SUPPORTING THE LEARNING PROCESS OF LSP LEARNERS WITH A COACHING-ORIENTED APPROACH: EXAMPLES IN THE CONTEXT OF AN INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

Abstract

A constant element of professional discourse on teaching methodology is the need for a change in pedagogical culture, which includes a shift from the traditional teacher-centred approach toward a teacher’s role that supports the learning process and gives more space to student choices. In the CORALL project conducted at our university we have promoted this change in pedagogical culture by developing and implementing a coaching-oriented approach. The main aim of this paper is to show what a coaching-oriented approach means in LSP teaching in the framework of an international university project and how the coaching-oriented approach is integrated in the material developed in the project. We have applied a qualitative analysis of the project material along the basic features of the coaching-oriented approach, including treating learners as partners, increasing transparency, developing learner awareness and encouraging reflection, as well as supporting language learners to make informed choices using their own resources. The main findings of the study underline that the coaching-oriented approach can be applied in teaching and learning LSP but also emphasise the need for a supportive environment and step-by-step implementation strategies for effective pedagogical transformation. Finally, the study illustrates how the CORALL project can be used as an inspirational model for change in the teaching methodology of LSP and other subjects.

Keywords: autonomous language learning, LSP teaching methodology, coaching-oriented approach, teacher’s role, international project
1 Introduction

The need for a change in pedagogical culture to accommodate and adapt to the changes in our society, which has been present for several decades now, requires a shift in the language teacher’s role towards a more learner-centred approach (e.g. Dam, 2020; Kleppin & Spänkuch, 2014; Little, 2017, 2020a, 2020b). This is even more true in higher education, where the increasing number of students, the decreasing number of classes and employers’ changing expectations necessitate a paradigm shift (Asztalos et al., 2020). At universities the focus is on teaching LSP (dominantly English for Business Purposes) and the heterogeneous knowledge and skills of students require teachers to apply innovative teaching approaches (Einhorn, 2015). In addition, learners may have various levels of motivation depending on the type of language course they take (e.g. compulsory or elective), the time they have besides their other courses and jobs and their previous language learning experience (Kleppin & Spänkuch, 2014).

Therefore, learners should be encouraged to follow individual learning paths and become more autonomous language learners. In order to achieve this, teachers need to change their teaching approach but retain a key role in supporting learners on their way to develop autonomous language learning skills (Benson, 2011; Everhard, 2016; Lamb, 2017; Little, 2020a). The thematisation of the changing roles of teacher and learner is also reflected in the terms given in the literature as alternatives to the term ‘teacher’: facilitator, counsellor, advisor, coach, consultant, guide, mentor and tutor (Lennon, 2020). The underlying meanings of these terms help to interpret the role of teachers in autonomous learning contexts, focusing on different ways of supporting autonomous learning.

Language learners’ growing need for individual support has led to the appearance of self-access language learning centres and language advisors or coaches, who provide personalized support to learners. Language teachers, who are not qualified language advisors or coaches, can still adopt a coaching attitude in their teaching to support autonomous language learning. At Budapest Business University, a university for applied sciences, a new coaching-oriented approach was designed for LSP teachers in the framework of an Erasmus+ international project to help them foster language learner autonomy. In this study, after a review of selected literature on language learner autonomy and language coaching and advising, followed by a short introduction of our project (https://corallprojecteu.wixsite.com/presentation), we aim to answer the following research questions:

• What does a coaching-oriented approach mean in LSP teaching in the framework of an international higher education project?
• How is the coaching-oriented approach integrated in the material developed in the CORALL project?

2 Theoretical background

The conceptual framework of our project is based on two areas of language learning theory: language learner autonomy and language coaching and advising. Two presentations provide an overview of these topics on the project’s website along with best practices from both
areas. In the following, a short review of literature will be provided in these areas focusing on the aspects relevant to our project.

2.1 Language learner autonomy

Language learner autonomy is a multifaceted, complex phenomenon and its description requires an interdisciplinary approach. Accordingly, the literature on this topic offers a number of different approaches to its conceptualization, operationalization and evaluation (see the extensive review of 61 research articles by Chong & Reinders, 2022). Central to the various definitions is the interpretation of language learner autonomy as taking responsibility for learning (Benson, 2001, 2011; Little, 1999, 2020a, 2020b; Mynard, 2019; Oxford, 2015). Four aspects of autonomy defined in this way are technical, psychological, sociocultural, and political-critical (Oxford, 2003; Sudhershan, 2012). From a technical perspective, autonomy encompasses the knowledge and ability required to manage learning, while the psychological perspective focuses on learner characteristics and includes, among others, metacognitive knowledge, reflective ability, the management of emotions and motivational resources. From a sociocultural perspective, developing autonomy involves accepting the challenge of learning from and with others. Finally, the political-critical perspective means overcoming obstacles to learners’ development (Benson, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Oxford, 2003).

