Coaching in another language:
opportunities for coaches and coachees

Katerina Kanelidou, PCC
Introduction

Can coaching in another language provide an opportunity for the coach's mastery? Can it be a vehicle for the coachee's growth? Usually, when we talk about coaching in another language we focus on the challenges; how to be authentic in a non-native language. We also talk about the opportunities presented from a business perspective. But how can it be an opportunity for mastery and growth?

I am Katerina Kanelidou, a leadership coach, trainer and mentor. In 2009 I founded my own coaching and training company in Greece and it was very clear to me from the beginning that I wanted to work globally, without geographical or other limitations. Immediately, I started participating in international projects and since then, I coach, train and mentor people from around the world. I also became associate director at Pivomo (UK based company), an associate at Asterys, a member of the HBR advisory council and a member of the global faculty of the International Coach Academy.

The ability to coach, train and mentor in English, Greek and Spanish brought many wonderful opportunities. But this presentation is not about the business opportunities that coaching in another language can bring. It is about exploring the opportunities to grow as coaches ourselves and increase the effectiveness of our coaching conversations.
During my own coaching journey, I discovered that coaching in a foreign language can give us many opportunities that we probably wouldn’t have when coaching in our native language. But maybe that was my perspective only. In order to test this assumption, I did a survey consisting of two questionnaires:

a) A questionnaire for coaches who coach or have coached in a non-native language (either theirs, their coachee's, or both)
b) A questionnaire for coachees who have experienced or are experiencing coaching in a non-native language (either theirs, their coach's, or both)

The results of thesurvey were presented at the International Coaching Conference “Coaching World Without Borders: Changing Your Coaching Mindset from Local To International” (February 2017), with the aim of exploring the opportunities that coaching in another language can bring to the coach and the coachee and the effectiveness of their work together.

46 coaches and 21 coachees with experience in coaching in a non-native language participated in the survey. A summary of the results are presented in the following pages.
46 coaches

- Coaching in my native language: 38 (82.6%)
- in a non-native language: 40 (87%)
- in my coaches' native language: 30 (65.2%)
- in my coachee's non-native language: 29 (63%)

21 coachees

- Coached by non-native speaking coach in native language: 7 (33.3%)
- Coached in my non-native language: 16 (76.2%)
- Both coach and coachees are non-native speakers: 11 (52.4%)

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The coachees

Percentage of coaches who reported that coaching in a foreign language has a positive impact on the core competencies:

- Establishing the coaching agreement: 50%
- Establishing trust and intimacy: 52%
- Coaching presence: 63%
- Active listening: 80%
- Powerful questioning: 63%
- Direct communication: 65%
- Creating awareness: 59%
- Designing actions: 49%
- Planning and goal setting: 43%
- Managing progress and accountability: 41%
Establishing the coaching agreement

• There is a need to be absolutely clear; we assume less the coachee’s understanding and “goes without thinking”.

• We pay more attention to the content, to the words and terms that we use, we check understanding with the coachee.

• All that lead to:
  - an ease in alignment
  - more accurately regulated expectations
  - clarity
  - simple and memorable agreement

“How coaching in a foreign language has a positive impact on the ICF Core Competencies:

“If you want to do a good job in coaching you must experience THIS challenge”
Establishing trust and intimacy

The clarity and the attention given when creating the coaching agreement, already has an impact on trust between the coach and the coachee. Additionally:

- Deeper curiosity and exploration.
- Respect to the diversity.
- The coach shows his/her vulnerability.
- We establish rapport not only with words, but also with the tone of voice, pace, all the non-verbal cues.
- Resourceful in ways of communication.
- Some clients are relieved to have a coach outside their culture

The above lead to:

- Connection at a deeper level
- Additional power to the relationship
- Stronger sense of intimacy and trust
- Safe space where the coachee opens up faster
- Lightness
- Reinforced cooperation
Coaching presence

Coaches reported that they are more mindful, alert, focused, attentive, engaged and concentrated. There is an “extra effort” from the coach’s part. They are more open to not knowing and tapped to their intuition.

Opportunities for:
- Better connection
- Less danger of falling into routine
- Increased levels of mindfulness
- Coach’s development

Active listening

• Active listening tools are more consciously applied: paraphrasing, rephrasing (which becomes natural), summarizing, reflecting and checking understanding.
• Coaches ask more and assess less.
• They listen at more levels: what is said and what is not said, body language, emotions, energy; beliefs; they listen for intent rather than relying on assumptions (“which happens when both native speakers”).
• There is an effort to listen and understand in depth.

Opportunities:
- Clarification is swifter and easier (contrary to the belief that it would be harder)
- More focus, as it is less easy to have the mind start wondering
- Elimination of chit-chat from the coachee. He/she goes to the bottom – lined
- Cultural distance that brings less assumptions, prejudice and judgment
Powerful questioning

• Questions are more clean, open, simpler, shorter and more precise ("less words, extra attention for choice of words")
• Questions are to the point, cutting-through.
• Mindful of the cultural diversity, questions challenge the coachee’s beliefs and frames of reference in a curious and respectful way.

