NLP: IF IT WORKS, USE IT...

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at some of the possible reasons behind the sharp dichotomy of opinion that exits in applied linguistics on the utility of NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) as a methodological approach. Notions of power in the wider context of ELT are considered along some of the basic discourse features and principles which characterise NLP. It is suggested that NLP has not been accepted into the fold as a mainstream methodological option because it is presented in a way that does not conform to either the explicit or implicit rules of academia in the field of applied linguistics. The conclusion finds that such criticism that is levelled against NLP is founded at least in part upon prejudices which are bound up with this non-conformity as much as any misgivings critics may have with regard to the basic principles and ideas underlying it. Finally, the general lack of coverage of NLP in applied linguistics manuals and reference books carries with it a tacit message of non-approval which is not only influential in persuading language teachers against its use but may also be construed as a form of censorship.

KEY WORDS

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), English language teaching (ELT), applied linguistics, methodology, humanism, discourse.

RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia las posibles razones que motivan los diferencias de opinión en torno a la utilidad de NLP como enfoque metodológico. Se examinan cuestiones de poder en el contexto de la enseñanza del inglés (ELT) junto con algunos de los rasgos y principios distintivos del NLP. El artículo sugiere que una de las principales razones por las que no ha sido aceptado como enfoque dominante se debe a que ha sido presentado de forma discordante con las normas académicas de la lingüística aplicada. Concluimos que

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el rechazo está no sólo en los principios que subyacen a NLP sino en pre-juicios vinculados con el no conformismo del enfoque. La falta de atención que se aprecia en manuales y obras de referencia de lingüística aplicada no sólo perpetúa este rechazo entre los profesores/as de ELT sino que se ha convertido en una forma tácita de censura.

PALABRAS CLAVE

NLP, la enseñanza del inglés, lingüística aplicada, metodología, humanismo, discurso.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie les raisons qui peuvent motiver les différences d'opinion relatives à l'utilité du NLP comme point de vue méthodologique. Les concepts de pouvoir dans le contexte de l'enseignement de l'anglais sont envisagés en fonction de quelques –unes de caractéristiques discursives de base et des divers principes distinctifs du NLP. L'article suggère que l'une des raisons principales pour lesquelles le NLP n'a pas été accepté comme approche méthodologique traditionnelle réside dans le fait qu'il a été présenté d'une manière peu conforme aux normes académiques de la linguistique appliquée. Le texte aboutit à la conclusion que la critique suscitée contre le NLP se fonde, du moins en partie, sur les préjugés lies à cet aspect de non-conformité de l'approche. Le manque de charges d'application du NLP dans les manuels et dans les œuvres de référence implique un message tacite de rejet qui non seulement augmente la résistance des professeurs de langue quant à son usage mais peut aussi apparaître comme une forme de censure.

MOTS-CLÉ

NLP, l'enseignement de l'anglais, linguistique appliquée, méthodologique, humanisme, discours.

1. INTRODUCTION

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) has "become a buzzword in ELF circles" over the last decade and a half" (Puchta, 1999, p. 246). Conferences and courses abound with titles alluding to it, societies and associations extolling its virtues appear to be more active than ever before and publications on the subject have increased appreciably. It is not atypically referred to in terms of "techniques and tools" (Robles, 2000, p. 75) rather than as a *method, hypothesis* or *theory* and is quite often defined with regard to each part of its compound: "... how the mind (Neuro) interacts with language (Linguistic) and the body ... [in order to develop] ... explicit skills and techniques –patterns of excel-

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lence– that people can learn (Programming) and thus enhance their own performance" (Puchta, *ibidem*). It is axiomatic that anything linguistic would be of interest to the language teacher/researcher and the interface between mind and language certainly lies at the heart of cognitive and psycholinguistics. Nevertheless, opinion on the utility of NLP in ELT is pretty much polarised between two extremes with little shading in between. Belonging to the wider movement of *humanism*, which foregrounds the affective realm of the learner, NLP like humanism, generates "strong sentiments" and "divides rather than unifies" (Bruton, 1999, p. 11). On the one hand, it is lauded by its advocates with overstated claims underscoring its benefits whilst, on the other hand, it is rejected, overlooked and not infrequently sneered at by applied linguists and faculty departments as pseudo-psychology which is based on decidedly shaky foundations.