Autonomous language learning is a prerequisite for effective learning (Little, 2017). Autonomy, as a complex dynamic system (Oxford, 2015; Tassinari, 2012), can be achieved in different ways and to different degrees, depending on the individual and the context (Benson 2011; Tassinari, 2012). According to the four aspects mentioned above, it includes the learners’ ability to control their learning process, to take responsibility for the learning content and the shaping of the learning environment, as well as the ability to know how to learn and what resources and strategies to use, to think deeply about oneself as a learner and one’s learning process, to collaborate and communicate with others, and to control one’s motivation and emotional state (Benson 2001; Mynard, 2019; Tassinari, 2012).

Autonomous language learning skills can be developed and enhanced with appropriate support, but this requires an educational environment that provides space for learners to exercise responsibility and gives them the support they need (Benson, 2011; Little 1999; Scharle & Szabó, 2000). Approaches that focus on classroom learning emphasise the central role of the teacher in developing and supporting autonomous language learning (Benson, 2011; Everhard, 2016; Godwin-Jones, 2011; Jimenez Raya et al., 2017; Lamb, 2017; Little, 2007).

Language learner autonomy can also be understood as the transition from a teacher-initiated and teacher-directed learning environment to a learner-initiated and learner-directed learning environment (Dam 2020; Little, 2017). There are many components and ways of teacher support for the development of autonomous learners, but gradual introduction, awareness-raising and support for reflection are central to this process (Scharle & Szabó, 2000; Tassinari, 2012, 2017).
2.2 Language coaching and advising

In higher education, the system of language advising has developed in conjunction with self-access language learning centres (Kleppin, 2019; Mozzon-McPherson & Tassinari, 2020). The concept of coaching, originally used in sport and the business world, has also spread to the world of education and language learning in order to optimise learning. In the last decade, much work has been done in the field of language coaching and advising. Accordingly, the two fields are constantly evolving and there are many different approaches in both (Kleppin, 2019; Kovács, 2022). The two concepts are often referred to as synonyms in the autonomous learning literature (see Kleppin & Spànkuch 2014; Mynard, 2019). Kleppin and Spànkuch (2014) point out that while language advising and language coaching have different theoretical backgrounds, they also share many similarities in their functions and principles and have a common underlying goal: to support autonomous language learning (Kleppin & Spànkuch, 2014; Spànkuch, 2018).

Language coaching provides support and structured assistance to stimulate reflection on language learning. Language learners participate voluntarily in this process and are equal partners who know themselves best and who, with support, can optimise their learning process by drawing on their own resources, including their skills, abilities and competencies (Kleppin, 2019; Kleppin & Spànkuch, 2012; Spànkuch, 2018). In coaching, it is essential that the starting point is always the perspective of the language learner and not that of the supporting coach (Kovács, 2022; Spànkuch, 2018). It is equally important that the coach is results-oriented and positive, and trusts the language learners’ ability to find the best solution for them, even if they doubt it themselves (ITTA project, n.d.). Language coaching can help language learners in a number of areas, such as goal setting, developing self-awareness, exploring individual potential, developing an action or learning plan or identifying and overcoming language learning difficulties (Kovács, 2019, 2020, 2022; Spànkuch, 2018). The most common form of coaching and advising is a one-to-one interaction based on a pedagogical dialogue (Kovács, 2022; Mozzon-McPherson & Tassinari, 2020). In addition, there are many different forms of language coaching: face-to-face or online, oral or written, course connected or independent, a complete coaching process or focusing on specific elements, targeting different groups (e.g. international students) and group, peer or self-coaching (Braddell, 2017; Kovács, 2022; Mynard, 2012; Spànkuch, 2018).

Language coaching does not replace language teaching, but complements it, enriches it, provides new perspectives and supports the learning process at a deeper level (Kovács, 2020, 2022). It helps learners to become more aware of themselves as language learners, their learning circumstances and resources, to take responsibility for their learning process, and to make informed and conscious decisions for their successful language learning through continuous reflection (Spànkuch, 2018). This is particularly important in the context of higher education due to the increased emphasis on individual responsibility and the heterogeneity of students’ goals, motivations and language proficiency levels, as well as the diversity of language learning opportunities within and outside the institution (Kleppin & Spànkuch, 2014).

