

OVERCOMING PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS TO WRITE: A COGNITIVE COACHING APPROACH TO PLANNING WRITING

LAZAAR LAMYAE

'Literature, Arts and Pedagogical Engineering' Research Laboratory,
Ibn Tofail University, Faculty of Arts and Languages

Professor HIND BRIGUI

'Literature, Arts and Pedagogical Engineering' Research Laboratory,
Ibn Tofail University, Faculty of Arts and Languages

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ABSTRACT

The current research examines a common issue faced by high school students in Morocco, specifically in the area of sentence construction. The study uses action research embracing a cognitive coaching approach to identify and address the problem. The researcher hypothesizes that students' writing difficulties extend beyond the sentence level to the paragraph level. To address this issue, the researcher implements several activities which aim to raise students' awareness of sentence structure and help them construct meaningful and grammatically correct sentences. The results indicate that the activities were successful in improving students' writing skills, particularly in sentence construction. Moreover, the cognitive coaching approach which is applied to overcome the psychological barriers that hinder writing skills has yielded to positive results. Overall, the research suggests that these activities along with the approach used can be effective in improving students' writing skills and should be incorporated into language instruction.

Keywords: Cognitive Coaching Approach, Action Research, Writing skills, coaching map, coaching strategies.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Every school year is a new phase for teachers, with new students, new needs, and different intelligences. During the first weeks of the year, several activities took place, which might reveal learners' strengths and deficiencies. The majority of students encountered serious issues, such as sentence construction. As such, the students formulated poorly structured sentences in the sense that they started with the verb and then the subject. After several trials of prompting the correct sentences from the students themselves, it was revealed that they lack awareness about the structure of the language. Observing this phenomenon, it was hypothesized that first-year baccalaureate students (second year of high school in Morocco) will not only have problems at the sentence level, but also at the paragraph level. To confirm the hypothesis that students suffer from writing problems, starting with building sentences, they were asked to write a short paragraph to talk about their family members. Indeed, their paragraphs were meaningless and disorganized, which called for urgent remedial and action plans.

2.0 CONTEXT

The term "writing" has been defined by the Oxford dictionary as “the activity or skill of making coherent words on paper and composing a text”. In Morocco, a standard-based approach was adopted to enable students to communicate through a mixture of spoken, written, and auditory-based mastered skills. Moreover, this approach considers both target and local cultures. Students should be able to understand their culture and other cultures in terms of their perspectives, practices, and products.

Writing is not naturally an acquired skill. They are learned and transmitted through the environment. It demands more effort and practice than the other skills. Writing is a form of language production that requires grammatical sub-skills, which refer to the ability to write correct sentences. Second, stylistic sub-skills represent the ability to manipulate and use language effectively. Third are mechanical sub-skills, which stand for the conventions peculiar to the written language, such as punctuation and spelling. Finally, there is a need for judgment sub-skills to write in an appropriate manner for a particular purpose, with a specific audience in mind, and the ability to select, organize, and order relevant information. (Heaton, 1975, p.138)

Grammatical competence is the backbone of any writing product. According to Canale and Swain's (1980) framework, writers should have different competences, among which we find grammatical competence that refers to knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and the language system. First-year baccalaureate students are therefore required to reach a certain competence in writing. Given the fact that most students had issues with writing sentences, certain procedures were to be followed not only to enable students to write correct sentences but also to equip them with the tools to outline their writing.

In this respect, the requirements of writing, such as gathering information, developing a stance or argument, identifying an audience, and organizing thoughts, occasionally seem to be beyond the grasp of many pupils. These requirements include sentence structure, grammar, spelling, word choice, and paragraphing. The hypothesis was that coaching at the prewriting stage could supply learners with a structure for cognitive and organizational preparation in a psychologically safe atmosphere. Although Costa and Garmston's (2002) work is most widely used in professional interactions between adults, student-to-student coaching is thought to be effective as well. Cognitive Coaching is a conversational model for discussing planning, reflection, or issue solving. It allows for disciplined thought, allowing the learner to attain clarity of purpose and establish an action plan. Writing was comparable to a "conversation with a blank piece of paper," as described by Vygotsky (1986, p. 181). Because of Cognitive Coaching's systematic approach to planning, the coach uses mediation tactics to openly support the other's thinking, which is thought to improve student writing.

2.1 Cognitive Coaching Model Development and Theoretical Background

The model referred to as Cognitive Coaching was created in 1985 by Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston as an approach to promote teacher reflection through learning, autonomy, and trust-building. Through mentorship and reflection, this coaching approach aims to genuinely inspire participants to become their best selves. Costa and Garmston claim in their recently released book, *Cognitive Coaching: Developing Self-Directed Leaders and Learners* (2015) “Cognitive coaching is all about producing: self-directed learners and leaders with the disposition for continuous, lifelong learning” (p. 399). The planning, interactive, reflective, and application phases are the four stages which constitute the implementation of this model. In cognitive

coaching, the coach's role is to intentionally transform oneself into a more reflective person and then assist associates to achieving likewise. Both the coach and the coachee are intended to grow accustomed to this coaching approach. According to Costa and Garmston (2015), there are several elements that characterize Cognitive Coaching. These include: 1) skills, 2) capabilities, 3) mental maps, 4) beliefs, 5) values, and 6) commitments, all developed and put to the test throughout time before being integrated into their daily interactions. Ultimately, the principles and values of cognitive coaching shape an angle of experiencing life (p. 448).

