-awareness and reflected their language skills in a focused way e.g. Learner 1 focused on the need to manage his intonation better.

   b. **Which strategies were attributed to increased autonomy?**
      Inviting feedback from colleagues, family members, coach. Using online resources for improving pronunciation and grammatical accuracy.
      Learners talked about literacy *resources* more than strategies to increase autonomy.

2. **Where there was increase in autonomy,…**

   a. **what role did coaching play?**

   Data indicates increased autonomy in all learners.

   Overall the role played by coaching was the opportunity learners had in the sessions to reflect on their learning and career so far, where they would like to be by the end of the coaching programme and also in the longer term. More specifically, coaching behaviour which encouraged increased autonomy was
   - active listening
   - questions to narrow down goals to realistic ones and tease out learning and, literacy strategies as well as resources learners already had access to but may not have thought of as a resource before the coaching began
   - affirmation of improved language skills, broadening horizons 'in time you will be able to write a book not just read one'

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

   Coaching helped learners recognise as resources both texts (e.g. newspapers, books, audio and video programmes, activities and resources on the web) and people (such as colleagues and family who could scaffold and feedback on their language) already accessible to them.

   "She realised how she could use resources that she uses in any case slightly differently. 'Ooh, I could get some audio books now and I could listen to audio books in the car rather than listen to music.' So she was thinking of what she does in any case and how she could add the learning to that". [Coach 2 describing Learner 2]

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

   Learners identified a 'learning partner' – someone who commented on and corrected their speaking/ reading, including work colleagues, clients, family and friends. Learners typically also wanted to cast the coach in this role. Other resources identified by learners included online resources such as BBC Learn English on the web, newspapers (e.g. The Guardian), audio books and graded readers.

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

   The four learners interviewed at the end of the project (Learners 2, 3, 4 and 6) were all strongly positive about their experience of the coaching. In particular, they liked being able to set their own learning agenda. They contrasted this sense of being in charge in their sessions very favourably with their experience of classroom learning where the agenda is set by the teacher.

   I was the person that was mostly in control. It wasn't like sit in a classroom. [Learner 2]

   When she teached me she choose all the subjects and everything what I have to do. For the coaching I have to choose what I want to learn and, if I've got some questions, I can ask and she's going to explain to me what it is. But always was my choice what I have to learn. Maybe when you go teacher, teacher taking more responsibility to teach you. … When you are learner in the coaching project, maybe I'm taking more responsibility to learn and not let down teacher. [Learner 3]

You feel more relaxed. It's not really, 'oh she's my teacher.' I feel like more like two people. I can tell what I needed, you teach me in a way what I needed. That is fantastic, it become less boring. Don't become like what's happen in the school most of the time. [Learner 6]

Enjoyable, yeah, I didn't feel like 'oh no, today is my class'. ... I am feeling, myself, different before and now so more comfortable to speak English, before I don't used to. I know like this is, but I don't feel comfortable to speak in English so now I feel comfortable. [Learner 4]

4. **Did the background of the coaches influence their approach? i.e. if they were teachers**
   All coaches acknowledged the potential value of developing learner autonomy and tried to implement the proposed coaching methodology.

   Coach 1, who was not a teacher and had prior training in and (some limited) experience of non-directive coaching, evidenced appropriate use of the GROW model and coaching behaviours.

   Coach 2, who was an experienced workplace basic skills practitioner and had understanding of coaching (though no prior training in coaching),clearly differentiated between coaching and teaching behaviours and reported that she consciously tried to coach rather than teach (though would often catch herself wanting to teach).

   Coach 4, who had previous experience teaching English and experience of therapeutic coaching, also recognised the distinction between coaching and teaching, but reported that she felt the learner she was working with needed instructional input as well as coaching and made space for both in her sessions with the learner.

   Coaches 3, 5 and 6, who had teaching backgrounds and no previous contact with coaching, reported feeling less clear regarding the distinction between coaching and teaching behaviours, particularly when faced with e.g. learner uncertainty re goals or requests from the learner for instruction, and were perhaps more reliant on teaching concepts as a reference point. Also, coaches 3 and 6 had pre-existing, instruction-based relationships with their learners.

   There is also some indication that the more language-teaching expertise a coach had, the more likely they were to focus in sessions on the technical aspects of language. This tended to reinforce a teaching, rather than a coaching, approach since it moved the focus away from the learner's real-life communicative problem-to-solve and towards a technical problem (e.g. grammatical structures) that required diagnosis and then instruction by a language teacher.