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To David [REDACTED]

NLP suits some people extremely well.

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### Some objections to NLP

After 10 years teaching the early steps in Neuro-Linguistic-Programming to some 250 EFL teachers from around Europe, I am convinced that NLP is not right for everybody. There are many reasons why this eminently Western system of thought, beliefs and practices may feel wrong to people who come to study it. X

There are aspects of NLP that do not sit comfortably with people from Confucian cultures, such as China and Japan. NLP maintains that each of us has the internal resources necessary to achieve whatever we decide to achieve. To a person brought up in Japan this will look like typically Western, childish individualism, an individualism that fails to respect the fact that we are social animals and that much of what we achieve can only be achieved in a group context and will anyway be a group achievement.

NLP maintains that a person's identity, beliefs, skills and behaviours come higher in a natural hierarchy ( Bateson Logical Levels) than the environment, both human and physical. This clearly offends the Marxist belief that we are hugely dominated and conditioned by our environment. In this area Marxism and NLP are hard to reconcile.

Two years ago I had a Catalan EFL teacher on a beginners NLP course. He was making heavy weather of the work and in the second week I discovered that the key words in his Roman Catholic philosophy were, QUIETNESS, HUMILITY and ABSTEMIOUSNESS. He found the slickness, the arrogance and the noisiness of NLP, as he experienced it, quite unbearable. "When you work your magic tricks, Mario, I don't know what to think". As his teacher, I was happy that NLP could act as a contrastive backdrop to his quite different belief set.

Typical Western European liberal objections to NLP follow this sort of reasoning: "NLP is a dishonest way of influencing people- by knowing how they are programmed internally you arrogate to yourself the power to manipulate them, and this for your own purposes. It would be better to stay morally clean and know less about how people's unconscious works." X

These critics have a point and when you <sup>saw</sup> ~~see~~ and listen to the fascist-leaning politician in Austria, Mr Haidar, using his NLP skills to sway TV audiences, and to sway them very effectively, you realise what a powerful instrument NLP is. X X

There are also a smattering of UK academics, applied linguists and psychologists, who decry NLP as being an unproven set of hypotheses. They would like NLP to be submitted to a process of falsification, in the Popper sense of the word. Interestingly they seem to have no quarrel with geologists who simplistically take lava calderas, fissures, X

fumeroles, volcanoes and seismic movement to be givens of their subject, rather than as hypotheses that need proving or disproving.

I hope that it is clear that I can appreciate and sympathise with many of the points of view outlined above that take issue with NLP. I feel that their concerns are grounded and deserve to be carefully thought through by those of us who have found NLP to be an essential tool in our work. Understanding and working with the objections to NLP is part and parcel of a good practitioner's mindset.

The only handful of nay-sayers I find it hard to respect are the last mentioned group, a flutter of academics from linguistics and psychology, who feel little need to seriously get to know what they are condemning and deriding.

### People for whom NLP has been really useful

Over now to people who have found NLP seriously useful in their personal lives and in their teaching of language. (Over the past 10 years we at Pilgrims must have trained 500 to 600 people in rudimentary NLP skills, and many other training centres in UK offer excellent NLP courses for EFL teachers, eg Nile and Bell.

In an article in **Humanising Language Teaching** ( [www.hltmag.co.uk](http://www.hltmag.co.uk) ) Year 6 Issue 1, Jan 2004 Teresa Marin Esteve writes:

*" NLP has not only changed my own view of life but it is also having a positive influence on my work as an English teacher.*

*I must confess that after coming back from the course at Pilgrims some questions assaulted me constantly like, for example: "How am I supposed to apply all this theory to my work?"*

*Forget all about this NLP stuff if I don't put it in into practice..."*

*students?"*

*I cannot say that these doubts have completely disappeared but I can say that, little by little I BELIEVE that the magic of NLP can come true. I am really conscious that the changes I am experiencing with myself and with my students in class are not big changes but every single little detail in( sic) every single day counts.*

