

## The implementation of aspects of NLP in teaching English

Wdrażanie elementów NLP w nauczaniu języka angielskiego

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on Neuro-Linguistic Programming and its main presuppositions and concepts which could be used in the field of education. The basis of NLP method is based on human neurobiology and relates to the function of its brain. Neuro-linguistic programming refers to effective communication methods which are based on the change of people's perception and thinking. It consists of many techniques that improve communication. It also provides simple tools to work with emotions and to manage stress, strategies for encouraging creativity, time management, problem solving, motivation and learning. Thus, although NLP originates from psychotherapy, its techniques and tools were rapidly transferred to other areas of life. Education is one of the fields where NLP can be applied. Research indicates that using it in teaching and learning process can be beneficial both for students and teachers.


**Keywords:** language education, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, language learning, communication


### Streszczenie


Niniejszy artykuł koncentruje się na Programowaniu Neurolingwistycznym oraz jego głównych założeniach i koncepcjach, które można wykorzystać w dziedzinie edukacji. Podstawa metody NLP opiera się na neurobiologii człowieka i dotyczy funkcji jego mózgu. Programowanie neurolingwistyczne odnosi się do skutecznych metod komunikacji, opierających się na zmianie percepcji i myślenia ludzi. Składa się z wielu technik usprawniających komunikację i zapewnia proste narzędzia do pracy z emocjami i radzenia sobie ze stresem, strategie zachęcania do kreatywności, zarządzania czasem, rozwiązywania problemów, motywowania i uczenia się. Tak więc, chociaż NLP wywodzi się z psychoterapii, jej techniki i narzędzia zostały przeniesione do innych dziedzin życia. Badania wskazują, że wykorzystanie NLP w procesie nauczania i uczenia się może być korzystne zarówno dla uczniów, jak i nauczycieli.


**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja językowa, Programowanie Neurolingwistyczne, uczenie się języka, komunikacja


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## **1. Introduction**

Teaching in the modern world is not only about transferring knowledge and pedagogy. It is about relationships and feelings formed during the teaching/learning process. It is about the multisensory environment that stimulates students to gain knowledge and develop skills. It is about observing students in the school reality to get to know them and to be able to respond to their needs. Neuro-Linguistic Programming, which is based on human neurobiology, appears to offer a wide range of techniques and tools to make the process of education individualised.

## **2. Origins and development of NLP**

Review of literature on Neuro-Linguistic Programming presents NLP as a form of therapy, a set of communication techniques, way of modelling human behaviour, the study of human behaviour, and from a more general perspective – science, persuasion and even magic (Žak, 2016). The idea of NLP being relatively popular, not many people realize that it was initially developed in California in the early 1970s as a therapeutic tool to solve personal problems and treat phobias, and emerged a bit accidentally through the cooperation of a 20-year-old student of first mathematics and computer science, and finally psychology Richard Bandler and an associate professor of linguistics at U.C. Santa Cruz, John Grinder (Adlam, 2015).

The first years of NLP were the years of experimentation during which the founders of NLP tested their new concepts on several therapeutic groups (Žak, 2016, p. 21). They combined the work of Virginia Satir (1916-1988), an author, a social worker and an internationally appreciated family therapist with the work of Fritz Perls (1893-1970), who is the founder of gestalt therapy (Adlam, 2015). As Adlam explains (2015), ‘Bandler and Grinder teamed up (...), [they] did whatever worked and removed what didn’t work.’

## **3. NLP characteristics**

NLP seems to have developed much further than just therapy. Its purpose is not just to cure people from their deficiencies and insecurities, which therapy does, but primarily strengthen their skills and maximize their performance. As Bandler and Fitzpatrick (2009, pp. 14-15) initially explain, NLP ‘is an approach which deals with human behaviour, cognitive functions and their structure, models of language, and human psyche’. They continue that NLP ‘is

not a theory, but rather a combination of attitude, method and techniques which are used in the fields of psychotherapy, business, sports, medicine, and education – just to name a few'. According to the definition by Bandler and Benson (2016, p. XIX),

Neuro Linguistic Programming is a set of behaviours, skills and attitudes that enable us to understand how we organize information and communicate with others. Put simply, your nervous system (Neuro) is directly affected at all levels by the way you communicate with yourself (Linguistic). The interplay between your neurology and your language sets us patterns of behaviour (Programming).

Neuro-Linguistic Programming assumes that the three constituent parts of Neuro, Linguistic and Programming are linked and interact constantly with each other.

