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Neuro-linguistic Programming and its Applicability in EFL Classrooms: Perceptions of NLP-Trained English Teachers

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to examine the applicability of NLP techniques in English Language Teaching (ELT), an under-investigated topic in the literature on EFL contexts. The researcher also attempts to examine the extent to which Iranian EFL instructors in language schools implement NLP techniques in their classrooms. In an effort to achieve the research aims, a sixteen-hour NLP training workshop for 20 conveniently chosen in-service EFL instructors was designed and held by the author. The workshop aimed at helping the participants to achieve a working knowledge of the concept of NLP. Prior to conducting the workshop, in order to gain a better understanding of the participants' needs and the benefits of the implementation of the training program in teachers' instructional practices, 60 class sessions of the 20 teachers were observed using a researcher-made observation checklist. To identify any changes in the teachers' pedagogical skills and to assess any perceived learning outcomes from participating in the workshop, the researcher repeated the observations almost seven months after the last session of the workshop. Subsequently, in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore the teachers' perceptions of the topic under investigation. According to the findings of the thematic analysis, almost all the EFL teachers used NLP techniques to varying degrees in their language classes. The results of this study, provided at the end of the article, offer some valuable suggestions for different stakeholders in the field.

Keywords: *Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP), English Language Teaching (ELT), Applicability, EFL Teachers, NLP Techniques*

Introduction

The pursuit of excellence and progress in language education has a long history. Language teachers and scholars, as Weigang (2011) maintains, have been involved in discovering the best method since the beginning of language teaching. As a result, teachers are expected to be equipped with up-to-date knowledge about innovative and effective methods and techniques that enhance learning. And new approaches are always being discovered, which can help teachers streamline the teaching process. One such recent approach in education is neuro-linguistic programming. In simple terms, NLP deals with establishing a relationship between linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical information in order to promote learning (Moscoso, 2018). NLP is all about personal effectiveness, and it provides teachers with a variety of resources and strategies for improving interpersonal and intrapersonal capacity, managing emotions, and sustaining effective work relationships (Vieira & Gaspar, 2013).

NLP can be described as a methodology for modelling human experience and communication (Bandler & Grinder, 1979). In fact, NLP was originally described as an approach termed “modelling” (Grinder et al., 1977). The objective of the NLP modelling process is the determination of what is unique about exemplars’ techniques and strategies in a given skill, including internal cognitive and behavioural elements so that others can learn to use the same skill (Tosey & Mathison 2008).

The founders of this approach, Richard Bandler and John Grinder (1979), intended to examine how individuals who are high achievers get outstanding results, identify the specific skills they develop to achieve excellence, and then teach or impart these skills to others to help them enhance their performance. Therefore, NLP is the study of not only what effective individuals do but also of how they do it (Churches & Terry, 2007).

The ultimate aim of NLP in education is to provide a fundamental framework that is compatible with empirical learning and teaching in order to increase the effectiveness and pace of goal-oriented learning. Antic (2006) views NLP as a type of teaching method that consists of a series of techniques for improving language teaching and persuading people that they have sufficient power to control their minds and lives in order to achieve better results. García and Tamayo (2017), likewise, define NLP as a psychotherapeutic tool that helps learners improve their performance. Turan, Kodaz, and Turan (2016) have examined the effect of NLP training on Turkish teachers’ professional achievements and motivation. It was found out that NLP positively contributes to teachers’ professional development and motivation. Generally, NLP coaching enables individuals to be more efficient, innovative, and positive in the pursuit of their goals and values through the use of concentration techniques (Silva, 2017).

Highlighting the important role of NLP for English language teaching and learning, Siddiqui (2018) alleges that instructors can apply different NLP techniques to assess the kind of language that is used by learners and consider their thinking process, which can enable them to change students’ thoughts and behaviours in a way that leads to desired outcomes. This is also verified by Pandey and Kornana’s (2016) study in which it was illustrated that the application of NLP techniques in English classrooms could influence the teachers’ as well as the learners’ thinking

and language patterns. NLP has also been considered as a program that can be adapted to all types of EFL learners (i.e., visual, auditory, and kinesthetic). Since NLP is practical for a wide range of diverse learning abilities, it may be a useful technique in most English classes. (Moharamkhani et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that despite NLP's wide range of practical applications, it has not been well accepted in academia and is regarded by its detractors (e.g., Diamantopoulos et al., 2008; Heap, 2008; Rosen, 1997; Singer & Lalich, 1996) as pop psychology. As a matter of fact, most NLP techniques are used effectively for psychology, health, and business; however, in the field of language teaching, the situation is still exploratory (Revell & Norman, 1999; Craft, 2001; Gupta, 2008; Yero, 2001). As Yero (2001) rightly argues, the reason for this controversy is that most instructors know nothing or very little about NLP. As a result, they are unaware of the benefits it has for their profession. Consequently, there is less demand for NLP training among teachers. Given these concerns, the current research intends to explore the applicability of NLP techniques in EFL classrooms from the perspective of NLP-trained instructors.