2.2 Coaching Role and Strategies

Carrying on the position of a coach entails additional duties. In addition to meeting the needs of learners who encountering challenges in the classroom, these duties expand on the expertise of a teacher (Brooke Walczak, 2022). A key aspect of being a coach involves comprehending the position and reflecting on the obstacles that may exist within that role. When interacting with participants, coaches need to possess a nonjudgmental perspective which creates a safe environment and defeat the psychological barriers during the coaching sessions. Each of these sessions aims to assist the coachees in developing greater independence and reflection skills (Englert et al., 1991, p. 348). This is intended to support educators in the event that obstacles arise in the classroom. Coachees will be able to construct effective learning experiences when faced with problems by drawing on their development, knowledge, and past experiences.

The objective of the coaching stages is for the coach to build trust in the environment, process, and relationships. The coach additionally requires to intentionally engage with the goal of self-directed learning, employ techniques to develop a stronger sense of self awareness, and keep evolving both intellectually and professionally as a coach (Costa & Garmston, 2015). Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston (1992), “believe that all human beings are capable of change, that we continue to grow cognitively throughout our lifetime and that we possess a vast reservoir of untapped potential” (p. 91). This concept was entailed in the notion that learners would become more conscious of their practices and strive to better their work through intrinsic motivation if they were given the opportunity to be placed in an environment that supported growth and reflection.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

As its primary goal is to solve real-world problems, action research is carried out in real-world scenarios rather than in controlled experiments. Nevertheless, in accordance with its ideals, it is typically chosen when conditions necessitate flexibility, the involvement of people in research, or change must occur rapidly or comprehensively. Based on this line of thought, the current study takes a form of action research immediately after noticing students’ issues related to writing skills.

In this respect, the following question was triggered:

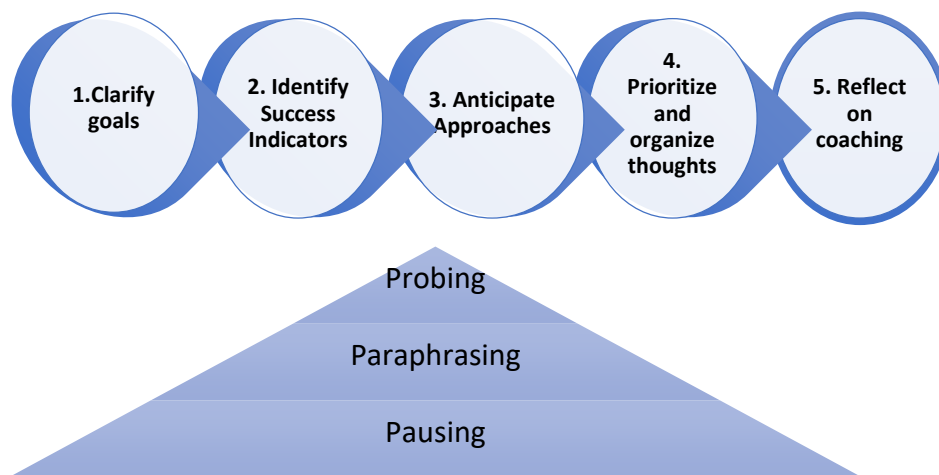
- What are the strategies to be implemented to help students improve their writing at both the sentence and paragraph levels?

3.1 Participants

Students in concern belong to first year of baccalaureate Science stream. They all belong to the same group with a total number of 20.

3.2 Procedure

To overcome students' deficiencies in constructing sentences, which is regarded as one of the most important elements in writing a paragraph, certain activities took part in the lessons with first-year baccalaureate students. It is worth mentioning that the activities were sequenced with the aim of pushing students from one level of awareness to another. The activities used were 'scrambled sentences, 'identification of components of a sentence,' and 'sentence construction'. After introducing the current intervention, a workshop was organized with the aim of applying the cognitive coaching approach to planning writing. This approach was decided on because coaching at the pre-writing stage provides students with a framework for organizational and cognitive planning in a psychologically secure environment. The following figure is the coaching map utilized in the coaching sessions along with essential coaching strategies.



4.0 RESULTS

Taking the students' level into consideration, the aforementioned activities were carried out to enhance their writing, starting with the sentence level. As mentioned earlier, when the problem was detected, the first step was to introduce scrambled sentences to students with the aim of familiarizing them with the English sentence structure. This activity remains a motivating tool, because the task is performed in groups. Students enjoy helping each other and collaborate to find the correct answer. The task then creates an opportunity to negotiate the components of the sentence and agree on the final product. A competitive atmosphere was created to obtain the highest number of correct sentences.

