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Journal Contents

Utilizing NLP Language Patterns in Educational Settings

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This article aims to examine the use and influence of teacher language and behaviours in educational settings from an NLP perspective and to demonstrate how teachers have a strong influence on the lifelong beliefs of students and wider society. It also discusses how NLP language patterns can be effectively used in the classroom, and reports on two related research studies with which I have been involved. First, however, I would like to tell you a story about a little boy long ago.

When I was a 4 year old boy attending a Montessori school in Ireland, there was one specific day that is still completely vivid for me today. The teacher was helping us to learn to write our own names in our copybooks, and I can still see the letters on the page where I was writing them: 'b r i o n'. When I finished writing, I saw that I had made a mistake and became so upset that I started to cry. Writing an 'o' instead of an 'a' was a complete failure, and almost 45 years later I still feel the devastation and upset that little boy felt. Then the teacher came up behind me. I could hear her breathing and see her kind face in deep thought, and I knew that she cared. She slowly reached around me and picked up a pencil and added an extra stroke to the 'o' and magically changed that 'o' into an 'a'. 'brion' became 'brian', and then she smiled at me. With that simple stroke of a pencil, she changed my entire feeling. She also probably changed the course of my life by installing a variant of the NLP presupposition of "there is no failure, only feedback."

Years later, I was nearing the end of secondary school at the age of 17 and I wrote an inspired essay in an English examination. Of course, 'inspired' is a subjective term and not necessarily the same as being good, and my teacher ripped that essay apart in front of the class after the exam. He sat on the edge of an empty student desk at the front of the classroom and said, "This is a torrent of indecipherable nonsense… I am not going to embarrass you by reading any of it aloud here." And then he finished by saying something rather curious, "you are such a good writer that it is a shame to see you write nonsense like this."

I didn't even notice what the teacher had done until many years later when I studied applied linguistics and NLP and became more aware of linguistic patterns and what

people can do through language. Back then, I just knew that I wanted to write more and for a while I considered becoming a journalist. Because in just a few words, that amazing teacher had both condemned my behavior and supported my identity, thus installing in my unconscious the useful NLP distinction between *identity* and *behaviour*. My behaviour in the form of the essay was indeed a piece of rubbish, but the teacher utilized this to provide a positive boost to my identity as a writer.

These were good teachers, and I was extremely fortunate to have them teaching me and instilling supportive beliefs. Other learners have been less lucky. Many learners are scarred and put off learning for life by a teacher's words. Most people probably have a mixture of these experiences–some good experiences with teachers, some bad, and mostly just forgettable. This is a pity because teaching and learning are important and teaching in a formal setting is the most common way that our society aims to facilitate learning.

Teaching in Japan

About 25 years ago, I became a teacher myself and began teaching children and later young adults in schools. One day, I was talking to an experienced teacher and she said to me, "Education is not really about learning–education is about socialization. Our classrooms and lessons are designed to create the kinds of people that are needed for society." I was young enough and idealistic enough to strongly disagree… I knew that teaching was about helping people to learn… until I had gained enough years of teaching and life experience to understand what she had really meant and ultimately how she was correct.

To illustrate what I mean here, I would like to draw a little on my own experience of living and teaching in Japan for 25 years. In general, Japan is seen as and presents itself as a homogenous society. This homogeneity of Japanese society is largely created by the behaviours, beliefs and values, and identities that are instilled by the education system. On any particular day in Japan, if you were to peer into a classroom in the cold northern island of Hokkaido or alternatively into a classroom 3,000 kilometers way down south in tropical Okinawa, you would likely see young students studying the same information on the same page of the same textbook. The teacher is likely to be following the same teaching methodology. The government carefully controls both the content and choice of textbooks.

In NLP terms, the Japanese educational system is highly successful at installing beliefs. Our neuro-linguistic programs are created largely by the input that we receive from

society, and when the educational system successfully structures everyone's school experience in the same way, it is not surprising that the result is a society of fairly homogenous people. For example, Maciamo (2003) is one of many commentators who note that the average Japanese person holds similar stereotypical beliefs such as "Foreigners cannot speak Japanese, use chopsticks or eat sushi", "Japanese used to be farmers, while Europeans used to be hunters", and "Only Japan has four seasons." Whether any of these beliefs are true or useful is not relevant for this paper, and indeed there is also considerable research that suggests that this installed homogeneity is actually covering up a wide range of identities that are struggling to emerge (e.g. Burgess, 2004). However, from an NLP perspective, what is clear from the highly-structured Japanese context is that formal educational systems can play a huge role in installing the maps by which people live their lives: their identities, beliefs, capabilities, and behaviours.