Literature Review

NLP can be briefly defined as the psychology of excellence (Bashir & Ghani, 2012). It is also a series of guiding techniques, ideas, and strategies that allow people to alter their behavioural patterns as they want (Yemm, 2006). Subjectivity, consciousness, and learning are three key elements in NLP (Moharamkhani et al., 2016). In 1999, Puchta explained NLP as the way the mind (Neuro) relates to language (Linguistic) and the body in order to build explicit skills and strategies—patterns of excellence—that individuals may acquire (Programming), and, therefore, enhance their own performance. In the NLP approach, according to Alder (1992), there is no failure, but only feedback, which means that if something did not go according to plan, one simply would respond logically and then change his or her behaviour to attain success or the desired outcome.

NLP is common in education, and its techniques have been unconsciously used by language teachers for many years. For instance, when instructors incorporate aspects of suggestopedia, drama, music, community language learning, and body language into their instruction, they are already using NLP as it was twenty years ago (Darn, 2005).

NLP is a collection of principles and tools that may be applied to a variety of situations. According to Smart (2006), the fundamentals of NLP are 1. Have a clear idea of what you want (outcome/direction); 2. Get the unconscious mind's attention (Rapport); 3. Know if you're receiving what you want (Sensory Acuity); 4. Adjust your actions accordingly (Behavioral Flexibility). In one of the prominent works related to the EFL context, Millrood (2004) categorised the NLP techniques into establishing a rapport between the teacher and learners, modelling the learner, creating a learner filter, pacing with the learner, leading the learner, elicitation with the learner, calibration of the learner, reframing the approach, and collapsing an anchor.

Nevertheless, given the fact that the connection between neuroscience and education is definitely growing (Willingham & Lloyd, 2007), EFL teacher-training programs should provide prospective teachers with opportunities for understanding what NLP is and how it works so as to make NLP implementation in the language classroom feasible and effective. As Einspruch and Forman (1985) pointed out, some modifications are necessary to improve the designs of research conducted on NLP. First, a skilled NLP practitioner should train the researcher. Sensory-observable measurements should be used as well. Then, evidence should be gathered at the individual level and, subsequently, summed to provide group data. And finally, studies should only be conducted when participants are experienced and have proven mastery (Einspruch & Forman, 1985). Similarly, Kotera and Sweet (2019) hold that one may argue that research with qualified experts should be carried out before any decision is made on the effectiveness (or the lack thereof) of NLP (at the very least).

There have been several attempts to interweave NLP and education. And accordingly, a number of studies have been conducted to decode the role of NLP in education and how it has profusely caught the interest of educators. NLP affects students' life because it assists them in solving psychological issues and positively influences their overall attitude (Turan et al., 2016). Students, Salami (2015) contends, may use NLP to improve their communication skills as well as their memory and intelligence. In their study, Legall and Dondon (2006) have similarly referred to the significant role of NLP in the learners' behavioural evolution and the enrichment of the quality of the emotional bond between teacher and students. Likewise, Tarnopolsky (2016) concluded that learning NLP and Suggestology gives teachers a chance to build positive relationships with their students, which ultimately improves their satisfaction as teachers. Churches and West-Burnham's (2009) study discusses the effect of NLP on the learning of teachers and students in England with the conclusion that within this approach, both teachers and students had more confidence in the classroom, learners were more motivated and were able to benefit from a higher quality of learning.

NLP techniques can, according to Kudliskis and Burden (2009), aid instructors and learners in coping with exam anxiety and other pressures. Fakehy and Haggag (2016) analysed the pre-and post-tests of a group of 30 students aged 19.6 years who were diagnosed with high test anxiety to see whether an NLP training program could help them reduce test anxiety. For three months, the experimental group was trained in 24 NLP techniques. The findings revealed statistically significant differences in the average test anxiety scores before and after applying for the program, indicating better results in the post-test than in the pre-test. In conclusion, NLP had a significant impact on reducing test anxiety.

Teachers from 12 schools were trained in NLP definition, presuppositions, well-formulated outcomes, eyes access cues, modalities and submodalities, anchors, rapport, meta-model, the Milton Model, and emotional state management as a part of the Durham Project. Then came the intervention phase, which ranged from individual to group. This culminated in 24 case studies (Carey et al., 2009), revealing that teachers improved their professional skills, used persuasive language to motivate students to learn more, and had a totally better understanding of the

students' psychological needs; there was an improvement in their abilities to manage difficult situations in the classroom; there was also an increase in the level of students' self-confidence and motivation. As a result, evidence suggests that NLP can help teachers to be more successful. In a study carried out in Portugal, Rocha and Filomena (2013) tried to identify how teachers' effectiveness can be improved through NLP professional training. The findings revealed that factors such as giving and receiving feedback, setting specific goals, successful interpersonal communication, classroom climate, beliefs, and expectations are determining factors in promoting teachers' effectiveness. To assess the efficacy of NLP for improving the critical thinking skills of teachers, Sheybani and Miri (2019) used a questionnaire with 38 items. The findings highlighted the positive influence of NLP in this regard.