### **3.1. NEURO**

The term is derived from the Greek neuron, meaning nerve. Alder points out that the component refers to neurological processes of seeing, hearing and feeling with touch, taste and smell, namely - it refers to the senses used while thinking and receiving stimuli from the surrounding world. All our knowledge and what we describe as our consciousness reaches our brain through the senses (1997, p. 11). NLP, being based on the knowledge of neurological functioning of human brain, tries to penetrate the mind and unravel its mysteries, uses the knowledge of cognitive functions of human beings and attempts to explain human behaviour not only through the prism of motives and urges but either through neurotransmitters functioning and brain mysteries (Žak, 2016, p. 17).

### **3.2. LINGUISTIC**

The term is derived from Latin, meaning language. The linguistic component is connected with the way we use language, both in internal dialogue and external conversations with other people. Words influence our reality, they shape it and change it every day. As Žak points out, people are immersed in words, and the ability to communicate through language distinguishes us from other leaving creatures (2016, p. 17). NLP aims at shaping communication behaviours which are effective in everyday interactions.

### 3.3. PROGRAMMING

The term refers to the method used to control our own thoughts and our behaviour, almost as the same as you can program a computer to perform certain operations. Alder summarises that NLP examines how, with the use of the five senses, we filtrate stimuli from the surrounding world and how we use the senses (consciously and unconsciously) to obtain the results we want (1997, p. 11). NLP assumes that human behaviour is programmable and the way people behave is based on both developed thinking processes and action patterns. Żak indicates that the awareness of the existence of these patterns can help in understanding others, it lets us believe that we have a possibility to modify the programming and gives us a possibility to intentionally influence the way we think about ourselves and the surrounding world (2016, p. 18).

### 3.4. The four pillars of NLP

The whole concept of NLP addresses the widely understood communication between human beings, the success of which relies on the four pillars proposed by Ravell and Norman (1998, p. 16): outcomes, rapport, sensory acuity and flexibility (Table 1).

Table 1. The four pillars of NLP based on Ravell & Norman (1998, p. 16)

Outcomes	objectives or goals: knowing what you want can help you to achieve it
Rapport	minimizing differences between people so that communication would become positive and harmonious and everyone would achieve their outcome
Sensory acuity	observing other people carefully without making quick judgments or assumptions about them, 'noticing what another person is communicating – often non-consciously and often non-verbally'
Flexibility	adapting the means taken to the particular situation: If the way you act is not working try to act in a different way

These four pillars provide the Basic NLP Action Model known as a success in four steps, explained by Ravell and Norman (Figure 1).

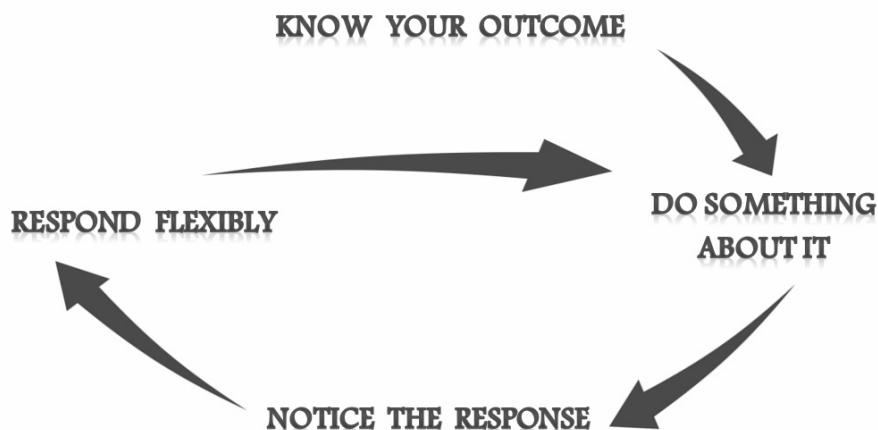


Figure 1. The Basic Action Model (Ravell & Norman, 1998, p. 17)

According to the authors, each step of the Action Model is related to one of the four pillars of NLP. The first one, know your outcome, means that in order to achieve what you want you need to know very clearly what is your goal. The second one – do something about it, until you take action, nothing will help you achieve your goal – involves communication with other people, hence the significance of rapport. The third one, notice the response, is connected to sensory acuity. If you are aware of this you are able to notice, hear and feel what does not work. The fourth one, respond flexibly, means that if what you do does not work, you should try to do something else (Ravell and Norman, 1998, p. 17).

#### **4. Presuppositions of NLP**

As Church and Terry (2008, p. 5) notice, ‘we can’t change anyone else’s behaviour, we can only change our own.’ This presupposition lies at the very heart of NLP, and although there is no official cannon of NLP, the number of assumptions in literature gangers from 6 to 24 (Alder and Heather, 2013, p. 20). Some of these were developed initially by Bandler and Gridner, others were added later (Žak, 2016, p. 24). The most frequently mentioned presuppositions point to the common problems with perception

and interpretation of human behaviour and outline the characteristics of successful communication (Table 2).

