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Field applications of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) to improve communication styles in psycho-pedagogical centers

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Abstract

Achieving effective communication within psycho-pedagogical centers is a fundamental element for the success of their psychological, educational, and social mission. It is also a vital factor in raising awareness among professionals in this field regarding the importance of their leadership roles, increasing scientific and productive efficiency, and solving practical challenges. As former specialists in this field, we have observed that some psycho-pedagogical centers—much like other social institutions—suffer from daily disputes and recurring conflicts between various parties. This has hindered the realization of the true objectives set for these centers. Accordingly, this research paper aims to propose a set of tools and techniques from the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). As an applied approach that places great emphasis on the communication process, NLP serves as a means to achieve desired goals at the individual, group, and institutional levels.

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Introduction

Specialized centers are considered social institutions that seek to achieve educational, psychological, and social objectives. In order to attain these objectives, they rely on several fundamental components, among which communication occupies a central position, as it constitutes the foundation of social systems and the cornerstone of relationships established among individuals for various purposes. Indeed, individuals cannot live in isolation or without interaction with others. In this regard, *Watzlawick* states: "One cannot not communicate."

According to *Norbert Sillamy*, every living being—not only humans—constantly needs to acquire information about its internal state and the external world in which it lives. Communication is defined by *Anzieu and J.-Y. Martin* as “the set of psychological and organic processes through which an operational relationship is established between one or more senders and one or more receivers in order to achieve specific goals” (Anzieu & Martin, 1968, p. 131). *Norbert Sillamy* also defines communication as “a relationship between individuals involving the voluntary or involuntary transmission of information with the aim of informing or influencing the individual or the receiving group” (Sillamy, 1994, p. 58). Furthermore, *Jean-Claude Abric* defines communication as “the set of processes through which exchanges of information and meaning occur between individuals in a given situation” (Abric, 2004, p. 29). Accordingly, communication is an interactive process through which ideas, information, and attitudes are transmitted among individuals. It constitutes the basis of human relationships, which refer to interaction among individuals in various domains of life. Human relations exist wherever individuals cooperate in work in pursuit of shared goals (El-Harfa, p. 35).

J.-C. Abric emphasizes that, in a communication situation, the relational climate—that is, the human relationship—prevails over the techniques employed. He argues that the quality of the relationship determines the quality of communication; therefore, it is not the individual who possesses the greatest amount of information who communicates most effectively, but rather the one who is capable of creating a harmonious relational context that facilitates expression and enhances influence.

From this perspective, effective communication is that which generates positive interaction and exchange among individuals, contributes to psychological balance, promotes social adjustment, and leads to positive behavioral change. Based on our professional experience as psychologists and speech therapists working in psycho-pedagogical centers, we observed the existence of various conflicts among staff members—as is the case in most social organizations—which hindered the proper fulfillment of the core mission that should be prioritized. This situation highlighted the need to reflect on and seek appropriate solutions to bridge this gap.

In this context, many specialists and researchers, despite differences in their theoretical orientations and fields of interest, have sought to propose effective methods and techniques to enhance communication skills. Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is one of the approaches that has placed significant emphasis on the communication process in both its verbal and non-verbal dimensions, with particular focus on the latter. According to *Catherine Cudicio*, NLP represents a new perspective on communication and human behavior.

Before addressing the techniques of Neuro-Linguistic Programming and their importance in achieving effective communication, it is useful to present its historical background, the main assumptions on which it is based, and some of its key concepts. It is also necessary, first, to introduce psycho-pedagogical centers as the applied context of the present study:

Psycho-Pedagogical Centers

Psycho-pedagogical centers are social institutions concerned with providing psychological and educational services to individuals with special needs, particularly those with intellectual disabilities at varying levels. These services are delivered through psycho-pedagogical programs tailored to their cognitive, linguistic, and motor abilities, as well as to their emotional, psychological, and social characteristics. Such centers operate under the supervision of a multidisciplinary (pluridisciplinary) educational team that seeks to train individuals with intellectual disabilities to acquire adaptive behavior in both its psychological and social dimensions.

1. History of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) emerged in the early 1970s through the work of Richard Bandler and John Grinder.

Richard Bandler was initially trained in mathematics and computer science. He later turned his interest toward psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Bandler was influenced by the work of Fritz Perls, a leading figure of the Gestalt school, and collaborated with Virginia Satir, a specialist in family therapy.