NLP has recently proven to be particularly influential in second language learning and teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and has also been considered a supplementary technique to improve the effectiveness of teachers (Gewasari et al., 2017). Siddiqui (2018) referred to the important role of NLP in English language teaching and concluded that English language teachers could promote creativity, create confidence, and improve their use of body language by employing NLP approaches and techniques. As to the beneficial nature of NLP for English language teachers and learners, an illustrative example is Hedayat, Raissi, and Azizzadeh Asl's study (2020), in which NLP was considered as a tool that enables instructors to develop exceptional skills such as critical thinking, self-efficacy, and rapport, which are required for educational success and achievement. It was also shown to support students in achieving excellence in their performance. Pishghadam, Shapoori, and Shayesteh (2011) conducted a study investigating the interplay of NLP and teacher success, gender, teaching experience, and a degree in both formal and informal settings. To that end, 166 instructors and 1200 learners were selected. The results of the correlational analysis and t-tests revealed that with the exception of gender, there was a connection between teacher success, teaching experience, degree, and NLP. In another study conducted by Ilyas (2017), the researcher aimed to examine the relationship between the acquisition of basic skills and students' thinking during the learning process when NLP techniques are used. The findings revealed that NLP intervention in both teaching and learning could encourage the development of basic skills in ESL/EFL situations. It was also found that NLP would be able to find a common technique for eliciting emotional responses and a willingness to communicate in learners regardless of their background.

In an attempt to probe the effect of NLP on teachers' reflective teaching, Marashi and Abedi (2017) found, after 20 sessions of treatment on 30 Iranian EFL instructors, that NLP affects English teachers' reflective teaching significantly. In this research, 8 NLP techniques (i.e., leading, rapport-building, elicitation, modelling, anchoring, individual differences, flexibility, and cognitive-emotional boosters) were introduced. At the outset of the study, a reflective teaching questionnaire was completed by the participants as a pre-test. Then, a paired samples t-test was used to test the null hypothesis, which indicated a significant difference between the scores of the group at the pre-test and post-test levels.

Although there is a growing demand for NLP in education, the majority of teacher training or pre-service education programs do not take serious measures to prepare the novice teachers with NLP, and the use of its techniques is generally considered at the level of the general problems of

education (Mion Pop & Tacea, 2014). Generally speaking, teachers are attracted to how the brain functions, but they struggle to use existing neuroscientific findings in the classroom (Rato et al., 2011). Kotera and Sweet (2019) argued that it could be claimed that assessing inclusive training is impossible. However, given the popularity of NLP (and the number of certified practitioners), the lack of research investigating a thorough NLP course is a salient shortcoming.

Based on an extensive literature review and through a qualitative design, this study intends to discover the extent to which NLP techniques are applicable in EFL classes. Furthermore, the study attempts to investigate the extent to which EFL teachers make use of NLP techniques when they are teaching English. Following the objectives of the study and in response to the existing needs in the literature, the following questions were posed to guide the study:

RQ1: To what extent are NLP techniques applicable in EFL classes in Iran?

RQ2: To what extent do Iranian EFL teachers make use of NLP techniques when they are teaching English?

Method

Participants

To fulfil the goal of this study, 20 EFL teachers (12 females and 8 males) teaching English in private language schools in Tehran, Iran, were selected based on convenience sampling as the participants of the current study. The participants were 23 to 48 years old, and their length of teaching experience varied from 4 to 25 years. They held the various degrees of BA, MA, and PhD. the majority of the participants (40%) had graduated in TEFL, while 25% and 15% of them had studied English Language and Literature and Translation Studies, respectively. The remaining participants (20%) had majored in other fields of study. The participants' informed consent to participate in the study was obtained in accordance with research ethics, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Instruments

Considering the objectives of the study and having reviewed the literature, the researcher employed observation checklists and semi-structured interviews to meet the objectives of the study. As a matter of fact, they were considered to be valuable complementary data collection methods in the implementation and practicality of NLP techniques in private EFL schools in Iran.

Classroom observation

Prior to conducting the workshop, 60 class sessions of 20 (12 females and 8 males) teachers were observed (3 observations per teacher) after the permission and consent of the participants and authorities were granted. The goal was to gain a better understanding of the participants' needs and the benefits of the implementation of the training program in teachers' instructional practices. Each session took about 90 minutes. Indeed, through pre-observations, the researcher gained the opportunity to know if the participants used the NLP techniques subconsciously in their classrooms. The selected instructors had given their consent for further cooperation. Before the observations, a semi-structured interview was also conducted, which allowed the researcher to know whether the participants were acquainted with NLP and determine if they had had any

training in this respect. The results indicated that they had no prior knowledge of NLP. Neither had they been enrolled in any of the NLP courses. To identify changes in teachers' pedagogical skills and to assess any perceived learning outcomes from participating in the workshops, the researcher repeated the observations with the 20 instructors almost seven months after the final session of the workshop.

As for the type of observation, it is worth mentioning that the researcher followed non-participant observation. Moreover, during this phase, I provided the teachers with feedback after each observation session in order to help them analyse their instruction of NLP techniques more deeply and to improve their teaching quality. In fact, through post-observation feedback, I could provide each participant with insight on how to plan and teach his/her subsequent lessons more effectively. Additionally, the teachers were given the opportunity to reflect on their observed lesson and receive constructive feedback on the weak points that required improvement.

To determine the extent to which instructors implemented each NLP technique in their EFL classes, a researcher-made observation checklist was used. The checklist was categorised based on the eight NLP techniques. As a whole, 33 items were developed, including Rapport (5 items), Flexibility (4 items), Pacing (4 items), Modelling (4 items), VAK (3 items), Anchoring (5 items), Elicitation (5 items), and Reframing (3 items). In this checklist, the researcher was required to rate the degree of implementation of each item on a five-point Likert scale from "never observed" to "consistently observed" (1= never observed, 2= rarely observed, 3= often observed, 4= frequently observed, 5= consistently observed). The observation results are presented in Figure 1.

