

## **THE COACHING APPROACH TO BUSINESS ENGLISH**

### **What benefits does Business English Coaching bring to teachers, students and companies that traditional teaching doesn't?**

BIO: Liz Jolliffe, Chair of ELTAF near Frankfurt, is a British Business English coach and consultant. She has been coaching Business English for 18 years in-company and also in her cosy kitchen, "Kitchen Coaching" over a hot cuppa. See <http://www.jolliffe.de>.

ABSTRACT: By definition, teaching is a general transfer of knowledge whereas coaching is a development process in which an individual is given support while learning himself how to achieve a specific personal or professional result or goal. This article examines how this approach can benefit the student, his company and us with long-lasting results.

I never wanted to become a teacher. In fact, I became one by pure chance. I had had a relatively successful career at a bank in Frankfurt and taken six years off when my children were born. In need of a challenge, I started a translation service as freelance work suited family life. One Monday morning in February 2000, I was translating some very boring building specifications when the phone rang and a language school asked if they could place an ad for Business English trainers in a British publication where I was Advertising Editor. I immediately asked what was required to become a Business English trainer and was told "Business English and good communication skills".

You may wonder what this has to do with coaching, but let's keep these requirements in mind. Back to my story, there was quite a shortage of Business English trainers at the time. They gladly took me on and a week later I was sitting in the office of the Assistant to the President of the Bundesbank in Frankfurt. He mainly wanted conversation about anything from his family to his challenges at work and I found it relatively easy. Don't get me wrong, I would strongly recommend getting a teaching qualification to anyone starting out in the trade but for me, learning on the job with a lot of ELTAF workshops, BESIG conferences and support from the language school seemed to work. I loved it!!!

A few years later I had my own website and clients and a busy schedule. My "kitchen English" was getting very popular and I had a lot of 1:1 students. However, I often got the nagging feeling that I could be doing more for my students when they told me about their problems at work or home than just correcting their English and offering a sympathetic ear.

This time it wasn't a phone call on a cold February morning but lunch with a HR student in the autumn of 2008 that changed my life. I was again looking for something new after going through a sad divorce. When I heard about the coaching course she had

taken at the European Business School not far from Frankfurt, my ears pricked up. What was coaching? What do you learn? I looked at the website and registered without really knowing what it was. My family asked what sort of coach are you going to become? After all, coaching was more associated with tennis or other sports at the time.

I soon found out. Coaching, quite simply, is all about asking questions that make a difference. We learned about reality constructs, about how we see things as we are, not how they could be. If we ask students or coachees the right questions, they can find the answers to problems which are important to them. I soon realized that if a coachee said “Oh that’s a good question”, it had been a good session.

So how can this benefit out students? Let’s start at the beginning, the student assessment. Instead of asking the usual questions of what do you need English for and where do you need to improve, I started to ask:

- What goal would you like to achieve and why?
- How will you know you have reached it?
- How high is your motivation (from 1 to 10)?
- Who else could benefit?
- What can YOU do to achieve your goal?
- What would like ME to do in particular?

By making potential students really think about their motivation to improve their English, we could focus on a very specific need e.g. a potential meeting with a new client, conference calls in a new international project and most importantly, what they can do themselves.

I found that one particular answer started to dominate the goal question – I would like to get rid of my fear of speaking English. And I found that coaching was the perfect solution. Let’s take the example of Johannes\*. Johannes, who I first met at one of the wine festivals in the Rhine region, was a colleague of my partner. He was the life and soul of the party. But when it came to his English skills, he told me he had taken many courses at language schools but could not get rid of his fear of speaking English.

My partner convinced him I could help him and a few days later he was sitting in my kitchen telling me of his fears in quite reasonable English. I couldn’t understand – this confident and funny guy afraid of speaking English? I asked him why and he told me his colleagues laughed at him when he spoke English so it must be bad ... In his reality construct, they were laughing at his bad English and it took just one coaching question to make him realise they were actually laughing because he was FUNNY! It seemed obvious really, but not in his mind. After that revelation, he apparently couldn’t speak enough English at work and improved in leaps and bounds.

Coaching my students’ fears away has become my speciality and one huge benefit over traditional teaching methods. By making students realise with coaching questions

that they do not need to be afraid, they start to really enjoy English conversations. Motivation increases dramatically and they improve really quickly – moving from Fear to Freedom.

I could quote Horst whose teacher had told this highly successful IT consultant that his English was rubbish, or Maria, a top PR specialist whose teacher had said her accent was awful. In fact, it often seems to be school teachers who kill the joy of speaking English with a careless remark and make our students afraid.

Student assessment and fear coaching are just two examples of how coaching tools can be useful. I have also taken training in leadership, conflict and organisational coaching which of course come in very useful in training executives. When my students walk into my kitchen now, I don't know if I am going to be doing a grammar lesson or talking about a leadership issue. They know I am happy to talk about whatever is on their mind and often go away telling me that not only do they feel they have done something for their English skills but solved a problem they had. So they come back ...

You may ask how do I prepare their lessons? Well, unless we have a specific task planned, I just make sure I have some goodies in my bag to take out if my student doesn't come with his own agenda. This is the beauty of the job – you never know what is coming next!

So let us go back to the requirements of the language school - “Business English and good communication skills” – are these enough? I think you need Business English experience to really be able to understand their needs and coaching comes hand in hand with good communication skills. Of course, as I said before, traditional teaching skills are vital but I think to take yourself and your student to the next level, a coaching qualification can open up a new world. A new world which will benefit you, your student and at the end of the day, the company he works for.

\* All names changed by the author.