Reminders / Learning:
  1. The effectiveness of KISS (keep it super simple)
  2. Less could be more
  3. To adopt the same stance with the other clients

Direct communication

• Not only the questions are more clear and precise, but the overall communication as well.
• Language used is thoughtfully selected and clearer.
• Coaches have increased awareness of the impact of our words and use more direct vocabulary.
• The limitation in words ("when we don’t speak perfectly a language") makes the coach or the client to speak directly, without any "decorations".
• Coaches step out of cultural codes and bring more objectivity.
• They talk less.
• Give more space to the client.
• Communication flows.

Reminder / Learning:
"Not to fool around even in the native language"
Creating awareness

• Coaches get out of the way more, allowing the coachee the space for awareness to emerge.
• As the reflection is more intense in searching precise expression of ideas and feelings, we think more.
• Cultural diversity ("foreign" perspective) – even the use of a foreign language by the coachee – helps see things from different point of views, and facilitates awareness.
• The attention at the non-verbal communication and the listening for the energy, the tone of voice, etc, makes it easy to detect incongruences.

Opportunity: broader awareness

Designing actions

• With the awareness that "words create worlds" things are articulated carefully when designing actions too.
• More clarity checking of different options, choosing steps and finding own way.
• Simpler, bolder, and straightforward actions.
• Increased commitment.
• Take time to find out what is culturally acceptable and the impact on others.
• Keep it simple works very well here too.

“We become a true apprentice of our coachee’s mental map.”
Planning and goal setting

• Simpler, direct goals, clearly defined and explored.
• Dates are more focused, as both coach and coachee tend to be precise.
• Intuition is present here too. Coaches facilitate the process and the understanding of it with intuition and simple language.
• Easier for the coachee to own the actions. The commitment is increased.
• Cultural awareness and sensitivity are present when exploring and creating a plan.

Managing progress and accountability

• Simpler lists, less excuses
• Clarity on accountability
• Easier to express it in a foreign language
• Paying more attention
• Higher intuition

“Working with people from other countries and cultures, gives us the opportunity to see that we are not so different after all. As we build trust, our shared human experience becomes more apparent to both parties and the differences become a source of interest. And, through one another, we learn more about ourselves”
The coachees

I prefer to be coached: (21 responses)

- In my native language: 42.9%
- It depends on the coach's expertise: 14.3%
- No preference: 42.9%
- By a native speaker: 2.4%
- By a non-native speaker: 0.0%
Coaching in another language allows the coachee to:

- Break from familiar thought processes: 10 (47.6%)
- Be more authentic: 2 (9.5%)
- Be more creative / resourceful: 7 (33.3%)
- Pay more attention to the words used, which creates new awareness: 18 (85.7%)
- Let go of long descriptions - be more to the point: 11 (52.4%)
- Increase emotional intelligence: 5 (23.8%)
- Increase cultural awareness: 12 (57.1%)
- Other*: 5 (23.8%)

**Other:**
- Let go off biases (1)
- Be less emotionally attached and go less deep (1)
- Diversity (1)
- Urges me to feel understood (1)
- Feel different emotions or the same emotions in a different way (1)
**Benefits and advantages of being coached in another language:**

- Let go the perfectionism.
- Another type of thinking; be more open.
- Improved communication skills.
- Pay attention to the non-verbal communication.
- More clarity to express what I want; no meandering.
- Easier to express oneself: there are new ways to express feelings; less emotional bond than when using my native language.
- Been introduced to new words that reveal new values and different thinking.
- To be more aware of possible perspectives offered due to culture norms.
- A possibility to understand diversity.
- To have a brilliant Coach; I get the possibility to work with an experienced coach from another country.
• I think I can get different feedback and insights that are not easy to get when you share the same culture with someone.

• When I am coached by someone from another country, he/she can be more objective.

• To find new opportunities, to have another view, to be more creative.

• I made more personal effort to get the maximum benefit out of each session.

• The difference in the meaning of foreign words triggers attempts at translation which enlighten and sensitise words in my native language that I sometimes do not realise the depth and breadth of.

• Become aware of a different thinking process and approach.

• It seems as if you are thinking in both languages and switching from one idea to another to make yourself understood. Your brain is more activated and you feel more alive in everything you express.

• Working in a foreign language has helped me to enhance my self confidence.

“It is like swimming under water with goggles rather than swimming in water with the sight above.”

Katerina Kanelidou
Epilogue

In 2008, when I decided that I wanted to receive a formal education and certification in coaching, I had to overcome a few obstacles. The greatest one was language: my English was basic and the language at the academy where I wanted to study was English. I became a learner again, pursuing an advanced certification in English language at the same time as the coaching certification. This meant that I also experienced the insecurities and struggles of coaching in a language that I was not at all good at (yet). In this journey, I discovered that it was actually easier for me to coach someone in another language and that, as a client, I enjoyed coaching more than in my native language.

Today, I invite my students – who experience the same insecurities I had in the beginning – to look at it from another perspective: how our coaching conversations can become more intimate, deeper and effective because of the use of a non-native language.

The survey allowed me to test this assumption. Maybe in the future we will have the opportunities to explore the magnificent things that happen in our brain (and soul) when we are in this space where cultures and languages merge and form a common alliance between the coach and the coachee. And maybe we can test another assumption: that coaches who have the experience of coaching in a non-native language benefit from the advantage of improved cultural competency.