

# **The Role of Neuro-Linguistic Programming in Improving EFL Reading Comprehension Students with Special Reference to the University of Basra\***

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the influence of Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) principles and techniques to enhance English language learners in reading comprehension at the university level in Basra. The study is applied in the University of Basra; 125 students participated in the study. The students were divided into two groups; control and experimental groups. The research is comprised of a pre and post-tests used for both groups to detect the students' achievement in the experimental group after taking a two months reading comprehension course using NLP principles and techniques. The control group, on the other hand, was taught using traditional lessons. A paired-sample t-test for the experimental and control groups showed that teaching reading comprehension using NLP techniques has a significant positive effect on the experimental group as compared with the control group. These findings proved that using NLP principles and techniques in EFL teaching might help teachers teach reading comprehension more efficiently to EFL learners at the university level in Iraq. Taking these results into consideration, further scientific research about the various possible uses of NLP in EFL learning is recommended.

**Key Terms:** Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Reading Comprehension, EFL learners at the University level in Iraq.

## **1. Introduction:**

The commencement of NLP can be traced back to the 1970s at the University of California at Santa Cruz on the hands of its main co-founders; Richard Bandler, a student of mathematics and computer science, and John Grinder, a professor of linguistics (Tosey and Mathison, 2007:2).

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\*This paper is based on an MA thesis written by the first researcher and supervised by the second and submitted to the Dept. of English, College of Arts, University of Basra.

NLP has achieved popularity as a theory of communication and personal development. Though NLP has been identified as a method

of psychotherapy in the first place, it appears to be capable of recognizing the operational aspects of existing 'models' of communication. The query was to find out the 'difference that made a difference' between successful therapists and the less successful. Then, the focus was on the communication patterns that are actually used in practice (Tosey and Mathison, 2003:2-3; Roderique-Davies, 2009:58-59).

NLP is applied in the educational field and the rationale behind that is the difficulty of having a complete teaching and learning process. The educational process faces challenges all the time, and there is a need to overcome these challenges with practical solutions. The manipulation of NLP is one of these fruitful solutions. Hence it can be applied in language learning. This is due to the success of this technique in other fields like psychotherapy, management, medicine, sports, business, and law (Tosey, 2013:7).

### *1.1. Objectives*

The present research pursues the effect of using NLP principles and techniques in teaching reading comprehension to EFL students at the University level in Iraq. It tries to show the positive effects of using NLP to improve both the teaching and learning process.

### *1.2. Research Questions*

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. Is it possible to integrate NLP techniques to EFL teaching process, especially in reading comprehension classes?

2. Can these NLP techniques improve or enhance the teaching and learning processes and help students to be better learners?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Neuro-Linguistic Programming Background**

The origins of NLP are very much related to the fields of counselling and psychotherapy. At its beginning, Bandler and Grinder (1975) analyzed sessions of psychotherapy carried out by certain therapists who were known for being successful. Their major interest was to pass these successful experiences to other therapists. This was carried out through the early writings on NLP by Bandler and Grinder who published *The Structure of Magic* (1975a), and *Patterns of the Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D.* (1975b) where they focused on modelling as a process used by therapists such as Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, Virginia Satir, a family therapist, and Milton Erickson, a psychiatrist who was best known in the field of hypnosis.

In its essence, NLP is a set of rules and techniques proposed for adjusting behaviour in accomplishing self-improvement, and effective interpersonal communications. These are based on certain assumptions about how verbal and nonverbal language affect the brain, or the neurological functions. The basic foundation behind these assumptions is that achieving any kind of success depends on creating rich imagery of the goal (visualizing), duplicating successful behaviours (modelling), and adopting the appropriate behavioural patterns. The term Neuro-Linguistic Programming is confused if it is not clarified correctly. The word 'neuro' refers to the way humans

experience the world by their senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste), and interpret these experiences within the neurological system. Whereas 'linguistic' refers to how humans use language to comprehend the world, capture and conceptualise experiences, and then communicate these experiences to others'. While 'programming' addresses the way people code, i.e. the internal representation of their experiences, and how they adopt a sequence of systemic actions, behaviours, to achieve their goals. Even with the name and its connotations NLP has no direct association to neuro-science, or to computer programming, despite the fact that these fields are of interest to NLP developers in order to explain their concepts and methods (Tosey and Mathison,2003:5; Linder-Pelz and Hall,2007:12 cited in Kong,2012:135).