3 Coaching-oriented language teaching

But can a language or LSP teacher also be a language coach? Although some of the teaching competencies overlap with the competencies required for language coaching, the consensus
among experts is that professional training is required for this activity (Kleppin, 2019; Kleppin & Spänkuch, 2012, 2014; Kovács, 2019, 2022). However, it is possible for teachers to use elements of language coaching in language teaching (Kleppin & Spänkuch, 2014; Kovács, 2019; Mozzon-McPherson & Tassinari, 2020; Tassinari, 2017) that permeate the entire teaching/learning process (Kovács, 2019), thus supporting autonomous learning and allowing language learners to take responsibility for their learning. Reflecting the generally accepted assumption that coaching is not only a technique but an attitude (Whitmore, 2009), we coined the term coaching-oriented approach for the CORALL project. The term also shows that the theoretical background of the project is closer to language coaching than to advising as the project aims to broaden the role of the language teacher, away from giving advice and transferring knowledge, which are more commonly associated with the word advice. As a starting point, we have chosen Kleppin and Spänkuch’s definition:

»Language advising/coaching is support that enables language learners to reflect on what they have learned and thereby develop new opportunities for themselves to build on their own abilities, skills, and competencies to learn successfully toward a specific learning goal« (2012, p. 41, own translation).

4 The CORALL project

The CORALL project (Coaching-oriented Online Resources for the Autonomous Learning of LSP 2019-2022) is based on the premise that understanding the coaching approach is a key element in expanding the repertoire of 21st century language teachers and addresses teachers who have not attended a coach training course. Through its intellectual outputs (products), the project focuses primarily on communicating a coaching approach and disposition rather than the application of techniques and tools in the commonly known individual coaching process, which requires training. In addition to treating language learners as partners, increasing transparency, taking into account individual characteristics, goals and preferences, creating a positive and accepting atmosphere; developing language learners’ awareness and promoting reflection are also important. The role of the (LSP) teacher in this approach is not to propose solutions, but rather to stimulate reflection and help language learners make informed decisions about their language learning in areas where they have the opportunity to make choices, taking into account their own resources and possibilities. By promoting a coaching-oriented approach, the ultimate aim of the project is to support the autonomous learning of LSP at higher education institutions (Szénich & Asztalos, 2022).

4.1 CORALL project materials

Teachers interested in coaching-oriented development of language learner autonomy will find theoretical and practical support on the CORALL project website. The main aim was to provide information, tools and materials and to inspire and encourage teachers to use and adapt the materials. In addition to theoretical summaries, a glossary, scientific articles and further resources on language learner autonomy and language coaching, the website also provides a collection of good practices based on the literature review, which has provided ideas for the tools developed in the project. As hands-on material, shorter tools and more
comprehensive modules were created in the project to support autonomous language learning by focusing on a coaching-oriented approach.

The 38 tools and 11 modules developed in the project focus on areas relevant for learner autonomy: needs analysis, time management, assessment, planning, reflection and learner awareness. All materials contain instructions for teachers, which provide detailed information and recommendations for the use of the materials (e.g. purpose, language level, working format). While all tools are available in English, some are also available in German, Spanish and Hungarian. In addition, practical guidelines were developed for teachers to provide background information, help them select and adapt the right material for their needs, and to provide practical tips on how to use the material.

Due to institutional and other constraints, language teachers may have different opportunities to support learner autonomy (Tassinari, 2017). The CORALL project therefore aims to inspire interested language teachers with a practice-oriented toolkit to start, even in small steps, with a coaching-oriented approach to language teaching that supports learner autonomy. The materials produced can be used in conjunction with or independently of a language course and can be adapted to a specific teaching context.

Twenty-five case studies help teachers make informed decisions about how to use the tools. The case studies summarise the circumstances and experiences of the piloting process, highlighting elements that worked well, as well as possible difficulties. They also suggest ways to overcome these difficulties, to give more learner control or more guidance to students, according to the educational context.

4.2 Examples of the coaching-oriented approach in the project

Several examples which follow illustrate how some of the basic features of the coaching-oriented approach are reflected in the tools and modules created in the project. A key role was given to treating language learners as partners in the language learning process, increasing transparency, developing learner awareness and encouraging reflection on all aspects of autonomy (see four aspects), and helping language learners to make informed choices about their language learning, while recognising and taking into account their own resources.

