

## Case 7: workplace, London, UK

### Introduction:

This pilot was hosted by an employer-organisation.

The organisation is a charity that provides adult social care services, including residential care, day care and home care, in London and the east of England to 7,000 adults and their families, including frail elderly people, people with mental health needs, people with dementia, MS, Parkinson's, strokes and those who are visually impaired.

The organisation employs 1,500 paid staff and 3000 volunteers.

A very high proportion of paid staff are migrant workers for whom English is an additional language.

English language support is available to staff through a tutoring scheme staffed by volunteers and co-ordinated by the employer's HR department. Managers are able to request support from the scheme for individual staff. The scheme entitles staff to one hour per week of one-to-one instruction in paid work time, delivered by a volunteer tutor, who is often a retired English language teacher.

The pilot was arranged through this scheme.

### 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 not 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:

- Learner 1: Male, Filipino, aged 55-60, qualified nurse, in UK for more than 10 years

Learning focus: pronunciation [2 sessions\*]

- Learner 2: Female, Brazilian, aged in her 40s, support worker, in UK for more than 30 years  
Learning focus: spoken grammar, pronunciation [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 [6 sessions\*\*]
- Learner 4: Female, Nepalese, aged in her 30s, care worker, in UK for more than five years  
Learning focus: pronunciation, report writing [12 sessions]
- Learner 5: Female, Polish, aged in her 30s, care worker, in UK for more than four years  
Learning focus: report writing, reading [4 sessions\*\*]
- 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 [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.

#### **Background of coaches:**

- 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\*]
- 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]
- 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\*\*]
- 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]

- Coach 5: Female, retired EFL teacher, no prior coaching experience– already involved with volunteer tutoring scheme, but no prior relationship with learner [4 sessions\*\*]
  - 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

All coaches acted on a voluntary basis, with the exception of Coach 1, who was employed by organisation hosting the pilot.

### What were the coaches asked to do?

The coaches were asked to use non-directive coaching techniques to help learners become more autonomous as literacy and language learners. More specifically, they were asked to help their learner develop and carry out a learner-generated, 12 week self-directed learning project, with a view to building the learner's confidence, raising the learner's awareness (e.g. of learning strategies effective for the individual) and enabling the learning to take responsibility for their own learning.

In addition, coaches were asked to record sessions (with the agreement of the learner) and keep a written record of what happened during the pilot (using templates developed by the project, see below).

### Coach training:

Coach training included

- Four pre-readings on coaching and the concept of self-directed learning
- Three half-day training sessions, including
  - An initial session at which coaches were issued with a number of prompts to help communicate the aims and objectives of the pilot to learners (i.e. replacing instruction with non-directive coaching to develop learner autonomy) and templates to help learner-coach pairs structure their sessions together, including templates to record session aims, objectives and outcomes.
  - Two further sessions (requested by coaches) at three-month intervals to review and reflect on progress; the first of these two sessions included some further input on coaching theory and practice
- During the project, individual coaches contacted the project team member co-ordinating this pilot on a number of occasions via telephone and email for advice and guidance on specific issues arising for them.
- At the end of the pilot, nine months after the initial session, coaches met with the co-ordinating project team member for a final review session.

### Pilot site:

Coaching sessions were held where the learner worked; this included the organisation's main administrative building (Learner 3) and different residential care homes (Learner 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6).

### Findings:

Both learners and coaches found value in the approach (including the reluctant Learner 1). Learners reported significant gains in confidence directly linked to the perception that they were now in charge of their own learning  
*Pilots ALL-SR - For more information see [itta.uva.nl/learnerautonomy](http://itta.uva.nl/learnerautonomy)*

(they compared this aspect of the coaching very favourably to learning situations where the agenda was set by a teacher). They also reported the development of new learning strategies and the identification of new learning resources. Coaches likewise noted the transformational impact of encouraging learners to take responsibility for their own learning in this way. Coach 2 characterised the approach as one which ‘empowers, engages, involves and respects the learner.’ Coaches also reported that the coaching approach allowed them to form a much fuller understanding of their learner than a teaching approach did.

This fuller engagement might also present the coach with challenges, as this report from one coach illustrates:

*[The learner] came into the room and sat down and then burst into tears. She said that nobody understands her, it's all a waste of time, she is very stupid etc., etc. She was very distressed as you can imagine. I asked her why this had happened, and it seemed that the other carers were finding her English difficult.*

Overall, it is clear that coaches and learners were just starting to get to grips with the approach by the end of the pilot. For the most part, learners continued to view their coaches as teachers and to look to them for instruction, corrective feedback and guidance on strategies and resources. Coaches responded to this in different ways at different times. Some coaches tried consciously to avoid teaching behaviours while others consciously and explicitly devoted a portion of their session to teaching. In some instances coaches appear to have been unclear as to the distinction between coaching behaviours, teaching behaviours and befriending behaviours.

In addition to these uncertainties around behaviours appropriate to the coaching relationship, there were also uncertainties around how to structure the coaching process, in particular goal-setting and the formulation of learning projects. Learners and coaches tended to arrive at goals focused on technical aspects of language, e.g. pronunciation, grammar, functional language, vocabulary and then seek to address these goals, often from an instructional perspective. There is little evidence of the formulation of 12-week learning projects (the approach suggested to coaches by the project team member responsible for this pilot).

This touches on the crucial issue of responsibility for learning. The coaching approach gives that responsibility wholly and solely to the learner. The coach's responsibility is to the coaching process. In the pilot, however, it appears to have been very difficult for coaches – particularly coaches who identified as language learners – to relinquish responsibility for the learner's language development. Obviously, this is hardly surprising, particularly given that only one of the coach's had received any prior training in coaching.

In light of which, it is perhaps striking that learners responded so positively to the approach, reporting empowerment in many areas of their lives both at work and outside work, which they attributed directly to confidence gained through the coaching approach.

### Lessons learned

- The basic concept of the approach – i.e. that coaching can help learners develop autonomous learning skills and that autonomous learning skills help learners develop and sustain their skills – seems sound; all learners in this pilot (including reluctant Learner 1) reported and evidenced gains in learner autonomy. Some also evidenced quite striking improvements in their communicative competence.
- For the process to work as intended, coaches must understand clearly that they are there to coach, not instruct; that their responsibility is for the coaching process, not the learner's progress. This may be difficult for coaches who identify themselves primarily as language teachers.



Erasmus+



- Helping the learner to identify goals and then formulate an appropriate learning project to help achieve those goals is an essential competence for the coach.
- None of this is rocket science, but it does require from the coach clarity of purpose and commitment to the value of autonomous learning. Commitment to the value of autonomous learning may not be trainable, but clarity of purpose surely is.
- The pilot suggests that 12 weeks of supervised practice with a learner, combined with input of the type provided by this pilot (i.e. three or four half-day training sessions, process guidance and supervisory support) would be sufficient to communicate the approach to would-be coaches.
- As well as learning how to behave as coaches themselves, coaches are also likely to have to cope with learners who expect to them to teach. Guidance for coaches on how to clarify roles and responsibilities with the learner – e.g. a contacting template – is likely to be useful to coaches, both in practice and also to help them clarify their own understanding of roles and responsibilities.
- Language teaching expertise is unnecessary for coaches and may even be unhelpful.