Table 2. Main presuppositions of NLP based on Churches and Terry (2008), O'Brien (2012), Ravell and Norman (1998), Suhecka (2010) and Žak (2016)

Presuppositions of NLP	
(1) The map is not a territory	All people have different maps of the world. The internal map of the external world, shaped by insight perception, is never an ideal replica. In other words, what exists outside is never the same as what exists in our brain. The filtration of the stimuli depends on our beliefs, values, points of views, experiences, cultural and social background. We react upon the map that exist in our heads. In the process of communication it is crucial to try to understand the map of a person that we communicate with. At times the map of other human seems to be ridiculous for us and then we need to be more tolerant and understandable. We need to understand that people can have completely different structures of their maps full of their own beliefs, certain values and memories (Churches and Terry, 2008, p. 1).
(2) Mind and body are interconnected	Mind and body are part of the same system and they affect each other. The mind-body system is strongly integrated. Neurotransmitters are chemical compounds which transmit nerve impulses. The impulses decide about how the brain is interacting with the rest of the body. Every thought travels to the smallest body cell through neurotransmitters. Body and mind should be considered as unity (Suhecka, 2010, p. 38).
(3) There is no failure, only feedback	Making mistakes equals making progress. We have the choice between becoming passive due to the mistakes or being mobilized to act and attempt to solve the problem. The difficulties that approach should be treated as a learning experience, as an opportunity to draw conclusions for the future and as a chance for development. The feedback gives the opportunity to achieve excellence.
(4) The resources needed are within us	Everyone has the potential develop. The positive resources include confidence, patience and sense of humour. There is a difference between a resource and a skill. The resource is not the skill. Not everyone has the skills to fly Boeing 747, for example but everyone has the ability to learn (Ravell and Norman, 1998). If something is possible, then it is possible for us to learn it how to do it. There is an existing notion that 'if one person can do something so can anyone else' (Churches and Terry, 2008, p. 6).

<p>(5) All behaviour has a positive intention</p>	<p>Whatever we do we do for a certain purpose. All behaviour has a positive intention. The fact it is positive doesn't ultimately mean it is good but rather that it is oriented toward the desirable goal. It is done for a reason (O'Brien, 2012, p. 12). It is good to have a variety of choices. People rarely behave in a way to make the others feel miserable. At the time people make the best choices available to them.</p>
<p>(6) The meaning of communication is the response I get</p>	<p>The success of the interaction is dependable on how well the message is incorporated by the recipient. The meaning of communication is based on the response. The measure of communication's efficiency is the response triggered by a message (Žak, 2016, p. 25).</p>
<p>(7) Communication is non-conscious as well as conscious</p>	<p>We believe that we learn something when we learn consciously but according to the research more than 99 percent of the learning process is non-conscious. We gain information mainly non-consciously. (Ravell &amp; Norman, 1998, p. 95)</p>
<p>(8) Communication is non-verbal as well as verbal</p>	<p>Communication is less verbal than non-verbal. Psychologists claim that 50% of our message is communicated with our body, 38% through our tone of voice and 7% through the words we use (Mehrabian, 2017). Whenever there is a divergence between what we say (words) and the way we say it (with our voice tone and body), the latter carries more weight. The discrepancy between non-verbal and verbal message leads to miscommunication. Also, people also can communicate by saying nothing (Churches and Terry, 2008, p. 6).</p>
<p>(9) If what you do doesn't work do something different</p>	<p>In social systems the person who is flexible has the power over the system, not in the sense of controlling the system but in terms of making adequate decisions and acting in the right way. It is better to modify our performance than to continue banging our head against the brick wall. Changing behaviour requires less energy than attempting to force someone to adapt to our expectations (Churches and Terry, 2008, p. 7).</p>
<p>(10) Having choice is better than lack of choice</p>	<p>The possibility to have choice gives us freedom of action and more chances to achieve your goals. NLP recognizes the issue as follows: one possibility is no possibility, two is a dilemma, three and more possibilities let you to find the best way to achieve your goal (Žak, 2016, p. 26).</p>

All these presuppositions have or should have their certain reflections in education. They may be applied in the field of education, especially in language teaching. Each of the NLP assumptions offers certain guidelines

for educators, indicating what to do and which actions and reactions should be avoided.

## **5. NLP presuppositions in language education**

The 10 presuppositions are illustrated below with suggestions for their application in the teaching/ learning process.

