

Finding Relationships between Acquisition of Basic Skills and Neuro-linguistic Programming Techniques

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Abstract

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) gained its popularity as a self-motivation and personal development tool in industry to enhance employee productivity and develop a strong workforce capable of managing stress and accomplishing challenging tasks. In the field of education in general, and ESL/EFL in particular, studies have proved that NLP enables learners to use more than one learning style in developing basic skills of Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. NLP also provides the ESL/EFL instructor an additional tool to study behavioral changes that occur in the learner through his responses in the classroom. This research seeks to make a conceptualized understanding of the relationships between acquisition of basic skills and learners' thinking during the learning process when NLP techniques are applied. This research study also examines what innovative ways can be introduced in instructor's teaching methodology after application of NLP techniques in order to make acquisition of skills easier and smooth. The findings of this study are based on experiments conducted on an experimental group, members of which were pursuing/ had pursued the basic skills courses in an undergraduate degree program.

Keywords: learning behavior, learning process; teaching methodology

1.1 Introduction

Neuro linguistic Programming (NLP) was first coined by Bandler and Grinder(1976) who compared a person with a cybernetic unit, a complete mind-body system, making no distinction between his internal experience ('neuro'), language that he uses ('linguistic') and the behaviour ('programming') that results from his interaction with the outside world. NLP practically is a collection of techniques that provides information about individuals, how they think (neuro), how they communicate (linguistic) with themselves and with others and how this communication creates different patterns of behaviour (programming). Accordingly, NLP practitioners use learner-specific or the behaviour-specific techniques attempting to modulate the learners' behavioural patterns from negative to positive and from failure to success, by eliminating their fears, hesitations and mental or emotional blocks that might be disrupting their learning. (Bandler & Grinder,1975; Bandler & Grinder,1979; Craft,2001; Mathison,2003)

This study emphasizes that the NLP techniques popularly used in other fields like industry and business, where psychological measurement and emotional intelligence are key factors of employee productivity and business performance, can also be used to measure and facilitate the growth of learners' linguistic competence and their usage of basic skills of Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. For the purpose of this study, the researcher will refer extensively Mathison's doctoral study (2003) in order to illustrate the successful application of NLP techniques used by him in his empirical experiments and which can be replicated by any language teacher for his or her learners in ESL/EFL situation. The originators of NLP itself had designed a core model based on NLP, called the 'meta-model' of transformational grammar which helps the teacher to identify linguistic patterns that reflect upon the learners' internal representations. (Bandler & Grinder 1975). A specimen of NLP was also introduced in the form of 'spelling strategy' (Bandler &Grinder, 1979), that draws a relationship between the techniques used by the learners to complete spelling of words and the sequences of internal representations that assist in their efforts. These strategies are both effective and ineffective and based on the success of any one strategy, the learners perform the behavioural modelling of completing spelling of words on every occasion. Tosey, Mathison, and Michelli (2005) also assert the possibility of innovation of NLP techniques due to its wide range of techniques such as representational style, modeling and meta-analysis.

NLP uniquely is a culmination of several technical sciences and behavioural practices like Gestalt therapy (Perls 1969), Behavioural Psychology and Operant Conditioning (Skinner, 1953) Counselling (Rogers,1983), Transformational Grammar (Grinder & Elgin,1973), Educational Psychology (Thorndike, 1913) and cybernetics or artificial intelligence (Ashby,1965). NLP techniques are much similar to the techniques used in these fields of study. However, the differentiating factor in NLP that separates it from all other fields of learning is its emphasis on personal change and development of the learners, assuming that all learners are inherently creative and capable of transforming and modulating their behavior according to the way they understand and represent the world and not according to the way the world exists.

Mathison (2003) uses the Korzybski's phrase, 'the map is not the territory', (Korzybski,1958) in order to emphasize how NLP works, and calls people's minds as 'maps of the world' rather than fixed, restricted territories. Mathison also recommends a constructivist approach to evaluate people's acts or behavioral

constructions. He emphasizes on understanding the structure and process of people's behavior or experience, rather than its content. According to him, NLP techniques seek to understand what cognitive processes people use for a specific type of behavior or to construct an experience. NLP does not seek any explanation or justification from the past or enquires about the content of a specific behavior or an experience. In all these techniques, language plays an important role since people use language patterns to narrate their experiences. For instance if learners make a visual (verbal) predicate about a subject (e.g. 'it's the most difficult problem', or 'I have never liked mathematics because of these problems') or when they make responses like (e.g. 'it's quite interesting to learn L2 in this way') or when he utters his excitement for a foreign language (e.g. 'Now I can learn English through Arabic!'), NLP therapists or practitioners would try to match these statements with the context or the background of the learners' interaction, which include the learning environment in the classroom, teaching methodology used and the manner in which they acquire learning (Bandler & Grinder 1979).

