

# QueSCo – Questioning Sequences in Coaching



## TEAMS | LOCATIONS



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

"Effective questioning lies at the very heart of the coaching conversation" (Grant & O'Connor, 2010, p. 102).

"Questioning Sequences in Coaching" (QueSCo) is the first international and interdisciplinary research project on coaching. It is funded by national funding organizations from Austria (FWF, Lead Agency), Germany (DFG), and Switzerland (SNF) and runs for 36 months (March 2021 to February 2024). Its home bases are the English Department of the University of Klagenfurt, the Leibniz-Institute for the German Language in Mannheim, and the Department of Applied Psychology at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences. The project is headed by Eva-Maria Graf.

QueSCo investigates questioning practices in business coaching. Coaching as a helping profession builds on the interaction between coach and client, addresses clients' work-related problems and aims to ultimately facilitate clients' change (Graf & Spranz-Fogasy, 2018a; Graf, 2019). While coaching is becoming increasingly popular, its academic foundation is still underdeveloped, particularly in the context of coaching process research. This (predominantly qualitative) research addresses what coach and client actually do together on a moment-by-moment basis in their conversations, and looks into the effectiveness of coaching interventions (Fleischhacker & Graf 2023; 2024).

The analysis of questioning sequences (i.e., questions – client reactions – coaches' reactions to clients) as an essential change-inducing intervention (Peräkylä et al., 2008) thereby represents a major research gap: Though questions are presented as central and powerful tools in practice literature, there is hardly any empirical research on questions in coaching (Graf et al., 2020; Graf & Spranz-Fogasy, 2018b). The aim of QueSCo is therefore to develop a coaching-specific typology of questions as well as questioning sequences and to investigate their function and change potentials: How do questions locally and also globally contribute to clients' change?

Theoretical models in psychology describe change via specific developmental phases clients pass through (Greif & Benning-Rohne, 2015). Yet, these are not observable. What can be observed and linguistically analyzed is the sequentially organized coaching interaction, i.e., the coaching conversation and its development (Deplazes et al., 2018). Here, the sequential relations between the participants' turns ensure the transformation of clients' experiences and the generation of new knowledge, which contribute to the process of change across and beyond successful coaching interactions (Peräkylä, 2019).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Which kinds of questions and questioning sequences occur in business coaching? What are their coaching-specific functions?
- How often and where do they occur along coaching sessions or processes?
- Which sequences are (un-)successful?
- How can we understand the relationship between the frequency of (un-)successful questioning sequences and their local and global effectiveness?

The data consists of authentic, video-/audio recorded, and linguistically transcribed coaching processes from systemic, solution-oriented business coaching. By drawing on German, Austrian, and Swiss data, the project covers the entire German-speaking coaching market. The corpus consists of 14 processes with 50 sessions and a total length of 60.5 hours. The project uses a mixed-methods research design, in which qualitative linguistic (Conversation Analysis, Interactional Linguistics) and qualitative/quantitative psychological (Qualitative Content Analysis, Descriptive Statistics) methods are combined.

## PROJECT RESULTS

**THE QUESCO CORPUS:** Following Graf's (2019) (first / second largest) coaching corpus of Emotional Intelligent Coaching, QueSCo has collected the largest corpus of systemic, solution-oriented (online and face-to-face) business coaching interactions: Overall, 14 coaches and 24 clients participated. The entire data amounts to 24 processes, 116 sessions (57 FtF and 59 online sessions) and a total length of 149 hours. About 90.5 hours (i.e., 66 sessions) have already been transcribed according to (minimal) cGAT conventions using FOLKER/EXMERALDA.

**THE TYPOLOGY OF QUESTION TYPES:** A typology of coaching-specific questions (1st position / "target action") was developed primarily by the linguistic team via in-depth (re-)analyses of the authentic coaching data. In collaboration with the psychologists, 12 coaching-specific question types attributed to 7 main functions were identified (see figure 1).

**THE TYPOLOGY OF QUESTIONING SEQUENCES:** The typology of coaching-specific questions (1st position) is expanded to include categories for possible client reactions (2nd position), coaches' reactions (3rd position), as well as prior actions (positions -2 and -1) to questions. Additionally, evaluation criteria were defined to assess the local effectiveness of questioning sequences (see figures 2 and 3). The third positions and sequence evaluations were carried out from both a linguistic and a psychological perspective. Though the focus here is on the linguistic criteria, a collaborative typology of questioning sequences has been developed in this way.