## *2.2. The Main Foundations of NLP*

There are four pillars that NLP fits in. These are considered as the bases from where all the principles of NLP have evolved out. Churches and West-Burnham (2008:6), and Ready and Burton (2010:13) defined these four pillars as follows:

1. **Rapport:** It concentrates on the strategies for building a relationship with oneself and with others in order to influence them.
2. **Sensory awareness:** It is concerned with the maximum use of the sensory system. When people pay attention to their senses, they can perceive the world in a richer way.

3. **Outcomethinking:** The strategies of motivation which means neglecting the negative problems along with their effects, and thinking about the desired outcomes that will motivate positive and fruitful manner of thinking.
4. **Behavioural flexibility:** This term means the readiness for **practising** new methods or behaviours when the current performance is not working to gain the desired goals and states. Then flexibility is achieved, and this is a very important foundation to practise NLP.

### *2.3. The Presuppositions of NLP*

NLP is based on certain presuppositions, or principles. These can be considered as the convenient beliefs within NLP practicing. These presuppositions are generalisations about the world that can help in gaining the flexible attitude towards life, and from them all NLP techniques are generated. Most of the books that deal with NLP present these presuppositions such as Bandler and Grinder (1975b), Bandler and Grinder (1979), Hall and Bodenhamer (1997), O'Connor and Seymour (1993), McDermott and Jago (2001), Knight (2002), Alder (1994), and others. The number of these principles is not fixed, but the most agreed upon principles are:

1. The map is not the territory.
2. Underlying all behaviour is a positive intention.
3. People have all the resources they need to change.
4. The meaning of every communication is the response it elicits.
5. You cannot Stop communicating.

6. If you go on undertaking the same strategies all the time you are very likely to go on getting the same results as you are getting now
7. Mind and body form a system, they both effect each other
8. There is no failure, only feedback
9. If one person can do something, anyone else can learn to do it
10. People make the best choices open to them when they act.

#### *2.4.NLP Techniques*

Several techniques have been derived from the principles of NLP. These techniques witnessed a series of progress along the last four decades that resemble the age of NLP. These techniques are the methodology, or the how to do part of NLP. By employing these techniques the inspected or the wanted change can be carried out to real life to become a concrete reality rather than a cluster of abstract concepts. These techniques were mentioned by several NLP practitioners such as Bandler and Grinder (1975b), Alder (1994), Knight (2002), Dilts(1998), O'Connor (2001). The techniques manipulated in this research are: Creating Rapport, Matching or Mirroring, Pacing and Leading, Anchoring, Reframing, and Visualization.

#### *2.5. NLP and Language Teaching*

The relation between NLP and language teaching is rather recent since the first applications of NLP techniques were in psychotherapy and human resources development. Due to this variation NLP was a promising, advantageous comer in many fields including education. The only obstruction was the limited literature which discusses the

employment of NLP in education. This barrier have been overcome after the publication of many books and researches discussing the topic such as (Tosey and Mathison,2003,2007; Churches and West-Burnham, 2008;Terry and Churches, 2009; Peker, 2010; Tosey,2013). Most of the publications in this field have investigated the importance of modelling in addition to the use of NLP techniques and the manipulation of specific teaching and learning strategies. The results of these researches addressed the importance of teachers' communication skills such as establishing rapport, reframing, anchoring, visualization, and paying attention to the representational systems, or learning styles while they are teaching to create a positive atmosphere between them and their learners.

