

## Comparing NLP and communicative approach: A study on spoken performance in ELT

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### Abstract

Applications based on neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) in English language teaching (ELT) provide various means to make learning more effective and involving. Nevertheless, research on NLP is often based upon descriptive rather than empirical research. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the efficiency of NLP applications in ELT via comparing it with communicative approach (CA) to language teaching. In this study, a group of 4th grade students ( $N = 20$ ) were observed in a classroom in which CA techniques were applied. The students' frequency of participation was recorded during two lessons. In another two classes with the same group of students, the learners' frequency of participation was evaluated in a classroom setting where NLP techniques were applied. The results indicate that NLP-related applications are as efficient as CA applications in achieving high level of learner participation and oral production.

**Keywords:** Neuro-linguistic programming, language teaching, young learners.

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## 1. Introduction

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) refers to an alternative form of therapy as a training philosophy and set of training techniques focusing on how people influence each other and how people can imitate the behaviour of very effective people (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). It was first introduced by John Grindler and Richard Bandler in order to suggest the techniques and strategies applied by people in the pursuit of excellence. NLP is considered as an attitude to life. It is a suggested list of strategies to help effective communication, personal growth and change, and learning (Revell & Norman, 1997). It has achieved much popularity as a method for communication and personal development. Winch (2005) proposes a description for NLP as follows:

‘Neuro’ refers to the nervous system where our experiences are received and processed through our five senses.

‘Linguistic’ represents the language that we use—both verbal and non-verbal, that shapes and reflects our experience of the world.

‘Programming’ describes training ourselves to think, speak and act in new ways.

NLP has also been regarded as a tool to improve the effectiveness of language instruction (Hardingham, 1998). As cited in Millrood (2004), Thornbury states that ‘NLP claims to help achieve excellence of performance in language teaching and learning, improve classroom communication, optimise learner attitudes and motivation, raise self-esteem, facilitate personal growth in students and even change their attitude to life’ (p. 28). The NLP-related applications in English language teaching (ELT) provide various means to make learning more effective and involving. NLP targets a state of mind to let learning occur naturally via techniques of relaxation, some of which are breathing exercises and autogenic training. Via such activities, learners feel ‘emotionally calm’, ‘mentally alert’ and can go over their ‘ego boundaries’ (Hismanoglu, 2006, pp. 105 & 106). Revell and Norman (1997) state that in NLP, there are five systems that are called *VAKOG*:

Visual: we look and see

Auditory: we hear and listen

Kinaesthetic: we feel externally (=tactile)

we feel internally (=visceral or emotional)

we feel movement (=psycho-motor)

Olfactory: we smell things

Gustatory: we taste (Revell & Norman, 1997, p. 31).

Nevertheless, research on NLP is often based upon descriptive rather than empirical (Tosey & Mathison, 2003; Winch, 2005). While business professionals and therapists have been working with NLP since the 1980’s, educators have not showed much interest in adapting NLP for the classroom (Love, 2001). Nevertheless, NLP is claimed to present ‘its theoretical contents in a manner which may be unwrapped and digested, with minimal effort’ (Harris, 2001, p. 10). Although NLP did not gather much attention in the area of foreign language teaching, the communicative approach (CA) emerged in the early 1970s and has achieved to be the main area of focus for the studies done on methodology of instruction. CA has received the paramount attention with the axioms such as; priority in language teaching is on semantic content rather than grammatical form, and the selection of activities is based upon the both meaningful and authentic language use (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

The aim of this study is to investigate the efficiency of NLP applications in ELT via comparing it with CA to language teaching. In the classroom environment, since communicative competence can be achieved via tasks and activities encouraging risk taking strategies and student output as possible,

NLP-related in-class applications might foster student participation and language use leading to the betterment of learners' competency.

## 2. Method

The participants in the study were 4th grade students ( $N = 20$ ) studying at a private primary school in Turkey. As reported by the class teacher, the subjects had been attending a mixed ability class that consisted of students learning English for 5 years. The participants had English classes for 8 hours a week. The related applications of CLT lasted for two class hours and for NLP-related applications, two class hours were allocated as well. The same group of participants experienced two different procedures; so, students' language competency level was ensured to be the same by applying all these classes to the same learners. The hypotheses of the research were established as in the following:

H<sup>0</sup>: There is no relationship between the lessons in which the techniques of NLP and CA were applied.

