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# Towards the reflective football coach from qualitative analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Kassim, M. (2014). Towards the reflective football coach from qualitative analysis. *J. Hum. Sport Exerc.*, 9(Proc1), pp.S249-S256. This study is the first attempt in Malaysia with a qualitative approach to elucidate the behaviour with respect to performance of football coaches especially at grass root level. This study also involves the Chief Coach (n=2), the Assistant Coach (n=2), the Youth Department Officer (n=1), the Executive Secretary of the Forest Football Academy (n=1) and the Players (n=40). The data obtained from the interview and observation techniques have been analysed in accordance with the phase of analysis. For purpose of description of the analysis, it begins with the interview transcripts and progressing to the creation of 'tags', to 'properties', and then finally to the highest order categories'. Apart from the interview, I employed observation technique as a means of collecting data for this study. The researcher does not have to speak to the respondent and ask them about their own behaviour and actions. The researcher can simply watch as individuals act and speak and this enables the researcher to collect data first hand. The findings of this study revealed that i) the environment factors highly influence the coaches behaviour; ii) the component of professionalism, knowledge, behaviour and players performance were related and each of the component has influenced from other factors such as organization, significant experience, environment, training and competition. The findings also showed that the behavioural aspect, is to exhibit their strong commitment to make the players follow the activities constructed. Hence, the coaches had successfully demonstrated positive behaviour by emphasizing fun and enjoyment that helped the players enjoy their training sessions and this showed that the coaches' behaviour is important in imparting knowledge to the players. In conclusion, the findings of the present study thus offer significant contribution to the existing literature and conceptual development on coaching by looking at the relationship between the coaches' behaviour during the coaching process. **Key words:** FOOTBALL, PERFORMANCE, COACHING, QUALITATIVE.



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## INTRODUCTION

The national body that is responsible for the development of the National football teams is the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM). According to the Youth Department Officer of FAM (Subramaniam, 2005) the aims of this Association is to provide a strong base of many players who are technically, tactically, physiologically, and psychologically sound and strong. Its middle and long term plans include the concentration and focus on individuals.

For such reasons, the FAM has always placed great importance on the development of young players for the future of football in Malaysia and various development programmes were formulated and implemented from the 80's and these programmes are being constantly refined and modified to suit prevailing conditions. In 1995, the implementation of a new concept of youth programme, in the form of State Football Academies (SFA) under the supervision of the State Football Association was seen as the best way to develop young footballers.

This decentralized programme is thought suitable for the development of young players, since parental support could be more easily obtained and at the same time provide wider coverage of development and more opportunities for potential footballers (Youth Department FAM, 2004).

Like a school teacher (Bloom, 1985), a coach is responsible for transmitting and transforming a collective body of knowledge and skills on a given subject in order to help footballers acquire and use that knowledge in various situations. A coach is seen as an agent of change due to their great influence on the development of athletes (Walton, 2007).

According to Bloom, et.al (2003), teachers, coaches or instructors need different kinds of knowledge and skills for different phases of a learner's development. It would seem that the knowledge and behaviour of a coach in training sessions and competitions is crucial for the development of players in sport performance.

### *Problem Statement*

An official report of FIFA revealed that the performance of the Malaysian football team had not reached the level which the country expected for over 20 years, and fruitful efforts needed to be made in order for the team to regain its former glory, for example, it had qualified for the Olympic Game in Moscow in 1980. However, since the 1980 Olympics, the national squad has never qualified either for the Summer Olympic Games or the World Cup.

In my view, lack of application of sport science knowledge and the poor behaviour of coaches in the coaching process failed to produce outstanding players and this resulted in poor performance of the national football team. Since then, it was always my intention to develop research in coach education in Malaysia, and to test my own theories as to why the National Team was performing so poorly.

Since the present study is not a comparative study, I sought to better understand the problems being experienced by coaches in Malaysia. Even though coaches in other countries like England, Canada, and Australia have good and effective systems of coach education, I felt that it would be less than productive to transfer practices from these unfamiliar cultural contexts to the academies in Malaysia. I will discuss the limits of comparative study later in the chapter on methodology. This study constitutes an endeavour on my part to throw light on practices in Malaysia in order to contribute to the improvement of the coach education system, particularly for football. Evidently, coach education in Malaysia is facing a range of challenges

which are in urgent need of attention and resolution and there needs to be a continuous evaluation of the existing problems.

Under such circumstance, I felt there was a need for an in-depth study related to knowledge and behaviour in coaching practice, particularly in football in order to produce a more effective coach education system in Malaysia.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions as follows:

- i. How do football coaches at the academies develop their behaviour of coaching in the coaching process?
- ii. What are the elements that impact upon behaviour of the football coaches at the academies in the coaching process?