Richards and Schmidt (2010:393) state that the training techniques of NLP or 'training philosophy' gained its position within language teaching by those interested in the 'humanistic approaches' since these approaches concentrate on developing 'self-actualization' and 'self-awareness'. Moreover, NLP has been used unconsciously in language teaching for years. Along with NLP, many other approaches have adopted some of its principles as in using drama, music, and body language that are now combined in language teaching. Accordingly, teachers who incorporate elements of suggestopedia, community language learning, and communicative language teaching in their lessons are actually sharing the same corner stone with NLP.

Tosey and Mathison (2003) in their cooperative work derived their emphasis on the use of NLP in language teaching from the findings of field work researches such as Lyall (2002), and the doctoral study of

Mathison (2003) (both studies cited in Tosey and Mathison, 2003:4) Hence, NLP helps in solving classroom common problems like 'classroom management', and according to Tosey and Mathison (2003) it has the following characteristics in relation with teaching and learning:

1. The relationship which gathers teachers and learners is a mutual, active process in which the transmission of data is mutual also.
2. People perform according to the mental image they have about the world, not according to the real world (i.e. the map is not the territory).
3. In NLP it is assumed that there are regular relationships between the internal representations and the individual's language and behaviour. Then, learner's internal representations and how the experiences are processed. All these are reflected, in numerous ways, in their verbal and non-verbal language.
4. Unique behaviours or strategies that lead to success are all learnt. Learning in NLP context refers to the process of acquiring such strategies and skills.
5. The learners' ability to learn is strongly affected by their 'neuro-physiological state' in which the motivation plays a major role, i.e. when the learners are engaged emotionally and become more interested in the lessons rather than feel bored.

6. The learners' beliefs about learning and about themselves include beliefs about their capability of learning and about the process of learning itself when the learners expect learning to be fun. This is more useful than the opposite feelings. Such states and beliefs are also learnt and subject to change.

### *2.6. Reading Comprehension*

Reading comprehension, on the other hand, consists of two processes rather than one, reading as the first process, and comprehension as the second. As for reading it is defined by Richards and Schmidt (2010:483) as "the processes by which the meaning of a written text is understood". While reading comprehension is defined by them as understanding that results from the first process which is reading. The process of reading involves different 'cognitive skills', such as recognizing letters and words, and distinguishing the text structure and the text type.

The process of comprehension is basically of two types. The first type which is based on clues in the text is known as 'bottom-up-processing' where reading is a matter of decoding a series of written symbols into their aural equivalent. While the second type uses information outside the text and is called 'top-down processing' and it involves the reader in the process of meaning reconstruction rather than the mere decoding of forms, then comprehension of texts is an interactive process between the knowledge of readers about a text and identifying the written symbols into words (Nunan, 1991:63-66).

The process of reading varies according to the reasons for reading. Nowadays, the list of reading materials includes more than books and

newspapers, in addition, it includes letters (personal and formal), leaflets, labels on jars, tins and packets, advertisements, magazines. It is also possible to add emails, text messages and all kinds of texts from the Internet and the social media. All these types of texts are not processed in the same way. Reading, accordingly, can be classified into: (1) getting general information from a text, (2) getting specific information from a text, and (3) for pleasure or for interest (McDonough, et al., 2013:110-111).

### *3. The Procedure*

The procedure used in this research is experimental since it includes teaching a reading comprehension course via NLP principles and techniques. Moreover, the experimental course includes a pre and post-tests administered to the control group (62 students) and the experimental group (63 students) before and after the course. A learning style test is also administered but to the experimental group only to find out each student's learning style.