In fairness to the many sceptics, it is important to underline the fact that those who would defend NLP principles have neither met this criticism head on by way of promoting a public image (i.e. at congresses and the like) which transgresses from what the uninitiated might take to be trivial, puerile or to paraphrase one self-mocking NLP *Master Practitioner* "Mary Poppinsy" (Revell and Norman, 1997, p. 136); nor have they intellectualised the study to any great extent by joining academic debate in reputable journals or books of legitimate scientific standing. Indeed, to the world of ELT, which has become accustomed to defending itself against the strictures of Michael Long's "theory culling" (Long, 1993, p. 249), there is a patent lack of scientific or academic literature to support some of the central blocks upon which NLP is built. Nearly all the published material on the subject to date is practical in nature and this is seemingly related to the widespread aversion amongst its would-be apologists to theorise something which they see as being eminently pragmatic.

Perhaps then we should not be surprised to find that even though NLP has found a receptive audience amongst language teachers –and in this, book sales figures speak for themselves– and has been in circulation for long enough to have found its way into standard reference works on ELT methodology, more often than not, its relative size in these books is reduced to that of a footnote or less. Brown's (1994, pp. 58-66) *Teaching by Principles* gives over space to five humanistic methods: Community Language Learning (CLL), Suggestopedia, The Silent Way, Total Physical Response (TPR) and Natural Approach but does not mention NLP. Bailey and Nunan's (1996, p. 58) *Voices from the Classroom*,

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which according to the dustcover, offers "original papers written by teachers and researchers about what actually happens in the language classroom", makes passing reference to TPR and CLL while Ur (1996, pp. 243, 298) in *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory* cites "humanistic methodologies" once and CLL once. Neither book alludes to NLP. Ellis's (1994) 800 page thesis, *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, goes as far as to index both TPR and the Natural Approach although he stops short of indexing either NLP or humanism.

An in depth analysis of a larger cross section of books might throw up some interesting data (though such a study lies outside the scope of the one in hand) but even the briefest of examinations is sufficient to inform us that ELT authors are selective about information which is included or not included in their books. This may well serve as a prime example of how the different branches of linguistics "tend to think about language in fundamentally different ways" (Meara, 1997, p. 109) or, alternatively, it may be interpreted, like the non-coverage of a news story in one newspaper which is amply covered in another, as a clear sign of reservations on the matter or that an *anti*-stance has been taken up. Scott Thornbury does not express his reservations about humanism by keeping quiet about them, but there is an interesting footnote in one of his recent attacks on the subject in which he quotes Richard Schmidt, "one of the world's leading experts on SLA", responding to a question put to him by Thornbury himself on what he thought of NLP. Schimdt's reply: "NLP doesn't even enter into my radar screen" (2000, p. 30), predictable perhaps though it was given the circumstances, sums up the broad base of opinion in faculty circles on the matter and this type of comment in turn has far-reaching effects upon the general acceptance of NLP in the language teaching profession as a whole.

2. THE QUESTION OF POWER IN ELT

The argument is, as we can see, a complex and multi-layered one and however inadvertent or innocuous a book's discourse features may appear to be, covert rebuttals in the form of the non-referencing of NLP, especially by influential academic figures, undoubtedly influence "the way we think about language [which ultimately] governs the type of textbooks which get published" (Thornbury, 1999, p. 19) and provides an undeniable potential for publishers and applied linguistics departments alike to indulge their own interests. Questions of power

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and equality colour the backdrop of ELT and although teachers may be made to feel that they are entering into a healthy partnership with renowned applied linguists of the ilk of Rod Ellis, who closed the 32nd IATEFL Conference with an plenary session entitled "Second Language Acquisition Research: What's in it for the teachers?" with apparently well-intentioned comments such as "theory informs practice and practice informs theory" and "act upon your hunches" (Ellis, 1998), it is clearly a one-sided partnership which decides on behalf of teachers precisely *whose* and *what* "practices" and "hunches" are going to be used to define a working framework for ELT. Many scholars would distance themselves from Sinclair's (cf. Thornbury, 1998, p. 19) high-handed comment, "those who teach languages depend on those who describe them", but few would doubt his claim.

