

# Using NLP in the Classroom.

Philippa Nugent

In today's educational establishments there seems to be mounting pressure on foreign language teachers coming from all directions. More than ever before students are being viewed as consumers; falling student numbers and the competitive market for foreign language education contribute to this pressure. The expectations that fall upon teachers have shifted and new methodologies have been introduced making it no longer acceptable or appropriate, in many cases, for teachers to teach as they themselves were taught. Many of the traditional and familiar methods of foreign language teaching have been hailed as outdated and in recent years a more humanistic approach to teaching has been introduced with an interest in the importance of learning processes as well as in language content. Research shows that students vary greatly in the learning styles that work for them and the learning strategies that they employ. With this awareness comes a responsibility for teachers to reflect these findings in their classroom practices: To strive to help students become effective learners and enable them to exploit the learning environment of the classroom to its fullest potential.

In this modern world where information is at our fingertips as it never has been before, boundaries between disciplines have become blurred as expertise from one area is taken and put into practice in another. The links between psychology and education that developed over the last century benefited the two fields both in theory and in practice. While this is a widely recognized marriage,

many teachers are unaware of some of the methods and processes implemented in the worlds of business, politics, sales and advertising that can contribute to the realisation of personal potential. Methods that have been designed to increase self-awareness and self-development are often in fact, fully transferable to the classroom context. One such set of tools and techniques that has been called the 'technology of personal excellence' is Neuro Linguistic Programming, or NLP for short.

NLP offers teachers a way of thinking and a new approach to many of the challenges faced in the classroom every day. It is the purpose of this paper to introduce some of the concepts and practices of NLP as much to spark further interest than to inform of any particular methodologies. First, a brief overview of the history of NLP and how it came about.

Neuro Linguistic Programming was developed in the 1970's by Richard Bandler, whose background was in philosophy and psychology, and John Grinder, a linguist specialising in transformational grammar. With roots in psychology and neurology NLP was born out of the interest these two men held in how the brain works and how it can be trained or developed to perform better. They found themselves exploring what it is that makes a successful person excellent at what they do and what makes them different from an average person. What behaviours and thought processes do accomplished people have that contribute to their achievements? Can these skills be taught to others and if so, how?

Bandler and Grinder developed a variety of tools and techniques to address these questions and so to help people to reach their potential. Many of these techniques involve embracing a certain way of thinking and believing what Bandler and Grinder termed 'Presuppositions'. These are a set of attitudes that if are 'pre-supposed' to be true and so acted upon, have a strong positive influence in a person's life. One of these presuppositions is that for whatever we want to achieve, we already have all the resources we need or we can create them.

Furthermore, NLP upholds that there are no un-resourceful people, only un-resourceful states of mind. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, what you believe about yourself and your abilities largely determines what you *do* achieve. NLP helps us to become aware of what we believe about ourselves and offers tools to help us change those beliefs where it would be advantageous to do so.

Bandler and Grinder advocate that since we all have the same neurology, anything that someone does can be copied by another individual who can learn to reproduce the same results and therefore get the same outcome. This process of discovering exactly how people produce a specific outcome and then copying that 'how' to achieve the same success, they termed 'modelling'.

With the concept of modelling success in mind, Bandler and Grinder studied the behaviours and thought processes of people who were considered to have achieved excellence in their professional fields. They chose to model Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt psychology ; Virginia Satir, the foremost practitioner of family therapy of that time, and Milton Erikson who is considered to be the father of clinical hypnosis. These people were chosen because they were acknowledged to be amongst the most successful professionals at rapidly creating behavioural change in others, in part through their extraordinary interpersonal skills. In studying such people, Bandler and Grinder found that they had many common attributes : They found that using precise language was a very important factor in influencing people and in moving them in the right direction. They found that building rapport with those you are communicating with is a vital element in achieving a successful exchange or a desired outcome and that it is a skill that can be taught and learned. Through working with these specialists in communication, Bandler and Grinder came to understand that verbal and non-verbal language affects the human nervous system in a way that changes someone's thoughts, feelings and behaviours towards an event, a situation, a person or even towards themselves. And that changing key perceptions and behaviours enables an

individual to get into the positive frame of mind that leads to success. In fact, the importance of using precise and purposeful language to alter someone's state of mind and so their behaviours had been investigated and exploited by Bulgarian psychologist Georgi Lozalov, founder of the Suggestopedia method of teaching. He claimed that with his methods, which included amongst other things using the language of positive suggestion, a foreign language could be taught three to five times more quickly than by conventional methods. Methods that are aimed at not only the conscious but also the subconscious mind are successful in part because they lower the affective filter of the learner. The affective filter is a learning blockage caused by a negative emotional attitude or state of mind.