Workshop

In an effort to achieve the research aims, an eight-day NLP training workshop was conducted with all the English language instructors whose classes were observed. The principal aims were to develop the teachers' understanding of what NLP involves, explain the advantages of applying NLP techniques for their professional growth, provide an opportunity for teachers to engage directly with NLP techniques, and guide them in integrating them into their teaching practices. Moreover, the training sessions aimed at yielding insights that inform each participating teacher's inquiry into their own teaching practices. In designing the workshop, insights about teaching practices regarding NLP techniques gleaned from the initial classroom observations in twenty different classrooms were taken into account. Both theoretical and practical aspects of NLP were covered during this sixteen-hour training workshop. In order to give workshop participants a broad overview of current research on NLP and not just the researcher's own perspective, each workshop also began with a short lecture and research overview. Attempts were made during the first week, which was mostly preparatory, to provide participants with a summary of the background and context of what NLP is and why it matters. Participants were also encouraged to think about each NLP technique. The workshop also included PowerPoint presentations with five related video clips of NLP-based classroom activities. Worksheets were presented to each participant to guide them through the workshop.

In fact, the workshop format was designed to provide EFL teachers with a professional development space where they could not only learn NLP techniques but also improve their ability to incorporate them into their teaching practices. A number of practical sessions were held to this end, during which the teachers worked on hands-on examples. The techniques that all participants experienced during this phase were inspired by Millrood's (2004) taxonomy. The practical sessions were interactive, and a number of activities that were well-aligned with NLP techniques and allowed teachers to actively engage with them were implemented. In addition, the teachers were divided into small groups of 4–5 participants each. The groups were then given discussion time (10 minutes or more). The group discussions offered excellent opportunities for the teachers to interact effectively, express their own opinions and ideas, discuss a problem, and arrive at solutions to it. The researcher immersed herself in interactions with the teachers in order to provide guidance to them. Some time was also allocated to session assessment at the end of each session of the workshop. The participants completed a feedback questionnaire, which helped the researcher identify their expectations and make amendments to the rest of the program.

Teacher Interview

After administering the workshop and conducting the classroom observations, in-depth semi-structured interviews (45-60 minutes) were carried out. In fact, insights from the interviews have informed my understanding of the participants' experience in respect of the use of NLP techniques in their classrooms. Semi-structured interviews, as Kajornboon (2005) states, give the interviewees the chance to talk about their perspectives and interpretations of a situation. Meanwhile, the interviewer can gain a deeper insight into a given situation and elicit further information if the initial responses are ambiguous, off-topic, incomplete, or not specific enough (Mackey & Gass 2005).

In order to give the participants the opportunity to reflect on their pedagogical practices and the inclusion of NLP in teaching, the interviews were held at intervals of seven months. During this period, the participants were provided with guidance via Skype and Email. To prepare the ground for the interviews, a list of ten open-ended questions was initially developed by the researcher. The questions mainly revolved around the instructors' teaching experiences during this period and their perceptions about the effect of NLP on the way they teach. More specifically, the interviewer wanted to know whether NLP made the teachers use better teaching methods, whether they observed any changes in their pedagogical performance, what aspects of their profession improved as a result of using the techniques, what they thought about the applicability of NLP in EFL classes, and how much their teaching skills improved.

Data Collection

Having fulfilled the ethical prerequisites (e.g., obtaining signed consent forms) and informed the participants of the purpose of the study, 60 classroom observation sessions involving 20 EFL teachers were carried out through a researcher-made checklist. Classroom observations gave the researcher a chance to identify instructors' needs and the contribution of workshops to successful language teaching. Then, an eight-day workshop was held by the author. The training sessions

continued for one month and were administered twice a week during the summer of 2019. The principal aims were to develop the teachers' understanding of what NLP involves. Subsequently, I conducted several activities with the participants so as to give them a clearer idea of how to implement NLP in their classrooms.

For each workshop, the session evaluations were carried out, and questionnaires were distributed to all the participants for the purpose of collecting information on their feelings about the workshop. Next, classroom observations were repeated in order to compare the results with the data collected earlier. Lastly, all the participants attended a one-to-one semi-structured interview. In this way, the researcher probed deep into what the teachers learned from the workshop and the way the training sessions contributed to the enhancement of their overall teaching quality. The framework for carrying out the interview was based on Dornyei's (2007) guidelines. For ease of analysis, the interviews were recorded on a Digital Voice Recorder (DVR), transcribed, categorised, and analysed for the purposes of the study. The researcher believed that having the participants involved as much as possible in the research process (i.e., the workshop, observations, and interviews) would lead to a greater consciousness of the topic under investigation and a better understanding of the whole process.

Data Analysis

With regard to the classroom observations, the data obtained through the observation checklist were analysed by calculating each teacher's mean scores for the items within each component of the survey across all the sessions observed. The data were also displayed using a bar graph. The validity of the observation checklist was approved by five experts specialising in the field of NLP and teacher education. They read the checklist carefully and gave their comments regarding the content. As regards the interview questions of the study, thematic analysis was carried out. First, all the interviews were transcribed, summarised, categorised, and analysed. Such a categorisation process led to the conceptualisation of the dominant patterns extracted from the participants. Then, themes were coded and analysed using a frequency count. Subsequently, descriptive statistics were applied for a better and more accurate interpretation of the results. Finally, to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness (validity) of the findings, member checking was used several times. More specifically, during and after the coding process, five of the participants in the interview were asked to check the resultant codes for confirmation (Heigham & Croker, 2009).

