

Defining the niche

The *Language Coach for Leaders* is a one-to-one or small-group training niche that has developed out of the convergence of various approaches to training for various needs that globalised society presents us. *Language Coaching for Leaders* is typically a seamless bundle of the following: development of

- an individual's lexical resource (see our method), including specific business lexis training)
- their leadership competence and attitude; motivational work – particularly relating to communication
- their language structure awareness, including grammar, syntax and typical functions in typical genres
- their awareness of formality, appropriateness, style, tone and other subtextual aspects
- their cross-cultural knowledge, both in theory and application
- their interaction awareness: emotional intelligence and empathy in interviewing and presenting
- their voice, for authority, clarity and expression

Reasons for the niche

The niche arises out of specific needs:

- The globalisation of labour markets
- The communication needs that international executives have

As globalisation of markets has blossomed in the last half century, the commercial world has found a greater need for a lingua franca. Alongside this great need has been an explosion in technology and media. English, by default, has so far assumed top position.

In response, language training as both academic discipline and industry has also flourished. Cross-cultural interest, heightened awareness and the related academic disciplines and practical areas of cross-cultural and diversity training have also grown around it. Thus, organisational leadership has necessarily taken on a whole new shape in recent years.

Thinking behind leadership

Historically leadership development was informed by a complex range of thinking. In the last hundred years there have been four broad 'generations' of leadership theories:

- Trait theories: about qualities or attributes of people
- Behavioural theories: about the contrast between concern for task and concern for people - also exploring the contrast of directive or participative leadership
- Contingency theories: thinking about situations such as relationships between people, task structures, positions and power
- Transformational theories: thinking about the distinction between transactional management involving simply heading processes and transformational leadership involving team-concepts, change, strategy and vision

Confucius, Martin Luther King, Bill Gates, Plato, Hitler, Mao Zedong and Nelson Mandela are a handful of very divergent examples of leaders or commentators on leadership style. Worldwide business schools with MBA programmes are now a great source of study into leadership. Thinkers have debated widely on the roles that genetics, childhood, training and work experience have on the effectiveness of leaders.

Leadership competence

According to John Gardner, leaders can work on certain qualities: physical vitality and stamina, intelligence and action-oriented judgement, eagerness to accept responsibility, task competence, understanding of followers and their needs, skill in dealing with people, need for achievement, capacity to motivate people, courage and resolution, trustworthiness, decisiveness, self-confidence, assertiveness and adaptability.

And as the research of Steven Covey tells us, effective leaders are proactive, they prioritise, they begin with the end in mind, they listen empathetically, they invest in themselves regularly, they exploit diversity to synergise, and they look for mutually advantageous outcomes with others.

Other approaches cite leaders as able to trust, see long-term, question, challenge, innovate, originate, develop, focus on people and do the 'right thing'. And, clearly, there are a number of functions centred on communication that run as common threads through modern leadership: team building, performance, image and media management, and change and influence management.

Yet, in this modern, globalising world, leadership is much more than theory can provide us. The greater relevance of cross-cultural issues and the great benefits that diversity can potentially bring mean a need for heightened awareness by leaders for these aspects of leading.

Cross-culture and diversity

True leaders are now necessarily relating to people from different cultural backgrounds. They necessarily both negotiate and do business with diversity and should also employ diversely - and not only in regards to ethnicity and gender.

If they do not, they will not survive in a globalised world with near perfect competition in many industries, with competition often almost completely unconstrained by borders, and with supply chains that now circumnavigate the world several times before reaching the consumer.

A buzzword of the past decade has been 'Harnessing Workforce Diversity to Raise the Bottom Line' clearly linking diversity to its merits in terms of innovation and profitability rather than simply seeing it as a compliance issue for the sake of equality.

The most cited element of diversity is culture. Culture is a system of shared beliefs and values that give us a sense of identity or belonging. It can be ethnic, geographic, organisational, or in many other forms. It includes the ways in which people behave, think, communicate and perceive reality.