Bandler and Grinder realised that if thinking could be controlled many of the limitations that people place upon themselves could be lifted and they could be encouraged towards a more positive, a more resourceful state of mind.

In practical terms NLP exemplifies an approach that promises to give both students and teachers a more positive mental attitude. The work of Bandler and Grinder recognised that people use different learning processes to intake and organise knowledge and so NLP also offers some insights into different modes of learning, vital in the field of education. Introducing NLP into the classroom can be a science in itself; what follows are some of the easiest and most useable techniques that can be easily adopted by the non-NLP practitioner to enhance the classroom experience.

NLP has developed a basic model for change that takes people from where they are now, their present state, to where they want to be, their desired state. Along the way is a learning process called the 'Learning Ladder' that has four stages or levels. The bottom stage, or lowest level is the stage called 'Unconscious Incompetence'. At this stage a person doesn't realise what they don't know. For example, the very first time someone gets into a car to drive they don't realise how difficult driving is. The next level is that of "Conscious

Incompetence”. At this level, the person now knows what he doesn’t know and realises how much there is to learn. The third stage is after some mastery has been achieved and is called “Conscious Competence”. At this stage we can do it, but it takes a lot of effort and concentration. The last stage and the highest level is when we achieve “Unconscious Competence” and can now use the skill at an unconscious level. NLP offers ways to find the resources and skills that take us from the level of unconscious incompetence to that of unconscious competence and is thus, ultimately about betterment. In the classroom context this can manifest in three main ways ; in the betterment of the teacher in becoming a more effective facilitator of learning ; in the betterment of the environment, the situations, conditions and atmosphere created for the learner, and in the betterment of the student him or herself, who can be guided towards ways of becoming a more successful learner and a better speaker of the target language. What follows are some suggestions as to how NLP can serve each of these purposes.

Research into what defines an effective teacher typically provides studies that focus on teacher behaviours. While such studies are undoubtedly of value, NLP directs us to dig deeper and to address and examine what underlies these behaviours. In NLP, behaviour patterns themselves are considered to be the result of beliefs, either those that we hold to be true, or those that we have never brought to consciousness or questioned. To explore our effectiveness as teachers, the practise of NLP encourages us to identify and question our beliefs. What are the truths that we hold consciously and subconsciously that provide the foundation for our ways of teaching, for our attitudes and ideas about how to behave in the classroom? What assumptions do we make about our students’ needs and expectations? What are our beliefs about education and the nature of language learning itself as well as about the roles of student and teacher? Naturally, much of what teachers believe about education and learning comes from their own experiences as students. Because these ideas are habitual and largely unconscious,

they rarely get questioned or even examined however, they are important: "It is what teachers think and what teachers believe and what teachers do at the level of the classroom that ultimately shapes the kind of learning that young people get." (Hargreaves and Fullan in Yero 2001).

It may be that teachers' own experiences of and beliefs about learning were shaped by out-dated or unsound educational theories. That these concepts have since been proven to be inaccurate or inappropriate doesn't negate their influence upon our own ideas and inner beliefs. An example of this is how in the past, a child's mind was seen as a 'Tabula Rasa' or clean slate to be written upon by others. Knowledge was in this way objectified and students seen as little more than empty vessels waiting passively to be filled. More recently, it is believed that students learn best from an active personal involvement and direct experience that engages as many of the senses as possible. These contrasting beliefs as to the nature of knowledge color dramatically everything that happens in the classroom. From the relationships of the teachers to the students to the relationship of knowledge to learning, everything changes once students are viewed as in part responsible for their learning and not just passive receivers. Although few still believe in the mind as a clean slate metaphor, many of the practises and behaviours of teachers in the classroom remain rooted in this concept. Foreign language learning is still commonly treated as the transference of knowledge objects, later to be verified by tests on paper. In classrooms driven by this 'test as goal' way of thinking, the practical use of these 'objects' typically receives little attention as time is better spent collecting and storing as many of these objects as possible. According to Yero (2001) this situation results in students being unable to communicate in a language they have studied for perhaps seven or more years. She describes how this encourages the mind to become like a filing cabinet where foreign language knowledge is stored in a compartment marked 'school' while having a conversation with a foreign person is an

