

# The My Plan approach

## Peer coaching for migrant cleaners in the Netherlands

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### ABSTRACT

'My Plan' is a weekly group conversation used by low-skilled workers who follow a course of Dutch at the workplace. My Plan adapts the GROW model of coaching to help learners become more aware of their motivation and goals, to develop confidence and to take ownership of their own learning. The teacher takes on the role of a non-directive coach to support learners to discuss their long-term and weekly goals for learning outside the classroom. The coaching teacher asks questions that lead to awareness, responsibility, confidence and ownership by the learner, such as 'Why do you want to learn Dutch?' 'How much time do you want to spend on study and practice?' and 'What do you want to do this week to learn Dutch?' The teacher gradually withdraws as the leader of the group conversation, so that the learners can coach each other in pairs.

### KEYWORDS

language for work, coaching, peer coaching, classroom practices, low-skilled L2 learners, L2 learning in the workplace, self-directed learning, learner autonomy.

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### 1. Introduction

As courses for Dutch in the workplace in the Netherlands tend to get both shorter and less intensive, the need for migrant workers to study and practise outside the classroom is greater than ever. Coming to class a couple of hours a week is simply not enough to learn a second language. In order to improve work-related language skills, learners need to do considerable work on their Dutch in their own time and at work, during and after their course.

Fortunately, adult migrants in The Netherlands have free access to online learning programmes, such as DigLin.eu (Cucchiari et al. 2014, 251-278) and Oefenen.nl (Vaske 2014, 333-354). And for those who do not have an internet-enabled device at home, public libraries provide computers with internet access throughout the country that can be used free of charge. Furthermore, a large group of Dutch volunteers is willing to support learners during their learning process. So there are several resources in the Netherlands, independent of any Dutch in the workplace course, that the adult migrant can use to reach his or her literacy and language-for-work learning goals. But how can the low-skilled migrant worker learn to plan and direct his or her study and practise outside the classroom?

Anecdotally, teachers of work-related Dutch as a Second Language (DSL) often report that their low-skilled learners show little skill in managing and evaluating their own learning. Instead, learners adopt a passive attitude, looking to the teacher for direction. Learning a second language is, under any circumstances, hard work. When it includes learning, for the first time, how to read and write it becomes a tremendous endeavour, demanding a lot of the learner's time and energy. Emerging learners, however, often seem to be unaware of this, perhaps since it is the first time they go to school to learn how to read and write. Still, in order to become functionally literate, especially in the

current situation of ongoing budget cutbacks, it is important that the low-skilled adult migrant becomes more autonomous, confident and aware of his or her motivation, goal and plan. Non-directive coaching is designed specifically to help people develop the awareness and confidence to take responsibility for their own learning. This article describes how to use a peer coaching approach called ‘My Plan’ to develop the ability of low-skilled adult migrants to set learning goals and to take advantage of practice opportunities outside of the classroom.

## 2. Context of the case

My Plan was piloted and developed during the first ten weeks of a twenty-week course on Dutch in the Workplace, from January 2016 to April 2016. The course took place every Tuesday from 12 to 3 pm and lasted sixty hours in total. The course was delivered at a mental health care institution in the Amsterdam area of the Netherlands. This was one of several work locations for the learners, who were employed as cleaners by a large, international facilities management company providing services at a number of different locations around Amsterdam. The learners attended in their own time after working a morning shift – and in the case of some, before going on to a second, evening shift. Their time in class was unpaid, but traveling expenses to the venue were covered by their employer.

The course itself was organised by the Dutch trade union for cleaners, who commissioned *Taal in het Bedrijf* (Language at the Company), a private organisation specialising in Dutch at the workplace, to deliver it. Course participants were recruited (on a voluntary basis) by their manager. *Taal in het Bedrijf* assessed the learners’ oral and written skills in Dutch and agreed an outline curriculum with the trade union then sub-contracted delivery of the course to the author of this paper. The trade union of cleaners requested two reports on the individual progress of the learners and the results of the final oral exam. Payment to the language company was dependent on the end result of the learners: they had to reach level A2 for the oral skills in situations at work.

### 2.1 Background of the learners

The learners already spoke a little Dutch at the start of the course, around level A1. Table 1 illustrates the background of the five learners.