Results

The first research question aimed to investigate whether Iranian EFL teachers believe that NLP techniques are applicable in EFL classes in Iran. Among the participants that took part in the interviews, 18 out of 20 EFL teachers (90%) mentioned that NLP techniques could be applied in an EFL context like Iran. Only 2 of these interviewees believed that teachers need to be more cautious about applying these techniques in their classes. Table 1 illustrates the participants' views about the applicability of NLP techniques in language classes.

Table 1*Iranian EFL teachers' Views about the Applicability of NLP Techniques in Language Classes*

The status of NLP in language classes	Frequency	Per cent
NLP techniques are applicable in language classes	18	90%
NLP techniques should be applied with more caution in language classes	2	10%

The following excerpts indicate how the interviewees justify their positions with regard to the applicability of NLP techniques in language classes. Focusing on the affective aspect of language teaching and learning, one of the interviewees contended that:

Since students are more emotional in Middle East countries, in comparison to students from Western contexts, specific NLP techniques such as establishing a rapport between the teacher and the learners might enhance the students' performance.

Making a comparison between innovative and traditional methods of language teaching, another interview believed that:

The applicability of language teaching methods and language learning materials depends on the extent to which they could be flexibly adapted to students' learning styles. Language learning is facilitated as soon as the learners find it interesting because the process keeps them away from the traditional language learning practices like repeating and memorising.

Drawing on her experience of teaching at different language schools, one of the interviewees pointed out that the applicability of NLP techniques might closely correlated with the policy, curriculum, and the materials of the specific context in which language teaching/learning happens:

As a teacher, sometimes you do not have enough authority to make decisions about different aspects of language teaching. As a result, you might not have the support or space to use these techniques. I have experienced classes where I had the freedom to design activities and situations to implement these techniques, and I have had classes where I had to copy whatever I was told to. I must say I was not a happy teacher in the latter classes.

Highlighting the context-specificity of these techniques, however, another teacher mentioned a number of factors that might affect the applicability of NLP techniques in EFL classes:

We cannot say that all NLP techniques are applicable in EFL classes in Iran. It depends on many factors like class size, teachers' creativity, students' age, proficiency level, and gender. I try to use some of the NLP techniques based on the specific situation and context.

Likewise, another interviewee indicated that some teachers might be reluctant to use the strategies in their classes:

Some teachers do not have enough time, and their payments are not enough to support their financial needs. As a consequence, they have to work for long hours during the week, and they might not necessarily think about and have a prepared lesson plan about using different NLP techniques in their classes.

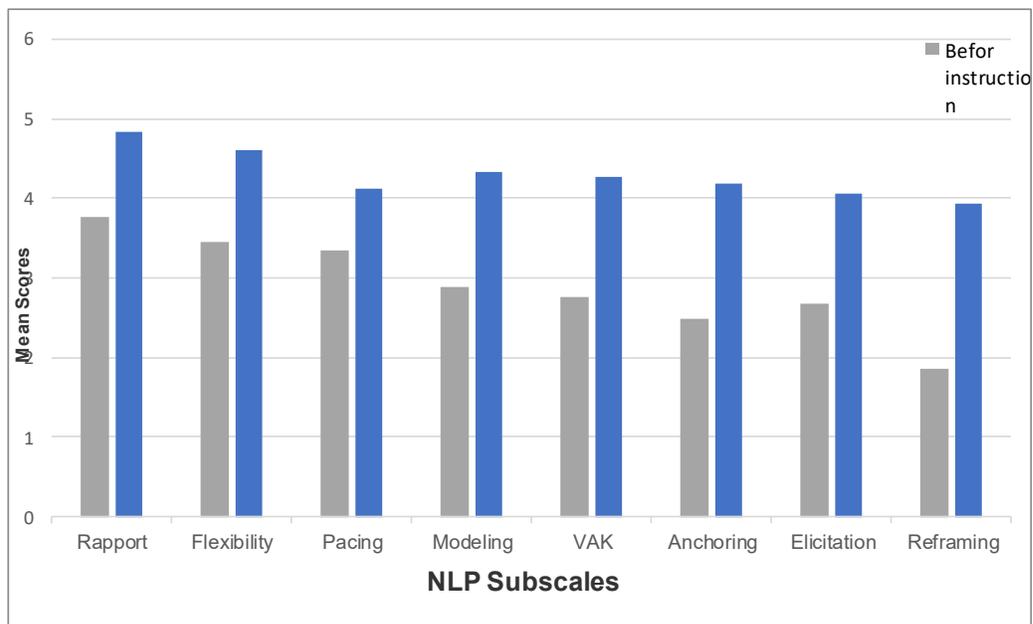
Moreover, from a cultural and religious point of view, one of the interviewees pointed out that although most of the techniques introduced by NLP are applicable in the context of Iran, some of them might lead to a sense of confusion or even disrespect between teachers and learners:

When it comes to the gender of the students and teachers, for instance, putting the hand on the shoulder of the students to show agreement/sympathy or make them feel relaxed is a nice gesture only when both teacher and student are of the same gender.