Each international individual will have a main culture, sometimes co-cultures and possibly subcultures in their identity than inform their understanding of the world. Leaders, international managers and users of English in an international world are thus set to encounter cross-cultural behaviours and communication differences.

The approach of the Language Coach for Leaders is necessarily deeply rooted in cross-cultural theory. Tony Corballis, *The Language Coach for Leaders*, has a Masters Degree in Communication Management, which consistently centred itself on cross-culture and culminated in a thesis on aspects of the public and workplace manifestation of co-cultural identity in multicultural metropolitan settings.

Practical cross-cultural tools

Thus, fundamental to coaching are such practical tools as Hofstede's cross-cultural dimensions and Hall's notions of high and low-context communication (though critically revised versions).

Such real-world insights, like power-distance, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, understanding the range of group v. individual thinking and behaviours, alternative approaches to conflict resolution, and the difference between masculine and feminine societies, are keys to the relativity of experience in a globalised world, and are central to the *Language Coach for Leaders* content.

Leaders may be puzzled when staff say 'yes' when they mean 'no' or in witnessing various approaches to decision-making, meetings, and in seeing the relationships people form or refuse to form in the workplace. They need to see how cultural context impacts on them and their personnel. Clearly, this is elemental to international team-building and diversity.

Coaching can explore issues of international assignee adaptation to the local culture(s) and working practices, assuring a company avoids the stress of secondment failure through client or colleague rejection, and the immense related costs of early repatriation. It can work with the spouse in a secondment and provide them with communications and cultural training to ensure a meaningful stay and reduced isolation in their host country, be it the UK or abroad. Or it can provide country briefings that cover local communication and social nuances, and dispel fears, stress and misunderstandings an assignee may have about a particular country. All aspects of cross-culture can be explored; yet from all angles, communication remains elemental to it.

Communication needs

Whether leaders are advanced in their English use, fluent, or indeed, bilingual, if they wish to operate effectively in this world we have created, leadership now necessarily includes the ability to use the current lingua franca, English, proficiently. The needs of English language communication skills for leaders are burgeoning as globalisation unleashes across the world.

Eloquence and lexical dexterity have been closely correlated with leadership effectiveness and success. And in many cases, this success is simply not evident. The problems are quite plain.

According to Professor Stephen Hagen, author and director of the Mercia Institute of Enterprise in the UK, not addressing language and cultural difficulties means companies are losing business.

Nearly half of British companies experience obstacles to international trade yet only 11% of them have strategies to cope. More than 20% recognise that business has been lost due to language and culture difficulties yet 40% expect to trade internationally in the near future. Hagen believes, "There is a need for a new 'export culture' with international communications as its key feature".

Furthermore, studies have shown that a strong command of lexis (the meaning behind vocabulary, phrases and idiomatic language) is linked to leadership success. Research demonstrates that higher executives score better on lexical tests than their subordinates do.

Research of supervisory and executive personnel in 39 companies by academic Johnson O'Connor quantified a correlation between lexical ability and status on the corporate hierarchy. The results showed that presidents and vice presidents averaged 87%, managers 62%, foremen 41%, and floor bosses 32%.



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Clearly, success depends on your ability to express yourself. The world's top achievers typically have a rich lexis. Similar studies show a correlation between lexis and salary levels.

It seems that people assess executives by how they communicate. Whether right or not, when people open their mouths, their education, intelligence and class in society are judged. A rich, crystal-clear use of the English language gives a great impression. Effective leaders are hungry for the proficiency they need to communicate widely in the world's lingua franca.

Language Coaching for Leaders is not afraid of the nitty-gritty. The basic key to communication is language training, an area of background crucial to such coaching.

Origins of English language training

The English language training industry has undergone several fascinating transformations that give us a clear picture of what is involved in language acquisition.