experience that belongs in an area marked 'real life'.

Past experiences and their related belief structures, whether conscious or unconscious, form the basis for everything from our perceptions of the world to the patterns of behaviour and ways of operating that we have. Teachers may have many limiting beliefs that they inherited from their own classroom experience that continue silently to affect the classrooms of today. How many teachers believe that a quiet classroom is a productive one? How many believe that passive and obedient students are good students? And how many teachers believe that student ability is more fixed than variable? Through encouraging self-reflection and the questioning of underlying beliefs, NLP offers teachers a stepping-stone to change leading to professional development and self-betterment. Let us now turn to the positive contributions NLP can offer in relation to the working atmosphere of the learning environment itself.

Perhaps one of the most important factors that can contribute positively to learners' experience is the atmosphere of the classroom. Classroom atmosphere may be considered as two separate but inter-related concepts: The first is the atmosphere as it relates to the 'feeling' of the classroom, or the emotional atmosphere. This may be a difficult thing to define precisely but often it is easy to tell if the general mood is one of a relaxed good feeling or of a less comfortable, clock-watching tension. The second meaning of atmosphere relates to the arena of learning itself. Does this learning atmosphere offer the opportunities to work and interact in those ways that are conducive to the active uptake of knowledge? Are the stated and unstated expectations those that will nurture and encourage experimentation and independent learning?

Firstly, to the emotional atmosphere: Georgi Lozanov, founder of the Suggestopedia method of teaching, used a background of classical music to positively impact his students' learning ability subconsciously. Milton Erickson, the famous clinical hypnotist modelled by Bandler and Grinder also believed that

the subconscious mind was always listening, always alert and open to influence. To guide and influence students' minds towards a more positive state teachers can use something as simple as the power of association. Make it paramount that students have a joyful experience in the English classroom and pretty soon the association between uplifting, positive feelings and studying English will have become established. This, in NLP terminology, is called 'Anchoring' and exploits the connection that humans make between an emotional experience and a physical one. Using simple techniques such as this, the emotional atmosphere of the classroom can be effectively managed and controlled.

To assess the learning atmosphere we can consider the NLP tenet that to become successful one must study success. Most ordinary people are actually examples of successful language learners themselves. We have all learned our native tongue and so we can examine and model the learning environment that fostered this accomplishment. How did we learn our first language? What were the conditions that contributed to our success? What did we do and what processes did we go through that took us from a few words to total mastery? As we examine what constituted a good learning environment for our first language we can recreate this to provide similar conditions that will help us to learn our second. What, for example, were those conditions?

Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, there was always a reason that we had to use this new language; we needed to be able to communicate in order to survive and to satisfy our needs and desires. In attempting to recreate such conditions it would seem logical that our students need good reasons to communicate in the second language too. To address this, teachers must provide opportunities for genuine and meaningful communication to take place. When children are first learning to communicate verbally, it is the message that is important and that is concentrated on rather than the form of the language itself. To emulate this, activities need to be task based rather than content based exercises where a

