
Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) as a Lever for Conceptual Change in Teachers

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INTRODUCTION

This presentation report is an attempt to evoke the feeling, atmosphere and interactive thought content of the session some of us experienced on the afternoon of Saturday, October 15th, at the 2005 Korea TESOL Conference.

The session began with participants putting their books down, standing up, and taking a partner. The partners faced each other and began moving their arms in unison, one following the other. In some cases, you could clearly make out who was leading the movements and who was the follower. With other pairs, it was really hard to discern who the leader might be: The two people simply seemed wrapped in a kind of instinctive harmony. At moments like these, you know that two humans are actually communicating, and doing so without the extraordinary complication of words.

A CENTRAL NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING CONCEPT

"Why start your session with a classical drama training mirroring exercise?" you might ask. After people resumed their seats, I explained that this session did not aim to be a comprehensive introduction to neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). For this I referred them to the books by Revell and Norman (1997) and Seymour and O'Connor (2003). The purpose of the session was to introduce one NLP concept and to examine just how central it is to our thinking as teachers. The concept in question is:

- The map is not the territory.
- We began chewing this over with the help of three exercises:

EXERCISE 1

Ten people came to the whiteboard at the front of the hall. Each took a marker and had 20 seconds to draw an impressionistic map of Korea. Here we had ten different spatial representations of the territory we conventionally call Korea. Some people drew the country diagonally rather than vertically, some showed the 38th parallel border, some had a clear northern border along the Yalu River, some included the island of Jeju, etc. . . . The maps were different enough to provoke some gasps from the audience.

Quite irrespective of the individual differences in perception, memory, and drawing ability, these maps illustrated the concept that *the map is not the territory* in their inability to show the curvature of the Earth and in their two-di-

mensionality: they showed no mountains or low places.

EXERCISE 2

For the second exercise, I dictated this sentence:

- I'll meet you at the Seoul City Hall.

People from around the room then told us what came to mind for them on hearing the phrase: *Seoul City Hall*. As you can imagine this building evoked varied responses from people; for some it was hardly known, for others a well-known landmark, for yet others, it was mainly felt to be a subway stop. Some thought it was an interesting building, while others felt it was ugly. We had a clear case of the map being different from the territory.

EXERCISE 3

I dictated the snippet *The old man looked out of the window . . .* and asked people to write one sentence describing the man who popped up before their mind's eye. We seemed to have as many old men as there were people in the room!

AFTER THE SESSION

You may well be wondering what all this has to do with teaching EFL, since after all, it is fairly obvious that people will react differently to the same thing. But is it that obvious? Ten minutes after this session I am writing about, a friend came up to me and asked, "How did your NLP workshop go? He did not ask *How do you feel after your NLP workshop?* or *Did you enjoy the workshop?* or *What wild guesses do you have about how people felt in the workshop?* Instead, he asked *How did your workshop go?*

His question ignores the fact that the multitude of people in that room all had their own hugely complex reactions to the workshop, based on their expectations, on their prior knowledge of the subject, on their mood after lunch, on their emotional reaction to me, and on a million things that I will never know.

In a loose, conversational way, my friend's question is understandable and legitimate. If you start thinking about his question, though, it was and is an absurdity based on the implicit theory that a teacher can comprehend what he is doing from his students' points of view. Clearly this is impossible, and the NLP messages to us teachers are:

- Stop assuming.
- Stop mind reading.
- Stop comfortably fantasizing.
- Ask for clear verbal feedback from your students.

There are so many examples from typical teacher talk that show how we assume that students will have done what we meant them to. Take, for example:

I taught them the comparative last week. Does the speaker really believe that the students, each and every one, learnt the comparative last week? Does she believe that each student understands the comparative in English in precisely the way that she, the teacher, understands it?

I would suggest to you that the dictum *The map is not the territory* should be central to all our thinking about our teaching. It is not a given in current EFL thinking. Current EFL thinking is not aware that accurate communication is, as Caleb Gattegno once said, close to a miracle. If you really take on board the idea that "the map is not the territory," it will change your whole approach to other people. Let me give you some examples.

In a disagreement with a colleague, you will be aware of the presence of two maps, theirs and yours, rather than rectitude (on your side) and error (on the other person's side). When a student regularly fails to hand in their homework, you will be more interested in discovering their map of the situation than in going ballistic or moralistic. The realization that "the map is not the territory" comes in very handy in situations of marital discord where both partners tend to mistake their own map for the territory. Have such things ever happened in your life?

IMPLICATIONS

Let us now turn to the implications of *The map is not the territory* for our teaching. If you take on board the fact that the subjective map and the out-there territory are often seriously different, you will change the sort of reading and listening exercises you give your students. You will start to prefer exercises that get the students telling each other about the different ways in which they have *elaborated* the text when listening or reading. You will find yourself abandoning comprehension questions about the listening or reading text since these questions implicitly deny that each student has their own, quite individual map of what they had just heard or read.

PERCEPTION ACTIVITY

At this point in the workshop, we did an activity to show that perception of units as small as single words varies hugely from one person to the next. Participants created four columns on a sheet in front of them with these headings:

I see	I hear	I feel through my body	I taste/smell

I then explained that I would dictate simple words to them and that each person should write the word in the column that corresponded to the sensory channel in which they got their *first* sensory representation of the word. So, for

example, I dictate the word *cow*, and people who get a mental picture of the animal and put the word in column 1, under *I see*. Those who get an auditory representation of *cow* would write it in column 2, and so on.

When I had dictated 25 words, people worked with their neighbors and compared their placings of the words. The lecture hall was abuzz with excited voices as people realized just how different their sensory reactions to these words had been. With the word *mother*, some people got a picture, more people heard her, and the largest group felt her through their bodies. One or two people put *mother* under *taste/smell*. Here you have a typical exercise (first published by Davis & Rinvoluceri, 1988) that works on the principle that each person will have their own map, even of single words, and that valuable language practice can be afforded by getting them to compare their maps.

STORYTELLING ACTIVITY

The last activity we did in the workshop was around storytelling. I told the group a searingly sad Vietnamese story, and then we explored the mental pictures that the telling had filled people's heads with. People worked in pairs and asked each other these technical questions:

- Were your pictures black and white or color?
- How big were the pictures?
- How close to you or far away were they?
- Did they have frames or did they go off into space?
- Were you actually in the space where the story took place?
- Did you mentally "become" any of the characters in the tale?
- Were your pictures well focused or blurry?
- Where they flat or did they have deep perspective?

People in the hall found that, just at the level of visual perception, the stories they had in their heads were quite different from those of their neighbors. They were fascinated to be exploring each other's visual mappings of the story. Here was real communicative follow up to a short listening task.

CONCLUSION

I suggested that any post-listening or post-reading exercise should deal with the current reality of the text as elaborated in each student's head and should not hark back to the original text. To ram this point home, I ended the session with a little story about an interview Umberto Eco gave to a journalist shortly after his novel, *The Name of the Rose* came out. After they had had coffee together, Eco asked the journalist, I know you have a busy life, but have you had a chance to read any of the book? She blushed scarlet, and told him she had read the whole book and some parts twice. Eco sat back and sighed, *Then we do have a problem. Do we discuss the parts you read once, the parts you read twice, or the text that I wrote?*