Originally it was based on 'grammar translation', and was treated structurally (made up of logic and technical rules, conjugations and parts of speech) as the classical languages of Greek and Latin had been. Its written form was primary and eloquent literature was its highest form. People memorised vocabulary lists and did grammar exercises, translations and dictations.

This thinking still informs much English teaching throughout the world and is not entirely inappropriate. However, it became criticised for not including conversational aspects, such as those needed as international travel grew. The response was 'phrase books'.

The audio-lingual and other approaches that took over were a backlash against 'grammar translation' and totally steered clear of the use of a student's native tongue. Based on form and context, these approaches dealt with phonetics as they centred on spoken everyday communication such as question-answer methods and narratives.

The learning was based on students discovering structural rules for themselves rather than made explicit. The patterns were repetitively drilled and substituted with different content. Teacher correction was important. This presentation-practice model is still widely used today. The skills were taught in a sequence: listening, speaking, reading, with writing last.

Cognition in language training

Psychological and linguistic thinking around cognition was to follow. It came with a return to grammar with the guided discovery of its rules through meaningful practice and creativity.

The idea of universal grammar (Chomsky's idea that structures in our thinking underlie all languages to be manifest in different languages) meant liberation from the rigidity of the previous methods, although it was clear that learning is not an innate habit but a cognitive process and hard work.

Error became seen as natural and a sign of learning. It also reshaped language study to being more about an integrated system of sentence structure, grammar, phonology and lexis. It was more inclusive of the various previous approaches.

Functional communication in language training

There was an evolution in language teaching practice during the seventies, the decade of the 'Communicative Approach' when syllabuses were responding to the needs of the European Economic Community.

Language came to be seen as comprised of functions like offering, complaining and refusing. Style and register were also talked about. It was assumed this way of doing things was more motivational. It was also the first decade of investigation into error analysis, discourse analysis, and other thinking.

There were also breakaways from mainstream EFL teaching as the industry grew in size. There began narrower areas of focus such as English for Specific Purposes (such as in law, medicine and business) and English for Academic Purposes.

There was also a spate of quick-fix approaches which caught the public's attention with claims of super easy ways to absorb a language fast.

In the 1980s, all the methods of a hundred years previous and some remarkable innovation and greatly increased practice to observe came together to produce real improvements in the quality of learning.

There was widespread debate on all aspects of language teaching rather than language itself. Grammar made a comeback and the 'task-based' and 'competency-based' and 'text-type-based' syllabuses were born. Textbooks moved towards a multi-syllabus approach.

Methodologies looked at humanistic values, student interaction, authentic materials, and the issues of 'accuracy versus fluency', and individualisation with social and emotional factors clearer than ever. Learners became seen as individuals: individual learning strategies were examined and Independent Learning Centres began opening up. The issue of 'conscious and unconscious learning' was explored.

'Needs analysis' also became integrated into syllabus design, especially in English for Specific Purposes, such as Business English, the forefather of *Language Coaching for Leaders*.

Vocabulary had been largely ignored for decades. From 1985 onwards, vocabulary re-emerged alongside grammar and phonology and this was reflected in the appearance of the 'Lexical Syllabus' and the Lexical Approach. Language is a mix of rules and patterns and seeing language as 'pre-packed word chunks' to be learnt contrasts with language as sets of rules learned cognitively.

Contemporary language training

Teachers and trainers became more varied in approach and are now 'facilitators' rather than 'language police'. There are countless grammars, none right nor wrong, just different. Facilitators of language learning break down the language as they see it and students construct their own, with checks and adjustments. Each setting and each trainee needs its own approach.

Good coaches are now flexible enough to draw on all methodologies of a hundred years of language teaching and learning, to suit their particular learners who may come from a range of different learning styles and multiple intelligences.

Good coaches never assume they have actually taught anything. All they can do is make learners aware of something which they will later pick up and process at some point in time if the need arises and if they want to. Enjoyment and motivation are therefore also crucial elements. Coaching has to be fun.

