

# COACH-PLAYER COMMUNICATIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF TOP-LEVEL COACHING DISCOURSE AT A SHORT-TERM ICE HOCKEY CAMP

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study sought to analyze the instructional discourse of top-level coaches to identify the specific language content of coaching discourse in practice.

**Methodology:** The study analyzed the recorded discourse of four coaches of the West Coast Hockey Prep Camp in Port Alberni, BC, Canada, between 2012 and 2016. Transcriptions of on-ice instructions were analyzed using Provalis QDA Miner v5.0.1 and Provalis WordStat v7.1.6 software to determine word-type and frequency.

**Main findings:** The processed corpus of 21,376 words produced 1,022 quantifiable words which were classified into one or more of the categories of single-category language (i.e. General (G), General Slang (GSI), Sports Specific (SS), and Sports General (SG)), or the eight additional multi-category sub-categories (i.e. G/GSI, G/SS, G/SG, SS/SG, GSI/SG, G/SS/SG, G/GSI/SG, and GSI/SS/SG). Analyses revealed that single-category vocabulary (i.e. G, GSI, SS, and SG) made up 75.2% of the categorized language, with SS (4.6%) and SG (11.1%) making up 15.7% of the total.

**Applications:** An understanding of the linguistic framework of instructional language in short-term training camps allows athletes to invest greater focus in their athletic performance in camp. The results offer athletes contextual reference for preparatory language study and authentic linguistic insight for the counter of potential target language anxiety.

**Novelty/Originality:** Results indicate that top-level coaches relied significantly less on sports-specific word-type to facilitate their instruction and suggest that a general comprehension of English can provide a strong foundation for understanding top-level coaching discourse. This provides significant insight for athletes harboring concerns for English proficiency and coach-player miscommunication.

**Key words:** *coach-player communication, short-term sports camp, coaching discourse, foreign language anxiety, sports English*

## BACKGROUND

[Hanin's \(2000\)](#) findings in the development of the ZOF Model (Zone of Optimal Functioning) identified anxiety as a significant factor in sport performance, later proposing that each athlete possesses an optimal range of anxiety for performance. [Raglin and Hanin \(2000\)](#) also reference the long-held belief of sport psychologists in the debilitating effects of excess anxiety, alongside the widely accepted supposition that positive emotions augment sport performance. Discussions of competitive worry in ice hockey ([Dunn, 1999](#)), competitive trait anxiety (CTA) in particular, also refer to fear of negative social evaluation as a dimension of CTA. In Dunn's study, 16 items were developed for the Collegiate Hockey Worry Scale (CHWS) to measure athletes' predisposition to worry. Among these items, the five characterizations in Figure 1 hold discernible relevance for (foreign language) investigations into coach-player and player-player communications.

**Figure 1: CHWS (item) applicable to coach-player communication research**

- what my teammates will think if I let them down (Item 2)
- making mistakes... other people being disappointed with me (Item 3)
- not knowing the characteristics of opposing players (Item 5)
- not knowing how the opposition will play. (Item 11)
- not knowing what to expect in the game (Item 15)

The lessening of potentially anxiety-inducing stimuli which may serve to deter athletes from performing at their maximum potential or from maintaining focus is understandably advantageous towards their success. The relevance and significance of attention is phrased well by Englert and Bertrams ([2012, p. 581](#)).

...the success of selective attention is impaired by anxiety, as anxious individuals' attention is automatically occupied by threatening stimuli that can either be internal (i.e., worrisome thoughts) or external (i.e., audience),

which leaves less attention available for the actual task and can lead to performance decrements (Behan & Wilson, 2008; Vickers & Williams, 2007; Vine & Wilson, 2011; Wilson, Vine, & Wood, 2009).

For top-level athletes, short-term camps can provide a shortcut to success through such favorable resources as staff and experience. The camps elicit quality short-term interaction and high demands on output, both in skill and communicative connectivity. With top-level coaching, scouting, and management alongside top-level competition, players are given the stage to develop and to market for their futures. Practice sessions thus offer opportunities to perform together with other similarly goal-driven athletes and experienced and accomplished staff.