Table 1: *Background of the learners*

Learner	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Time in the Netherlands	Years of previous education	Years of experiential learning Dutch in the classroom	Dutch proficiency level reading & writing	Dutch proficiency level speaking & listening
D.	m	48	Ghana	6 years	none	None	0	A1
H.	m	51	Morocco	22 years	5	2	A1	A1
L.	f	38	Spain / Morocco	3	7	None	A1	A1
M.	m	42	Nigeria	4 years	4	None	A1	A1
N.	f	22	Pakistan	4 years	10	1	A1	A1

### 2.2 Curriculum and goals of the course

The curriculum of the course was already set in collaboration with the trade union. It focused on using the Dutch language at work. Examples of language goals in the curriculum are:

- understanding instructions about how and what to clean;
- calling in sick;
- knowing your rights and duties as an employee;
- describing tasks and interacting with patients and colleagues.

However, in the first session, the learners told the teacher that they also wanted to work on reading and writing, and raise their general level of Dutch, not only for work-related use. When asked later on in the course during the My Plan conversations, the learners turned out to have long-term life goals they related the L2 learning to, such as getting a qualification to become a bus driver, being able to speak to the doctor, or becoming a manager in the cleaning company.

### *2.3 Assessment of the course results*

The teacher wrote a report for the language school on the progress of each learner after ten weeks. She also discussed the content of this report with the learners. After twenty weeks, the learners had to take an oral assessment, in which their communication skills at work were tested in several role plays about communication at work. The goal of the course was to reach level A2 for the practical oral tasks<sup>1</sup>. The teacher wrote final reports about every learner, which were again evaluated with the learner and later on shared with the manager and the language school. The language school then informed the trade union about the learners' results. At a ceremony after the course finished, the manager gave a certificate and flowers to every worker. The learners discussed what they had learned with the manager and made plans for further learning.

### *2.4 Why coaching was introduced in this course on Dutch in the workplace for cleaners*

Prior to the course, the author of this paper had worked on the Erasmus+ project, Autonomous Literacy Learners: Sustainable Results (ALL-SR). The ALL-SR project aimed to explore the potential of coaching to support self-directed language and literacy learning.<sup>2</sup> When contracted to teach the cleaners' course, the author was concerned that 60 hours of classroom contact over twenty weeks would prove insufficient for the learners to reach level A2, let alone achieve their own language goals, and decided to experiment with coaching for self-directed L2 learning.

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1 Introducing the coaching*

The coaching was introduced in session two in simple words. The teacher asked the learners how children learn to walk. When and where do they practise? How often? Is it easy? Do they get help? How long does it take before they can walk really well? Naturally, the learners knew how children learn to walk: they had seen it around them many times. They told their teacher that children practise all the time, that they often fall, but that they do not give up trying, that they use the couch and the coffee table and their older brothers and sisters for support. The teacher then explained that learning a new language is similar to learning how to walk. Coming to class a couple of hours a week to practise is not enough to learn the language. Children do not learn how to walk by practising a couple of hours a week either. The learners thought this was funny and true. The teacher proceeded to explain that the learners were adults, not children. This is why they were invited to make a plan for practising. It is important to make a plan, because adult learners usually have more to do in a day than just learning Dutch. That is an important difference with a small child, who can dedicate all his or her time to this goal. This introduction made it more clear to the learners what My Plan was and why they were invited to work with it.

### *3.2 The GROW model*

Non-directive coaching is a conversation structured by the coach using non-directive questioning. The goal of this conversation is to help the individual or group to improve their performance in a specific area (Braddell 2017, 6). In

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<sup>1</sup> A2 is a proficiency level described in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001)

<sup>2</sup> The results of the project are available online at [www.itta.uva.nl/learnerautonomy](http://www.itta.uva.nl/learnerautonomy).

order to provoke awareness and responsibility, the coach can follow a sequence of questions. A well-known one is called the GROW model:

**Goal** setting for the session in both the short and long term

**Reality** checking to explore the current situation

**Options** and alternative strategies or courses of action

**What** is to be done, **When**, by **Whom**, and the **Will** to do it (Whitmore 2009, 55)

### *3.3 A simplified GROW model*

Classical non-directive coaching as described above can be problematic in a Language for Work context for several reasons. In the reality of a low level language classroom, there is often little time for individual learners. Also, learners may lack the language level and/or familiarity with reflective thinking that typically underpin the coaching conversation. My Plan aimed to adapt classical coaching to this specific context. The GROW model was therefore adapted by simplifying the sequence of coaching questions to a set of here-and now-questions that came up every week. Less context-rich questions were left out. Thus, typical coaching questions such as “What steps can you identify, and what is their time frame?” and “What if you knew the answer? What would it be?” were excluded. All the questions a coach can ask about the goal, reality, options and plan of the coachee were reduced to five questions for long term goal setting and five questions for short term goal setting, by and large following the order of the GROW model.

