

Improving Language Teaching & Learning through Neurolinguistic Programming

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that proficient language learners who are also called 'Self-Directed Learners' and 'Good Language Learners' constantly have successful language learning experiences. They are known to be motivated, independent, flexible and creative language learners compared to the less proficient learners. This leads us to the question, "Why do proficient English as Second Language (ESL) learners have more successful language learning experiences as compared to the less proficient ESL learners? Are the less proficient learners deemed to have bad language learning experience all the time?" This paper suggests various Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) models that can be used by the less proficient learners who can also reach autonomy in acquiring their second language. Therefore, this paper aims to connect language teaching with learners' cognitive behaviour in order to improve, particularly, the less proficient language learners' learning experience through NLP. The outcome of the present study would be useful to assist language instructors in helping the less proficient ESL learners to undergo a more effective and successful second language learning experience.

Keywords: Less Proficient Learners, Language Teaching, Neurolinguistic Programming, Cognitive Behaviour

NLP IN GENERAL

NLP is an important concept in humanistic psychology which emphasises the art of communication and the study of the structure of subjective experience (Tosey, Mathison & Michelli, 2005). This theory was first introduced by John Grinder and Richard Bandler in mid-70's. Since then, the success of this theory can be noticed in various fields such as counselling, corporate training, sports training, and language teaching. According to Helm (1989), NLP is a positive strategy to improve one's learning experience in which the brain uses the entire sensory elements (smells, feelings, sounds, tastes and images) to experience something. Therefore, when all these elements are connected with learning, which is supported in NLP, it becomes the most wonderful experience.

The term NLP can be divided into three different aspects – neuro, linguistic and programming. According to Revell & Norman (1997), *neuro* in NLP signifies the part where neurological process takes place. When the brain is connected to different senses, eventually different ideas are revealed to our mind. Hence, this is called "subjective experience" which is an important aspect of NLP. Besides that, *linguistics* in NLP

denotes the way language is used which shapes the way life is experienced. Language can be used in thought and speech. It is believed that the way language is used to speak and think correlates with behaviours. When there is a change in the way language is used, there are also changes in behaviours. The last part of NLP is *programming* which is to act, think, speak and believe in a new and positive way in order to achieve the desired outcome.

LESS PROFICIENT LANGUAGE LEARNERS REQUIRE NLP

According to Oxford and Nyikos (1989), proficient language learners generally use strategies that are appropriate to their own stage of learning, personality, age, and purpose for learning a language. As Green and Oxford (1995) mentioned, in studies investigating the relationship between proficiency and language learning strategy use, students who were better in their language performance generally reported higher levels of overall strategy use and frequently used a greater number of strategy categories. Therefore, it is known that proficient language learners seldom face difficulty in language acquisition because they can conjure a set of pattern or strategy appropriate to their needs. In past studies conducted, proficient ESL learners are also labelled as good or fast learners and their experience of second language learning is always a successful one. Much research has been done in the past focusing on proficient/good/fast ESL learners and their learning strategies. Researchers who have conducted studies on good and proficient ESL learners are Thompson (2005), Sewell (2003), Rubin & Thompson (1982) and Naiman (1978).

However, only a handful of studies focused on less proficient ESL learners such as Vann & Abraham (1990). This is the group of learners that should be given more attention in order to make them aware of the various ways of learning languages effectively. NLP is one of the effective ways in assisting the less proficient learners to experience a more successful language learning environment. Firstly, through NLP, the less proficient learners will become more aware of their state or level of proficiency. In view of this, Schmidt (1990) claims that conscious learning is a necessary condition for every aspect of language learning. Therefore, when the language learners become aware or conscious of their level, they will take more responsibility in learning. Secondly, the role of instructor is very important in NLP and this is crucial for less proficient learners because they need the guidance of the instructor or teacher in order to carry out certain activity correctly. The teacher is a role model in NLP learning. This on the other hand, is not necessary for the proficient learners because they are independent learners. In view of this, Thompson (2005) claims "rather than seeing the teacher as 'all-knowing' and someone never to be questioned, proficient learners see the teacher as a facilitator or an equal partner". Therefore, it can be said that NLP learning experience will be more helpful for the less proficient learners.

