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*The Effect of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) on
EFL Learners' Accuracy, Fluency, and Complexity in
Speaking*

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ABSTRACT

Learning to speak English as a foreign language is one of the important goals of language learners nowadays, therefore this study aimed at investigating the effect of using NLP techniques on EFL learners' fluency, accuracy, and complexity in speaking. In order to do this, 55 participants who were chosen amongst 79 on the basis of their performance on a Preliminary English Test (PET) were divided into two groups, an experimental group with 30 participants and a control group with 25 participants. The experimental group used NLP techniques while doing speaking activities, however, the control group received no such treatment. At the end of the 10 sessions of instruction, both groups took part in a speaking posttest and were rated by two raters on their fluency, accuracy, and complexity in speaking. Pearson and Spearman correlations were used to check inter-rater consistency and independent samples *t*-test and Mann-Whitney test were used to investigate whether the mean scores of the two groups were significantly different or not. The results indicated that NLP techniques significantly affected accuracy but not fluency and complexity in speaking.

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CHAPTER I

Background and Purpose

1.1. Introduction

Learning a language is a long and sometimes frustrating endeavor especially when it comes to attaining aspects of speaking skill such as fluency, complexity, and accuracy. Although these aspects are said to be difficult and time-consuming to master, many EFL learners evaluate their progress in language learning through them. Language learners value speaking for different reasons. Some for instance, consider speaking to be the first and best means of communication and thus functioning in contexts where their mother tongue is not the medium of communication.

According to Ellis (1988), language learners “view speaking as an essential skill for functioning in another country, and except when they have special needs, they enroll in language classes with speaking as one of their principal goals” (p. 271). Brown and Yule (1983) believe that speaking is the criteria most language learners regard as knowing a language and that students assess their progress in language learning through this skill.

Although speaking is seen as a very important skill in TEFL, at times the students’ achievement is not as promising as is expected by both teachers and learners. The reason is that speaking fluently is not just a matter of pronouncing phonemes correctly, using appropriate stress and intonation patterns, or to speak in a connected speech (Harmer, 2007). According to Harmer, “Speakers of English will have to be

able to speak in a range of different genres and situations and they will have to be able to use a range of conversational repair strategies. They will need to be able to survive in typical functional exchanges too” (p. 343).

Therefore speaking has been regarded by many scholars (e.g. Levelt, 1989; Levelt, Reolofs, & Meyer, 2000) as a highly demanding and complex cognitive skill that involves several different mechanisms. Tarone (as cited in Hinkel, 2006) points to the complexity of speaking a second or foreign language and maintains that this complexity is reflected in the range and types of the sub-skills that are entailed in L2 oral production. Learners are demanded to attend to content, morpho-syntax, and lexis at the same time and should simultaneously attend to discourse and information structuring, the sound system and prosody as well as appropriate register and pragmalinguistic features.

Hinkel (2006) also agrees with the fact that the characteristics and development of oral skills are indications of this skill being cognitively demanding and she adds that, to be able to convey meaning in a foreign or second language successfully one should attend to the production quality as well; as a result, speaking in an L2 requires fluency, accuracy, and a sufficient lexico-grammatical repertoire.

It could be gathered from her opinion that among the sub-skills of speaking mentioned above, fluency, accuracy, and complexity play an important role in conducting a successful conversation. Likewise, Inoue (2010) believes that “the most common measures used to capture the differences in the quality of performance under different conditions are those of fluency, accuracy, and complexity” (p. 2).

Fluency has been defined by different scholars in different ways and each of them has been concerned with a set of criteria to determine who is to be considered a fluent speaker of English. Lennon (1990) for instance, has categorized fluency into two senses; broad and narrow. Broad refers to global oral proficiency which means that the speaker has a high command of the language, whereas in the narrow sense, fluency is regarded as a component of oral proficiency.

Ellis (2004) defines fluency as “the extent to which the language produced in performing a task manifests pausing, hesitation or reformulation” (p. 342). Similarly, Harris (1969) states that fluency is the ease and flow of speech. No matter how fluency is defined, it is considered a challenging area in teaching a foreign language because finding ways to boost this aspect of speaking is not easy as claimed by Baradaran and Khalili (2009).

