COACHING IN TESOL

By Carolyn Kristjansson[1], Gwen Klassen, Michelle Goertzen Martins, Matt Dissen & Shawn Rotchford

Coaching is a practice that many people typically associate with sports. What does it have to do with Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)? And what might it look like when used to support professional development in TESOL?

The answer to these questions starts with one's definition of coaching. As we understand it, coaching is a customized approach to personal and professional development. Like Flaherty (2010), we view it as a set of disciplines and practices aimed at helping others "develop new capabilities, new horizons, and new worlds of opportunity for themselves and those around them" (p. xi). Not only is this a useful definition of coaching, it's also a helpful way of framing what we try to do as language teachers. And it's an understanding that sheds light on what effective TESOL education is all about: helping pre-service and in-service teachers develop new capabilities, new horizons, and new worlds of opportunity for themselves and their students.

In recent decades coaching has been used to bring about positive change in diverse contexts. For example, performance coaching has significantly impacted the achievements of many in business (Whitmore, 2017). Leadership coaching has been widely applied to support the development of individuals and teams in organizations (Blanchard & Miller, 2013). Transformative coaching has contributed to significant changes in primary and secondary schools that have embraced it (Aguilar, 2013). And cognitive coaching has been used in education to support the professional development of teachers in multiple contexts (Costa and Garmston, 2015), including those serving linguistically diverse students (Gonzalez del Castillo, 2015). Yet, there are no known reports of coaching to support pre-service and in-service teachers in TESOL, nor of the impact of such coaching on the coaches themselves.

In 2017, a decision was made to incorporate strengths-based coaching in the MA TESOL program at Trinity Western University (TWU) to support incoming MA TESOL students. The TWU MA TESOL program views students as leaders, currently in their classrooms and spheres of influence and as emerging leaders in the language education profession. Strengths-based coaching is grounded in an understanding of leadership development which starts by recognizing strengths as an integrated aspect of human functioning (Linley & Harrington, 2006). This includes, for example, how strengths—those we use frequently,

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occasionally, or even neglect—come to bear on the way we make sense of circumstances, engage interpersonally, and go about our work, individually and collaboratively. It also encompasses an understanding that strengths develop and are deployed in relationship with others, and that teams which learn how to appreciate and harness the combined power of diverse member strengths can accomplish more than any individual alone (Welch, Grossaint, Reid, & Walker, 2014).

In what follows we provide an overview of what we did and learned during the first 15 weeks of the TWU MA TESOL coaching initiative. We touch briefly on the parameters of the in-house coaching program, our observations of benefits and challenges that emerged, and aspects of personal professional development for those of us who coached. We then briefly present ideas for additional applications of coaching in TESOL and conclude with some questions for reflection.

Coaching Program Overview

The TWU MA TESOL coaching program takes a non-directive strengths-based approach to coaching. First, a non-directive approach means the coaching process is grounded in an understanding that those being coached can generate their own solutions. From this perspective, the coaching relationship is seen as a collaborative thinking partnership in which the primary role of the coach is to listen and ask questions to help the coachee gain insight and awareness that lead to desired self-identified actionable outcomes. Second, our approach also draws on insights derived from the Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI; Scudder, Lacroix, & Gallon, 2014, pp. 1–9), an assessment tool that provides a snapshot of assessment-takers' underlying motivations and values and related deployment of strengths in two conditions: when things are going well and in conflict. In brief, this is built on the premise that an awareness of one's purpose and choice of strengths, along with that of others in such situations, can lead to enhanced personal and professional relationships and outcomes.

Program Design & Implementation

In early April of 2017, the first author invited four graduates from the TWU MA TESOL program to become part of a coach team to work with 16 incoming MA TESOL students from May to July. Because coaching was intended to support students in the eight-week online orientation program and first online course, we decided that coach training and ongoing support of coaches should also be conducted in an online environment. In fact, this was necessary as members of the coach team, like members of our incoming cohort, were spread across a range of locations and time zones. In-house coach preparation consisted of individual coach completion of the SDI along with personalized feedback reports and basic coach training. The latter was grounded in published coach training material (Essential Impact, 2013) and mediated via a series of online webinars distributed across several

weeks for a total of 10 hours. Ongoing support and development for coaches throughout the subsequent three-month interaction with students consisted of a 30-minute bi-weekly opportunity for each member of the coach team to be coached by the first author, also the lead coach, and 60-minute online monthly meetings for the coach team to touch base and compare notes.