**THE QUESCOM MANUAL:** The QueSCoM coding manual was developed to operationalize the two typologies and code the entire corpus of 14 processes in MAXQDA after an Interrater-Reliability of  $\kappa \geq 0.7$  had been reached. The master code consisted of 121 (sub-)codes and, overall, 87,237 codes were assigned (see figure 4).

**THE MAIN RESULTS:** In the entire corpus, 3,023 questioning sequences including 3,691 questions have been identified. They make up 83% of the entire coded transcripts, which attests to the centrality of questions in coaching.

**Questions (1st position):** Wh-questions make up the most frequent question form (1,629), followed by declarative questions (996) and polar interrogative questions (792), i.e., both open and closed questions play a role in coaching. The most frequent question types are "questions topicalizing problematizing" (24%), "questions managing the (working) relationship" (21%) and "questions topicalizing resources" (18%). Overall, solution-oriented questions make up 41% of the questions, problem-oriented questions make up 26%, which showcases the solution-orientation of the interaction. Question types that most often initiate phases are "questions topicalizing problematizing", "questions managing the (working) relationship", "questions topicalizing client motivation and/or goal" and "questions evaluating interim results" (see figure 1).

**Reaction/Answer (2nd position):** Client reactions to all question types are mostly responsive. The reaction types "client does more (responsive)" (i.e., the client provides an answer as well as additionally relevant information) and "client participates" (i.e., the client provides an appropriate answer to the question) together make up 73% (44% and 29% respectively) of client reactions. Such a result attests to the coaching clients' overall willingness to participate in the coaching process and to actively work towards transformation and change (see figure 2).

**Coaches' Reactions (3rd position):** Particular attention was also paid to the third sequence position. The most frequent (descriptive) linguistic category here is "request for clarification or elaboration" (48%), which means coaches most often use the third position to address unclear aspects of the client's response or to elicit more information. This is followed by "transformation" (15%) by which coaches initiate a decisive change in perspective in relation to the client's response, e.g., from problem- to solution-orientation (see figure 2). From a psychological perspective (which considers topic, affect and relationship management in 3rd position), coaches are highly responsive and attuned to their clients.

**Sequence evaluation:** According to the linguistic definition of local effectiveness (i.e., fulfillment of the questioning sequence): 46% of sequences are fulfilled, i.e., successfully completed, 35% are extended, and only 19% are not fulfilled (see figure 3). From a psychological perspective, which evaluated sequences according to a 5-point scale, 52,3% of sequences received 5 points, 31,7% had 4 points, and 16% received 3 points or less.

**This high percentage of successful sequences points to an overall (local) effectiveness of questioning sequences in coaching, which is both based on clients' as well as coaches' responsiveness.**

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FIG. 1 TYPOLOGIES OF QUESTION TYPES