EFL teachers need to be made more aware of such designs on the ownership of ELT and learn to value their own experiences and intuitions in preference to an academic fraternity which can itself stake no great claim to success in providing a definitive theory to govern SLA, which could in turn be applied to ELT methodology. We might do well to reflect upon Stern's (1983, p. 337) cautionary note with regard to theories and research that "evidence is sometimes inconclusive, questionable, or altogether lacking" or Swan's (1985, p. 87) diatribe which lays bare the mysteries of research in the field:

> Teachers do not always appreciate how little [new approaches and theories] are based on proven facts. We actually know hardly anything about how languages are learnt ... and rely on a pre-scientific mixture of common sense and insight derived by experience. Like eighteenth century doctors, we work largely by hunch, concealing our ignorance under a screen of pseudo-science and jargon.

The whole debate is tainted by what one might almost describe as an insecurity on behalf of applied linguists and a perceivable need to be accepted into the general fold of the scientific community which forces them into needless attempts to beef up the field's academic status when it is nothing if not a practically oriented discipline. Applied linguistics should be able to respond to the minimum requirement of making theoretical notions applicable to practical contexts which, to use the title of a recent article upholding the same philosophy, is "The Point of Applied Linguistics" (Kerr, 1999, p. 15). Experts in research might be advised to encourage and promote a more open dialogue with experts at the chalk face who are more centrally involved in language teach-

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ing so that "practices" and "hunches", which may not necessarily fit criteria for assessing their susceptibility to verification and falsification even though they have proved successful in the classroom, are not discarded out of hand or stigmatised in a way that appears to have happened with NLP and other humanistic approaches. In the early years of psycholinguistics, the eminent psychologist and psycholinguist George Miller, spoke of a time when "scientific progress will be forced to halt" whereupon it will be necessary to "pretend to see certain similarities" (Miller, 1967, p. 92) and two decades later McLaughlin (1987, p. 18) recognised that "no one theory has a monopoly on the truth." McLaughlin *(ibidem)* went on to add, "Scientific knowledge in any field grows when the phenomena to be accounted for are viewed from diverse perspectives." Like John Horgon's best seller, *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age,* there is a suggestion in all of this that conventional science has taken us as far as it can go in SLA and ELT methodology and that we need to be receptive to all the available data –to do anything else would be unscientific– and look at it with an open-mindedness which is unrestrained by traditional paradigms. Underhill (1989, p. 250) talks of a need for a "shift in attitude" for humanistic approaches to be understood and maybe it is time to promote a shift in paradigm from one which is dependent upon *evidence* in the true tradition of scientific investigation to something which requires a small synaptic jump to make the connection between what has been proved and what is still to be proven.

3. NLP DISCOURSE

NLP books on the market are highly accessible in terms of both price and content *and* cast a wide net with applications in "education, counselling, business and therapy" (O'Connor and Seymour, 1990, p. 2). Many emulate the characteristics of best sellers and often are. They are usually attention-grabbing paperbacks with easy-to-read uncluttered texts and few bibliographical references which are packaged in a style that is not dissimilar to Tony Buzan's *Use Your Head,* which may be regarded as belonging to the first generation of popular psychology books aimed at and marketed for a wide audience. Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence,* which has topped best selling lists on both sides of the Atlantic over the last few years, fully embraces these characteristics.

Language, as we have noted, is very important in NLP and metaphors are particularly prevalent in NLP literature. They are used to

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"by-pass the conscious mind ... [which] gives us direct access to the non-conscious mind" where "a new perspective on a situation" is more likely to be found (Revell and Norman, 1997, p. 101). Many of the metaphors seem to come in the form of quotations from famous writers and philosophers. Eric Jensen's *Super Teaching*, for example, gives over an entire title page to Marcel Proust's, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes" while Alistair Smith's *Accelerated Learning* opens with Kahlil Gibran's "The wise teacher does not ask you to enter the house of his wisdom. He leads you to the threshold of your own mind."