Interaction with students took place online as indicated above. Each coach was assigned four incoming students who became their "quartet". Incoming students did the SDI assessment and received personalized reports and individual debriefing from the lead coach, thus laying the foundation for a shared framework and metalanguage regarding strengths. Coaches were responsible to coach each student in their quartet once every two weeks for 30 minutes. In addition to individual coaching, they were asked to attend and help facilitate discussion in the seven weekly 45- to 60-minute webinars in which the quartets explored different aspects of strengths deployment. This ran parallel to students' individual work in a customized version of a commercial e-book designed to prepare them for MA TESOL work. Overall, the goal was to create conditions that would facilitate students' ability to maximize opportunities for personal and professional development in their MA TESOL journey and beyond.

What was the outcome? As participants in this new venture, we noticed certain patterns. Since we were not conducting research, what we present here are our observations as educator-coaches who engaged in the implementation of this new MA TESOL program component. We make no claims regarding student perspectives. We hope that future research will allow for an exploration of student insights, but in this article we start with what is available to us, our own experience.

Benefits

To begin with, based on our collective observations, we saw a number of benefits. Several interrelated elements stood out, including (1) space for student agency and autonomy, (2) enhanced student reflection and awareness, and (3) increased student options, along with (4) enhanced team dynamics.

First, individual coaching sessions were intended as opportunities for students to gain a sense of autonomy and empowerment as coaches posed questions to help them discover insights and identify options, resources, and actions available to them. Yet as coaches, early on we noticed that it was tempting to give advice. We had been told there was some limited scope for direct input (e.g., as it pertained to MA TESOL processes and procedures new to students), but overall, that our role was to partner with students' in developing their capacity to navigate the online orientation and initial course with attention to intersections with their strengths, circumstances and future aspirations. As we learned to increasingly act on our understanding of students as a source of knowledge and manage the coaching process by means of exploratory questions rather than suggestions, we recognized a

complementary growth in space for student agency, which corresponded with an increased emergence of self-identified options for addressing the situations they brought to coaching. In short, when we asked questions that facilitated self-discovery, students came up with insights, possibilities, and action plans that exceeded what we could provide.

In Jordan's[2] case, this awareness was rooted in coaching she herself had received during coach training. At that time she expressed being overwhelmed by the many pressing needs of the new arrivals to Canada with whom she was working. The coaching team posed questions which helped her prioritize the most immediate needs and identify resources she had not yet thought of. Later when coaching her quartet, Jordan remembered how helpful that had been and posed similar questions to help her coachees. As a result, they were able to identify resources they could access to develop their writing skills, help with research, and adjust their schedules and finances to realize their goals and get the most from their MA TESOL experience.

Another example occurred in a session Morgan had with a student in the early stages of the online course that followed orientation. The student had been having trouble understanding course material and was convinced he couldn't do MA-level work. This was accompanied by a heightened state of emotions and he was ready to quit. As Morgan asked questions prompting reflection, there was a shift in the student's perspective. He realized it was not a case of being unable to deal with the materials or the tasks. Rather he became aware that the issue had to do with his own expectations for himself and his understanding of course expectations. Furthermore, this was linked to his default use of preferred strengths. The upshot was that there was a shift in emotional state, he decided not to quit, and he left the session with new strategies and increased confidence.

A final example is what we viewed as an emerging sense of group cohesion that developed throughout orientation and initial interaction in the first course. The MA TESOL program is highly collaborative, requiring students to participate in teams and perform regular interactive research projects. Weekly orientation webinars laid the foundation, introducing the students to each other while raising awareness of the technical and relational demands of online collaboration. Each week students were also presented with different scenarios and coaching questions were posed to facilitate discussion of how they might respond to diverse dynamics in light of their values and strengths. The webinars culminated in the co-creation of a team charter which was subsequently applied in a coach-led discussion of a sample case study of collaborative online work prior to the start of the first course.