A different education system might try to install beliefs such as "everyone is different", "it is ok to express opinions different to your teacher", and "it is possible to take different perspectives on the 'facts'." Again, the truth or usefulness of these beliefs is not the focus here. In any society, if it were possible to trace the cause-effect relationships and complex equivalents that make up people's beliefs back to their roots, we would probably find that most of these beliefs were created by upbringing and schooling, and in particular by the beliefs that teachers held and expected students to hold.

The Influence of Teachers

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1966) carried out an experiment illustrating the impact of teacher beliefs, in particular expectations by teachers that certain students would perform better. Across 18 classrooms, the teachers were given the names of students who were expected to be high achievers. Eight months later, these children (who had actually been selected at random) showed significantly greater gains than did the remaining children in the control group.

How much time do children spend in formal education absorbing the beliefs and language of teachers? In a report, the OECD suggests that the average time spent in school is 791 hours per year in primary school and 907 hours in secondary school (OECD, 2013). Assuming six years of primary and secondary school, the average student will have spent just over 10,000 hours in formal education before going to third-level education or entering the workforce. Coincidentally, this is almost identical to what Malcolm Gladwell specified in his book, *Outliers,* as being the time "required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert—in anything" (Gladwell, 2008, p. 40).

So it seems likely that learners in formal education are mastering the inherent beliefs and socialization norms of the classroom at a very deep level. In other words, what happens in the classroom is indeed socialization and the manner in which teachers organize and run the classroom is a major determinant of how society is constructed.

If we wish to see NLP used in a positive way to support a strong and healthy society, then perhaps supporting teacher development is an area where a little bit of effort can yield substantial results. Teachers are in positions of influence, and whether a teacher's beliefs are implicitly or explicitly held, they will have a strong effect on the amount and type of learning that takes place in any course. Teachers, students, and all of society can benefit greatly when teachers begin to explicitly decide the important beliefs that they wish to hold and the beliefs that they wish to convey to their students about learning.

NLP offers tools for identifying current beliefs and can also offer effective and ecological ways of installing these beliefs. Of course, many teachers are already natural motivators and facilitators of learning, and using the modelling techniques of NLP, we can also make valuable contributions by studying the language and behavior patterns that these teachers are using to get their results just as Bandler and Grinder studied the excellent models of Perls, Satir, and Erickson.

With sufficient research, we can hopefully begin to create better pre-service and in-service training for teachers. The field of NLP has been relatively weak to date at creating this kind of reliable peer-reviewed research, but if we are not willing to do it for the sake of NLP-recognition, perhaps we can at least recognize the power of education as a tool of socialization and carry out this research for the sake of a better society.

In previous papers, my colleagues and I have shown have explored the application of NLP concepts to education (e.g. Cullen, 2010). More specifically with regard to language patterns and beliefs, we have looked at how Milton patterns can be contextualized in particular learning situations (Mulvey, 2012), how they can be used for motivating students (Mulvey, 2012), how particular beliefs can be encoded in teacher language (Cullen, Deacon, Backwell, & Mulvey, 2013), and how the use of these language patterns consistently can produce very real quantifiable results. Much of this research is summarized in the book, *Explorations in NLP and Language Teaching*.

In the field of NLP, we already know how beliefs and values frame and influence behavior. Teachers, through their use of *neurology* (body and mind) and *language*, install or maintain the *programs* of students. The greatest tool that a teacher possesses is his or her words and actions, yet despite the educational research cited above, teachers in formal education settings are often using less than optimal verbal and non-verbal classroom

language. Teacher expectations and beliefs become self-fulfilling prophecies, yet many teachers are unaware of the beliefs that they are consciously and unconsciously conveying to students.

One first step that we can take is to set an outcome frame by assisting teachers in recognizing what beliefs they want to bring to the classroom and what beliefs they would like to impart to students. As an example, here are some possible beliefs elicited from a teacher of English as a foreign language.

As a teacher, I want to believe …

- I'm doing the best that I can do.
- I'm well prepared.
- I have my students' best interests at heart.
- These students are capable of learning.
- My classroom is a fun and safe environment for learning.