The four coaches in this study well illustrate the latter. At the time of research observations, the coaches held a combined 40 seasons of head coaching and 25 seasons of assistant coaching experience (including parts of seasons) in North America, Europe and Asia. Over this time, they coached a combined 6 seasons at the university/college level, amassed 8 championships, 2 Coach of the Year awards, and headed 7 national/provincial/state teams including the Canadian men's national hockey team ([hockeyDB.com](http://hockeyDB.com); [West Coast Hockey Prep Camp, 2017](#)).

Coaching experience and accolades translate into opportunity for short-term camp athletes. However, with this opportunity comes the pressure to perform. Easterbrook (1959, in [Raglin and Hanin 2000](#), p. 97) theorizes that “with increased anxiety, the reduced attentional capacity should eventually lead to a decline in performance as crucial information is not perceived.” In consideration, and in line with the understanding that attention is a finite and selective resource, there is an undeniable need for any potentially intrusive anxiety to be kept as non-intrusive as possible.

In establishing an argument for the need for increased research surrounding the instructional language of short-term sports camps, this paper begins with a consideration of theory related to foreign language anxiety. Based on the structure of short-term sports camps, it appears that foreign athletes can face similar state anxiety (and the potentially debilitating effects thereof) to that of language classroom learners. While the variable of language formulates both goal and anxiety in the case of language classroom learning, it is reasonable to assume that the same anxiety-inducing stimulus (i.e. foreign language use) would affect foreign camp athletes in a similar fashion. With language possessing the capability to potentially inhibit athletic production and limit opportunities for timely success, the importance of research surrounding sports camp instruction appears without question. Aptly, the paper subsequently presents the research and results of an analysis of the instructional language of four top-level coaches followed by a discussion of the implications of these results.

## RELATED THEORY

### *Language Anxiety*

[MacIntyre \(1999, p.31\)](#) contends that the genesis of language anxiety is when one “comes to associate anxiety arousal with the second language... they expect to be anxious in second language contexts.” To date, much of the research surrounding second language anxiety has focused on language classroom anxiety as a state anxiety (i.e. specific to a specific situation, in this case foreign language learning) and in terms of language performance ([Horwitz et al., 1986](#); [MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989](#); [MacIntyre, 1999](#); [Young, 1991](#)). The term itself was coined to characterize exactly as the name implies, a specific anxiety manifested through the variables of foreign language learning in a language classroom. [Young \(1991\)](#) summarized six possible sources of second language anxiety: (1) personal and interpersonal issues, (2) instructor-learner interactions, (3) classroom procedures, (4) language testing, (5) instructor beliefs about language learning, and (6) learner beliefs about language learning. Whereas Young's fourth point of ‘language testing’ does not ostensibly hold relevance to athletes in short-term sports camps, the five remaining points quite plausibly do. While perceivable testing may arise in, for example, a measure to confirm linguistic competency with relation to basic daily living skills – a legitimate concern if a team were to take on a non-speaker of English – Figure 2 (placed at the end of article) illustrates the plausible relevance of the other five.

It has been reported in the past that foreign language anxiety is specific to a language learning context ([Horwitz et al., 1986](#)). Although the comparative focus of consideration in Figure 2 differs (i.e. language vs. sport), the fundamental variable of language intertwines Young's categories of second language anxiety in both learning environments as the culture of sport includes the language of sport therein. Consequently, foreign athletes indirectly target that language in their camp development. While the language classroom is arguably a more restrictive learning environment due to its overt language-based goal orientation, short-term sports camps are not dissimilar in their educative structure. The sports camp venue holds similar characteristics to the classroom, especially in the value and intention of teacher talk as [Wardhaugh \(2002\)](#) describes below.

...classroom talk is dominated by the teacher, who selects topics, sees that participants stick to the chosen topics, and decides how these will be discussed and who will be allowed, even nominated, to discuss them... questions are

quite often addressed to a whole group of listeners and individuals in that group are required to bid for the right to answer. Furthermore, (when someone is chosen to answer the question) the whole answering ritual is gone through for the benefit of all participants.