## METHOD

The study used a qualitative approach from the Interviews analysis. The interviews with the coaches and players were semi-structured. The researcher observed the coaches' behaviour and the players' performance during training sessions and competitions. Apart from the interview and observation technique, documentary analysis was also carried out in exploring the main elements of the coaching process that impact upon knowledge and behaviour of the football coaches. Thus, the research framework represents the overall direction of this study guided by the literature review and research methodology in answering the research questions.

- i. Data Collection

### *Interview*

In carrying out the interviews, I spent approximately six weeks in each Academy, attended five days a week (Monday to Friday) of training sessions and one day (on the weekend) for competition. For two Academies, I interviewed the Chief Coach (n=2), the Assistant Coach (n=2), the Youth Department Officer (n=1), the Executive Secretary of the Forest Football Academy (n=1) and the Players (n=40). The interview was in a form of semi-structured and unstructured with each respondent lasted between one or two and a half and four hours, and took place at the office of the Academy, on field, school library, or school classroom. The interview sessions were carried-out at the Forest Football academy (within six weeks) 12 times with the chief coach, 8 times with the assistant coach, 4 times with the players, 1 time with the Secretary. For the City Football Academy the interview sessions were completed within six weeks, 10 times with the chief coach, 7 times with the assistant coach, 5 times with the players. I continued with the interview sessions until I felt I had enough data to enable me to answer the research questions.

### *Observation*

In this study, every coach was observed for a total of 60 hours (2 hours per session of training x 5 session of training x 6 weeks= 60 hours). The series of observations, promoted the development of confidence and trust between myself and the respondents (coaches and players). It also helped me to reduce the possibility of being deceived by one's respondents (Kassim, 2007). During my observation sessions, I was able to assess the consistency of coaches' statements, moods, and behaviour at different times and in contrasting situations, eliminating the possibility of being fooled by the respondents.

For this study, I used non-participant observation because I did not become a participant in the activities of the respondents. According to Baumgartner et al., (2002), non-participant observers enter the setting as outsiders to observe events and behaviour. The researcher is removed from the social process and must find key informants. Key informants are individuals who are knowledgeable about what goes on and who are willing to talk with the researcher and provide explanations. Subsequently, non-participant observers must find ways to negotiate and gain access to the setting, as well as earn the trust of participants.

In using non-participant observational procedure, I took the role of an observer. I did not become part of the team or offer coaching advice. I was a non-participant observer. Therefore, I kept in mind three major considerations put forward by Nachmias & Nachmias (1996), in ensuring the data obtained are systematic and meaningful. They are: 1) what to observe, 2) when to observe and how to record, and 3) how much inference is required.

In carrying out the observation, I attended 30 training sessions and 6 competitions for each Academy team. I used a pocket-microphone tape recorder to record my voice on anything I saw, heard and thought about, upon observing the coaches' and players' behaviour during these training sessions and competitions. I did not take part in the field-training and competition but I only observed the coaches and the players in the field.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The finding of this study identified that the behaviour of coaches in the coaching process is very important apart from the knowledge of coaching. The ways the coaches behave that reflect the knowledge that the coaches possess will have impact on the players' performance. Behaviour of the coaches in this study is seen in the context of the coaches' characteristics in organizing the team, planning for the team's training activities to prepare for competition and the coaches' reaction during the competition. The finding revealed that the coaches' behaviour has impacted on the players' performance. This finding confirms the previous research on behaviour, in which the coaches, through their words and actions, affect the players' performance and their social and emotional wellbeing (Jones et al., 2004). For purpose of description of the analysis, it begins with the interview transcripts and progressing to the creation of 'tags', to 'properties', and then finally to the highest order categories'. (refer table 1).

**Table 1.** List of category and property.

Organization	Training	Competition	Coach-Centred Process	Players-Centred Process	Contextual Factors
-Outlining the mission	-Physical training	-Pre-game competition	-Growth process of coaches.	-Players empowerment	-Job Environment
- Planning				-Concern for players	
- Goal setting	-Tactical training	-Game day preparation	-Ways of learning		
-Team building	-Technical training	-In game day coaching adjustment	-Personal approaches to coaching	-Personal characteristics of players	
-Administrative tasks.		-In game day personal behaviour			
-Working with support staff		-Post competition			

In this study, the coaches' actual behaviours were seen in their task of organizing the team, which was a prerequisite step for the coaches to prepare the players for training and competition. The coaches' organizational tasks involved outlining the mission and direction of the team, providing up-to-date information to the players, prepare seasonal training plan, helping players to set the team's goals, guiding the players into compatible team, and communicating the team's rules and sanctions to the players. For training purposes, the coaches display their knowledge and skills in the areas of physical, tactical and technical training to help their players prepare for competition. During competition, the coaches' behaviour was seen to be important as it involved the coaches' attitude, emotion and reaction in giving confidence to the players to perform well in the game. (refer table 2).