I want my students to believe…

- It's ok to make mistakes.
- English will be very useful in my life.
- I am able to learn English.
- I will learn new skills and knowledge in this course.
- My teacher can be trusted and has my best interests at heart. I can go to my teacher with questions and concerns.

Once a teacher has identified the target beliefs (the desired state in NLP terms), we can help him or her to start to encode those beliefs linguistically in ways that can be conveyed to students. In the next section, I offer examples of how some standard NLP language patterns and techniques can be used to convey specific beliefs effectively to students.

Effective Language Patterns

Yes-Sets

In a Yes-Set we *pace* people with a series of statements with which they are likely to agree. These "truisms" are effective for pacing because they create a momentum towards "Yes" which then makes it easier to *lead* people in the desired direction that we want them to go.

Yes-Sets are a particularly useful language pattern in classroom situations because teachers are often leading their students in directions that require focused attention on various materials, activities, language features, and amongst others, the teacher him or herself. A Yes-Set can be an elegant way to gain rapport by first pacing students before, then leading them to where we want to focus their attention. A good rule of thumb is to use about four or five of these truisms before leading students to the desired goal.

Imagine for a moment that you are a teacher and want your students to review their former lesson before starting something new. You could simply say, "Okay everyone, today we are going to begin by reviewing our last lesson before starting today's lesson." In all likelihood, however, some students will have forgotten what was done in the previous lesson, some may have been absent, and others may not yet be in a state to learn. With a Yes-Set, they can be gently guided to recall what was covered in the former lesson before they actually review and practice what they had learned (or didn't learn previously, as the case may be). So, a teacher could use the following Yes-Set pattern to review the former lesson:

1) "Hello everyone. It's a lovely sunny day and we are here to learn English together again;

2) You might remember that last class we focused on the topic of (substitute your topic, e.g. sports);

3) And in our last lesson we (substitute what you did, e.g. listened to a dialogue about various sports; learned some collocations such as 'do', 'play', and 'go' that connect to various sports; and practiced conversations);

4) And you can remember those activities that we did now;

5) And that means we can begin by (doing the activity that you want students to do, e.g. reviewing the sports collocations)".

The pacing is set up in #1 ~ 4 and the leading occurs in #5. The students can easily accept the pacing patterns, and will then participate more readily in the leading step.

Yes-Sets can also be effective, not only in order to lead students to do various activities but also to get them into more resourceful learning states such as curiosity, relaxation, and excitement. To lead students into a state of relaxation, for instance, we could substitute the following sentence in place of #5 above: "And that means *you can relax as we review our previous lesson*." As you probably noticed, the leading statement in #5 also includes the

complex equivalent, "and that means we can begin…", and is a good example of how a teacher can effectively combine multiple NLP language patterns.

Modal Operators to Embed Suggestions

Modal operators are a useful Milton language pattern because they can seem to create a choice for the students. Sometimes, that choice is an illusory choice. In other words, we are really only pretending to give a choice by using the options that satisfy the teaching goals and objectives. Some useful modal operators that are effective for teachers include:

You could …	You have to …	You might …
You can …	You may …	You might …
You will …	You would …	You shall …
You should …	You ought to …	You don't have to …

Modal operators also make it easy to embed suggestions. The following example combines modal operators and embedded suggestions:

 "You can <u>do your homework</u> tonight, or you could <u>do your homework</u> on the weekend. It's really your choice when you decide to <u>do your homework</u>."

The following examples show further ways that modal operators can be used in teaching contexts for the purpose of encouraging various learning outcomes and supporting specific beliefs.

- "You could begin to enjoy learning English in this course, or perhaps you have always enjoyed English, and you might start to enjoy English even more;"

- "You don't have to enjoy English as much as your favorite music, and you might not even enjoy English as much as your favorite food; you may just choose to make English your favorite subject, or perhaps you just ought to think of English as a great communication tool. And you may be wondering how you can get the most out of this lesson;"

- "You will sometimes make mistakes… and it's good to know that mistakes can be useful, and you can learn from your mistakes;"

- "You shouldn't enjoy learning English too quickly because you want to continue learning English all your life;"

- "You shouldn't believe every word that I say just because I'm your teacher … you can believe me because I give you your grade."

Delivering Suggestions

How you say something is just as important as *what* you say. Milton Erickson often used changes in his voice or the position of his head as a way of marking out embedded suggestions. This kind of analogue marking is also a useful way for teachers to embed powerful learning messages for students. As shown in the table below, analogue marking can happen in various forms.