For foreign athletes, coach-player interactions can clearly offer scenarios for the generation of anxiety. As Wardhaugh explains above in characterizing the intention of teacher talk, there is a necessity for athletes to maximize comprehension in the event they are called upon to provide an educated response for the benefit of the group. Selective attention is clearly an applicable concern for participants in this regard. As with Gardner's (1985, in [Ohata, 2011](#)) contention that the type(s) of motivation learners hold in language learning will correlate to the level of their language anxiety, for foreign athletes harbouring concerns for linguistic competency in seeking to realize camp goals, the extent to which they are determined to realize these goals would likely correlate to the levels of anxiety they hold toward both language input and output. This anxiety is directly and highly relevant to the inescapable communicative environment of short-term camps and to the need for research surrounding the instructional language in use therein.

In a study which applied the second language speaking anxiety scale (SLSAS) in seeking to support the premise that second language anxiety extends beyond the classroom, [Woodrow \(2006\)](#) concluded that anxiety resulting from communication in English can be debilitating and can influence adaptation to the target environment, noting results which indicated the most frequent source of anxiety being that of communicating with native speakers. [Horwitz et al. \(1986\)](#) similarly observed that student anxiety levels arose when they were required to use English outside of the classroom. Furthermore, Woodrow reports Tobias' (1985, in [Woodrow, 2006](#)) assertion that worry occupies cognitive capacity that otherwise would be devoted to the task in hand and therefore is debilitating. For Japanese language users, [Thompson's \(2001\)](#) rendering also brings an additional cultural dimension to the dialog. For the Japanese, Thompson writes, (communicative) "tentativeness is preferred to assertiveness, hesitancy to momentum", and the Japanese do not care to be 'put on the spot' especially in front of peers.

In the context of a discussion of anxiety inducers for foreign athletes, it is clear that the need for communicative proficiency, both self-fulfilling and camp-supportive, is essential, and therefore contributes to a potentially (language) anxiety-laden environment. And, while some hockey lingo has filtered (somewhat) into the sport in Japan (see, for example, the [\[Snow Box by masa\]](#) homepage), it has taken the route of most loanwords. Due to the phonetical demands and morphological changes of the Japanese language, even correctly borrowed language (i.e. meaning and usage) is, to varying degrees, cultural-specific (see [Kay, 1995](#)). [Bauman's \(2013\)](#) research also showed that problems resulting from English loanwords were due to their differences in form, function, and/or English meaning, leaving the cultural influence on this language alive with questions of context- and nuance-appropriate usage. The terminology itself is an area that can be defined through an infinite number of ice hockey related resources as it is on the website above. Usage, however, as with the changes that often coincide with borrowed language, cannot easily be accurately depicted in a scripted manual such as a textbook without direct and up-to-date reference for the language in action.

To summarize, research into the influences and effects of foreign language anxiety on student performance in language classes appears to leave such discussions open to include foreign athlete-coach relationships as well. It is also reasonable to assume that potentially debilitating anxiety, with native speakers in particular (as the studies in foreign language anxiety report), would translate likewise. Considered together with the demands of the instructor-centered communication illustrative of sports camp sessions, and the user concern for potential incorrectness in borrowed terminology and usage, research to help alleviate such relevant worry for foreign athletes appears highly essential. Moreover, the evaluative pressures on athletes to perform in short-term camps bring additional importance to the need for reducing any non-performance enhancing anxiety.

## METHODOLOGY

Methods for this study comprised the basic formula of record, transcribe, and analyse. Observations were recorded using a Camera-Mount Wireless Microphone System (Sennheiser ew 112-p G3) mounted on an HD camcorder (Panasonic AG-AC90). Coaches were briefed on the content of the research study prior to each recorded session, and then equipped with a clip-on omni-directional microphone (ME2) and bodypack transmitter (SK 100 G3). The adaptive diversity receiver (EK 100 G3) was attached to the camcorder and both were positioned in the players' bench slightly back from the ice surface in order to remain out of the players' and coaches' direct line of sight. While the positioning of the camcorder allowed for discreetness, it did restrict visual access to the immediate left and right corners of the arena. Conversely, the capabilities of the Sennheiser ew 112-p G3 enabled the EK 100 G3 and SK 100 G3 to maintain clear uninterrupted contact over the entire ice surface and for the duration of each session.