Scrambled sentences: This activity is a motivating tool to establish a learning context in which students are required to put words in the correct form so that they will make meaningful and correct sentences. Indeed, it is a good trigger to review grammar structure and a mind-bending game that not only tests grammatical knowledge but also builds sentence-making skills.

Identification of components of a sentence: The aim of this activity is to raise students' awareness of the sentence structure, its basic components, and their organization. To a large

extent, students notice the difference between their native language and the foreign language structure once the components are identified and highlighted.

The activity was followed by sentence construction in the form of homework, mainly after teaching vocabulary. The teacher modeled one sentence in which she used one of the vocabulary items studied during the vocabulary lesson. Students were asked to write at least three similar sentences in which they used vocabulary. They were encouraged to write simple sentences as well, which made some of them succeed in transmitting meaning using the correct structure.

Sentence construction: Sentence construction is regarded as the final stage of the sentence level in which students implement what they have learned in grammar. Because the sentence structure has been raised, constructing sentences must be easier than before. This stage can be applied as a warm-up for writing a paragraph. Thus, when students form their own sentences with the vocabulary learned, they mostly continue to the paragraph level.

Several students managed to write correct sentences in terms of structure, but the meaning remained redundant. This contradicts the structural view of language, which defends communication as the ultimate goal. It might be said that in our case, raising consciousness about the sentence structure of the language has been achieved. This phase remains important in writing, mainly during the outlining stage.

After six weeks of remedial work and different activities aimed at sentence structure, students were introduced to the writing workshop, which aimed to write a postcard to their friend. The coaching session initiated with a discussion that revealed that participants were unaware of the process of writing as they do not abide by the planning phase, which results in feeling of being blocked after writing the topic sentence and creates a psychological barrier.

Following the coaching map, the session introduced the first step which was clarifying goals. Learners analyzed the writing prompts and defined the audience. During the second step, coachees identified success indicators through listing components of a good postcard along with statements that reflect their own intellectual and emotional reaction to the quality of their written expressions. Third, coachees anticipate approaches through identifying themes and connections based on writing prompts. This step paves the way to the fourth stage of the coaching map that is prioritizing and organizing thoughts. The aforementioned steps are unaccustomed to learners as they were performed orally which is not usually done in a writing session. While going through those steps, coachees were equipped with three strategies to debate their planning phase and enrich the discussion. First, coachees were urged to use “Pausing” as a strategy that enhances substituting the paper with their real voices through listening carefully to each other. Afterwards, they were encouraged to use “Paraphrasing” since when they paraphrase the previously heard ideas, a bridge is created between each other’s thoughts. This does not only improve their paraphrasing skill, but also stresses on active listening and positive communication which are vital tools of coaching. It also broadens their lexical baggage and makes them open to more ideas. Finally, the “Probing” strategy is utilized through the process of asking questions that elicit specific cognitive activities in the person being coached such as recalling information or clarifying a point. As a final stage, coachees were asked to reflect on coaching and portray how the coaching conversation has supported their thinking.

While planning, students exploited their background knowledge of writing sentences in the correct form and tense. The students, along with the teacher, took part in whole-class correction in which both the structure and meaning of the sentences were revised. Ultimately, the sentences were organized to be joined using the appropriate linking words that students already know. The purpose was to create an atmosphere in which students could make use of their previous knowledge in the right way.

Generating and organizing sentences along with coaching strategies implemented within the coaching map paved the way for drafting a paragraph in which students described their own school. The first draft was edited by group members. Students were given the opportunity to write and organize the postcard. Ultimately, Postcards were presented throughout the class. Students took part in the correction and scoring of the paper regarding the content, organization, and layout of the product. They were motivated to assess each other's products and vote on the best postcard. The best postcard was selected based on three criteria: correctness of language, organization of ideas, and coherence of text.

Throughout the writing process, students must go through different stages to come up with a neat paper. Unfortunately, it was revealed that students were unaware that writing involves different processes. Feedback is believed to provide good results in terms of students' improvement in writing. In this respect, the overwhelming majority of participants indicated that coaching provided a powerful means of supporting their thinking as they integrated several strategies of active listening and purposeful communication so as to reach the logical analysis of their own thoughts. Thus, they agreed that they sensed a difference between coaching to write and attending the traditional writing sessions. Additionally, they became aware of the coordination between the grammar and writing courses as they shaped an awareness about the importance of grammatical knowledge when implementing it in written production which could not be done without the cognitive coaching approach that researcher implemented with them.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study attempted to examine the issue of writing deficiencies among high school students in Morocco and employed action research to implement remedies. The study revealed that students lacked awareness of language structure, leading to disorganized and meaningless writing products along with psychological barriers to express their thoughts on paper. Various strategies related to Writing Approaches in general and Cognitive coaching approach specifically were applied to boost learners' awareness about the stages of writing and the products as well. The results has shown that the activities were effective in improving students' writing skills, particularly in sentence construction thanks to the competitive atmosphere which motivated students to collaborate and negotiate the correct answers and also discuss thoughts and clarify them through coaching strategies such as active listening and productive communication.

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