Voice	Body	Writing
• Slightly pausing • Making changes in pitch/speed/tonality	• Changing positions in the room • Gesturing • Tapping the desk	• Using various colors • Underlining words • Circling words

Even without being aware of it, teachers already use analogue marking. For example, most teachers have said to a noisy class, "Everybody please BE QUIET." The most important words are marked with more volume, an auditory submodality change. Another way to analogue mark in the auditory modality is to use pauses effectively. If, for instance, a core teaching belief is that it is okay for students to make mistakes, then the teacher might start a class discussion by saying:

"So, we're going to talk with our partners and remember to keep talking even if you make a mistake because… everyone makes mistakes… and it's okay to make mistakes… mistakes are small steps to learning… so with that in mind, let's start."

In the kinesthetic modality, a teacher can use analogue marking through body language, for example, a clap to get attention or mark an activity transition. Or a teacher can easily mark out embedded commands through spatial anchoring, for example, setting up and consistently using a specific area in the classroom such as the front left corner for delivering key messages.

One simple form of visual analogue marking is the use of colours, size, style, and space on the blackboard (or slideshow). While writing on the board, a teacher can highlight the key point in a different color, underline it, make the key words bigger, or write it in a specific area of the blackboard.

These simple examples of language use and analogue marking are discussed more extensively in the volume, *Explorations in NLP and Language Teaching*. Teachers already use all of these tools, usually without being consciously aware of it. NLP offers a systematic way of thinking about these tools that can support a better learning environment.

Quantifying the Results of Language Pattern Use

To this point, I have offered several examples of language patterns and how they can be used to convey more facilitative learning beliefs and suggestions to students. The aim has been to invite the reader to consider ways how NLP language patterns and techniques can be utilized in the classroom to more consistently communicate empowering messages to students. In the final section of this paper, I would like to summarize the results of two studies which my colleagues and I have carried out with the aim of quantifying the effects of systematic language pattern usage in the classroom.

Study 1: Timed Writing

In the development of fluency in writing skills, one learning activity that is sometimes used is timed writing. Students are asked to write as many words as possible within a short time frame, typically 5-10 minutes and to focus on fluency rather than grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Deacon (reported in Cullen et al., 2013) carried out a study to investigate the impact of teacher use of NLP language on student task achievement in timed writing tasks.

Japanese university students were divided into two groups: Group 1 (the control group, n=20), and Group 2 (the experimental group, n=16). A baseline was set up in the first lesson by measuring the initial writing speed of all students. Over a period of 10 weeks, Group 1 was told to write as many words as possible within the fixed time limit. Before the activity, Group 2 was given numerous suggestions in the form of language patterns (including Yes-Sets, modal operators of possibility, and other embedded suggestions). The results were measured to investigate any longitudinal differences. As can be seen in the

chart below, Group 2 made significant progress in its writing speed compared with Group 1.

	Baseline	Weeks 2-4	Weeks 5-7	Weeks 8-10	Baseline vs. Weeks 8-10
Group 1 (Control)	109.05	128.03	125.74	126.11	+ 17.6
Group 2 (Experimental)	132.63	167.12	180.1	180.6	+ 54.49
Avg. word differences between Group 1 & Group 2	+ 23.38	+39.09	+ 54.36	+ 54.49	+30.37

By the end of the 10-week time frame, Group 2 had increased their writing speed by 54.49 average words, while Group 1 only had increased by 17.6 average words from the initial baseline measurement, respectively. It is clear from these results that the experimental group did benefit from the intervention.

Study 2: Timed Reading Study

In learning a language, one of the most effective ways to develop fluency is to have learners read more and to read quickly. One technique for increasing reading speed is *timed reading* in which learners read the same text several times with the goal of increasing reading speed. In a study described in detail elsewhere (Cullen, 2013), two groups of Japanese university students of similar ability were given timed reading activities for seven weeks in a class held once a week. Before the activity, the teacher consistently used NLP language patterns with Group A and did not use them with Group B. Group A (n=38) had a steady and substantial increase, but Group B (n=39) showed relatively little change. This difference between the two groups, illustrated in the graphs below, correlates with the controlled use of teacher language patterns.