Audio and visual data was recorded to the camcorder’s two SD drives and transferred to computer for transcription following the completion of camp observations. All comprehensible utterances in the data (i.e. coach and player) were transcribed in their entirety by the researcher. Utterances which were unable to be understood with complete accuracy were marked as ‘inaudible’ in the transcript. The various nuances of speech were also maintained in the transcription (e.g. “ya”, as opposed to the standard version of “yes”) in order to produce an analysis which would accurately reflect the real language in use in camp instruction.

Transcribed files were uploaded to Provalis QDA Miner v5.0.1 software where superfluous text (e.g. “whistle”, transcribed for contextual understanding; “Coach” and “Player”, to delineate speaker) and content (i.e. any utterance provided by someone than the target subject, e.g., players) were deleted. The scaled-down file was then selected for data analysis within the program, transferring the data automatically to Provalis WordStat v7.1.6 where text content was analyzed for frequency of occurrence. Applying the WordStat v7.1.6 exclusion list to remove pre-set words with “little semantic value such as pronouns, conjunctions, etc.” (WordStat 7 User’s Guide, 2015), file data for each coach was reduced and ranked as a list of vocabulary based on a frequency setting of >2. The setting omitted any vocabulary used two times or less during the recording under the premise that this vocabulary would be less worthy of focus in a study identifying *common* language in use.

The application of the exclusion list produced a set of vocabulary ranked in order of occurrence and labeled by the software as Frequency. The remaining items were then analyzed for categorization. With apposite consideration for usage in the camp context and intended meaning (i.e. how they were used in the context of the coaches’ instruction), 12 categories were formulated for the final analysis. The categories comprised four single-category groups (i.e. General (G), General Slang (GSI), Sport Specific (SS), and Sport General (SG)) for vocabulary which was determined to fit into one specific category, and eight multi-category groups (G/GSI, G/SS, G/SG, SS/SG, GSI/SG, G/SS/SG, G/GSI/SG, and GSI/SS/SG), composed of various combinations of the four single-category groups to reflect the multiple meanings of certain items. An item like “pass”, for example, was categorized as G/SG, as it was judged to be a vocabulary item characteristic of basic language study but also retaining quality as a sporting term for sport in general.

**Figure 3: Categorized description for single-category vocabulary**

Single-Category	Vocabulary Description
General (G)	associated with general language study (e.g. “good”, “start”)
General Slang (GSI)	informal usage (e.g. “fellas”, “kay”) or alternative forms or pronunciation (e.g. “talkin”, “gonna”) of vocabulary associated with general language study
<sup>1</sup> Sport Specific (SS)	directly applicable to ice hockey (e.g. “puck”, “wall”)
Sport General (SG)	applicable to sport in general

## DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS

The instruction of the four coaches produced a total of 21,376 words for analysis. Total word count ranged from 3,391 to 7,313 words for the recorded sessions, averaging to 5,344/session, and showing a difference of 3,922 words/session between the top and the bottom of the range. The total was reduced to a corpus of 1,022 words for final categorization and analysis following the application of WordStat v7.1.6 and its default exclusion process. The percentage of categorized words averaged to 4.9% of the total transcribed dialog, with a range extending from 3.8% (Coach 2) to 5.8% (Coach 1). The analysis produced no direct correlation between high usage and low categorization (or vice-versa), though it is of note that the two coaches producing the most transcribed wordage (Coach 2 and Coach 3) placed in the bottom two slots when ranked in terms of categorized words (%).

<sup>1</sup> \*SS vocabulary was classified based on context. Some SS vocabulary (e.g. “stride”, “walk”) could be categorized as SS (i.e. in another sport) or as SG in alternative contexts.