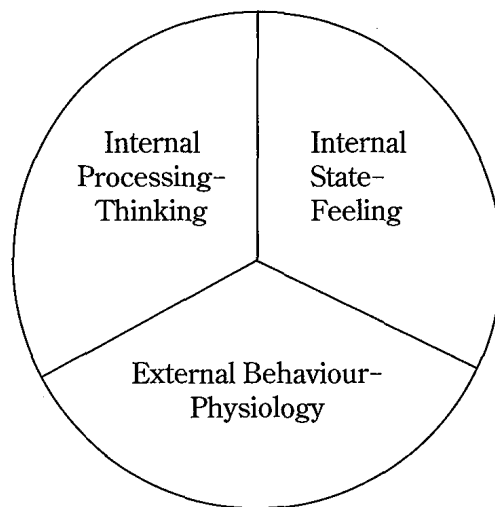


successful exchange of understanding is the goal. As young communicators every attempt at talking likely did not involve being 'taught' or mistakes corrected by adult caretakers ; a successful interaction and grammatical correctness didn't necessarily coincide. To offer second language students such a holiday from accuracy and to focus on fluency while a communicative event is taking place will give them a chance to see the exchange in terms of what they can do rather than in terms of what they cannot do. As children we learned by copying those people around us. One of the foundations of NLP is the concept of modelling excellence and this is indeed what young learners naturally do. To acquire a second language in the same way as the first, language learners must be given access to 'experts', ideally native speakers, whom they can model. Learners must be given opportunities to imitate not only the spoken language but also the body language and back-channelling cues that native speakers use. The learning strategy used by children seems largely to be trial and error ; something is tried, if it produces the desired results then it will be maintained, if it doesn't something new is tried and the unsuccessful way abandoned and forgotten. To provide for this, students should be given plenty of opportunity to use the new language they are learning over and over again. They must have time to put the new forms they are discovering into practise, to test their success, to make adjustments where necessary and to have time to reflect on what worked and what didn't. As children, our attempts at communication were greeted with praise and often wonder by our devoted parents. In the classroom, setting up a 'compliance-success-praise' cycle increases student motivation and self-esteem no matter what the achievement or the task. Something as simple as asking students to open their books at the beginning of class : It doesn't matter that many of the students have done so anyway, and even as it's sure that the rest will follow soon, by asking them you are creating an opportunity for praise. Children learning their first language had a safe environment in which to experiment and to develop, as

teachers we can recreate this by being positive, supportive, friendly and caring towards our students. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly of all, as children it was expected 100% that we would succeed to full fluency. As teachers it is our responsibility not only to provide students with as many opportunities as possible to learn and to use the new foreign language but also to expect them to succeed.

The third aspect of how NLP can contribute to the betterment of the language learning experience is through the students themselves. It would be a nice situation if language learners came to the first class with positive associations and attitudes towards learning English. It is unfortunate that this is often not the case. Students may be in a state of conflict or confusion in the university classroom as the tasks and expectations may be quite different from their past experiences. Certain beliefs will have already been developed about how to behave and what is required of them. In this uncertain new situation students often revert to previously adopted learning strategies that may no longer be helpful or appropriate, such as wanting to learn items by rote rather than use them communicatively. NLP offers students tools and techniques to make improvements in three areas: The area of attitude and thinking; that of study techniques and finally in the area of modes of learning.

As has already been mentioned, NLP asserts that there are no un-resourceful people only un-resourceful states of mind. From this idea it can be understood just how important state of mind is considered to be in NLP. Bandler and Grinder developed what is known as the 'Mercedes Model' to show how interconnected thoughts, feelings and behaviours are. They used it to explain how to move from the present state to the desired state one must be prepared to address all three areas. For example a student striving to be a better language learner may need to think, feel and behave differently.



The Mercedes Model.

Furthermore, this model shows how if one area is changed the effect of this will be experienced in the other areas. An example of this in practice is if students are feeling down or low in energy this will be reflected in their thinking and also in their external behaviours, their physiology. They may be slumped at their desks or their talking may lack expression and have a monotonous quality. Rather than urging them to bring a change to their feelings, (which they may not realise they can easily do) it is more effective to direct them to change their physiology by sitting up, taking a few deep breaths and encouraging them to bring a wider range of intonation to their speaking. As the behavioural area is changed so effects will be experienced in the other areas and students are likely to liven up and become more actively engaged with their task.