### *3.4 Setting long-term goals*

The first sessions of My Plan were group conversations about long-term goals. The teacher asked each learner:

1. Why do you want to learn Dutch?
2. What is your plan?
3. How much time do you need to reach your goal?
4. How much time do you want to invest?
5. When do you want to take time to study?

The teacher would invite another member of the group to summarize the plan of the other, and so facilitate understanding each other, listening to each other and improving the attention span of the learners in Dutch.

### *3.5 Making a plan for the week*

In subsequent sessions the coaching took place in pairs and focused on setting a learning goal for the coming week. The questions were:

1. What are you going to do this week to learn Dutch?
2. Where are you going to this?
3. When are you going to this?
4. Who can you ask for help?
5. Can I ask you next week how your plan went?

After some time, the learners were able to coach each other without the help of the teacher. Sometimes they would coach differently from the teacher, for example, by asking many questions all at once or by advising their peers (see Table 2).

Table 2: *Fragment of the transcript of a conversation between learners D. and M.*

D:	When the chicken soup is finished, I'm going out. I go to the house of my friend. Then I'll talk a bit. Then I go back home and look at the Dutch lessons.
M:	At what time are you going to read? And at what time are you going to ask someone if your reading and your talking is good? When can you ask someone for help?
D:	It's difficult with my friends. Nobody speaks Dutch well.
M:	Look, I am telling you this now, look, you're taking Dutch classes now, right? As for me, I used to hang out only with Africans and I only spoke my own language. That was not good for me. Now I look for people I can practise my Dutch with. You should do the same. Look for a man, a woman, it doesn't matter who it is. Not only 'Ghana, Ghana, Ghana.' That's not good.

As shown in Table 3, the learners memorized the coaching questions, sometimes mixing them up, but still staying close to the essence of coaching.

Table 3: *Fragment of the transcript of a conversation between learners N. and L.*

N:	What do you study?
L:	My book, about working in the Netherlands. And also the homework.
N:	What are you going to learn from your book?
L:	I want to learn phrases. It is good for me to repeat them. So, to repeat the phrases. Also, I want to do the homework.
N:	Is this book difficult or easy for you?
L:	The book is fine, but there are days that my head is completely full, then looking at it is really difficult.
N:	Okay, so do you have someone to help you at home?
L:	There are days I ask my daughter. When there are phrases I don't understand, I ask her. I ask her to take a look, if it's correct or not.
N:	Okay, and if your daughter doesn't understand it either, then what?
L:	No, it's fine you know, because my daughter speaks Dutch really well. She learned it at school.
N:	L., do you practise every day?
L:	No, I can't every day.
N:	What times? And which days?
L:	Three or four times a week.
N:	Friday or Saturday? Which day do you practise?
L:	Monday, Wednesday, Thursday also. Not on weekends, then I'm really busy.

### 3.6 Looking back at last week's plan

Every week the learners asked each other how the plans of the week before had turned out. This step was important, both for cultivating awareness about reality and for building confidence. Often, learners were confronted with unexpected events that made them change their initial plan. Learner D. from Ghana received some bills and parking fines one week, that he couldn't pay for. He had to look for help to solve this urgent problem. The learners became aware of how hard it was to carry out a plan when you have so many other responsibilities and tasks. Learner N., the young woman from Pakistan, found herself confronted with a lot of housework that her brothers and sisters expected her to do. She saw the opportunity to study for a couple of hours every afternoon in the kitchen, while keeping an eye on the dishes simmering on the stove. Learners often practised less Dutch than they had planned to, but they were still successful. Every success, however small, was celebrated by the group. Little by little, both their level of awareness and their confidence grew.

### 3.7 Weekly group discussion

As shown in Figure 1, My Plan formed a part of the weekly lesson programme. The questions were always the same, allowing the learners to memorize them. In the beginning, only the teacher took on the role of the coach, and led the group conversation. After the third lesson, the teacher started experimenting with peer coaching. The learners would coach each other in pairs. There were still group conversations also, but the teacher did not direct the conversation as much anymore.

Figure 1: My Plan as part of the lesson programme every week.