**Figure 4: Categorized words vs. total transcribed word count by coach**

Categorized words/Total Word Count (%)	
Coach 1 (MH)	191/3391 (5.6%)
Coach 2 (MJ)	238/6224 (3.8%)
Coach 3 (SA)	334/7313 (4.5%)
Coach 4 (TK)	259/4448 (5.8%)
Total word count	21,376

In ranking occurrence (Figure 5), single-category vocabulary placed in positions 1 (G: 41.5%), 2 (GSI: 17.8%), 3 (SG: 11.1%), and 7 (SS: 0.04%), with the General language (position 1) and General Slang (position 2) groups combining to make up 59.3% of the total (607/1,022 total words). Multi-category groups comprised of two groups made up 19.3% (198/1022) and held the 4 (G/SG, 0.09%), 5 (SS/SG, 0.07%), 8 (G/GSI, 0.01%), 9 (G/SS, 0.008%) and 10 (GSI/SG, 0.004%) positions in the ranking. For three-category vocabulary items, which held the 6 (0.05%), 11 (0.0009%), and 12 (0.0009%) positions, the total was 0.05% (55/1022).

**Figure 5: Vocabulary categories ranking of occurrence**

Ranking of Occurrence		
G	425	607 (59.3%)
GSI	182	
SG	114	
G/SG	94	
SS/SG	77	
G/SS/SG	53	
SS	48	
G/GSI	13	
G/SS	9	
GSI/SG	5	
G/GSI/SG	1	
GSI/SS/SG	1	

The categorized vocabulary list of each coach (Figure 6) was subsequently charted for the ratio of single-category words versus their overall total. Analyses produced a 75.2% (769/1,022) average share being attributed to single-category vocabulary, with the lowest ratio (Coach 1) of the range at 64.3% (123/191) and the top (Coach 3) at 81.7% (273/334).

**Figure 6: Single-category vocabulary vs. total categorized text**

Total words categorized	Single-Category / Total categorized text
Coach 1 (MH): 191	123/191 (64.3%)
Coach 2 (MK): 238	166/238 (69.7%)
Coach 3 (SA): 334	273/334 (81.7%)
Coach 4 (TK): 259	207/259 (79.9%)

In total, General language (Figure 7) appeared in 6 of the 12 categories (including the single-category of General), for a 58.2% share of the 1,022 word corpus. Re-calculating this share to include the 182 vocabulary items classified as General Slang,

this number increases to 76%, and to 76.0049% when the GSI-inclusive multi-categories of GSI/SG (0.004%) and GSI/SS/SG (0.0009%) are included. The remaining categories (Figure 8) which do not include General vocabulary (i.e. SG, SS/SG, and SS) amount to 23.3% of the total. Those labeled as Extra Categories in Figure 7 are not included in the above numbers as they did not appear in a sufficient number of cases to influence the final numbers.

**Figure 7: Single/Multi-category categories not including G/ GSI**

Single/Multi-category occurrence of G	
G	425
G/SG	94
G/SS/SG	53
G/GSI	13
G/SS/SG	9
G/GSI/SG	1
<b>Total occurrence of G: 595/1,022 (58.2%)</b>	
incl. GSI Single-category (182)	777/1,022 76%
Extra Categories: GSI/SG (5); GSI/SS/SG (1)	

**Figure 8: Occurrence of occurrence of General vocabulary**

Categories (occurrence) not including G or GSI	
SG	114
SS/SG	77
SS	48
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>239/1022 (23.3%)</b>

## CONCLUSION

With language having been observed as one of the chief (mental) barriers for many Japanese athletes considering the offerings of abroad to forward their careers (Elmes, 2014), the findings of this study are significant as they offer corroboration that general language vocabulary comprises a majority of the instructional discourse in this top-level short-term sports camp, combining to make up almost 60% of the instruction (76% if General Slang is included) for the four coaches in this study. The applicability of this *learned-to-usage* language relationship is clear when considering the focus of the primary and secondary school English language curriculum of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT). Based on the Ministry's goals, the *Plan for Improving Student English skills* was developed for implementation from 2014 (English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization, n.d.). Under the heading of *New English Education corresponding to globalization*, the vision aims to nurture basic English language skills and the ability to understand familiar topics, carry out simple information exchanges and describe familiar matters in English.