In the last ten years, this great coming together of methods and schools of thought has also combined with multi-media technologies to produce a fresh range of new, richer and potentially more rigorous dynamics among learners and trainers.

Fragmentation and specialisation

As began in the eighties and still continues, the burgeoning English language industry is fragmenting, with strands narrowed more and more, and aligned to particular needs, such as for those of international leaders.

With the fragmenting of the industry into 'different Englishes', Business English arose as the most popular specialisation. It has seen very rapid growth, as reflected in the great expansion of publications and courses.

Speculation exists about the growing use of such English and the particular type of English used in interaction among non-native English speakers. This idea of a non-English (global, 'lingua franca core' or internationally-owned) English is having a major impact on the needs of users of English.

Business English training has a particular set of guiding principles and necessary competencies, which Tony Corballis has specialised in and written books on. Both of these areas of expertise were a result of combining knowledge provided by two degrees in areas of business with the practice of high-level language teaching.

Other specific strands within Business English are practical and skills-based: presentation skills training, voice coaching, text development, editing and advanced writing, and a full range of other subsets within language teaching.

The strands continue to redefine and refine. English for Academic Purposes breaks down into English for specific academic subjects and English for Academic Purposes for International Business Studies or English for Economics, for example, became related sub-specialisations for Tony Corballis, *The Language Coach for Leaders*, in recent years, as he has trained the best and brightest in some of the United Kingdom's best universities.

Ethics in the industry

Looking at the English Language Teaching industry in commercial terms reveals a multi-billion dollar phenomenon with corporate interests keen to exploit the profit potential. Strategists, keen to exploit a growing industry, but unaware of the complexity of the processes they are peddling, have turned language training provision, in many cases, into *uniform factories of under-experienced and poorly paid trainers*.

Learners assigned to large language training companies or educational institutions report widespread dissatisfaction.

Almost all 78 international learners surveyed in a ten-month period by Tony Corballis in 2004-2005 across three central London Further Education colleges, four university language centres and six private colleges and training companies *agreed that effective learning is hit-and-miss in institutions or training companies*.

The obstacles to their gaining better competence in communicating were cited as:

- Teacher competence. 91% of respondents had experience of a teacher who was bitter, disinterested, unenthusiastic, or in some way, less than professional.
- Unsuitable peers. 74% mentioned tolerating grossly weaker or stronger peers in their groups on courses.
- Lack of rigour. 38% preferred to be challenged and saw learning in an institution as time wasting.
- Not relevant content. 34% found materials to be not motivating or not related to their own experience or practical concerns.
- Intimidation. 34% felt intimidated at times, mostly due to class size, preventing them exploring risk-taking in a 'safe space'.
- 100% of respondents said there were times when institutionalised learning was not fun.

The main reasons for this dissatisfaction stem from the commercial scale of the provision and labour market issues. Institutions under pressure to cut costs sometimes pay less attention to streamlining the ability of groups. They often set their break-even point for a class running artificially high to ensure profitability.

However, the greatest cost of all to providers is the cost of labour. Though larger institutions cite quality accreditation and liability insurance as driving up their costs, the truth is their main expenses are labour, marketing and premises (real estate), with labour way ahead of all others.

This has meant pay levels for teachers, trainers and coaches within institutions and commercial organisations have been eroded to extraordinarily low levels. This combines with the fact that language teaching is romanticised and practised by a great over-supply of travel-keen young people with little expertise. Companies are quick to exploit this pool of enthusiastic and energetic yet inexperienced and therefore often ineffective teachers and trainers.

Grand educational establishments with expensive marketing and overheads and with top-heavy management and shareholder expectations are in danger of becoming dinosaurs. Exploitative large language providers are specialising in low-level mass learning processes. They generally have over-prescribed materials facilitated by strictly undeviating teachers. Flexibility is at an all time low. This approach may suit certain basic general needs. It may also suit certain teachers and trainers. But it is not satisfactory and not meeting market demand.