The CORALL project's approach is based on treating LSP learners as partners, which is the basis of all the tools and modules developed. An illustrative example is the tool to support the contracting of teachers and language learners. Students and the teacher will enter into an agreement, which includes the learning objectives for that course including the course description. In the contract, students break down these goals into sub-goals and may also include their own individual learning goals. They can also reflect on what professional language skills they would like to develop during the course. Another example for treating learners as partners and for developing language learner awareness is the encouragement of reflection on the roles of language teachers and language learners. This can also contribute to specifying learners' responsibilities at the beginning of a course.

Transparency through involving students in shaping the language learning process is also reflected in the CORALL project materials, for example, through the clarification of the
requirements and the assessment system for a language course or for certain tasks. The assessment and grading criteria may be available in an elaborated form for some tools; in other cases they may be developed together with language learners using examples provided. The contract tool described above is also a good example of the principle of transparency: awareness of the institution’s standards, curriculum and requirements is a prerequisite for students to take responsibility for their language learning.

In order to support autonomous language learning, raising awareness and supporting learners to make informed decisions about their language learning are also essential. The coaching-oriented approach is based on informed decisions made by learners about their own language learning. In contrast to the traditional role of the language teacher, this approach does not aim to give specific advice, but to support the language learner in recognising that decisions can only be made with the right information and in accessing the right resources. Awareness raising about autonomous language learning may involve discussing related topics, which include the concept of learner autonomy, motivation, goal setting, language learning strategies and personal learning style, self-assessment and needs analysis, time management, collaboration and peer feedback, reflection and reflective writing. These topics may be discussed using various prompts: in the case of language learning autonomy, a variety of materials collected as input (a definition, a comic strip, a saying, short texts, an autonomy model, etc.) help to elicit ideas related to the topic under discussion. In other cases, links are provided to articles, websites, videos, tests, etc., which help students to find out more about, for example, individual language learning characteristics, language learning styles, the effective use of time, SMART objectives, planning learning, the challenges of reflective writing, or the GROW model. In addition, a range of materials produced as part of the project also inform individual choices, such as recommendations and tips for oral practice or graph description.

An important part of autonomous language learning is self-reflection, i.e. language learners’ conscious reflection on themselves as language learners, on their language learning experiences and circumstances, and on the process and outcomes of language learning (Benson, 2001, Little, 2017; Mynard, 2019; Scharle & Szabó, 2000; Spiczné Bukovszki, 2016; Tassinari, 2012; Wenden, 1999). The aim of reflection is to consciously examine and understand past experiences and one’s own resources in order to make informed choices (Boud et al., 1985; Dam & Legenhausen, 2010; Little, 2017; McCabe et al., 2020; McCarthy, 2013), thereby taking control of one’s language learning.

Reflection is part of most of the tools and modules in the project material. It is implemented in many different ways: from tools offering the opportunity to discuss relevant topics to tools to encourage individual reflection and to a module dedicated to coaching. In line with the coaching-oriented approach, it is important to discuss the role of reflection with language learners, which is supported by project materials. For example, the Managing the self module introduces important areas of language learning autonomy and deepens the knowledge of the learners about autonomy, including reflection and reflective writing. The topics to be reflected on may be based on different materials, textual or visual inputs, question sets, tests and known coaching tools (e.g. scales or the coaching wheel). The number and nature of these can be adapted to the context. Individual reflection can also be practised through reflective writing, which is part of several tools and modules, for example, in the module on
developing speaking skills, learners can choose from a catalogue of questions relevant to their own learning and answer them at the expected length.

Two further examples are highlighted to support reflection, learning diaries and tests and questionnaires. Developed by the Finnish partner, learning diaries address topics relevant to higher education and the world of work beyond the context of language learning, such as the autonomous search for information or managing autonomous learning in multicultural project teams. The tools include group work, which is a fundamental feature of Finnish higher education, either by promoting individual reflection preceded by group discussion or by having teamwork as the object of reflection. The diaries support individual and group reflection in a structured way based on precise instructions guided by questions and topics to be reflected upon. Self-reflection can also be based on tests. Needs analysis questionnaires, including a language placement test, are recommended for the beginning of the term and allow students to reflect on their perceived and actual level of language proficiency. Even personality tests can contribute to developing learner awareness and target language use by using reflection for the interpretation of the results.