Fluency is mostly said to be in contrast with accuracy which Ellis (2004) defines as “the extent to which the language produced in performing a task conforms to target language norms” (p. 339). Although accuracy is an important component in oral production and comprehensibility of speech, some believe that it has been underestimated by giving more importance to fluency. Takashima (2000) states that teachers emphasize on their students practicing speaking without paying attention to grammatical accuracy, and that results in the fact that “while students’ ability in terms of fluency has improved, they often cannot communicate appropriately in English due to lack of grammatical knowledge” (Ano, 2003, p. 9)

Some others like Richards (2008) believe that “accuracy may not be a priority as long as information is successfully communicated or understood” (p. 26). Murad (2009)

claims that in the past 20 years language teaching field has focused around the debates about merits of focusing on accuracy and form as opposed to fluency and meaning and he cites Radwan who believes that a level of accuracy should be achieved in order for language learning to take place. Either way, it seems quite logical that fluency and accuracy are both important goals to be pursued in language teaching.

With the development of communicative approaches, Hedge (2008) claims, teachers have concentrated on not only the learners practicing speaking in a controlled fashion to produce features of “pronunciation, vocabulary and structure accurately” (p. 261), but they have also worked on using these features “more freely in purposeful communication and therefore there are activities that include both fluency and accuracy from the beginning of the course” (p. 261).

Another important component of speaking is complexity which is defined by Ellis (2004) as “the extent to which the language produced in performing a task is elaborated and varied” (p. 340). It is proposed by Foster and Skehan (1996) and Skehan (1998) that subordination is an index of internal complexity of speech and Greenbaum (as cited in Borges Mota, 2003) asserts that subordination is a non-symmetrical relation, holding between two clauses in such a way that one is a constituent part of the other. An easier way to define complexity according to BeitKhalifa and Region (2009) is to look at it as “the ability to use different strategies to connect words and sentences and also to be able to say one thing in different ways.” (p. 38).

Since speaking is an essential skill to develop and human beings are constantly engaged in finding better approaches to accomplish their goals, a large number of communicative speaking activities have been proposed and worked on in order to find

the most efficient method to best pursue this end. Some of these methods are role play, group discussion, games, problem solving, information gap activities, and guessing activities (Harmer, 2001; Littlewood, 1981; Scott & Ytreberg, 1990).

One of the approaches that has recently entered the realm of TEFL is Neuro-linguistic programming. Millrood (2004) says that, “Neuro-linguistic programming or NLP (Hardingham, 1998) has been seen recently as one of the resources to enhance effectiveness of language instruction. It has been well established in the framework of humanistic psychology since 1971” (p. 28). He goes on citing Thornbury (2001) who states that “NLP claims to help achieve excellence of performance in language teaching and learning, improve classroom communication, optimize learner attitudes and motivation, raise self-esteem, facilitate personal growth in students, and even change their attitude to life” (p. 394). Regarding what NLP actually is one could refer to Richards and Rodgers (2003) who state that, “NLP is a training philosophy and a set of training techniques” (p. 125). According to them, NLP was developed by Richard Bandler and John Grinder who studied how the behavior of successful people could be “duplicated” to make others successful as well. They maintain that originally NLP was meant to make “therapeutic changes” in behavior but its principles are used in many other fields as well (p. 125). According to Richards and Rodegers, the methods of NLP were brought to the field of second language teaching and were altered to suite the field through the efforts of authors such as Norman and Revell.

Antic (2006) introduces NLP as not just a teaching method consisting of a set of techniques for teaching a language based on assumptions at the levels of an approach or design but as a humanistic philosophy and a set of beliefs and suggestions based on

popular psychology which is designed to convince people that they have the power to control their own and other people's lives for the better and suggests practical prescriptions to achieve this end. NLP practitioners believe that if language teachers adopt and use the principles of NLP, they will become more effective teachers.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The ability to speak a foreign or a second language has been and is considered to be one of the important goals of the instructors, instructional courses, material designers, and learners and it is among the most challenging skills to master. Consequently, a lot of studies have been conducted on different aspects of speaking such as the cognitive processes involved in speaking, differences between first language acquisition and second or foreign language learning, various methods of learning how to speak and so on. Fluency, accuracy, and complexity are the three famous concepts which are discussed in relation to speaking. Skehan(1996) considers these three factors as important in grading and sequencing language tasks.

Gaining oral fluency in a second language is a demanding undertaking; Al-Sibai (2004) states that, "One of the most difficult challenges in teaching an L2 is finding ways to help students improve their oral fluency. This is especially true in countries where learners share a common mother tongue and have little or no exposure to the L2 outside the classroom" (p. 2). She goes on saying that "we live at a time where the ability to speak an L2 fluently has become a must, especially for those who want to advance in certain fields of human endeavor" (p. 3).