Being able to control the state of mind is a useful skill that will help students in every area of their lives. NLP offers some tools and techniques that enable students to get the best out of their personal inner resources such as for example, being able to access certain states of mind at will. The use of anchors to control the general atmosphere of the classroom has already been briefly introduced but they can also be used in a more individual and personal way. Anchors are a very effective tool allowing students to get into a particular state of mind whenever they

want. This is advantageous when, for example, they experience nervousness or a lack of confidence when trying to use the foreign language. This causes stress and consequently affects performance, which then causes more stress and so a negative cycle starts. The way many successful language learners overcome this is to put themselves into that stressful situation over and over again so eventually it becomes a familiar situation and so less stressful. In the classroom environment, as much student talking time as possible may begin to address this but NLP offers a simple technique to achieve the same results. An anchor is a stimulus that produces a consistent response due to the powers of association. One anchor that many people can relate to is the reaction they experience when they smell cut grass. In this case, the smell of cut grass is acting as the anchor that brings on a recreation of thoughts and feelings that make up the emotional memories from the past. We all have anchors to our past experiences, some of them induce wonderfully positive feelings and thoughts, others bring forth not so positive associations such as feelings of inadequacy and fear.

For the most part anchors develop naturally, unintentionally and so remain largely unidentified as they silently affect the state of mind. They are equally as effective however, if created intentionally and set to call forth a positive and resourceful state of mind. Students can be coached to set up their own positive anchors ; to feel confident, for example, which they can 'trigger' whenever they need to. Anchors used in this way also operate through the power of association but with a more consciously directed approach. Here, students are asked to bring to mind a time in their past when they felt, for example, feelings of confidence, motivation or intense enjoyment or satisfaction. They are guided to associate into that state of mind by noticing the separate elements of the feelings and then intensifying them. Just as the feeling is at its highest and most intense the students are directed to choose a particular physical action, for example pinching a finger or clasping their hands. This physical action becomes the stimulus that

links to that particular mind-body state. Consequently, whenever the student wants to feel that feeling, for example confidence, they can trigger the stimulus and initiate that state of mind. Giving students tools and techniques so that they may access optimum modes of operating and desired states of mind is one of the most valuable and useable aspects of NLP.

The study technique that NLP directs everyone who desires change to is the modelling of excellence. The technique of modelling is clearly a useful skill for the student both to become a better language learner and also a better user of the target language. To become a better user, native speakers can be modelled: Television or movie characters can be copied after watching a short scene or film clip. There are various methods to focus students on particular aspects of the modelling task; watching with the sound turned down or only listening to the soundtrack with no picture demands that students engage their imaginations in the task. Following observation comes the putting into practice as they copy and try to reproduce that character's actions and dialogue. Apart from modelling native speakers to make them better users of English, students can also model each other to help them to become better language learners.

When asking the question what makes a good language learner often the mind jumps to research examining phonetic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity inductive language learning ability as well as rote learning ability (Thomson, 2000). But much of the literature examining successful language learners is concerned not so much with aspects of student aptitude but with what it is that good learners *do* differently than ordinary learners. NLP embraces this concept that excellence can be recreated by anyone therefore if a good learner is modelled, then the student modelling will also become a good learner. Behaviours and attitudes of the successful learner are identified and copied and the situations and circumstances that contributed positively are sought out thus recreating the experience of being a good learner.

NLP bases many of its approaches and practises on studies of how the brain works and its neurology. The technique of modelling, for example, is effective because it engages the student in such a way that the limbic part of the brain is activated. The limbic system is the part of the brain that is connected to emotion, motivation and the emotional association of memory. It influences the formation of memory by integrating emotional states with stored memories of physical sensations. The limbic system is engaged by personal involvement or 'self-investment' in a task and so is stimulated during the activities involved in modelling.