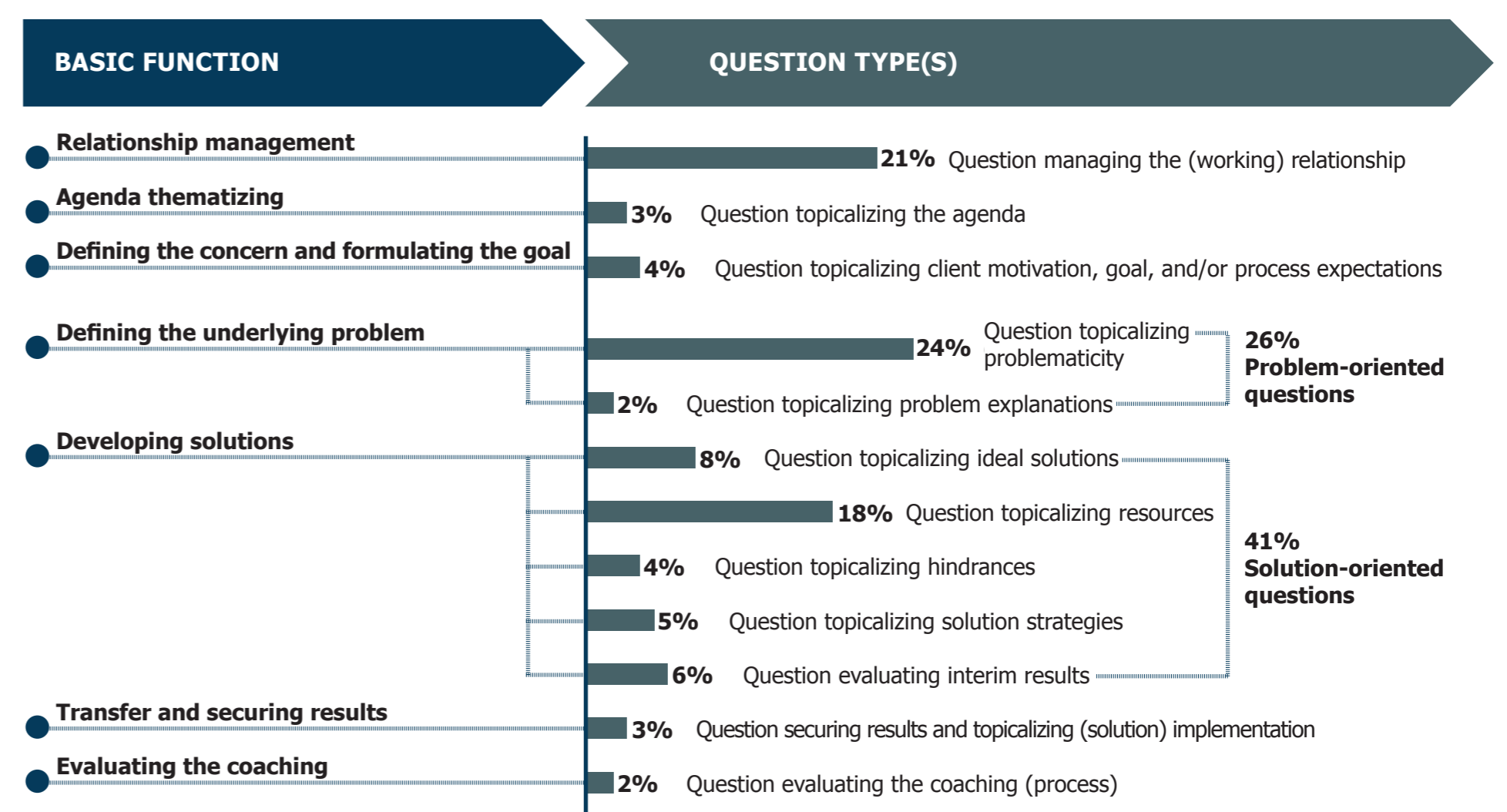


FIG. 2 TYPOLOGY OF QUESTIONING SEQUENCES (LING)