Metaphors are not infrequently delivered in the form of stories and guided fantasies which "allow the non-conscious mind to work its magic" (Revell and Norman, 1997, p. 13). Anecdotes too tend to make up an integral part of NLP and this is one of the characteristics which sets NLP discourse apart from other discourse. Indeed, as was previously intimated, it may be the very nonconformity of NLP writing, which has so little in common with the generally accepted canons and traditions of academic discourse, that scholars find so incompatible with what they regard as serious research. O'Connor and Seymour's (1990, p. 3) allusion to John Grinder and Richard Bandler's "discovery" of NLP illustrates the point:

> In the spring of 1976 John and Richard were in a log cabin, high in the hills above Santa Cruz, pulling together the insights and discoveries that they had made. Towards the end of a marathon 36 hour session, they sat down with a bottle of Californian red wine, and asked themselves, "What on earth shall we call this?"

Given the high-standing of the book and its authors in NLP literature, we may take this to be prototypical within the genre and it highlights the fact that such discourse is almost the polar opposite of widely accepted norms for the *research article* in terms of references, syntactic and lexical features and organisation (Swales, 1990).

Some of this might suggest that NLP lacks a scientific base upon which to lay its foundations. But this does not appear to be the case. Not only does NLP recognise many of the theories and hypotheses which are frequently referenced, not to say scientifically documented, in cognitive and psycholinguistic studies, but it actively promotes and uses them in the classroom. Labels and jargon are invariably changed so that the metalanguage of SLA is changed in NLP discourse. *Cognitive styles* and *hemispheric involvement* thereby become *metaprograms*

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or *representational systems* and *multiple intelligences* respectively. Sometimes theories and hypotheses such as *schema theory* and *the affective filter hypothesis* are reduced to memorable approximations of their original form in sayings like *the map becomes the territory* or *whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you're probably right*.

Perhaps practitioners of NLP should strive to forge a stronger link between generally accepted theory in SLA and the central tenets upon which NLP is based. There is, however, a suggestion that maybe all of this misses the point and fails to recognise one of the most important aspects of NLP as a language teaching tool: NLP transmits an array of less than simple theoretical notions connected with learning and teaching languages which, in sharp contrast to standard reference works in applied linguistics, are easily understood by teachers and students alike. Heavy timetables and increasing administrative duties have left primary and secondary school teachers in Spain with comparatively little time or incentive to delve into the research archives with quite the same vigour and *gusto* as their university counterparts who have considerably less teaching hours, and therefore more time to investigate, and whose professional advancement is more directly linked to investigation. NLP packages its theoretical contents in a manner which may be unwrapped and digested, with a minimal of effort, by teachers who simply do not have the time for lengthy consultation. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, many of the learning strategies underpinning NLP can be just as easily transmitted by teachers as they can be absorbed by learners of all learning stages.

There is a further reason why NLP has not acquired the universal cachet of some other methodologies and approaches in ELT and this is bound up with the way that it has been so widely applied not only throughout the broad spread of education but also in other disciplines such as counselling, business and therapy. It is, therefore, not an approach which has specific or exclusive applications to ELT and certainly a cursory flick through any of the recent publications on the market is enough to confirm that the way to advance the cause of NLP, and indeed humanism in ELT, is to focus attention on specific language applications in the classroom.

4. CONCLUSION

The most obvious conclusion which can be drawn from this study is that the short shrift NLP has been given in works of reference in

applied linguistics is clearly out of step with the interest that it has gen-
erated in the field of ELT. This is a product of what some would call
"misunderstanding" (Underhill, 1989, p. 250) and others "ownership"
and "monopoly" (Thornbury, 1998, p. 19). NLP does not conform, nor
does it outwardly appear to attempt to conform, to either the explicit
or implicit guidelines which govern academic discourse although some
of the central tenets on which it is constructed comprise the very cor-
nerstone upon which psycholinguistic and cognitive linguistics are
based. Whether it is deserving of a more central position in ELT
methodology is a moot point although the general lack of coverage in
applied linguistics manuals is disappointing if only from an egalitarian
standpoint since it may be construed as a form of covert censorship.
Teachers should have the opportunity to choose the approach, method-
ology or set of tools which best suits them and their teaching context.
And yet there will be those who will be denied the unique possibility
that NLP may offer them because of the way it has been appraised,
albeit inadvertently, by some of the leading lights in applied linguistics.

In the final analysis, like any other methodology, NLP will work or
not for an individual teacher because it is right for them and not
because it is scientifically proven or not. And if after looking at or try-
ing NLP they decide that they want to discard it, they are at liberty to
choose another set of principles. Or, to borrow a well-known NLP say-
ing: *If it works, use it; if it doesn't, try something else.*

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