NLP can also offer insights and practices that take into account different modes of learning. As NLP is concerned with processes rather than content, another aspect of brain behaviour that fascinated Bandler and Grinder was how people took in external reality and transformed it into their personal internal reality. They realised that as externalities arrive, there is so much to process that our perceptions necessarily have to make some modifications in order to render the information manageable. Three major elements are involved in this process of information modification; deletion, distortion and generalisation. These processes are happening constantly with every perception that comes through the senses including when we receive new information as we learn. In relation to the classroom context, deletion occurs when learners are presented with too much information to process; information is omitted to make the input manageable. In fact, NLP practitioners widely maintain that people can hold between five and nine pieces of information in their mind at any one time. Consequently, when it comes to presenting new information to learners, less can be seen as more. Distortion occurs when learners try to change information into terms that are understandable or familiar to them. Although this is a negative process leading to the production of errors and misunderstandings, it does have a positive aspect in that it leads to learnability and motivation. Generalisation occurs when students

take in information and then draw broad conclusions as to the form, function or purpose of the items. Over generalisation, in particular of new language learned, causes the misuse of rules and poorly formed hypotheses. Though these three points are important considerations to take into the classroom, what students actually learn is dictated by their own personal filters. NLP identifies these filters as beliefs, values, decisions and memories, all of which are influenced by how information is taken in and processed.

Although we experience the world through all of our five senses, there tends to be a dominant sense through which we relate best, and thus, through which we learn best. People tend to be dominant in either seeing, hearing or feeling and are termed visual, auditory or kinesthetic learners. Visual learners take in information best when they see material presented on the page or blackboard and when they can see demonstrations of the content being taught. Auditory learners prefer to hear the material and then be given the opportunity to discuss it. Kinesthetic learners need to become physically and actively involved in order to optimise learning. Knowing that students learn in different ways gives teachers the opportunity to address these findings through the content and approach of their classes. Teachers can consider different modes of learning when they are presenting new information to students and also in the tasks that they set them to do. Taking into account visual learners teachers may employ a variety of diagrams, charts, pictures and realia. Students can also be encouraged to create inner pictures and to practise visualisation techniques either as a form of mental rehearsal or as a method to aid memorisation. They can be shown how to use mind maps for a variety of purposes including as a way to brainstorm a topic, make a presentation or summarise or review a book or movie. The layout of the black or whiteboard, how words are grouped together and writing in different sizes and colors for impact are also useful techniques to employ. Students who are not naturally visual learners can be taught how to enhance and develop this mode of

learning as it can be especially useful for skills such as spelling. Spelling phonetically is easy in a phonetic language which unfortunately for many, English is not. Consequently, students who prefer an auditory approach tend to be poor spellers. Good spellers in English generally use a visual approach and many 'see' the word in their mind as they are spelling it. Teachers can help students develop this skill in the following way : Write the new word on a card or on the board placing it in a position where students have to look up at it. When visual learners think they usually look upwards. Research shows that these eye cues indicate that the brain is accessing visual information and so in order to encourage the brain to make that link one encourages use of those eye positions. Have the students consciously blink their eyes and take a mental photograph of the word. Then, have them close their eyes and visualise the word, looking upwards in their heads to see the 'photograph' they have just taken, and as they are looking at this to try to spell it. If parts of the word are problematical, students can enlarge this part in their mind's eye or imagine it in a different color.

Auditory learners will appreciate as many opportunities as possible to hear and produce the material out loud. Offer variations on many basic classroom techniques such as drilling. For example, the teacher says a statement which students must repeat if true, if it's false, however, students should chorus "That's not true!" A kinesthetic element can be added by having students raise their right hand if the statement is true and their left if it's false. Some tasks not only contribute to physical elements of learning but they also serve as anchors : Requiring that students stand up and maintain eye contact with their partners whenever they do the practise dialogue part of the lesson forges links between these combinations of behaviours and is an important step from conscious competence to unconscious competence. Modelling tasks allow for the greatest kinaesthetic learning potential as students become involved in the activity on every sensory level. "Language is learned best through a combination of auditory,



visual and kinetic stimulation.” (Beare 1998). In this situation the learning is beyond purely linguistic as the students practise the body language, gestures, facial expressions and eye contact conventions of the target language culture while learning with all of their senses.

This paper outlines some of the practical techniques of NLP that can be implemented in the language learning classroom. Techniques that can enhance the learning experience in relation to the classroom atmosphere, the attitudes and behaviors of the students and through the personal and professional development of the teacher. It is hoped that these ideas will spark further interest in the concepts and techniques of NLP and that some of these suggestions will be tried and positive results seen.

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