1.2 NLP and its application in education

The UK education system has already included NLP techniques through its NLP network called *NLPedNet*, and there also exists associations such as the Society for Effective Affective Learning (SEAL) that encourages individual teachers and learners to receive NLP training, though NLP is also a recognized mode of psychotherapy in the UK, accredited by the UK Council for Psychotherapy and widely recommended as a remedial teaching tool for therapeutic purposes. In language acquisition, especially a foreign language or a second language (ESL/EFL), NLP principles have proven very influential. NLP practitioners (Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Millroad, 2004; Helm, 2009; Tosey and Mathison, 2003; Mathison, 2003; Legall and Dondon, 2006; Kudliskis and Burden, 2009) assert that NLP and teaching language skills are so closely blended that many language teachers apply NLP techniques in one way or other without being aware of it. Hence, when a teacher comments upon learners' behavior or sets up exercises in ESP/ESL classrooms to achieve learning objectives, they are using one or other NLP techniques unintentionally. Often the language teacher's discourse in the classroom is in congruity with learners' behavior (Millroad, 2004). It means that when the teacher adapts his teaching strategies to suit the comfort level of the learners, she is unintentionally using one of the NLP strategies. Legall and Dondon (2006) draw attention to this fact by asserting that NLP plays a major role in the learners' behavioral evolution and strengthens the emotional bond between the teacher and learners. NLP thus creates such a situation that encourages learners to explore the internal representations of the subjects being studied.

Technically speaking, any type of learners' internal experience including hearing, feeling, tasting, smelling, or physical movement will be termed as 'internal representation' (Mathison, 2003). Thus when learners' respond to verbal stimuli while learning basic skills, NLP regards such internal representations as verbal reports of learners' inner experience which are also an evidence of learners' internal visual imagery, which may eventually and gradually turn into feelings, beliefs, behaviour and in a systematic manner as the learners grow their learning (Helm, 2009). Such internal representations are also subjected to change or adaptation as the learners' become aware of their new learning. For this purpose, the teacher must design a NLP model and try to establish a link between the behavioral and verbal cues and the thought processes of the learners. For instance, NLP has discovered links between learners' eye movement and their internal representational systems (Mathison, 2003). NLP has several such techniques that can facilitate the teaching of language skills, a few of which have been employed to conduct this study.

1.3 Presuppositions in NLP

All NLP techniques are based on a few presuppositions that are underpinning and must be studied in relation to ESP/ESL situations (Mathison, 2003). The first presupposition requires that 'meaning must match the response' which means when the instructor transmits information through a lesson, the response or the feedback received must equal the meaning intended by the instructor. When an instructor, for example, delivers a lesson to the learners, he must ensure that the learner has understood its meaning in the same manner as the instructor intended. Often the response from the learner is not the one that the instructor wants to see; hence there is a need to vary the teaching pattern until the instructor gets the desired response. Similarly, the learner needs to vary his learning behaviour. Both the instructor and the learner must not take it as a situation of failure but as a feedback, a discovery not to adopt in future a particular teaching or learning pattern and find alternative ways to succeed. A second presupposition in NLP is that language appears in the learner's consciousness after undergoing a 3-tier experience process. First, when the learner hears a word, he gets stimulated; second, the stimulus reveals an experience to the learner; third, the learner requires a semantically perfect language to describe that experience. Language is thus not a direct semantic experience but an indirect representation of that experience that also later helps to shape learners' behavior. As learners see, hear and feel different things, they need different words to express and if the meaning of these words used by them is similar to what they have learnt, learning is said to have taken place otherwise, if meaning is dissimilar, the learning has not taken place.

A third presupposition that NLP practices and can be purposefully applied to language teaching is that

mind and body are parts of the same communication system and are interdependent; they are not separate, but parts of the same human being. Anything that happens to one part of the system will affect all other parts. In a learning situation, therefore, a learner's perception, thought processes, emotional or physiological responses including the behavioral output occur at the same time. A well trained instructor (particularly in NLP) can thus bring a change in how learners think or perceive a learning situation by changing their thought processes, their emotional processes or even at times by changing their physiological and behavioral responses. NLP has numerous exercises of mental rehearsals and visualization that will help the instructor to predict the desired behavior in the learners as learning outcomes.