As a result, parts of industry are quickly adapting to address these issues.

Smaller units and free agents

Other teachers and trainers are becoming aware of this dissatisfaction among their industry consumers. They are flexibly transforming to meet the need.

This and prior employment conditions means many of the more talented and brighter teachers are becoming free agents: private trainers, coaches and mentors where their extraordinary abilities are more suitably rewarded.

In a free market, ethical issues are sometimes self-correcting. The market is encouraging trainers to cut out the middleman, the middleman being his or her boss. And what is more, the real benefit is passed to the client, the learner. The learner has more customised support at a price that no longer factors in organisational overheads.

Small agency or free agent trainers who have a reputation for quality, flexibility and effectiveness, are independently assuming ever more narrow niches, to secure expertise as competition within the industry becomes fiercer. But they have to be exceptional – and with wide training themselves.

They do this by identifying their key competencies and areas of interest and combining it with complementary thinking, such as the fundamentals of Cognitive Behavioural Theory or the more ‘sensible’ aspects of Neuro Linguistic Programming, or subject-specific thinking such as the experience of Tony Corballis in organisational leadership, public communications, motivational and study skills coaching and other areas, to ensure his style is flexible, targeted and effective. *Language Coaching for Leaders* is thus a niche that arises out of several narrow and related strands and several complimentary fields.

An exposé of unethical practice

FACT: Tony Corballis is regularly phoned by zealous language training company agents, who are quite willing to employ and send him out on in-company assignments at minimal pay, with only a mere telephone interview or at the most a token ten-minute face-to-face meeting as their entire recruitment selection process! This is not very rigorous quality control!

Many clients – corporate or other organisations – are paying premium prices to these agents for coaches and trainers without anyone actually knowing whether they can demonstrate broad experience, flexibility and a deep understanding of language, communication and teaching-learning methodologies. Often a strong brand, slick web presence and a high price are all it takes to give client companies the confidence they need to sign the dotted line after which the agent seeks out a ‘body’ to send to the client.

Fortunately, this unethical practice provides a window for effective professionals to deal directly with clients. The rise in number of small enterprises like *The Language Coach for Leaders*, with dedicated and able practitioners, is good illustration of such positioning by them.

Such a niche is also a response to the industry trend towards leaner outsourcing strategies and developing business relationships with a network of smaller evermore specialised functions.

Professional development in HR management

Human resource managers are now more than ever recognising the bundle of English language training, cultural and diversity awareness, and communication skills for leaders and other staff, as fundamental and sitting alongside all aspects of international management. Such training has become as relevant and as wide as industry itself.

The future

All the elements that come together and form the *Language Coaching for Leaders* niche come at a time when coaching and life coaching are burgeoning in popularity. The notion of employing an impartial support function to one's life is currently proving terrifically useful to people who can afford it, and the results are generally cited as exceeding the investment in not only money but time as well.

In the typical metropolis (such as with Sydney, Hong Kong, London or New York demographics), around a third of citizens are foreign-born, and roughly half identify as either co-cultural (from two or more cultural identities) or internationally assigned, and this is fast becoming the majority. With the implications for consumer markets and labour markets, trans-cultural life is now not the exception but the norm – a trend which is clearly escalating.

Given the recognition of a need for personal support and development, the need for shared meaning in a world of pluralistic communication, and the above ethno-demographic trends, the *Language Coaching for Leaders* niche is certainly set to expand.

Undoubtedly, there are a great number of such practitioners who, by default, have fallen quietly into this niche, in many cases partially unaware of the transition from, for example, language towards motivational and language support coaching. Once the niche begins to self-identify more widely, it will fast become a recognised sector within training and developmental coaching in its own right. The future is looking outstanding for the *Language Coaching for Leaders* niche in the world's great cosmopolitan centres.

Tony Corballis, London

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