In his book “how to teach speaking”, Thornbury (2005) states that fluency includes factors such as pausing, placement of pauses, length of run, speed of speech, vocabulary and knowledge of the structures. Gaining an acceptable degree of knowledge in each of these areas is obviously time-consuming and would take a tremendous amount of effort on the part of the learners and the teachers. Thornbury (2005) also claims that “The inevitable lack of fluency involved in speaking an L2 is a source of frustration and even embarrassment for learners” (p. 27).

Other aspects of speaking, usually discussed alongside fluency, are accuracy and complexity of speech as mentioned above. The issue at hand regarding accuracy is “form”, that is to say attention to grammar and structure. Doughty and Williams (1998) believe that the aim of the studies carried out on focus on form are to figure out how the learners’ improvement towards approximating the target language can be influenced through focus on form integrated with communication purposes.

Skehan (as cited in Inoue, 2010) states “accuracy refers to how well the target language is produced according to the rule system”. . Complexity in speaking is “the ability to say one thing in different ways” (BeitKhalifa& Region, 2009. p. 38). Like the sub-skill of fluency, accuracy and complexity involve many factors that will take hardship, experience, practice, and time to master.

The above-mentioned issues that concentrate on the importance and difficulty of learning how to speak a second or foreign language along with the fact that there is no one best method to learn and teach it, could be summed up in Borges Mota’s (2003) claim : “The study of L2 speech performance has gained increased attention over the past two decades, researchers in the field of L2 acquisition and use have not reached

consensus on the best ways to approach L2 speaking as an object of study, or at least in a way that yields results that prove relevant from both a theoretical and pedagogical perspective” (p. 70).

Since the researcher has been teaching the upper-intermediate and advance classes of EFL for many years and has noticed the apparent lack of proficiency in speaking in the learners at even these high levels, she felt that there was still room for developing, improving, and utilizing new methods to help promote this obviously important skill.

A particular area of interest for the researcher was NLP and its methods and their use and application in order to boost EFL learning and teaching, particularly in the essential skill of speaking. “NLP is relatively new to language learning” (Winch, 2005, p. 1) it was developed in the 1970s by Richard Banldler and John Grinder. They studied patterns and the beliefs of people who excelled and from that they created a set of patterns, techniques, and strategies that other people can use in pursuit of excellence.

Some studies have been carried out on the effects of NLP techniques on foreign language teaching and learning. For example, Millrood (2004) studied the role of NLP in teacher’s classroom discourse and carried out a workshop in which he taught the teachers how to use NLP techniques to make their discourse more effective. Although his research was not a quantitative one, he quotes some of the teachers who participated in the workshop to be quite satisfied with what they had learnt.

Moreover, Goharkhaneh (2011) challenged the argument that NLP teaches learners to think critically through self-evaluation. She put learners in groups and let

them ask questions from each other and in doing so eliminate negative behavior. She concluded that NLP tries to program learners to be aware of their own thinking process and eliminates negative behavior and creates a new perception of the world.

NLP has been researched in Iran as well. Pishghadam (2011) studied NLP and its relationship with teacher success, gender, teaching experience, and degree. He studied 166 teachers and 1200 of their students as participants and came to the conclusion that there is a significant relationship between NLP and teacher success. There was a negative relationship between teaching experience and the use of NLP. He found no significant difference between genders in using or between school teachers with different degrees (BA and MA) in using NLP techniques.

In line with what was discussed so far and due to the fact that little research has been done on the effect of using NLP techniques on developing and excelling speaking abilities in EFL learners, the researcher attempted to investigate the effect of using NLP techniques on fluency, accuracy, and complexity in speaking of EFL learners.

1.3. Statement of the Research Questions

Taking into account the issues at hand, the researcher aims to answer the following questions:

Q1: Does NLP have a significant effect on EFL learners' fluency in speaking?

Q2: Does NLP have a significant effect on EFL learners' accuracy in speaking?

Q3: Does NLP have a significant effect on EFL learners' complexity in speaking?

1.4. Statement of the Research Hypotheses

In order to investigate the research questions the following null hypotheses were formulated:

H₀₁: NLP does not have a significant effect on EFL learners' fluency in speaking.

H₀₂: NLP does not have a significant effect on EFL learners' accuracy in speaking.