A final presupposition in NLP is that behavior is nothing but adaptation; in other words, a behavior is adaptive to the situation or context in which it was learned. If the behavior is not appropriate, it can be changed. In a learning situation, the learners have a widest possible behavioral situations and opportunities to choose from, which they choose according to their understanding of the reality or the meaning understood in the classroom. NLP though calls their present behavior as the best choice at any given moment of time, which is based on their experience and the choices made available to them. But if given a better choice, they will take it; hence in order to check learners' inappropriate behavior, they must be given additional choices.

These presuppositions thus elaborate the understanding of NLP and its relevance in learning a language in an ESP/ESL situation. These presuppositions can help the instructors to explore NLP as an instructional strategy to teach the English language and to improve their teaching capabilities.

1.4 Methodology

This study is a qualitative research study employing a single case study method (Yin, 2014) through pre-and post-observation method on a group that was formed as an experimental unit by making a random selection of participants to test the three NLP techniques selected for this study. This experimental group comprised of only 8 participants who were subjected to investigations through exercises involving reading passages, writing paragraphs, face to face discussions to check their eye contacts and kinesthetic skills for determining listening and speaking skills. Three NLP techniques were used to perform this experiment namely Anchoring (a mental trigger), Framing (recalling positive and negative emotions) and Mirroring (to build rapport and trust). After completing the experiment which took three days for both pre-and post-observation, a triangulation was performed to obtain the validity of the data that was collected from all three NLP techniques. During the triangulation that was happening simultaneously through probe questions, the researcher however also used in close conjunction two other NLP techniques: Eye Accessing and Meta questioning. The framework of this study was thus limited to three NLP techniques initially and two other NLP techniques subsequently during triangulation.

The first NLP technique used was Anchoring and the participants were dragged in a sort of Circle of Excellence to make them feel relaxed and confident, without any fear, stress or anxiety about the test being performed. They were insisted to repeat to themselves that they will remain confident and relaxed during the whole experiment. Having prepared them to draw a circle of excellence around them, the researcher used auditory and visual anchors, or stimuli to process the information in the minds of the participants. These anchors were in the form of such questions like 'What do they see? What do they hear? What do they feel?' Their responses showed whether they remain inside their circle or step outside it to respond to the stimuli during the probe questions and Eye Accessing. The researcher also observed whether they felt confident at the time of each anchor and whether they showed compatibility with other anchors while talking about them simultaneously.

The second NLP technique used in this study was Framing, a technique chosen deliberately to see how participants differentiate between emotions and memories. A common knowledge about human brain is the hippocampus part stores and produces memories while amygdala is responsible for emotions. In other words emotions are not stored in a memory, they are only referenced when needed; therefore by using the NLP technique of Framing it should be possible to edit the emotions associated with a memory! The participants were asked to recall and narrate good as well as bad memories. Participants had good memories like success in examination, their winning results in competitions, or victory in a match while bad memories were related to a theft incident, a street quarrel or parting away with loved ones. The researcher kept intervening while they recalled good and bad memories and observed through Eye Accessing technique the outflow of emotions that precipitated each time the participant recalled a particular memory. It was observed that while good memories had a positive framing, the bad ones had negative framing.

The third NLP technique that gave researcher a better understanding of the needs of ESL/EFL learner was the Mirroring Technique. Mirroring is understood as a mimicking process in which the learners imitate or mimic the subtle behaviour during a communication. The researcher found clear examples of learners mimicking the foreign accents as reflected in expressions like 'I wanna go' or 'Whassup!' In order to use this technique in a learning situation, mimicking must be so subtle that it must appear unconsciously performed. Mirroring is mostly performed in activities like speech patterns, body language, choice of specific diction or in auditory signals like

pace, tone, tempo and volume of voice. The researcher observed that while participants spoke or responded to probe questions, they were attempting to mimic the English accent, clearly hinting at the ESL/EFL attribute penetrated in their speech. A conscious effort of mimicking a foreign accent was observed that made it difficult to establish a communication or a rapport. NLP practitioners associate this consciousness to a kind of fear or a feeling of discomfort since the person that they mimic is different from them. The more different in form and content a thing is, the more he fears it. This applies to anything- culture, race, religion, species or a language. Therefore, in order to make mirroring an effective technique, one must make oneself more similar to the chosen person, who might be a foreigner or not speaking the same language, the mother tongue. This is possible only when the learners have reached the unconscious level and are capable to control xenophobic feelings. Once achieved, it is much easier to build trust and rapport, the main objective of using the NLP techniques.