#### *3.1. The Subjects*

The experimental group students are chosen out of the two sections of the second year students at the English Department/College of Arts/University of Basra in the academic year 2016-2017. The choice was made according to the students' achievements in the pre-test. After comparing the mean of students' scores in the pre-test, group (A) was chosen as the experimental group because of the low mean of their scores which was (17.3). While group (B) was chosen as the control group because of their high mean in the pre-test and that was (33.6). It wasn't possible to split the students according to any

measurement tool, e.g. a piloted test, because of the high number of students which is (125) students. Accordingly, a complete actual group in the Department is chosen. The experimental group which is group (A) consists of (63) students, and the control group which is (B) consists of (62) students.

### *3.2. Data Collection Instrument*

The pre and post-tests are used for both the experimental and control groups. In this design, the experimental and control groups are identified according to their achievement in the pre-test. Then, a post-test is administered to collect data about the students' achievements in reading comprehension after the experimental course. The tests were adopted from a series of books entitled *Select Readings: Teacher-approved readings for today's students*. These books are divided into three levels: *Pre-Intermediate*, *Intermediate*, and *Upper-Intermediate*.

#### *3.2.1. The Pre-test*

The reading comprehension pre-test consists of one passage adopted from the *Pre-intermediate* level book followed by twenty questions. These questions are not of one type, rather they varied according to some reading comprehension skills that students are aware of. Some of these skills are summarizing, inferring, identifying correct information, and tracing the students' points of view by directing the questions to them. This test is taken for both groups (A) and (B) within the normal class time (45 minutes). The results captured from the pre-test serve two purposes. First, these results are used to determine the experimental and the control groups. Second,

they serve to compare with the results of the post-test after the two months course.

### *3.2.2. The Post-test*

The post-test, on the other hand, also consists of one passage, but this passage is adopted from the *Intermediate* level book and followed by twenty questions as well. This test is more complex than the pre-test because it contains more reading comprehension skills, for both the experimental and the control groups. These skills in addition to the skills mentioned previously in the pre-test are: skimming, scanning, and guessing meaning from context. The advantage from this test is to measure the progress of the experimental group after taking a two months course of reading comprehension using NLP techniques. The results of this test serve to compare the level of achievement between the two groups. This test is also taken within the normal class time (45 minutes).

### *3.3. Data Analysis Method*

After collecting the data they were entered into and processed with SPSS software. The paired sample t-test is utilized in order to find out whether there were any significant differences between control and experimental group results in both tests.

## **4. Research Findings**

These tests include 20 different questions that focus on checking the participants' skills in reading comprehension and the ability to use reading comprehension strategies as well. The tests were adopted from the book that students are studying during the semester. To

carry on the comparison, first the descriptive statistics for participants' performances in the reading comprehension pre-test in the two groups were calculated. Table (1) manifests the related descriptive statistics.

*Table (1) Descriptive Statistics for Control and experimental Groups' reading comprehension achievement on Pre-test*

source	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group	17.3654	52	5.56258	.77139
Control group	33.6923	52	7.84041	1.08727

As obvious in table (17), the average mean score of the experimental group was (M = 17.36) with the standard deviation of (SD = 5.56); the mean score of the control group turned out to be (M = 33.69) with the standard deviation of (SD = 7.84). The mean of reading comprehension achievement on the pretests of the two groups are far from each other implying that they are not at the same level of reading comprehension proficiency. Depending on these results, the experimental group was chosen in order to apply the reading comprehension course by using NLP principles and techniques.

In order to compare the mean score of the control and experimental groups in the post-test, the participants' performances on reading comprehension post-test in the two groups were assessed. The related descriptive statistics are demonstrated in Table (2) below.

*Table (2) Descriptive Statistics for Control and experimental Groups' reading comprehension achievement on Post-test*

source	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group	30.1346	52	9.08571	1.25996
Control group	33.3654	52	6.96498	0.96587

Table (3) above illustrates that, the average mean score of the experimental group was ( $M = 30.13$ ) with the standard deviation of ( $SD = 9.08$ ). On the other hand, the average mean score of the control group was ( $M = 33.36$ ) with the standard deviation of ( $SD = 6.96$ ). In fact, the means of reading comprehension achievement on the post-tests of the two groups are not far from each other and the standard deviations of them are very different from each other. These results are arrived at when comparing the means of the two groups in each the pre and post-tests.