Challenges

While the benefits outweighed the challenges, that does not mean it was all smooth sailing. Four areas of challenge that stood out to us included (1) logistics and scheduling, (2) student expectations about coaching, (3) readiness for coaching, and (4) difficult conversations.

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2   Coach team members are identified by pseudonyms.

First, by its very nature, the online track of the TWU MA TESOL program can accommodate people from all over the world. In this case, coaches and students were distributed across seven countries and six time zones leading to logistical and scheduling challenges when we attempted to set up coaching sessions. Although effort was made to place students and coaches in groups with compatible time zones, challenges remained. Sometimes this resulted in late night and early morning meetings for coach or coachee as well as occasional missed appointments.

A second challenge we all faced was that of student expectations. As far as we know, with one exception, none of the incoming students had been exposed to non-directive coaching. In spite of having access to a brief introductory video and a written description of the coaching process, when students showed up for their first coaching sessions it became apparent that most did not know what to expect. This meant that coaches spent some of the initial sessions redirecting expectations and educating students about the intended process and focus of MA TESOL coaching sessions. In terms of process, students are often used to being told what to do in academic settings and some would come to coaching sessions looking to be directed in the next steps of the orientation or in a course of action for a particular situation. Similarly, our non-directive coaching model is based on the premise that the coachee bring to the session a focus of their choice. That chosen focus is then narrowed down to a manageable kernel, which is then explored, leading finally to an achievable action plan. Particularly early on, some students would arrive at their coaching sessions without a topic of focus. Depending on whether or not they wished to engage in a process of identifying a topic at that point, what was supposed to be a coaching session might become a mere conversation. While we could appreciate the value of this for relationship building, the potential benefits of coaching were lost.

This raises a third area of challenge, namely state of readiness. It's possible that those who did not come with a focus weren't yet convinced of the value of coaching for themselves or weren't sufficiently comfortable to want a coaching conversation. Simply put, for various reasons, at times it seemed students were not in a place where they were ready to be coached. In one case, a student in Chris's quartet was preoccupied with procedural matters regarding the weekly assignment, how to log into the online platform, and financial aid. While there were others in the program whose role it was to answer such questions, as long as the student viewed those unmet needs to be of primary importance, she was unable to engage in coaching. As such, Chris temporarily suspended coaching and answered the pressing questions.

A final area of challenge had to do with conversations that were difficult for one reason or another. While they did not happen often, when they did, we wanted to be able to handle them well. In one instance, one of us had a coachee who was not particularly comfortable with online technology and also had a fairly demanding work schedule. This left limited time for skill development and the troubleshooting needed to access and participate in online interaction and assignment completion. It seemed perhaps that an online MA

program was not the best place for her to be at this point in time. Given that the topic of technological challenges came up frequently, by the end of orientation, the coaching conversations with that coachee were focused on helping her realistically understand the demands of the program and the situational factors of her life so she could make an informed decision about continuing the following semester. The goal with this student, as with all, was to facilitate personal and professional development in the context of the coachee's unique circumstances.

Coach Benefits

In the process of helping others cultivate personal and professional development possibilities, we as coaches also experienced personal and professional benefits and growth. This took various forms, but to start, we all found ourselves enriched by insights that emerged from our personal SDI assessment and related discussions and exercises during coach training. The growth in self-awareness regarding our natural tendencies, values, and related use of strengths, both in conditions of well-being and when encountering conflict, was foundational to realizing our role as coaches, not to mention transferrable to a myriad of other roles. Some of us, for example, found these insights very helpful when interacting with people in other areas of our lives whose motivational values systems and strengths differ considerably from our own. The new insights led to new understanding and interactional choices we had not previously considered.

While coaching itself requires that both parties agree to the coaching purpose of a particular conversation, it is possible to draw on insights from coaching and take a "coach approach" to other types of interaction. Chris states that coaching helped her to be fully present when interacting with people in other situations. She notes that sometimes as teachers, we feel we have lots of answers, but coaching, in contrast, is about listening and asking good questions to help people gain awareness and find their own conclusions. Similarly, Sydney found a coach approach to make a difference in his interaction with students during teacher-student conferences. He took this approach to get students' perspective on their progress and find out what was truly important to them, how they might prioritize those things, and what changes he might make as instructor. One particular instance of this was when talking with a learner whose attendance had been irregular, putting his progress at risk. A coach approach to a conversation about these matters led to new insights for both parties and better ways of going forward.