Following the recommendations of Mathison, the researcher had designed the exercises/ tasks and statements for this experiment. A few of these tasks were deliberate and intentional e.g. to teach subtle variations in word structures, asking participants to 'introspect' and respond. One of the participants in the group used expressions like 'Will you *study* this subject?' instead of 'Will you *teach* this subject?' confusing the meaning of the two verbs 'study' and 'teach' for their semantic closeness. Learners are often seen making mistakes in distinguishing between verb and noun (e.g. *succeed* and *success*), adjective and adverb (e.g. *wrong* and *wrongly*) identical adjectives (*tall*, *long*, *high* etc.) or sometimes in using idioms and phrases in the wrong context e.g. 'Ali *passed away* last semester' to mean 'Ali *passed out* or graduated'. There are numerous examples of such related pair of linguistic constructions, that can be cited as deceptively understood in the ESL/EFL situation. Unless checked and corrected for their meaning, there could be such disasters like 'Dr Haadi has *left us*' or 'Dr Haadi is *no more with us*' to mean that 'Dr Haadi has resigned from the job'. A learner may be quite excited to use (or mimic!) expressions of a foreign language but without knowing their meaning or the context.

1.5 Results

At the end of the experiment, the researcher summarized the findings making the learners ask whether they had a choice to improve, or whether there was some kind of possibility that they might be able to do it better the next time. Such was the impact of using the NLP techniques in this experiment that it resulted in learners' getting conscious of their shortcomings and wanted to improve their auditory, visual, and writing skills. Such a success in this experiment was also because the researcher had chosen to share the feedback of the findings with the learners. The feedback was evidence to both the researcher and the participants to understand that wrong expressions or mistakes are internal presentations of learners' understanding of such words and phrases that are wrongly used or understood during the learning process or perhaps are the result of a flaw in the instruction method. These mistakes may also be due to learners' individual learning style or their understanding of a foreign language. But when given the feedback and explained the correct meaning of words and expression along with their context, all the participants reacted and corrected the error they had inadvertently committed by not being able to distinguish between deceptively similar words and expressions. This is further an evidence of a successful application of NLP technique in both diagnosis and the treatment of a learning problem.

However, it may sometimes be very intriguing for the learners to understand the internally constructed words or their meaning or when the amount of choices available may be very limited. NLP interprets this situation as unique to every individual because when learners use their senses internally, they create unique internal representations; in other words, senses are used as interior coding device, varying in each individual and hence there exists no regularity in the sense imagery created by learners in describing a situation or responding to a stimulus using a foreign language, NLP however insists to understand each learner's 'map of the world' (Mathison, 2003) by adopting a constructivist approach in designing exercises. By 'map of the world', Mathison meant complex and abstract imagery that learners built up in their 'internal architecture' or their inner consciousness and such cognitive mapping, according to his findings, correlates with the changes in the internal representations of the learner's experience of learning. In plain terms, it means that anything that learners' think, feel or speak is the internal representation of the changes caused by the learning experience.

1.6 Conclusion

Overall, this study has succeeded in finding out that NLP techniques increase the intrinsic confidence level of learners and make them feel a desire for change. The results show that NLP intervention in both teaching and learning is effective in developing basic skills in ESL/EFL situations. The learners may come from different backgrounds, but NLP will manage to find a universal technique to trigger emotional response and a desire to build rapport in learners. An additional benefit of this study is that it can offer alternative learning strategies to learners who want to develop their abilities and wish to utilize more than one learning style. It can also prove a useful additional tool to teachers to deal with challenging behavior in a classroom situation.

NLP thus has emerged as a model of interpersonal communication equally proven effective in a teacher-learner situation. The teacher, prior to commencing teaching and applying NLP techniques, must

however understand the significance of the subjective experiences of learners and try to correlate the specific emotional responses for each experience. NLP acts as an alternative therapy which can assist the teacher to train learners in self-awareness, effective communication and to change their behavioural patterns. NLP can also help in regulating emotional responses (EQ) that will work greatly in stress management and control of anxiety during examinations. While NLP techniques help improving communication skills, there will be stronger teacher-learner relationship patterns.

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