**Table 2.** Amount of tags in each property of coach-centred process.

Growth Process of Coaches	Ways of Learning	Personal Approaches to Coaching
1. Gaining knowledge	1.Workshop/seminar	1. Hard work
2. Always learning	2.Learning from others	2. Communicating
3. Coach maturing	3.Sharing information	3. Empathy
4. Self-evaluation		4. Personal style
5. Career choice		5. Having fun
6. Personal reflections		6. Good coach
7. Personal life		
8. Joy of coaching		

The coaches' coaching style, the coaches' communication with the players and the coaches' personal attitude towards the players are the important examples accounted for in this finding. The finding revealed that the players preferred a democratic style of coaching and it suggests similarity with the previous research which discovered that athletes did not like their coaches adopting a strict, authoritarian manner (Sherman et al., 2000; Smith & Smoll, 1977; Vallee & Bloom, 2005; Smith et al, 1979; Chelladurai & Smith, 1978). However, the dissimilarity of the finding of this study with the previous researches on the style of coaching was that the players' performance in this study were not really affected by the autocratic style of the coaches since the players had got used to the style.

Even though other previous researchers have found that a democratic coaching style can positively influence the athletes' motivation (Hollembek & Amorose, 2005), provide more opportunities for athletes to exhibit and develop their skills (Kozub & Pease, 2001; Smith & Smoll, 1977), and how an autocratic approach adopted by the coaches can sometimes have adverse effect on performance (Vallee & Bloom., 2005), the finding of this study is in contrast with the previous findings.

The finding of this study also revealed the importance of communication between the coaches and the players which affirms the previous research that focussed on improving the coach-athlete relationship and players' performance through improved communication (Orlick, 1990). Although the findings revealed that the coaches in one academy did not communicate effectively (verbally), demonstration and practical actions conducted by the coaches during training successfully constitute an effective way of communicating the knowledge and skills to the players. This finding has in fact contributed to the limited research being carried out previously on communication in the sports context and affirmed Marten's (1990) view that communicating with a positive approach (either verbally or by conduct) was most important in activities in sports.

Coaches' personal attitude towards the players constitutes another important behaviour of the coaches that have impact on the players' performance. Similar to the previous researches, the finding of this study showed the importance of the coach having a good sense of humour as the key to motivate the players (Grisaffe, 1996; Barnet et al, 1992; Bengoechea et al., 2004). The players in the present study enjoyed the training and showed positive displayed a towards their coaches. During competition, the coaches showed positive attitude to give confidence to the players and they reacted positively by not being too emotional if the team played poorly or lost while showing good spirit or effort.

The coaches also showed positive and gave encouraging feedback to the players during the post-competition period that built up the interest of the players and motivated them to provide better performance.

Since the coaches in this study also were concerned with the well-being of their players including their welfare and future career, a more positive learning environment was created. In effect, the concerns showed by the coaches were appreciated by the players and had produced a positive attitude and team cohesion among the players in the academy.

This finding added to the literature on coaching behaviour as a fundamental to effective coaching. Previous research has showed how coaches who take care of the opinions and feelings of their athletes can have the best relationships and contacts with those athletes (Kenow & Williams, 1999; Salminen & Liukkonen, 1996; Allen & Howe, 1998) and the relationship between the athletes' perceptions of their coaches behaviour can bring about changes in the athletes' level of intrinsic motivation (Amorose & Horn, 2001).

## CONCLUSION

As this study further seeks to understand the importance of coaching process in the development of the players, the previous literature on coaching process was analysed.

The coaching process as defined by Lyle (2003) is "the contract or agreement between athlete and coach and consists of the purposeful, direct and indirect, formal and informal series of activities and interventions designed to improve competition performance" (p.40). It is the most suitable term to describe the relationship between the coach and the athlete in order to improvise performance (Lyle, 1999). Thus, the coaching process is meant to help the player learn and improve a particular skill (Kassim, 2007).

This study has gone through an extensive data collection process and yielded findings that add to the literature on coaching practice. It has discussed the behaviour during the coaching process in two football academies in Malaysia and it is the first research on coach education in the country to utilize qualitative methods and hoped to become a breakthrough for future research in coach education in the country. There is a need to conduct further similar studies to provide further details concerning the coaching practice that has taken place in other academies and the problems faced by the coaches and the players during the coaching process.

Other than that, future research may want to embark on a study of the coaches' content knowledge, understanding the learning process in coaching, quality in coaching, coaching methods, and understanding of the athletes' abilities. It is hoped that future research can also focus on the coaches and the players in other sports at various levels. If this can be done, it is hoped that a theory or a coaching model can be

developed as a guide for the coaching practice in the Malaysian perspectives. Perhaps, it also can make some comparison study in future research between Malaysian coaches and international coaches from other countries. These additional studies will help to provide a basis for comparative analysis of the coaches' knowledge and behaviour in these academies. It would also be beneficial in future to further research the coach education programme being implemented at the national and international level.

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