To sum up, almost all the interviewees found NLP techniques applicable in the EFL context. The second question aimed to investigate whether Iranian EFL teachers use NLP techniques while teaching English in their classes and, if so, which techniques they rely on most often. Analysing each teacher's mean scores revealed that all of the interviewees employ NLP techniques in their classes to varying degrees. In this section, the responses of the interviewees are categorised based on their uses of different NLP techniques, which include rapport, flexibility, modelling, VAK, anchoring, pacing, elicitation, and reframing. Some excerpts are provided based on specific examples about each of these techniques. In the following section, Figure 1 represents the extent to which Iranian EFL teachers use NLP techniques in their classes before and after instruction.

Figure 1

Average Mean Scores for all Instructors for Each of the Eight NLP Subscales before and after Instruction



Rapport

Highlighting the learner-centred aspect of language pedagogy, one of the interviewees remarked that:

Since my classes are not teacher-fronted and the students are given the opportunity to work in pairs and groups, they could share their knowledge and interest, and they could learn how to meaningfully interact with each other. This way, they learn together as they scaffold each other's learning and find themselves responsible for that.

Moreover, another interviewee acknowledged the fact that:

Learning a new language can be an intimidating task at its initial stages. Most of the students might lack the courage to tolerate the ambiguities, ignore their mistakes and continue working hard. I try to be as close as possible to my students so that they can experience learning a new language in a comfortable atmosphere.

Finally, one of the interviewees pointed out that it is really important to encourage the learners to communicate in the new language by increasing their confidence:

I ensure my students that it is totally natural to make mistakes in a new language. It doesn't show that they can't learn anything. On the contrary, it is a very good sign because it shows that they are trying to produce the target language. What matters most is how they try to convey their ideas in the best way.

Flexibility

Focusing on the importance of making on the spot and informed decisions by teachers, one of the interviewees contended that:

I am not in favour of the traditional and rigid language teaching methodology. This is the learner-based and learning-oriented instruction that actually facilitates the language learning process. The students like to be familiarised with different strategies for learning a new language. By relying on integrated language learning, like when the students do both reading and speaking at the same time, they find the learning process more meaningful and productive. Also, in addition to doing some helpful activities introduced by the book, we do a set of task-based activities that facilitate the learners' negotiation for meaning and interaction.

Another interviewee believed that in order to get the best results, teachers need to be as flexible as possible:

I don't have a fixed and rigid teaching style. Based on the feedback that I constantly receive from my students, I adjust my teaching style to my students' learning styles. If my students tell me that the way I teach is not working for them, I would definitely change it based on their needs and expectations.

Modelling

Insisting on the role of collaborative learning, one of the interviewees mentioned that:

I usually assign the students to different groups for doing a variety of task-based activities like reading a paragraph, designing reading questions, answering reading comprehension questions, or learning vocabulary/grammatical points together. I usually put the students who are at higher and lower levels of language proficiency in the same group because in this way, they get

involved in a joint task and they work hard to do it while helping each other and learning from one another.

One of the interviewees believed that it is very important for the students to have a reliable source for the target language:

I think that in an EFL context like Iran, teachers are the most important models for their students. I use rising and falling intonation in my speech to catch the students' attention or to emphasise a point. Sometimes in my classes I ask my students to listen carefully to my speech and imitate my pronunciation.

This was supported by another interviewee's assertions about providing a native speaker model for the learners:

Each session I show them a video of a native speaker talking about a pertinent language point and I ask them to pay close attention to the way he talks.

VAK

Highlighting the fact that individual students have different preferences, styles, and strategies for learning languages, one of the interviewees argued that VAK techniques go beyond receiving information. In fact, they include the whole processes of input processing, storage, retrieval, and output.

I think visual and auditory systems are really practical. Using pictures to learn new words or listening to the passage for comprehension is helpful. The kinesthetic channel is also a strategy that I often use in the classroom. I use gestures and hand movements to make the abstract concepts more tangible and meaningful for my students.

In addition, one of the interviewees mentioned that teachers must always be ready to plan and deliver their lessons in a way that the needs of the students with various styles are catered for.

Some of the coursebooks consider students' VAK needs, but some coursebooks need supplementary activities to enable the students to move from the level of receiving meaningful input to producing output. Therefore, there is a need for teachers to adapt their teaching styles to the learning preferences of their students.

Anchoring

Emphasising the role of making associations between an internal response and some environmental or mental triggers, one of the interviewees mentioned that she really believes in using anchoring in her classes. She contended that providing stimuli that get connected to the reference experience of the learners is a critical factor in the process of language learning. This can be done by using visual (colour, realia), auditory (music), and verbal anchors like anchoring a positive state:

I usually use visual and auditory anchoring in my classes. I usually use my hands to encourage the students to repeat their correct answers more confidently or give them the positive feedback to increase their active participation in class discussions. I simultaneously use some words like 'perfect', 'well done', 'exactly', etc. too.

Furthermore, as indicated by other interviewees, anchoring can also be an effective tool for classroom management as well as making teaching input more memorable:

When I stand beside the whiteboard with my marker, my students notice that I am going to introduce or illustrate something new or give them some assignment, so they listen carefully.

Often, I try to remind my students of the positive and inspiring feelings that we had back then by saying “do you remember we felt like this when we were doing that activity?”