POPULAR NLP MODELS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

There are many different models in NLP in relation to teaching and learning. This paper reveals some preliminary suggestions on the effectiveness of NLP in language teaching and learning for the less proficient language learners. Further research can be carried out from this point.

The Preferred Thinking Pattern

NLP suggests that learners tend to develop a favourite thinking style that could be mainly visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), or kinesthetic (feelings). Although learners may use all the three methods in learning, they will be predominantly inclined towards one ideal method of learning. This knowledge becomes very useful for both learners and teachers in academia; learners may be able to take their own responsibility in learning and teachers may be able to conduct classes easily, especially in dealing with less proficient learners. These learners require the guidance and direction of the instructor.

Preferred thinking patterns can be identified by various questionnaires available or through the observation of the eye movement of the learner. Questionnaire created by Revell and Norman in their book "In your Hands: NLP in ELT" is called VAK (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) learning preference questionnaire. This questionnaire has nine categories with three statements for each category. Respondent has to grade himself / herself in each category according to which statement seem "most" and "least true". Besides that, questionnaire created by Allen (2003) is also comprehensive with a set of 10 statements; each with four phrases ranging from "least descriptive of you" to "best description of you." The eye movement observation on the other hand, discloses the direction of the eye movement and the reasons behind the actions. Table 1 is compiled from Helm (1989) which describes the eye movement and the representation of the thinking patterns of a right-handed person. Conversely, a left-handed person exhibits eye movement to the opposite direction.

Thinking Patterns	Eye Movement Towards Right		Eye Movement Towards Left	
Visual	Look up to the right	To create new ideas	Look up to the left	To remember past experience
Auditory	Look towards the right ear	To create new ideas	Look towards the left ear	To recall incidents
Kinesthetic	Look down to the right	Thinking in emotion	Look down to the left	To create new ideas/ to have internal dialogue

Table 1: Thinking pattern and eye movement

Learners of the respective thinking patterns may also use different choices of words in describing something. Helm (1989) points out that visual learners may say, "I like how your paper looks"; if auditory, "Your paper has a nice sound to it"; and if kinesthetic, "I feel good about your paper".

Once the teacher or the instructor has correctly identified the thinking pattern of students, he / she may start creating activities to suit the students' thinking pattern. This is because, different learners given the same presentation may respond very differently, and their ways of responding may be linked to a fundamental characteristic. For this reason, one cannot expect a learner to adapt to the instructor. Rather, the instructor must design approaches that will take advantage of the learner's unique talents (Moody, 1988). As mentioned earlier, this is vital for the less proficient learners because they need to

understand and take responsibility of their own learning. As suggested by Helm (1989), teachers can even use the board in classroom in order to suit the thinking pattern of learners. For example, the instructor can write information up on the board to help the visual learners, write something towards left of the board for auditory learners and towards down to the right for kinesthetic learners. Even when hand-outs are passed around, teachers can ask the learners to place the materials at the position as described in Table 1 to enhance recalling.

The Modelling Process

The concept of modelling is an important element within NLP (Craft, 2001). NLP experts believe that through modelling, certain behaviours can be emulated, thoughts can be influenced and ideas can be imparted to others in order to achieve the desired outcome. O'Connor & McDermott (1996) claims that "Modelling a skill means finding out about it, and the beliefs and values that enable them to do it. You can also model emotions, experiences, beliefs and values...Modelling successful performance leads to excellence. If one person can do something, it is possible to model and teach others how to do it."

This will be particularly useful for the less proficient learners as they will gain more confidence when they know that the method they are using to learn language has been tried, tested and successful. Through modelling, the perception of the less proficient learners can be changed effectively. According to Love (2001), learners who do not perform well on exams often carry feelings of inadequacy into subsequent testing experience or other aspects of their academic performance. Eventually, this feeling will perpetuate and persist in every phase of their lives. Therefore, through modelling process, the less proficient learners have an opportunity to reprogram their thoughts from failure to success. However, in the modelling process, guidance by the instructor is crucial for better understanding.