Group B

Group A
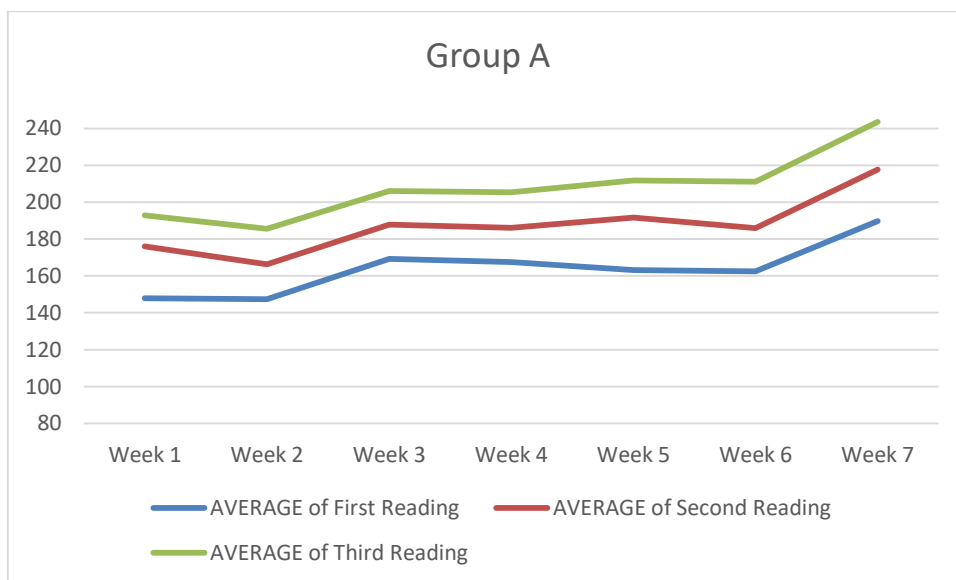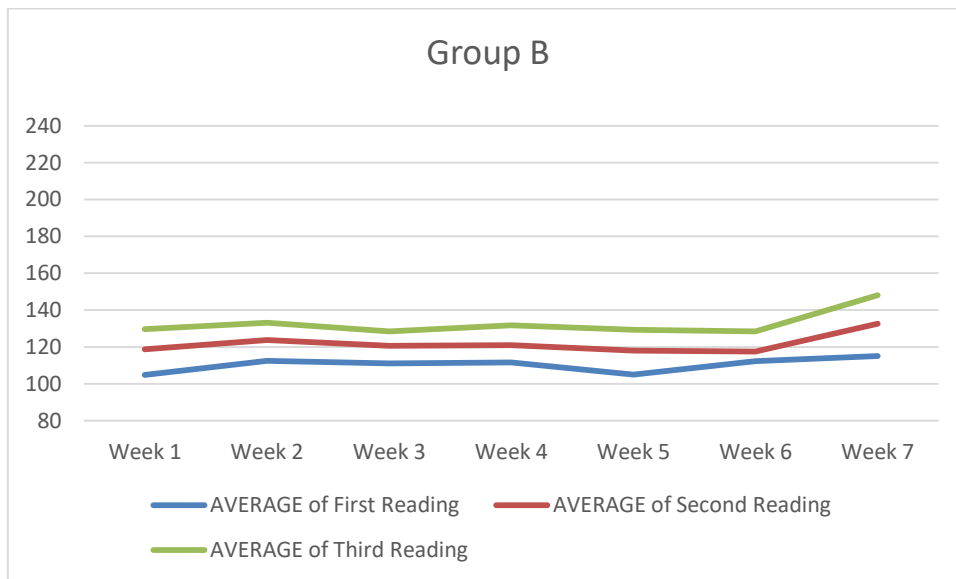
Conclusion

In the field of NLP, we recognize the power of language to install and maintain beliefs. Formal education is a huge influence on the beliefs of people and ultimately on society, and the linguistic tools NLP have much to offer the field of education. When teachers become more aware of the language patterns that they are using with students, and begin to structure classroom language to facilitate greater learning, formal education can offer classrooms with more empowering messages for students, which in turn can lead to a more empowered society. My colleagues and I invite any teachers who are interested in replicating or extending these studies to contact us. We also have a collection of useful language patterns and scripts that we are happy to share with other teachers.

Biography

Dr. Brian Cullen is an associate professor at Nagoya Institute of Technology, Japan. He leads a research group focusing on the use of NLP in educational settings, some of whose work is published in the book *Explorations in NLP & Language Teaching*. Brian is a master trainer of NLP (IANLP, NLPU) and trainer of hypnosis (NGH). He is also a songwriter and musician and has written many NLP-influenced songs and the musical *Jukebox Paradise*. More information and contact details at: www.briancullen.net.

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