Pacing, Matching, and Leading

According to one of the interviewees, teachers must always take into account the fact that the students who are in their classes are not exactly at the same level:

Because the students attending the classes are at different levels of language proficiency and they are not homogeneous in this case, I do my best to adapt the pace of my teaching to their learning pace. Sometimes when I see the students have not learned a specific point yet, I try to explain it more, ask other students to explain it, or even at the beginning of each session, I design a set of review activities because in this manner, the students review the previous sessions’ materials and indirectly learn them better. Sometimes some grammatical points or reading strategies are somehow complex. Therefore, I focus more on them and we do more and more activities so that the students could fully grasp them.

Another interviewee also mentioned that it is very important to create a supportive environment for the students by providing positive feedback and adjusting your proficiency level to that/those of the students:

Sometimes, for my elementary students, I adapt my level of proficiency to their levels. For example, I lower the rate of my speech and speak clearly. In this way, they think that we are at the same level and they open up and speak without the anxiety of being judged.

Elicitation

Stressing the role of emotionally regulated instruction, one of the interviewees mentioned that:

I prefer to engage the students emotionally so that the learning process could be accelerated. At the beginning of the semester, I do my best to identify what actually seems interesting to them and attracts their attention. In addition to the passages we are supposed to cover in our classes, I try to bring them the texts that seem quite intriguing and encourage them to go through the paragraphs willingly, critically explore them, and discuss the diverse dimensions while practicing how to read different text types and genres.

Emphasising the role of teachers in encouraging the students to take responsibility for their own learning, another interviewee put forward the idea that:

Teachers are not transmitters of knowledge. They are just there to orient the students towards the best ways of learning. I believe that encouraging the students to explore the realities in the world of language might be really productive since it poses some challenges for them that changes them from passive recipients of knowledge to active participants in the process of language learning.

Reframing

Insisting on the importance of reframing in enhancing how the students might think about their abilities, one of the interviewees asserted that:

As language teachers, all of us have heard negative words expressed by our students. Most of them often keep saying “I can’t do this,” and “I can’t understand this,” or “this is very difficult.” However, as teachers, our job is to enhance their self-esteem and reframe their way of thinking by changing their perspectives about their learning progress.

This was also confirmed by another interviewee who acknowledged that:

I use reframing strategy when I feel that my students have some negative feelings about language learning. In such cases, I always try to talk to them about their problems and ask them to tell me the reasons for their inhibiting feelings. Once we identify the roots of their problems, I ensure them that they are not the only people who feel that way and we try to think and come up with the best possible solutions for overcoming their problems.

In sum, almost all the EFL teachers used NLP techniques in their language classes to varying degrees, which are reported in Figure 1.

Discussion

As for the first research question, which intended to explore Iranian EFL teachers’ perceptions of the applicability of NLP techniques in language classes, the results of the content analysis supported that 18 out of the 20 EFL teachers (90%) mentioned that NLP techniques could be applied in an EFL context like Iran. Only 2 of the interviewees believed that although these techniques are applicable in Iranian EFL classes, teachers need to be cautious and take into account different factors that might affect the applicability of these techniques in English language classes. According to the interviewees of this study, the application of NLP techniques in the classroom can affect various aspects of teaching and learning the English language. In other words, they influence teachers who exercise these techniques in their classes and their students in different ways. With regard to the impact of NLP techniques on teachers, the interviewees contended that employing these techniques in EFL classes can improve teachers’ communication and management skills and enhance their abilities in building up a good rapport with their students. Such results are in compliance with those of other researchers (e.g., Antic, 2006; Churches & West-Burnham, 2009; Hedayat et al., 2020; Legall & Dondon, 2006; Siddiqui, 2018; Tarnopolsky, 2016). According to these studies, NLP empowers teachers to have a clearer understanding of their students’ learning needs and improve their relationships with their students.

As for the students who are given a chance to learn a new language through NLP techniques, the interviewees referred to several impacts such as encouraging the students to set learning goals, enhancing language and study skills and learning motivation as well as increasing their willingness to communicate with their teachers and peers in language classes. Finally, these techniques can play an important role in lowering the affective filters that might be present in the learning environment, as a result of which the learners’ anxiety levels are lowered to a large

extent. It is only in such a positive and non-threatening environment that learners are willing to participate in classroom activities and feel free to share their ideas and take risks while learning a new language. Similarly, these findings are consistent with those of Fakehy and Haggag (2016); García and Tamayo (2017); Ilyas (2017); Kudliskis and Burden (2009); Salami (2015); and Turan et al. (2016) claims, who argued that NLP encourages the students to set learning goals, enhances their language and study skills and learning motivation, and also increases their willingness to communicate with their teachers and peers in language classes.

As for the second research question, which sought to explore the extent to which Iranian EFL teachers make use of NLP techniques in their English language classes, it was revealed that all of the interviewees reported that they employ the different techniques of NLP in their classes for various purposes and reasons. Figure 1 represents the extent to which Iranian EFL learners employed each one of these techniques in language classes.

The first technique was rapport, which was practised by almost all of the interviewees. Acknowledging the crucial stages of starting to learn a new language, the interviewees believed that teachers need to take into account their students' concerns and worries. In fact, it is the teacher's job to create a positive environment where learners can feel free to take risks, make mistakes while learning and learn from their mistakes. By assuring the students that they do not need to be afraid of being judged, teachers can boost the students' self-confidence and communication skills.