Another example of benefit and growth came about through the opportunities members of the coach team had for personal coaching with the lead coach. Jordan reports how she found herself looking forward to preparing for her coaching sessions because it forced her to take some "me time." In her view, as teachers we have so many urgent and important demands to attend to, we rarely take time to dream and plan for the future. Coaching is an invitation to focus on ourselves and consider what we hope to accomplish in our personal lives and careers. She notes that she found it empowering to verbalize her aspirations

and fears to someone who listened intently, asked questions that helped her explore new options, and encouraged her to take next steps.

Coaching in English Language Learning

While our experience as reported above occurred within the specific context of a strengths-based MA TESOL coaching program, we see various other possibilities for coaching in the field of English language learning. For example:

- **Program Administrators and Managers** – Coaching with a trained coach for directors and managers can provide the same kinds of benefits as to leaders in other fields (Bower, 2012). In addition, program directors and managers, like teachers, are often accustomed to providing solutions. A coach approach to leadership and management can foster new possibilities and create enhanced ownership of solutions among those in the workplace (Stanier, 2016).

- **Teachers** – Professional development for teachers might occur with a trained coach or in reciprocal "collegial coaching" arrangements with colleagues who have a shared interest in coaching and a basic understanding of the coaching process (Kristjansson, 2016). This has the potential to support and provide a helpful means of cultivating the practices of a reflective practitioner (Sellars, 2013) in a manner that helps keep challenging issues manageable, while fostering engagement and action.

- **Teacher-Student Interaction** – A coach approach to teacher-student interaction can occur in any number of contexts both outside and inside the classroom. In general, rather than teachers simply providing solutions or directions, they might ask discovery questions to help students identify what has worked for them before or what resources they might not have yet recognized, including new ways of seeing and overcoming barriers. The potential is for increased student autonomy, agency, and engagement as illustrated in earlier parts of this article.

- **Pedagogic Design** – There are various ways of approaching teaching and learning, but for instructors who embrace constructivist models of student-centered learning, including problem-solving, inquiry-based approaches (Savery, 2006), and problem-posing approaches grounded in critical pedagogy (Crookes, 2013), a coach approach encompassing attentive listening and thoughtful use of questions has much to offer.

Conclusion

To return to the question we posed at the beginning: What might coaching have to do with TESOL? In our view, a lot!

Organizations that not only survive, but thrive, in changing times and conditions are learning organizations, organizations that seek to understand complexity, foster opportunities for reflective conversations, and create conditions for the kind of thinking where aspirations flourish and can be enacted. What's more, the nature of these organizations and the nature

of interaction between the people within them is co-constitutive (Senge, 2006, pp. xi-xviii). In TESOL, this brings us back to the significance of what goes on inside and between people in a learning environment (Stevick, 1980) and the potential related implications for what goes on beyond (Kristjansson, 2013).

While the use of attentive listening and insightful questions is not new in education (Bird, 2002), an understanding of coaching and related processes provides a helpful framework for the application of these skills in a strategic manner that supports not only reflective thinking but also enhanced possibilities for agency and empowered action. In short, we see coaching as a means of developing new capabilities, exploring new horizons, and discovering new worlds of opportunities for ourselves and our students.

What are your thoughts on coaching in TESOL?

We would like to end with an invitation for you to unpack this big question by considering some of the reflective questions below. While this can be done alone, if you would like to take a coach approach to the activity, we invite you to find a colleague who has also read this article. Then take turns as coach and coachee. When in coach mode, ask your partner several of the following questions or other relevant open-ended questions of your choice. Refrain from commenting on your partner's response; your goal is to listen only, to help your colleague explore his/her understanding, and clarify his/her thinking. Enjoy!

Questions for Reflection

1. What aspects of coaching in TESOL are familiar to you?

2. What aspects of coaching in TESOL are challenging to you?

3. What opportunities do you see for coaching in your own TESOL context?

4. What's one small step you could take to explore this further?

If you would like to let us know your thoughts, feel free to contact us.

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