H<sup>1</sup>: There is a relationship between the lessons in which the techniques of NLP and CA were applied.

Quantitative research approach was employed in the study. Considering that descriptive data would surface the possible effects of NLP in comparison to CLT, quantitative and statistical analyses were targeted. In addition, descriptive statistics summarise all the data in simple numerical expressions (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2005). As well as the quantitative data, the study was based upon empirical knowledge which is obtained by 'interacting with the real world, observing phenomena and drawing conclusions from experience' (Seliger & Shohamy, 1995, p. 15). Within the study, it was aimed to gather data on students' frequency of participation in actual classroom setting. Video recordings were used to observe student behaviour in the form of being responsive to elicitation applied by the classroom teacher depending on the selected method of teaching. The participants were first observed in two lessons in which communicative teaching techniques were applied to improve reading skills. The stream of in-class applications were as follows.

- The students were asked to give opinions about what they like doing most in their spare times.
- They watched a short movie of a very famous cartoon and talked about the cartoon character and the related theme given in the movie.
- They participated in an activity in which they personalised information and they talked about their own lives and opinions.
- Visualisation technique was used to predict and interpret the information related to a short reading text.
- The students played a communicative game in which information-gap technique was applied.
- The students worked in small groups and participated in an improvised role play activity related with the theme used for instruction.

In the following lessons, NLP techniques such as VAKOG, guided visualisation and guided imagery were applied. The initial activity aimed to activate visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and olfactory senses of the learners. The other one was a breathing exercise to relieve the learners' stress and tension. The following activities were based on guided imagery and guided visualisation techniques. The closing ones were based on comprehension. The procedure used by the in-class teacher for lesson planning was as follows.

- The learners were asked to pick objects from a box with their eyes closed. They were asked to comment on those objects in relation to where and for what purpose they were used.
- The teacher helped the students to make a breathing exercise in order to relieve the learners' stress and tension.
- The students listened to a text called 'Magic Island' and they visualised what they heard. In the audio text, there were some sounds such as the wind and birds.
- At the end of the text, the teacher told the students that they had to leave the island but they should think of an item to take from the island thus, they could go back to the island again by using it. Then, the teacher counted to three and asked the students to open their eyes and asked questions about what they saw, how they felt, what they smelled and what they experienced on that island.
- They read a text about Madagascar Island, participated in a vocabulary activity and answered comprehension check questions related to the text. Later, the teacher wanted them to answer some open-ended questions, such as what they would do to survive on an island like Madagascar.

### 3. Results and conclusion

This study examines the frequency of participation in two different applications: one is a class instructed via CA and another via NLP. During these two applications with different techniques, the class teacher exposed equal number of elicitation questions and the frequency of student participation was recorded. The mean of frequency account in the lessons with NLP applications was 9.55 whereas in the lessons in which communicative techniques were applied it was 8.7. Table 1 that displays the related results is as follows:

**Table 1. Analysis of applications with different methods**

Approach	N	F	Mean	Standard deviation	t	p
Communicative	20	174	8.70	3.342	2.243	0.037
NLP	20	191	9.55	3.471	2.243	0.037

Independent T-test was applied to investigate whether there is a statistically significant difference and the results were indicated in the chart above. As a result of the T-test, considering  $p < 0.05$ , it was found that there is a 0.05 significant difference between a lesson with NLP applications and a lesson with communicative applications ( $t = 2.243, p = 0.037$ ).

NLP receives criticism as there is not sufficient evidence for its efficiency in language teaching. Thornbury (2001) highlights this paucity as 'until practitioners can produce plausible evidence for its effectiveness, recognition is unlikely to be forthcoming' (p. 395). NLP paves the way to incorporating representational systems, VAKOG, in teaching and gives an opportunity to experience the language through one's own preferences. Nevertheless, ELT literature is in the lack of plausible results of concrete NLP applications. The scope of present study is limited with class hours and number of activity types applied. Further research with more participants and variety of applications will most probably justify the related results and definitely contribute to the area about the corporation of NLP into language teaching methodology.

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