One way of reprogramming the mindset is through the four key principles in NLP – outcomes, rapport, sensory acuity and flexibility (O'Connor & McDermott, 1996). *Outcomes* are the goals and aims that learners would want to achieve. For example, the less proficient learners may aim to learn language like proficient learners. NLP claims that knowing precisely what is wanted helps one to achieve it. The second stage is *rapport* where similarities are maximised and differences are minimised. Sometimes this stage can also be called as mirroring. It is vital for teachers to build rapport with the learners so that there is trust involved in NLP. Clabby & O'Connor (2004) viewed communication process between therapists and patients in two different aspects – physical mirroring and verbal mirroring. This process can be adapted to the context of teacher and learner. Rapport can be built through body language, eye contact, choices of words, tone and voice. The third stage is *sensory acuity*. In this stage, learner notices what another person is communicating, consciously and nonverbally. If the less proficient learners aim to learn language like proficient learners, then they should notice the way proficient learners use their choices of language learning strategies and styles in gaining a successful language learning experience. Then, they should compare with their current practice of strategies that are being used. Finally, the fourth stage is *flexibility*. This is when the learners take responsibility to do things differently if what they are doing now is not working. For instance, less proficient learners integrate the difference(s) noticed into their current practice. The less proficient learners should also be able to keep changing the strategies until they get what they want. It is recommended that the guidance from the facilitator is important throughout this process until the less proficient learners are familiar with these four key principles.

NLP Presuppositions

The following thirteen presuppositions were introduced by Revell and Norman (1997). In order to employ the NLP models effectively, it is best for teachers and students to understand the ideas proposed by the experts. Brief explanation about each of the presupposition is given as follows:

Mind and body are interconnected: They are parts of the same system, and each affects the other.

It is understood that a healthy and harmonious lifestyle leads to a better state-of-mind.

The map is not the territory: we all have different maps of the worlds

Due to different backgrounds and upbringings, different people have different experiences of life. Therefore, each individual has his / her own way of learning preferences, thinking processes, and decision making styles.

There is no failure, only feedback...and a renewed opportunity for success

NLP suggests that failure should be viewed as a stepping stone for success. If every unsuccessful learning process is viewed in this way, many other alternatives will be found. As Thomas Edison mentioned "I haven't failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

The map becomes the territory: What you believe to be true either is true or becomes true

Because each person has his / her own judgments, opinions and ideas based on his / her perceptions of this world, the actions, behaviours and thoughts too become territoriality. The perception that is created by the individual becomes his / her own reality.

Knowing what you want helps you get it

If the purpose and goal of an individual is clear, he / she is able to focus on his / her resources and efforts to achieve the goal.

The resources we need are within us

In NLP, it is believed that every individual has all the necessary resources needed within. NLP teaches how to access these resources at the right time using the right way.

Communication is nonverbal as well as verbal

In order to communicate effectively both verbal language and nonverbal behaviours have to be taken into consideration. Communication can be improved if these two aspects are given importance to.

The non-conscious mind is benevolent

Learning should be accepted with a fresh and open mindset. It is crucial to be non-judgemental so that learning can take place easily. What is right and wrong or possible and impossible are relative. These things should be accepted as if how a non-conscious mind would accept it.

Communication is non-conscious as well as conscious

Communication happens in both conscious and non-conscious state-of-mind. When an individual is conveying a message verbally, his / her non-verbal cues also contribute to the overall communication.

All behaviour has a positive intention

NLP techniques basically change the representation of one's reality in order to achieve the desired outcome. Part of the process is to identify the reasons behind certain behaviour because it is believed

that every individual behaves in a certain way because of a specific reason. Hence, NLP delinks the intention from action so that it is easier for a person to follow the NLP techniques.

The meaning of my communication is the response I get

In communication, it is commonly believed that it is important to send the intended message correctly to avoid confusion. However, in NLP it is important to evaluate the response one gets from the message sent. A good communicator will check the receiver's response and thus evaluate his / her own communication effectiveness.