But when these results are compared according to within groups achievement in both tests, it is obvious that the average mean of the experimental group had increased from ( $M = 17.36$ ) in the pre-test to ( $M = 30.13$ ) in the post-test. It is found from the results that the level of achievement of the experimental group in the post-test is higher than their achievement in the pre-test.

The matter is different according to the results of the control group in the pre and post-tests; the average mean of this group in the pre-test was (M = 33.69), while their mean in the post-test was (M = 33.36). These results are nearly close to each other and they denote that there was no difference in achievement within the control group in both tests. These scores were calculated by the paired sample t-test to find out if there is a statistically significant difference among them, see Table (3) below.

*Table (3) Paired Samples Test*

Paired Differences						
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Group A pre & post-test	12.76923	9.01331	1.24992	10.216	51	0.000
Group B pre & post-test	0.32692	5.08640	0.70536	0.463	51	0.645

The results of the paired sample t-test show a significant difference from pre-test of the experimental group to post-test of the same group, in which t- value is (10.21) and P- value is 0.00 which is smaller than the alpha value ( $0.00 < 0.05$ ). The results of the paired sample t-test for the control group from the pre-test to the post-test show that the t- value is (0.46) and the P- value is (0.64) which is bigger than the alpha value ( $0.64 > 0.05$ ). This value denotes that

there was not a statistical significant difference in the results of the control group in the two tests.

According to the above table it can be said that there is a relation between the pairs of pre-test and post-test of the experimental group and the control group since the correlation value between each pair of tests is close. These are stated in Table (4) bellow:

*Table (4) Paired Samples Correlations*

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Group A	pre & post-tests	52	0.819	0.021
Group B	pre & post-tests	52	0.770	0.000

The major interest of this research is in the experimental group (A), hence, the correlation between the pre-test and post-test of group (A) is strong and the value of ( $r = 0.81$ ). Then, the results arrived at in this research indicate the advantages of applying NLP principles and techniques to improve the level of achievement of students in reading comprehension. Also, the results of the control group did not increase in the post-test but actually they tend to decrease a little.

## **5. Discussions**

The current research is carried out through asking two questions that address specific aspects regarding EFL teaching and learning process. The first research question addressed the possibility of integrating NLP techniques to EFL teaching process, especially in

reading comprehension classes. The research was carried out by teaching a reading comprehension course by using NLP principles and techniques. Then, the students' achievement after taking this course is measured by comparing the pre and post-tests results for the two groups that participated in the research, i.e. the experimental and control groups. The results show a significant improvement in the scores of the experimental group students compared with no significance difference in the scores of the control group students.

The second research question addressed the influence of NLP techniques to improve or enhance the whole teaching and learning process and helps students to become better learners. Descriptive statistics of test gains scores for pre and post-tests for both groups demonstrated that the experimental group did better on the post-test than the control group. The greater development of the experimental group participants was also confirmed by paired sample *t*-test comparing pre and post-tests gains scores. In sum, experimental group outperformed the task-supported group and this is concluded from the difference between the pre-test and the post- means which was ( $M = 12.4$ ). Then, after the post-test the results have increased and the effect size can be calculated from the sum of the mean difference on the standard deviation of the differences.

In sum, the experimental group with NLP techniques outperformed the control group, thus demonstrating the efficiency of using NLP to improve the level of achievement for EFL learners in the university level. Finally, the fourth research question concerned the comparison between the experimental and the control groups.