### **5.1. The map is not a territory**

The assumption that 'the map is not a territory' is the one that definitely has to be taken into consideration in the classroom. All students act and respond according to their own map of the world. As Churches and Terry (2008, p. 6) highlight, the internal maps are full of memories, values and beliefs. The first step in the process of learning is to become aware of the content of the map and to become aware that it is only the map not the real territory. The teacher's map will be different from the learners' maps. If the teacher knows the group because the group has been taught by her or him for some time, then probably the teacher has a good insight into the students' maps. When the teacher meets a new group, it is essential to view into the students' territory by trying to get into their shoes and to recognize their point of view (Bartkowiak, 2010).

Teachers need to be aware that alternative ways of thinking about various things do exist, and 'the key' does not have to be the only answer. As Ravell and Norman (1999, p. 101) point out, teachers need to be open to the fact that students are different from each other and they experience the world differently, and it is better to ask rather than guess what student's maps are. They continue that imposing other students or people's maps on students should be avoided, but at the same time learners should be encouraged to get to know how others do things and check if it works for them as well is a way of learning, and story-telling and the use of metaphors might appear helpful here.

Ravel and Norman (1999, p. 101) outline the difference between the metaphor which is used in the literature and the one applied in NLP. Metaphor in NLP is a way to gain access to the non-conscious mind. It is a way to give advice or suggest something to someone in indirect way. Non-conscious mind considers the message hidden in the metaphor which is ambiguous and is open to be interpret. Teachers may use metaphors hidden in the stories (extended metaphors). O'Brien (2012, p. 86) also notices that metaphors used in the classroom can be linked to wisdom, which then can be adopted in



an easier way than just facts and figures, they can challenge students and get the class into the mood for learning.

## **5.2. Mind and body are interconnected**

The interconnectivity of body and mind should also be the teacher's focus. It is especially important nowadays, considering students' short attention span and lack of ability to filter out irrelevant stimuli (Kulińska, p. 2019). It is necessary to involve the whole student, as physical activities in the classroom optimize the learning state and enable students to learn more effectively. The student who just listens to the teachers will definitely remember less from the lesson than when they do things. Also, research on stress management and brain functioning both show that people need to pause from time to time and give the brain and body time to recharge. (Ravell & Norman, 1999, p. 96) It is difficult for students to stay still and focused at the classroom table for the whole hour. If the teacher notices that the students are upset or tired, this the moment to do something else (break state or quick energizers) e.g. saying tongue twister, shaking your body, shaking your hands, circle your arms, stretching, marching on the spot, dancing, doing something physical. The relaxation activities do not have to be long but they can make a difference (1999, p. 96).

Teachers should take care of the classroom too (classroom audit) and make it comfortable by adjusting the furniture arrangement. No one single layout of the furniture is suitable for all classroom activities (Bandler and Benson, 2016, p. 196) e.g., a horseshoe-style layout creates more opportunity to interact with the teacher and listen and see other students, and the cafeteria-style will be more suitable for projects or teamwork.

## **5.3. There is no failure, only feedback**

The attitude that 'there is no failure, only feedback' is definitely the one which helps to create safe atmosphere for learners to take risks and make mistakes. As Ravell and Norman (1998, p. 47) declare, 'Mistakes are positive evidence that learners are experimenting and...changing.' It is not possible to learn the language without making errors, especially when it comes to initial attempts to use a language structure. Teachers are responsible for helping the students to see the mistakes, to know that it is OK to make mistakes and support them with feedback, so that the learning processes could take place. Students need constructive feedback in order to know what they could change. O'Brien (2012, p. 38) explains that the feedback should be rather

focused on the solution than the problem. It is a good idea to give feedback as soon as possible after completing the given task. Teachers should give a variety of choices when providing feedback but not overwhelm students with too many options. Feedback should indicate teachers' care and respect for the students' work and it should take into account students' needs.

#### **5.4. The resources we need are within us**

One of the most powerful presuppositions of NLP states that 'the resources we need are within us'. It can be translated into making the students more aware of their strengths than their weaknesses. Ravell and Norman (1999, p. 70) point out that the challenge for the teachers is to show students how to access their resources. Teachers should help students recognize what they are good at and show them how to transfer their skill from one activity to another. It has to be noticed that this perspective can be both quite novice and relatively difficult for some teachers, mainly because of the tendency to concentrate on mistakes and problems, which are the weaknesses. In NLP, the focus is shifted from the limitation to the strength, and the first one is overcome with the power of the later.