*How do I know it is working?*

*Because I can see it in my students' faces and gestures and attitudes ....."*

In the same issue of **Humanising Language Teaching** Maria Cristina Diaz recounts how a two week encounter with NLP helped her to change a number of her strongly held beliefs about herself and her teaching. As is clear from what follows the beliefs she changed were mainly negative, self-destructive ones. Maria Cristina writes:

*Thanks to NLP I have changed the following personal beliefs and feelings:*

*I am not able to become a good teacher. I just can't face a group of teenagers and teach them something.*

*If the students do not understand me, there is nothing I can do.*

*There are some things I cannot do. I can't be good at everything. I cannot change this.*

*Sometimes I feel that the lesson has been a failure.*

*The students have to read. They will all read this book. I liked it a lot!*

*If I try this, they will think I am crazy.*

The meat of Maria Cristina's article is a description of precisely how she managed to to sometimes modify, to sometimes positivise and to sometimes discard these limiting convictions of hers. (to read the whole article go to [www.hltmag.co.uk](http://www.hltmag.co.uk) Year 6, Issue 1)

She concludes the piece with these words:

*The course was only two weeks long but I was able to catch a glimpse of NLP is about what and I must admit I found it deeply interesting. Firstly as an individual and then applied to my job. what*

*Maybe it was the little push I needed to be brave enough to change things in my class. I mean that sometimes I had not tried new things because of what the students or other teachers might think of me... .. Now I feel more confidence in myself and in what I do, and that has been a major change in me. There is still a long way to go, but I feel very lucky that I was shown its existence. what*

Even if you found yourself in sympathy with some of the objections to NLP listed at the start of this article I would ask you to read the two Spanish teachers' texts with equal care and openness, since Teresa and Maria Cristina are both thinking from the heart and from the whole person and such thought is deeper and stronger than mere intellectual discussion.

### **An NLP- inspired exercise for you to try out with your students**

If the opposing points of view around NLP have whetted your curiosity you could of course go out and enroll in an NLP practitioner course ( one month's intensive work) but this would set you back more than a few bob. ( NLP is an acronym that stands for both Neuro Lingusitic Programming, and Never Lower Prices!)

An alternative to taking a course is to open the NLP tool box by trying out some NLP-derived exercises with your students in class. Here is one to get you going:

### **Completion-Incompletion \***

1. Dictate these questions to your students:

*How do I feel when I am thinking about starting something new?*  
*How do I feel when I have just begun something new?*  
*What are my feelings half way through a journey, a task, a book, a project?*  
*How do I know when something I have been doing is completed?*

Dictate these phrases to your students:

*partially*  
*not far to go*  
*exhaustive*  
*thorough*  
*not sure*  
*good enough*  
*finished*  
*satisfying*  
*nearly there*  
*rounded off*  
*keeping my options open*  
*stuck*

Tell the students to underline the phrases that seem important to them when they think about finishing something off. Also ask them to add phrases of their own.

Dictate the following questions:

*What are three areas in which I am good at completing and three in which I find finishing off more difficult.*

*What, precisely, are my difficulties in knowing how to complete something?*

*Who do I know who is excellent at finishing things off? How do they do it?*

*Is there anything which I have finished which I wish I hadn't?*

*Do I believe completion is always possible?*

2 Ask your students to work in groups of three or four and answer all the questions.

3. Leave time for whole class feedback.

One reason for the success of the above lesson in most intermediate to advanced EFL

classrooms is that the students are gathering their thoughts together around an area of their own process that they have possibly never thought coherently about in mother tongue. For me, one hallmark of a good L2 exercise is that it invites the learner into thinking and feeling territory not yet explored and experienced in Mother Tongue.

I have written this article in typical FOR and AGAINST Western style in the hope that you, MET's readers, will send in your own thoughts about NLP and EFL and thus initiate a debate around this important new (and not so new) area in EFL thinking.

I look forward to reading you.

Mario

- If more exercises of this type might appeal to you have a look at **Unlocking Expression through NLP**, Judy Baker et al, Delta Books 2005.