Modelling excellent behaviour leads to excellence

A successful structured method used by a person can be modelled by the other person for a better result.

In any system, the element with the greatest flexibility will have the most influence on that system

It is crucial for a person to have flexibility to adapt to different alternative methods. If one method is unsuccessful, new methods should be tried.

INCORPORATING NLP AMONG THE LESS PROFICIENT LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Incorporating NLP methods and techniques among the less proficient language learners can create an interesting, creative, and positive learning environment if proper pedagogical considerations are addressed prior to utilisation. The next part of this paper will provide two examples to illustrate how simple NLP techniques are incorporated into language classroom discussions.

Example 1: Mind Mapping

Mind mapping may be an old technique but it is nevertheless proven effective. Mind mapping, developed by Tony Buzan in 1960 is a learning tool that can maximize brain potential in radiant thinking. Wang, Lee and Chu (2010) pointed out that through mind maps, one's attention, coordination ability, logic, reasoning, thinking, analyzing, creativity, imagination, memory, ability of planning and integration, speed reading, character, number, visuality, hearing, kinesthetic sense, and sensation are significantly enhanced because mind map organizes large amount of information systematically. Therefore, mind mapping helps the less proficient learners to grasp the lesson taught easily by providing them with a more wholesome picture. Less proficient learners can use this method as a structured method of learning.

At the end of every lesson teachers can encourage the students to create a mind map as an overall review of that particular chapter. While carrying out this task, teachers may or may not ask the students to refer to their notes. This depends on the goal of the teacher. If the teacher allows the students to refer to their notes of the chapter during the creation of mind map, then the purpose is to test the students' understanding of the lesson. On the other hand, if the teacher does not allow the students to refer to the notes, then the purpose is to check on their ability to remember the ideas taught in the chapter. Both the methods work well depending on the purpose of teacher.

Undoubtedly, this method works well for visual learners. However, teachers can also create opportunities for auditory learners and kinesthetic learners to benefit from this activity. For example,

teachers can get the kinesthetic learners to draw the mind map on the white board as a group work. This excites the kinesthetic learners as they get to move around in the class while carrying out the task. Whereas, the auditory learners can explain the mind map created by other type of learners. Auditory learners benefit from explaining the content as this helps them to remember the concept well.

Example 2: Positive verbal and nonverbal reinforcement

As discussed earlier, it is crucial for teachers to create good rapport with the less proficient language learners. This is because this group of learners have high anxiety level in learning language because of their proficiency level. As cited in Feng (2011), research has shown high anxiety in those students who are less proficient in using English in school contexts and there is a negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and English learning achievement (Liao, 1999; Chan & Wu, 2000). From a large-scale survey of 601 fifth graders from 205 elementary schools in Taipei and interviews with nine English teachers, Chan and Wu confirm this correlation and further identify several causes of language anxiety, including low proficiency, fear of negative evaluation and pressure from students themselves and their parents (Chan & Wu, 2004). Anxiety helps to explain why low-proficient students tend to give up on learning English altogether.

In view of this, NLP can be successfully used to change the less proficient learners' structured mindset in language learning. This can be done through the use of positive verbal and nonverbal reinforcement. Teachers can use positive verbal reinforcement like "good", "that's right" and "yes" instead of negative verbal messages like "no" and "nonsense". Besides that, positive nonverbal reinforcement also can be used such as smiling, nodding, clapping, and sitting near to the students while giving feedback.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through NLP, teaching and learning can truly be a very interesting experience because this model promotes learning by using all the sensory elements – smells, feelings, sounds, tastes and images. Less proficient language learners can now experience a successful second language environment. Therefore, this study proposes that the less proficient learners could monitor and emulate the way proficient learners use their strategies, thinking pattern or style with proper guidance by teachers, facilitators, instructors, lecturers and academicians. It is hoped then that the less proficient learners will also reach the same autonomy in language learning as proficient learners.

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