<p>Les 11 Dinsdag 5 april 2016</p> <p>☺☺ samen praten <u>mijn plan</u></p> <p>📖✍️ lezen en schrijven</p> <p>🌐 de bal uitspraak oefenen</p> <p>☺☺ samen praten: wat heb je gedaan?</p> <p>👤👤➔🏠 naar huis 15.00 uur</p>	<p>Translation:</p> <p>Lesson 11 Tuesday April 5, 2016</p> <p>Talking together: <u>My plan</u></p> <p>Reading and writing</p> <p>Practising pronunciation : the ball</p> <p>Leaving for home (3 p.m.).</p>
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## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Principles of coaching

The approach of 'My Plan' is based on coaching. But what is meant by coaching is not always agreed. When the term coaching is used, it can refer to many different things, such as mentoring, advising, guiding or helping. The coaching we refer to in this article, however, is non-directive coaching, as articulated by Whitmore (2009). Whitmore states that the essence of coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximize their own performance. A coach believes that people are capable of much more than they show and sees them in terms of their potential, not of their past failures. To use coaching successfully, the coach has to adopt an optimistic view of the dormant capability of the coachee.

The first key element of coaching is awareness. That awareness leads to skill was discovered in the sixties when this form of coaching was being developed for sports (Whitmore 2009, 10). Awareness is empowering, because one is able to attend to what one is aware of. Responsibility is the second key concept of coaching. Telling someone to be responsible does not make someone feel responsible. This involves choice. When the coachee truly chooses and takes responsibility for his or her goals, the commitment to them rises and so does the performance. Thirdly, building self-belief is a major goal of the coaching. Experiencing success is the most effective way to build this self-belief. The coachee needs to know that the success is due to his or her own efforts. (Whitmore 2009, 18) That is why in non-directive coaching, the individual or group is the expert and they set the agenda. (Braddell 2017, 6)

#### *4.2. Intercultural coaching*

There is also the issue of other cultural orientations. Non-directive coaching is a concept that was developed in the Western world. Coaching implies values that are not as common everywhere as we might think, such as the individual being the central point of focus, instead of the group. Also, the way the coach and the coachee communicate is typically Western: the coach asks direct, personal questions and the coachee is supposed to answer them openly and honestly, without worrying about losing face, questioning the authority of the coach or hurting anyone's feelings. In the My Plan approach, the coaching is a group conversation and the learners coach each other. This may be a more interculturally sensitive manner of coaching. Learning how to coach each other by observing and imitating the teacher as a coach may well be a way of learning that suits the culturally-bound learning styles of the learners. Barbara Rogoff et al (2003, 175-203), describe in their research how keen observation and listening-in are valued and used throughout many rural cultural communities in which children are part of mature community activities.

### **5. Results**

The five learners in this case worked with My Plan for only ten weeks, so long-term results cannot yet be reported. However, the learners and the teacher did report an increase of confidence and a rise in awareness and in responsibility. Every learner had a long-term goal, an intrinsic motivation for learning Dutch and improving literacy. Some wanted to find a better job, others wanted to communicate better at work. The learners experienced great enjoyment in the coaching and noticed an increase in team spirit and well-being.

When asked about learning activities outside the classroom, the learners reported that they had not managed to do everything they planned to do, but that they did get more practising and homework done at home. They were proud of that, and at the same time they realized that there was still much to be done to reach their goals.

The teacher found that in comparison to learners in similar language training courses without coaching, these learners were practising more outside the classroom. They also developed more realistic ideas of what it takes to learn Dutch and were more aware of their motivation and goals. The finding that most surprised the teacher was that all the learners adopted her coaching attitude to some extent. Two learners turned out to be especially talented coaches. All learners had carefully observed their teacher and after a few weeks imitated not only her sentences, but also her tone and even her body language when coaching. At the end of the course, all learners passed the oral assessment at level A2.

### **6. Recommendations for further use**

Coaching for L2 learning in the workplace can be applied in various other contexts than the one described here. The non-directive coaching approach can be integrated into classroom settings, in informal learning with the help of non-professionals, or in support groups of refugees. Some recommendations for further use of My Plan are presented below.

#### *6.1 Need for good coaching training*

The most important condition is having a teacher who is well-trained as a coach. Teachers who want to use coaching in their Language for Work classroom will have to invest time and energy to become familiar with the principles and practice of coaching, through self-study or training. This will take some effort, since coaching is not a trick or a simple technique. Coaching demands a non-directive approach from the teacher and it might take some time for teachers to get used to this. Asking the right coaching questions in simple language is not easy: it needs practice and a willingness on the part of coach-teacher to learn from mistakes.