The other frequent NLP technique that was very important in the interviewees' ideas and was practised by the majority of them is flexibility. The interviewees believed that it facilitates the process of language learning by providing a lot of opportunities for teachers to adapt their teaching styles to the students' learning styles. The interviewees also mentioned that flexibility has an important effect on improving the quality of teachers' lesson planning. Teachers cannot stick to the predetermined lesson plans they bring to the classroom. Instead, they need to be aware of the possible changes and welcome them in their classes. It is also worth mentioning that teachers need to make a lot of decisions about what needs to be done, omitted, or reviewed in the context of the classroom.

The third technique employed by the interviewees is modelling. The interviewees believed that the students need a reliable source like a native speaker or a competent speaker, from whom they can learn the correct form of the target language. Modelling was also used with mixed group activities in order to encourage collaborative working and also enable the learners to negotiate for meaning. This technique was found useful by them.

The fourth technique is VAK. Based on the interviews, this technique was used because there was a need to cater for the different preferences, learning styles, and expectations of the students. In this way, effective input is provided for each one of the students, and learning outcomes are enhanced as well.

The fifth technique employed by the interviewees is anchoring. Anchoring was also used when teachers wanted to make a connection between an internal response and some environmental triggers through the visual, auditory, and verbal anchors. The interviewees

specifically used anchoring for memorable teaching and classroom management. Pacing, matching, and leading are the next techniques that were employed by the interviewees. These techniques were practised because the interviewees believed that the students who are in a class are not homogenous. Teachers are responsible for adapting their pace of teaching to their students' learning. In this way, teachers can create and maintain mutual understanding and rapport with their students.

The least frequent techniques used by the interviewees are elicitation and reframing. The reason which was mentioned for using elicitation is that if the learners are emotionally engaged in the process of language learning, their performance can be improved. Furthermore, through using elicitation, learners learn to take responsibility for their own learning and become active participants in the process of learning. Likewise, the interviewees used reframing when they wanted to enhance their student's self-esteem and reframe their perceptions of their abilities by changing their negative feelings about language learning.

By performing these roles, NLP techniques can enhance the process of language learning as well as language teaching. The interviewees were also of the opinion that using NLP techniques can bring about more fruitful teaching outcomes and, finally, shape and improve teachers' effectiveness. Thus, such techniques enable language teachers to pay special attention to help students explore and identify their self-worth. As a result of this, both teachers and students are empowered to take a big step toward achieving their learning and teaching goals. These findings are also in agreement with the results of studies such as Carey et al. (2009), Gewasari et al. (2017), Pandey and Kornana (2016), Rocha and Filomena (2013), and Sheybani and Miri (2019), according to which NLP techniques improve different aspects of teachers' skills and teach them how to deal with different individuals by getting to know their various learning styles.

Conclusion

The results of the present study indicate that NLP can make a noticeable change in instructors' teaching experience. This study substantially contributes to the body of research on NLP, and it opens a new window to the applicability of NLP techniques in EFL classrooms which were overlooked in prior studies. In fact, the results of this study pave the way for those researchers who are interested in issues related to NLP and English language teaching. Regarding EFL teachers, familiarity with NLP techniques and their use can help them communicate better with students, strengthen the learning environment, develop positive interactions, and create a much more welcoming and friendly atmosphere, which will ultimately increase academic effectiveness. With NLP, English language teachers, as facilitators, can bring about practical results for learners, help them identify their own motivations in the learning process, enhance their personality and interpersonal skills, and attract them more to the class environment emotionally, which will assist them to be more confident towards resolving any problem. Likewise, the findings of this study can open up new possibilities for materials developers and syllabus designers in English language education. They can design instructional tasks with regard to the components of NLP so that teachers and learners get familiar with the concept of

NLP in an efficient and effective way. Another implication of the present study is to introduce new educational initiatives for educating more teachers. For instance, teacher trainers can hold a number of workshops and seminars on NLP and its necessary features for promoting teaching and learning quality. This could, likewise, inform English language school managers in selecting and employing more eligible and proficient language instructors.

The present study yielded a number of helpful and interesting findings about NLP and its applicability within the educational context of Iran. Nevertheless, there are still further avenues to explore the domains related to this study. First, the study covered a relatively small sample located in Iran, so future studies in other countries with different mother tongues and cultures can provide new insights for enriching our understanding of NLP. Second, this research concentrated on language school teachers (informal setting), who work in a context and atmosphere different from that of public schools (formal setting). Taking account of the substantial share of the public sector in EFL education, the researcher suggests that similar studies be undertaken in the context of public schools to compare the results. Third, the participants were selected through convenience sampling, and this could lower representativeness. The researcher suggests replication of this study with a wider range of participants selected through stratified random sampling to see if the outcomes change with more representative samples. Additionally, many different variables such as age, academic degree, cultural background, social environment, attitude, and motivation may have affected the results of this study; hence, similar studies can be carried out to investigate the role of these variables in the possible effect of NLP on the process of language learning and teaching. Finally, in the present study, the perspectives of the learners were not explored. Adopting a mixed-methods design, other researchers can take into account the attitudes of the learners concerning the effectiveness of NLP techniques.

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