#### **5.5. All behaviour has a positive intention**

Creators of NLP also believe that all behaviour has a positive intention. According to O'Brien (2012, p. 12), all behaviour is done for some reason. If the student is disruptive during the lesson, the teacher's role is to find out what need this behaviour is satisfying and help them to do it in a different, non-disruptive, way. If disruptive behaviour is a result of a need for attention the teachers should find alternative ways of getting the attention such as making the student the spokesperson for the group or asking to be the teacher's helper.

Ravell and Norman (1998, p. 106) postulate that the reason for misbehaving can be too easy a task, which can be boring, so making the task more challenging can be a solution to the situation. Whatever the reason is, the teacher needs to find out what it is and act upon it. The authors (p. 106) conclude that if there is no possibility to change the students behaviour, the teacher should try to change the response to the certain behaviour in order to achieve the desired result.

### **5.6. The meaning of communication is the response I get**

The assumption that 'the meaning of communication is the response I get' is crucial for successful communication and resolving any problems that might appear. If the teacher gets a negative reaction from the students, it is necessary to find out what the problem is and to act differently, trying an alternative approach. Ravell and Norman (1998, p. 128) say that 'If I don't like the response I am getting from someone, then I need to do something different to get a different response.' If the students have problems with learning what the teacher is trying to teach, the teacher cannot just determine it is the students' fault.

Churches and Terry (2008, p. 6) state that NLP offers an option which enables teachers to modify the behaviour that doesn't work. If one way seems not to work, the teacher should try another one, and another, and another before giving up. This can be compared to the 'bunch of keys' technique: when you try to unlock the door, it is necessary to find the right key to the lock. There is no point in keeping to try to unlock the door with the same key multiple times – the only outcome will be breaking the key instead of the desired result – unlocked door.

### **5.7. Communication is non-conscious as well as conscious**

It has to be taken into consideration that 'communication is non-conscious as well as conscious'. Ravell and Norman (1998, p. 96) suggest that teachers should create sensory-rich environment in the classroom to help students intake information both consciously and non-consciously. This involves having a changeable, informative and eye-catching display of visual materials. Types of activities should be changed frequently during the lesson. The authors (p. 96) claim that it is a good idea to overload students with more information than the conscious mind can cope with from time to time, so that the non-conscious mind is forced to help.

### **5.8. Communication is non-verbal as well as verbal**

There are two levels of communication: it is non-verbal as well as verbal. O'Brien (2012, p. 42) explains that teachers are role models so they should be aware and think of their language, gestures, appearance and the message they are communicating. Students are the audience that can be easily influenced so the teachers need to be aware of their non-verbal communication and make it as congruent as possible with the verbal one. All three channels (voice, body and words) should be used in teaching and they should work in harmony

in order to convey the same message. The author (p. 42) emphasises that using effective verbal and non-verbal language is crucial when it comes to creating positive environment in the classroom. It is especially important for foreign language students, who need to notice and practice verbal and non-verbal interaction and use all their resources to deliver the message.

The teacher's voice is very important, too, so it is a good idea for teachers to listen to their voice in order to know if it sounds interesting, lively or maybe dull and a bit monotonous. Churches and Terry (2008, p. 64) draw attention to the effectiveness of silence in the classroom. Even when saying nothing, the teacher will communicate something.

### **5.9. If what you do doesn't work, you should do something different**

According to NLP beliefs, 'if what you do doesn't work, you should do something different'. Teachers need to be flexible. Not every way of teaching will work all the time. The same lesson will not be taught in exactly the same way to different groups of students: every student is different, every group is different and school is a complex environment. It is different from the perspectives of teachers, students or parents. Teachers should be aware of those different points of views, understanding them support developing flexibility. Flexibility in thinking gives teachers more possibilities, more alternatives to apply while they teach. Flexibility means having more choices (Churches and Terry, 2008, p. 7). NLP offers teachers a variety of possible ways of thinking and behaving to apply them when they make sense.

### **5.10. Having choice is better than lack of choice**

The final presupposition says that having choice is better than lack of choice. With multiple options, it's more likely that every student will find something they enjoy. The variety should refer to the choice of topics, teaching materials, tasks for students, forms of work and patterns of interaction. When faced with lack of choice, students might feel forced to do something, and this results in opposition or even aggression.

## **6. Summary**

Summarising, NLP will not present us with ready solutions to every problem that might appear in the classroom. However, it does offer practical hints which can be easily applied in most situations. The method cares for the whole person, and the techniques it employs care not only for cognitive outcomes but

also for students' feelings and emotions. The founders of NLP well understand that teaching is not only about transferring knowledge, but it is about creating the right conditions for students to absorb information and develop skills.

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