### *6.2 Implementing coaching techniques in a team of teachers*

Coordinators and programme developers who would like their Language for Work teachers to adopt more of a coaching approach are advised to implement coaching in a sensitive manner. It would be somewhat contradictory to introduce coaching top-down in a team, while personal commitment is at the very essence of coaching. Coaching should be an option, not a mandatory way of working. When a team is enthusiastic about coaching and wants to start a training course, they will need time and opportunity to study and practice. We recommend that coaching training be embedded in a broader learning environment. For example, after the training, teachers could continue to learn through peer review. To facilitate their own self-directed learning in the longer term, the teachers might be supported by a coach themselves.

### *6.3 Explaining coaching to the learner*

Not only the teachers, but also the learners may need time to get used to coaching in the classroom, since adult migrant L2 learners often expect the teacher to direct the learning process, including giving homework and telling the learners what else to do to practise at home. Talking about the reason for coaching with the learners is recommended. Teachers may discover that low-level learners quickly grasp the rationale for My Plan, as long as it is explained in a way they can relate to, such as the example of the child that learns how to walk (see section 3.1).

### *6.4 The L2 proficiency level*

What L2 level do learners need to work with coaching? It may be preferable not to set a certain minimum proficiency level, since the skill of low-level learners is often hard to assess with a standardized test. It takes time and the trust of learners to discover their true ability to communicate in the L2. Naturally, learners need to have a basic vocabulary in the L2 to be able to understand and answer the coaching questions, somewhere between CEFR A1 and A2. Teachers are encouraged to try out coaching and carefully observe how learners react. In this experiment, the learners could follow My Plan at CEFR level A1. They greatly appreciated the interest of the coaching teacher in their goals, life and plans, which made them make an effort to speak in the L2. When working with the approach of My Plan, the same questions are repeated every session, so emergent learners get time to come to understand the questions over the weeks. They also build vocabulary. One of the learners in this case was mostly listening in the first sessions. He understood, but he couldn't or wouldn't talk. Around the seventh week, he suddenly told the group more about his plan. He had evidently been thinking about it all the time.

The learners described in this case were emergent learners. They all had a proficiency level around CEFR A1. When tested, they wouldn't pass level CEFR A2, because none of these learners was able to speak in more-or-less correct sentences yet. However, they were able to talk about much more than just the very familiar topics close to their own world, the standard for level A1. The reason for this was that their world was quite large, because they all worked. They had to communicate in Dutch in a range of situations at work every day. Especially low-skilled adults are often remarkably adept in getting a message across with very limited L2 proficiency. The learners in this case understood each other, but native Dutch speakers who are not used to 'foreigner talk' were unable to follow what they were saying. So it is also dependent on the ability of the teacher to understand and translate learner language to standard L2.

Working in a group with various language levels is an advantage. The learners who are more proficient can help learners with a lower level. Learners also learn the L2 through the coaching. Since My Plan is repeated every week, learners build vocabulary by listening to each other and by repeating the questions. If not all the learners understand My Plan the first time, after a couple of weeks they will get the meaning of it.

Also, it is important to realise that learners generally understand much more than they can express in the L2. Furthermore, we are dealing with capable adults, who are parents, workers, partners and citizens. The fact that they may be low-literate or non-literate does not mean they have a low intelligence. They have had many previous



experiences with learning and may have already learned other languages, which means they have developed preferred strategies. These learning experiences and strategies may well vary from traditional classroom teaching. In a Language for Work context, they could however be surprisingly useful, since learners learn and practise at work and in daily life.

When working with learners who have hardly any understanding of the L2 yet, the L1 can also be used. This could be especially practical in groups with a shared L1, such as Eritrean or Syrian refugees. In this case, the coaching teacher will need the help of a more advanced student to translate the coaching questions and answers.

For successful coaching to low-level learners, the language use of the coaching teacher is just as important as the proficiency level of the learner. Much is dependent on the competence of the coaching teacher to speak in correct but simple sentences and to make abstract concepts concrete and accessible for the low-level learner. Also, a teacher who is clear about what he or she is doing as a coach is surely more likely to communicate clearly than a teacher who is still trying to figure it out for him- or herself.

Lastly, non-directive coaching such as the My Plan approach can bridge the gap between the classroom and the learning opportunities and supports offered in the workplace. While there is great potential for learning at and through work, too often that potential goes unrealised because neither the learner nor any of the other actors present know how to realise it. My Plan can help the learner and the teacher to change that situation. Through the questions of My Plan, the learners become aware of when, where and with whom they can practise at work.

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