## 6. Conclusions

It can be said that the exploration of a way to utilize Neuro-linguistic Programming principles and techniques might enable the EFL teacher in the university level to teach more efficiently. Consequently, the effectiveness of this theory on EFL teachers and learners is clear. It was intended to combine communicative language teaching with NLP to prove the possibility of adding NLP to the process of teaching. Paying greater attention to providing better inner and external learning environments and using sensory rich language help students to learn more effectively and teachers to teach more easily. By knowing better learning strategies using NLP techniques, teachers are able to open up their students' minds to greater possibilities and more opportunities in life.

Around the world, many classes have been using NLP techniques in preparing lessons. It had worked because learners found the activity completely different. It is a new way of teaching. Teachers know that students need a change of routine once in a while. This is only a means to accomplish the objectives of the course. NLP is a good option if a teacher wants to break the routine and create a much better rapport with learners. Nevertheless, Neuro-linguistic Programming is not a teaching language method. It is a humanistic training philosophy that includes several techniques. It is related to humanistic principles and communication activities that have been used and proven successfully in language teaching.

The most important implications of NLP in the language classrooms are represented in giving EFL learners positive messages rather than

negative ones. It also helps the students to believe that they can learn and this would improve their relations with their teacher and improve their self-esteem in themselves as successful learners. NLP helps in improving classroom behaviour and gaining more active student engagement, particularly in whole class discussion and individual learning and consequently in improving their level of achievement in learning English as a foreign language.

## **7. Limitations**

1. The length of treatment: the whole instructional treatment lasted a total of two months with a rate of three hours weekly. These weekly hours were not accomplished completely for several reasons such as: unexpected holidays, the attendance of students in the early morning hours because of traffics, etc. Given that applying NLP to classroom instruction is a relatively novel pedagogical approach, it would be helpful to have the instructional treatment overextended over a whole semester. That way, more tasks could be done and the obstacles can be overcome.
2. This study took place in complete classrooms, and it was not possible to choose students randomly and split them into two groups since the study year started before the collection of data.
3. Being restricted with a specific curriculum to complete within the two months, it was not easy to interview students individually to detect their responses to the principles and techniques presented to them in the class.

## **8. Recommendations for Further Studies**

In order to extend the findings of this research, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Similar studies are critically needed in other EFL courses using NLP.
2. Focus is required on comparisons between NLP and different types of variables and with different characteristics of participants such as: gender, age, and etc.
3. Present training courses for EFL teachers and learners as well to keep up with the latest developments concerning the use of NLP in different ways.

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## المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى التحقق من مدى تأثير مبادئ البرمجة اللغوية العصبية وتقنياتها على رفع مستوى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في فهم القراءة في المستوى الجامعي في جامعة البصرة بالتحديد. شارك ١٢٥ طالبا في الدراسة, وقد تم تقسيم الطلاب إلى مجموعتين: المجموعة الضابطة والمجموعة التجريبية. ويتكون البحث من اختبار قبلي وبعديطبق على كلتا المجموعتين للكشف عن مستوى الطلبة في المجموعة التجريبية بعد أن تم تطبيق مبادئ البرمجة اللغوية العصبية في تدريس مادة القراءة الاستيعابية لمدة شهرين. ومن ناحية أخرى، فإن المجموعة الضابطة لم تتلقى أي توجيهات خاصة بل استمرت بتلقي مادة القراءة الاستيعابية بالطريقة المعتادة. وأظهر اختبار العينة المقترنة للمجموعتين التجريبية والضابطة أن تدريس القراءة الاستيعابية باستخدام تقنيات البرمجة اللغوية العصبية له تأثير إيجابي كبير على المجموعة التجريبية مقارنة مع المجموعة الضابطة. وأثبتت هذه النتائج أن استخدام مبادئ وتقنيات البرمجة اللغوية العصبية في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية قد يساعد المعلمين على التعليم بشكل أكثر كفاءة في المستوى الجامعي في العراق. وعند أخذ هذه النتائج في نظر الاعتبار، يوصى بالمزيد من البحوث العلمية حول مختلف الاستخدامات الممكنة للبرمجة اللغوية العصبية في تعلم اللغة الانجليزية.