In identifying general English vocabulary as occurring in 76% (777/1,022) of the categorized words of the four instructors, it is evident that costly programs (in terms of time and money for the development of individualized programming) like English for Specific Purposes need not take blind precedent over more readily accessible general English programs such as those targeted in the compulsory curriculum of MEXT. And while the word totals (Figure 4) might appear daunting at first glance (21,376 for the four coaches), application of the stock exclusion list of WordStat v7.1.6 (2015) further illustrates the comparably miniscule usage of sport specific language (48/21,376 or 0.22%) in reducing the total wordage for analysis to 1,022. With a language education that seemingly complements the greater part of the discourse of camp instructors, Japanese athletes can find greater confidence in their pre-existing language background: a substantial finding for athletes, coaches, and language instructors alike. Moreover, with a 75.2% (769/1,022) average share being attributed to single-category vocabulary (versus 18.46% for multi-category vocabulary: 2-category (18.4%); 3-category (0.06%)), the probability for communicative success for learners capable of fulfilling MEXT's targeted objective(s) surrounding *simple information exchanges* appears feasibly high.

Jowett (2017) affirms that the quality of the coach-athlete relationship is at the heart of coaching and that both coaches and athletes have power in the relationship through investment. In an analysis of interviews of elite level players attending the 2013 West Coast Hockey Prep Camp, Elmes (2016) reported that, when asked for their age, 4 of the 27 players responded with their birth year (e.g. "I'm a '94.") and 5 more clarified their age with "just turned" or "almost". In consideration, it was postulated that the results of this current study would reflect the degree of player commitment illustrative of these types of responses. It was assumed that coaches would apply a higher concentration of sport specific language in their instruction to parallel the degree to which their players have unmistakably invested themselves in their sport. The results, however, clearly did not support these assumptions.

It is difficult to calculate the impact that variables like language have in such a sport-reliant venue, but the knowledge that sport specific terminology comprises a significantly minor part (0.22%) of the overall instructional repertoire of the coaches provides valuable insight for foreign athletes eager to enter camp ready to perform from day one.

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**Figure 2: Young’s sources of language anxiety & relevance to sports camps**

Source of Anxiety	Description
(1) Personal/Interpersonal issues	Low self-esteem (negative peer perceptions) and competitiveness (when language learners compare themselves to others or to an idealized self-image)
<p>Perceived relevance: <i>Concerns that perceived inferior language/communication skills may:</i></p> <p>[Low self-esteem] transfer to similar views (coach and player) of prowess (i.e. (perceived) intelligence = competence misconception); result in communicative apprehension and contribute to feelings of distance or separation from others; contribute to poor interpersonal evaluations of others (social anxiety)</p> <p>[Competitiveness] contribute to impeded athletic performance due to distracted energy (i.e. reduced attentiveness due to a perceived (conscious) need to shift concentration from instructional content and/or sports performance to intentional language production/communication); contribute to social anxiety (i.e. concerns for poor interpersonal evaluations of peers)</p>	
(2) Instructor-learner interactions	Anxiety over how mistakes are viewed / handled by language instructors
Perceived relevance: Anxiety over how mistakes are viewed / handled by coaches	
(3) Classroom procedures	Oral requirements such as responding to questions, oral testing, and performing in front of others (e.g. speech, presentation)
Perceived relevance: Oral requirements such as responding to questions (coach and peer), clarifying understanding, input/feedback, language demands of drill/game situations	
(4) Language testing	Inconsistencies between methods of instruction and evaluation
Perceived relevance: n/a	
(5) Instructor beliefs about language learning	Classroom methodologies, roles and communication strategies inconsistent with learner beliefs
Perceived relevance: Coaching methodologies (both on- and off-ice), roles and communication strategies/language inconsistent with player beliefs, experience or knowledge	
(6) Learner beliefs about language learning	Conceptions of success (i.e., what makes a competent / successful language learner)
Perceived relevance: Concern for correctness of language may contribute to (1)	