In a coaching-oriented approach, in the context of self-reflection, it is important to emphasise that there is no right or wrong solution. The aim for students is not to discover the content expected by the teacher, but to explore their own ideas and to share them with each other in order to enhance individual reflection. At the same time, self-reflection is also an important element of the assessment of autonomous language learning, as it cannot be measured in a traditional way (Dam & Legenhausen, 2010). For example, reflective writing is part of the assessment of the module on supporting speaking skills mentioned above. The system and criteria for assessment should be developed together with the students based on the instructions in the module, including discussing the role of reflection. An important criterion for assessment is not the content, but the level of sophistication, the depth of reflection and the extent to which the requirements of scope and content are met (number of topics or questions covered).

It is recommended that self-reflection be conducted in the target language, even at lower language levels, in order to develop both target language use and communication skills (Dam & Legenhausen, 2010). Oral and written reflection requires practice and the development of communication skills in both the native language and the foreign language learned. Language difficulties in phrasing reflective texts in less proficient or heterogeneous groups may also be a problem. In this case, the native language (or another foreign language, e.g. English) can be used for group discussions, and bilingual materials can gradually promote the transition to individual reflection in the foreign language. Gamification can also be used to motivate students to engage in reflective writing in the language they are learning by giving more points for foreign language reflection.

Reflective dialogue is a key element of coaching processes, as well as of the coaching-oriented approach, in which feedback plays an important role in optimising the learning process. For teachers, the practical guidelines provide background information on the role and content of feedback, but the instructions of some tools also contain useful ideas. Teachers can give feedback to the whole language group, small groups of learners or individual learners on a variety of topics, orally or in writing, depending on the situation. It is therefore important
to discuss the role of feedback and the interfaces and methods of communication with the learners. In addition to the formal course interface, there may be other interaction spaces for communication, including in-class communication or, depending on the possibilities, coaching-oriented conversations outside the course. If teachers recognise that help is needed beyond their capacity, the individual language learner may be recommended to take part in professional language coaching or advising if available (Kleppin & Spänkuch, 2014). In addition to teacher feedback, peer feedback is also an option and guidelines for discussing the rules for this can be found, for example, in the Managing the self and the Developing speaking skills module instructions.

5 Conclusion

Achieving autonomy in language learning is a new challenge for teachers and language learners alike, compared to the traditional teacher-centred approach. Unconventional attitudes and activities imply extra work for both parties and require a supportive and accepting atmosphere, but also introduce new dimensions of responsibility, motivation and achievement. Through its tools, the CORALL project, introduced in this teaching report, aims to encourage this change of roles and to support language learners in taking small steps towards autonomy, using the opportunities provided by the different institutional contexts.

The results of the CORALL project have been integrated into the teaching program of the participating universities. Moreover, they were a fundamental construct in the design of two blended intensive programs (BIPs) in the final year of the project, and the participating universities agreed on a cooperation in further BIPs to be organized in the future. Although the project ended in November 2022, the results are sustainable as all the materials were created as Open Educational Resources, freely available on the project’s website for any student or teacher to use. As the teaching of LSP is integrated in the profile of all participating universities, it is the project participants’ intention to sustain and further develop the resources, based on students’ and teachers’ feedback. A further intention is to disseminate the project’s results at conferences, seminars, workshops and other events so that the materials could be implemented and commented on by LSP teachers at different universities.

References


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Izvleček

Podpora učnemu procesu TJS s pristopom, usmerjenim v kovčing: primeri iz mednarodnega projekta

Potreba po spremembi pedagoške kulture je stalni element strokovnega diskurza o metodologiji poučevanja saj vključuje premik od tradicionalnega, na učitelja osredotočenega pristopa k pristopu, kjer učitelj le podpira učni proces, da lahko daje več prostora izbiram učencev. Inovacije pri poučevanju jezikov za splošne in strokovne namene to spremembo paradigme pogosto upoštevajo, zato bi jih lahko uporabili tudi kot navdihujoč model za spremembe pri metodologiji poučevanja drugih predmetov. V mednarodnem projektu CORALL, ki smo ga izvajali na naši univerzi, smo spremembo pedagoške kulture spodbujali z razvojem pa tudi z izvajanjem v kovčing usmerjenega pristopa. V prispevku želimo v sklopu mednarodnega visokošolskega projekta raziskati, kaj pri poučevanju TJS pomeni v kovčing usmerjen pristop in kako je ta pristop vključen v gradivo, razvito v projektu CORALL. V ta namen bomo najprej predstavili ta projekt, nato pa še h kovčingu usmerjen pristop, ki ga bomo ponazorili s primeri. Na koncu pa bomo obravnavali ugotovitve in njihove praktične implikacije.

Ključne besede: avtonomno učenje jezika, metodologija poučevanja TSJ, v kovčing usmerjen pristop, vloga učitelja, mednarodni projekt