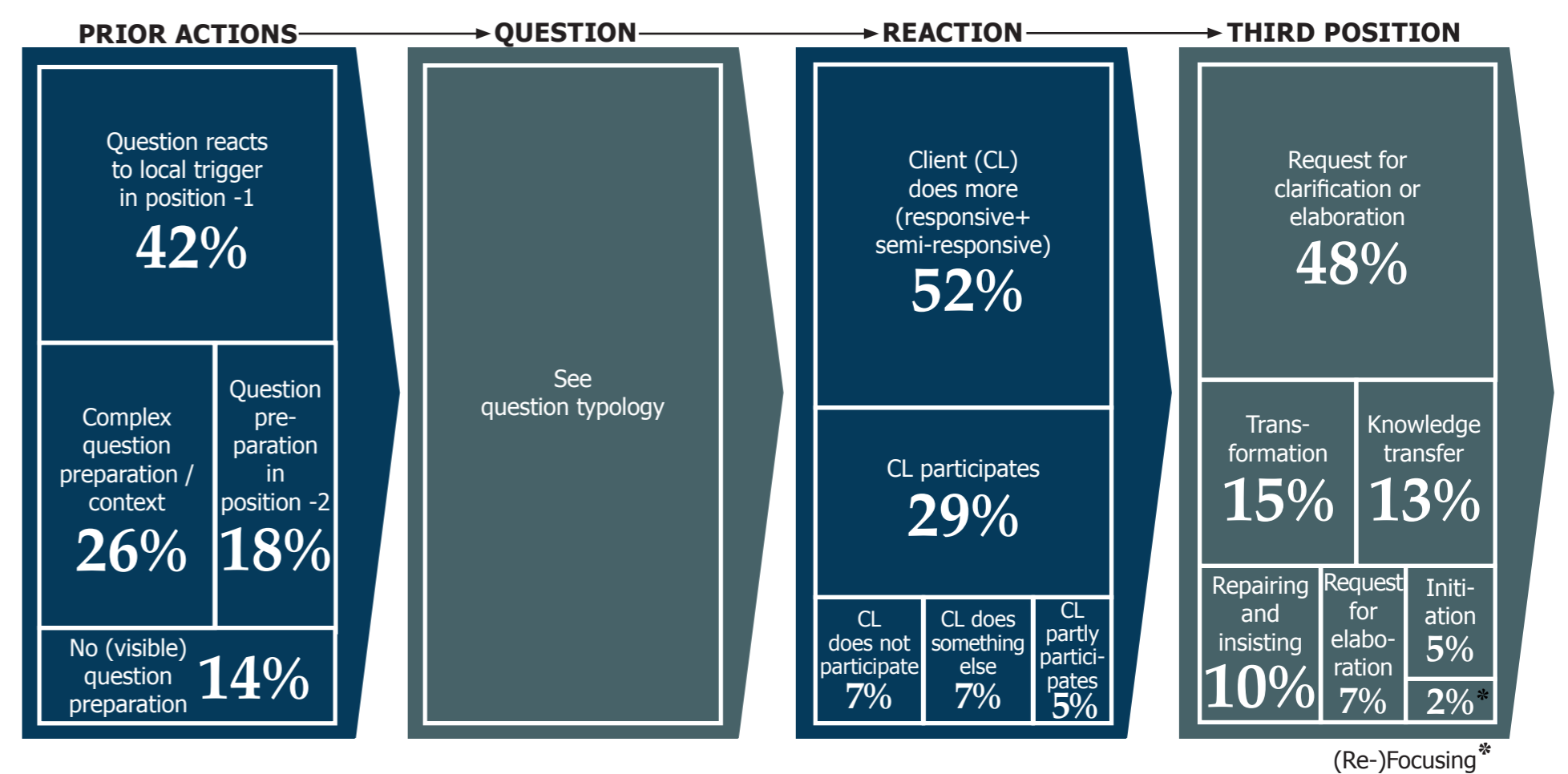


FIG. 3 SEQUENCE EVALUATION (LING)

Category	Description
<b>Fulfilled</b>	The 2nd position is categorized as CL participates or CL does more. CO indicates that the initiating action has been fulfilled, i.e., the question has been sufficiently answered, and something new can be done. Thematically, enough information has been provided by the client and intersubjectivity has been achieved.
<b>Extended</b>	The 2nd position is categorized as CL participates or CL does more. CO indicates that CL's answer is going into the right direction, but not yet fully sufficient; more information is needed to achieve full understanding of an issue. Thematically, CO asks CL to elaborate, clarify, expand, or specify.
<b>Not fulfilled</b>	The 2nd position is coded as CL does not participate, CL partly participates, or CL does something else. CO indicates that CL's response to the question is insufficient and that they cannot continue based on what CL has said. Often, the question is repeated or CO initiates repair. The sequence is also not fulfilled if CO ignores CL's answer, i.e., does not orient to it at all in the 3rd position.

FIG. 4 EXAMPLE CODED QUESTIONING SEQUENCE

Position	Participant	Text
-1	CL*	right (.) and it's like this because at this point i realise that i then also quickly (0.41)
-1	CL	maybe (.) i'm afraid and then i quickly start comparing myself again because i see my weaknesses more in this moment "h and then i start comparing okay she really knows her stuff here an with food and i know nothing at all about what uhm the difference now is between "hh uh this an that "h but uh [mm]
1	CO*	[do you] perceive this as weak[ness]
2	CL	[[smacks lips]] y[es] actually (.) yes (0.85)
3	CO	just asking provocatively uhm if you talk to your sister about energy efficient (0.24)
3	CO	construction and your sister is not well-ver[se]d in this "h] would you interpret this as [weakness]

\* Pos. ... Position / CO ... Coach / CL ... Client



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