


## Creating a brain-friendly environment through coaching techniques

Nicole Malloy describes a project with adult learners that will resonate with teachers of younger children and teenagers.

	<p><i>At the beginning of the year, I set out to discover what difference the integration of coaching strategies and techniques would make to learning.</i></p> <p><i>Would it increase learner confidence, engagement and progression through the provision of new approaches and techniques?</i></p> <p><i>Would it reduce barriers to learning and individualise learning more?</i></p> <p><i>In addition, as goal setting is part of its basis, would it assist me in my planning?</i></p> <p><i>And further, might it be interesting to teachers of different ages of learners?</i></p>
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I teach German to adults of the third age attending classes at an educational charity in Wilmslow, Cheshire, mainly for pleasure. The majority of my learners have some connection with a German-speaking country, quite often with family members living in either Germany, Austria or Switzerland. Some of my learners used to work in, or with, a German-speaking country, while others did German at University.

All of them wish to improve their language skills, but, like so many British people, doubt their own ability, often highlighting that their increasing age makes learning harder. I often hear: *'I have learnt this so many times, but can never remember.'* or *'For every word I learn new, I forget another.'* A never-ending worry about making mistakes also accompanies their learning.

This combination of negative feelings I have observed inspired me to research brain-friendly learning, which places the focus on reducing the factors which might push the brain out of a relaxed but active state into an anxious one, and on creating an environment shaped by learners' wishes, needs and interests; this is what brings in coaching techniques.

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In preparation for my research, I studied two books in relation to the topic: Paling's "Neurolanguage Coaching" (2017) and Betham's "Coaching for Language Learning" (2018) as well as a number of articles.

I read about the importance of creating a brain-friendly learning atmosphere by attempting to reduce as many fear factors as possible. Key, according to the literature consulted, was for learners to maintain a calm state of mind.

I learnt that asking learners to set themselves goals, to identify any hurdles which might get in the way of reaching the goals, and equally drawing their attention to existing knowledge and skills which might assist them, should be beneficial tools in focusing attention, individualising learning and building confidence.

Armed with these ideas, I started my project by asking learners to identify their goals, and identify any hurdles they perceived. Achieving these goals then formed the basis for my systematic planning of activities, while clearly naming the fear factors was the first step in overcoming them.

I then gradually integrated specific techniques, making the intention of each activity clear so that learners could focus, and to take away any worry.

We tried:

- listening for what learners understand (as opposed to losing focus because of information missed or not understood)
  - listening with the heart (dedicating full focus to the message heard without assuming or judging, but paying attention to the information conveyed including through means beyond the spoken word) in order to predict what would happen next, or to fill blanks, or to comment on what we heard.
  - reading for detail and putting cut-up text into the correct order
  - reading for full understanding of the content, or for particular information, reading aloud for rhythm or reading to stimulate thinking, e.g. interpretation or discussion or personal association.
  - learning grammar through self-discovery. When we are exploring new grammatical structures I invited learners to tell me what they could see and to hypothesise possible explanations for what they have observed. For example, when studying the Perfect Tense in German, we would choose an examples from a text, '*Ich habe ein Buch gelesen*' and comment on what we saw: 'habe'+ a second verb which has 'ge-' and is at the end of the sentence. We would attempt to translate in order to determine the tense and its use, comparing to English to highlight similarities and differences. My favourite questions became '*What is happening here? What do you think?*' As these questions merely focus on what learners think and observe (not already, or necessarily, know) their anxiety is reduced. In addition, the thinking activity may increase engagement and build stronger memories.
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- For speaking and writing we tried out the FAB approach (Betham, 2018):

F- Focus - on the message you wish to communicate (in speaking or writing)

A - Adapt - fill gaps, correct spelling, change words, check the grammar

B- Be the message - believe in it, focus it on your recipient and transmit it with conviction

(In the case of speaking the three steps need to be completed simultaneously.)

To reduce fear about speaking we have two separate types of activity: speaking for fluency (where the focus is on self-expression without interruption) and speaking for correctness. I found great benefit in the first option as learners have become so much more confident, and it is a pleasure to hear them having conversations in the target language.

To support the development of real life communication we also work on simplifying what learners want to say. Often the message they think of is complex (because they are capable of expressing this in their mother tongue). So how can we reduce it to a simpler essence that can be shared in German with the vocabulary and structures learners are familiar with?

In Writing I encouraged the learners to write their message focusing first on what they would like to communicate, and then revisiting it to refine vocabulary and grammar, but always keeping the reader in mind.

To reduce anxiety further, I offered my learners options in completing tasks such that they could attack them as they viewed best for themselves. I made sure 'mistakes' and questions were viewed as learning opportunities with a positive focus throughout, and I strongly discouraged comparison between learners.

Key new learning information was explored step-by-step, constantly linking it to existing knowledge, so as not to overload the brain, and to avoid confusion.

Throughout I strongly encouraged learners to get involved in the design and flow of our sessions by bringing queries and making suggestions for topics which reflected their goals.

From the feedback I received from my learners I learnt that they found the integration of these coaching strategies and techniques beneficial. They felt that the process increased their confidence in their abilities, and their motivation and offered them encouragement. Some said they felt they had progressed better and were more satisfied with themselves. They saw that the process had assisted them in gaining clarity about their motivation, their strengths and areas for development, and given them focus. Setting goals and identifying hurdles created a basis for measuring progress. Teaching and learning was perceived to be more structured, more relevant, more responsive to learner needs and hence more inclusive.

They appreciated that the techniques and approaches supported their learning for the following reasons:

- being very closely linked to the use of language in real life situations
- representing a natural and more inclusive approach
- providing a basis to understand the target language by giving insight into vocabulary and grammar, at times by comparison to English
- teaching useful strategies, such as simplifying the message to focus on communication
- maximising focus on the task in hand
- inviting learners to engage in using the language without fear
- supporting basic understanding and creating a basis to develop from
- encouraging them to take risks, to just 'go for it'.

Betham (2018) states that the approach would be best suited for B1 level learners, and some of my lower level learners did indeed feel that the techniques and strategies required a certain level of language competency.

(A small number also felt that techniques like listening and reading for gist, were not that useful for them as '*they wanted to know everything*'!).

Overall I concluded that my project positively answered the research questions. The integration of coaching-based strategies and techniques increased learner confidence and facilitated more individualised learning. It structured teaching and learning and was combinable with more traditional approaches. Above all, it seems to have supported learner satisfaction as highlighted by many in their feedback questionnaires. So an overall positive outcome, which will certainly influence my teaching moving forward.