H₀₃: NLP does not have a significant effect on EFL learners' complexity in speaking.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

This section is dedicated to defining the key terms in order to clarify the variables of the study.

1.5.1. Fluency in Speaking

Fluency in speaking is “the extent to which language produced in performing a task manifests pausing, hesitation or reformulation” (Ellis, 2004, p. 342).

In this study fluency is operationally defined as the obtained scores of the participants on the speaking section of a PET. Their scores in fluency were determined by the Discourse Management criterion of the Assessing Speaking Performance-Level B1 of PET, as it was best matched with Ellis's (2004) description of fluency, which comprises five points of the overall score. The Discourse Management criterion

included the following issues: producing extended stretches of language despite some hesitation, relevant contributions despite repetition and using a range of cohesive devices.

1.5.2. Accuracy in Speaking

Accuracy is defined as “the extent to which the language produced in performing a task conforms to target language forms” (Ellis, 2004, p. 339). In this study the operational definition of accuracy in speaking is the obtained scores of the participants on the speaking part of a PET. The score on accuracy was determined by the Grammar and Vocabulary criterion of the Assessing Speaking Performance-Level B1 of PET, as it was best matched with Ellis’s (2004) description of accuracy, which includes five points of the overall score (15). This part of the test was scored taking into account control of simple grammatical forms, attempts to use complex grammatical forms and using appropriate vocabulary to give and exchange views on familiar topics.

1.5.3. Complexity in Speaking

Complexity in speaking is “the extent to which the learners produce elaborate language” (Ellis, 2004, p. 340). In the present study, complexity in speaking is operationally defined as the scores the participants obtain in the speaking section of PET. The participants were evaluated on complexity by the Interactive and Communication Criterion of the Assessing Speaking Performance-Level B1 of PET, as it was best matched with Ellis’s (2004) description of complexity (Ellis, 2004, p. 117) which includes five points of the overall score.

1.5.4. Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

NLP is generally defined as “an approach towards developing mental and physical strategies which combine aspects of behavioral psychology, linguistics, hypnosis, modeling and common sense” (Beale, 2010). A more specific definition which is more related to TEFL is: “A complex set of beliefs, skills and behaviors that can help a person communicate more accurately, effectively and respectfully” (Baker & Rinvoluceri, 2005).

1.6. Significance of the Study

Hunter (2011) states that one major issue that continues to challenge language teachers is how to ensure that learners develop accuracy and complexity as well as fluency in their speaking. Speaking fluently in a foreign or a second language has always been an inseparable goal in language teaching and learning and a desirable one, as Richards (2008) puts it, “The mastery of speaking skills in English is a priority for many second language learners” (p. 19).

Richards (2008) goes on arguing that because the learners consider speaking a priority, they often evaluate their success in learning the language as well as the effectiveness of their course on the basis of how much they feel they have improved in their speaking. Since this skill is a valuable one, there have been numerous studies and researches in order to understand the process of learning how to speak and applying the knowledge gained from the results to come up with the best way to approach the teaching of oral skills.

Some studies have aimed at defining what fluency is and what the criteria are for determining a fluent speaker, Lennon (1990) investigated the variables which are good indicators of fluency by classifying them into two groups of temporal variables such as unpinned words per minute, pinned words per minute, total unfilled pauses and so on, and dysfluency markers which include repetitions, self-correction, filled pauses and self-corrected words.

Others like Riggensbach (1991) thought there was more to fluency than what Lennon claimed and analyzed speech in interaction. Yet others like Foster and Skehan (1996) investigated the impact of planning on fluency and accuracy. Then there was an idea that there is a trade-off among fluency, complexity, and accuracy in speaking. Moreover there were studies conducted on the relationship between working memory and accuracy and fluency (Tavares, 2008). There has also been empirical studies that have addressed the teaching of speaking strategies (Cohen, Weaver, & Li, 1998).

In the international scale a great deal of empirical studies address the issues of fluency, accuracy, and complexity in L2 speaking since they are viewed as important factors in the development of L2 speaking competence (Diniz, 2009).

All these studies and numerous others were conducted for the sole reason of finding the best approach to teaching and learning speaking in an L2. Richards (2008) claims that “oral skills have hardly been neglected in EFL/ESL courses (witness the huge number of conversation and other speaking course books in the market), thought how to best approach the teaching of oral skills has long been the focus of methodological debate” (p. 19).