John Grinder, on the other hand, was a linguistics specialist and a professor at the University of San Francisco. He was strongly influenced by the work of the renowned linguist Noam Chomsky, with whom he worked, as well as by George Miller in the field of cognitive science at Rockefeller University. Grinder later became a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he met Bandler.

Together, Bandler and Grinder contributed to the study of psychotherapeutic practices, drawing inspiration from Gestalt therapy, group and family therapy, and hypnotherapy as developed by Milton Erickson. Through their collaboration, they proposed specific concepts for understanding human behavior and developed different behavioral models of communication, which they termed Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP).

Definition of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is considered one of the branches that has grown and developed rapidly within applied psychology. It contributes to understanding individual differences in human behavior and helps enhance perception, learning, and self-understanding. This field offers training and practical skills aimed at achieving effective

interaction and communication, as well as obtaining creative outcomes (Joseph O'Connor & John Seymour, 2003, p. 13).

According to *Catherine Cudicio* (2004), NLP is defined as “the study of individual and collective psychological reality through observation and standardization techniques” (p. 34).

Robert Dilts' Definition

Robert Dilts defines Neuro-Linguistic Programming as referring to the three components that have the greatest influence on human experience: the neurological component, programming, and language. The nervous system plays an organizing role in regulating bodily functions; language plays a crucial role in communication and interaction with others; while programming refers to the automatic behaviors produced by the individual from birth and subsequently reproduced throughout life in different contexts (Cudicio, 2004, p. 35).

O'Connor and Seymour's Definition

J. O'Connor and J. Seymour define NLP as “a description of the fundamental dynamic processes of the mind and language, the way these processes interact, and how they influence our behavior” (O'Connor & Seymour, 1995, p. 16).

Ann Linder's Definition

Ann Linder defines Neuro-Linguistic Programming as “a set of tools that enable learning, change, and more effective communication.”

Furthermore, *Abdel Salam* (2008) indicates that learning NLP skills can lead to positive changes in an individual's thinking, behavior, and performance, while also helping to identify obstacles that hinder creativity, excellence, and achievement.

3. Assumptions of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

Neuro-Linguistic Programming is based on fourteen assumptions. However, only seven assumptions will be presented here due to their direct relevance to the topic of communication. These assumptions are as follows:

1. The Map Is Not the Territory

(La carte n'est pas le territoire)

The “map” refers to our subjective perception of the external world, whereas the “territory” represents reality itself. Thus, our perception is shaped by our personal filters—such as beliefs, emotions, and experiences—through which we interpret external events and information. Consequently, our perception may not reflect objective reality, yet it remains real and valid for us.

2. Effective Communication Requires Understanding the Other According to Their Own Model of the World

An effective relationship with another person requires adapting to their subjective perception of the external world and understanding their personal model of reality.

3. Behind Every Behavior There Is a Positive Intention

Influenced by *Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs*, NLP assumes that human behavior is always driven by a positive intention aimed at satisfying basic needs.

4. One Cannot Not Communicate

This assumption was proposed by *Watzlawick*, a member of the *Palo Alto School*. NLP emphasizes both verbal communication, which reflects our thoughts and beliefs, and non-verbal communication, which provides emotional and unconscious information. Even the refusal to communicate with others constitutes, in itself, a form of communication.

5. There Is No Failure, Only Feedback

According to NLP, there is no such thing as failure; rather, there is feedback resulting from previous experiences. This feedback enables individuals to use past outcomes to develop themselves and enhance their abilities in the future.

6. The Meaning of Communication Lies in the Response It Elicits

Regardless of the sender's intention in a communication situation, communication has meaning only through the response it produces in the receiver. Therefore, the way ideas and information are conveyed determines the type of response obtained.

7. Every Individual Possesses Resources and Abilities That Enable Positive Behavioral Change

NLP assumes that every individual has internal resources and capabilities that allow them to bring about positive changes in their behavior.

Representational Systems

According to Neuro-Linguistic Programming, achieving effective communication requires two fundamental conditions:

- Self-awareness, and
- Awareness of others.

This is achieved through what is known as representational systems, which consist of three main types:

- Visual representational system,

- Auditory representational system, and
- Kinesthetic representational system.

As interaction with the external world occurs through the primary sensory channels—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic—each individual processes information predominantly through one dominant sensory channel. Accordingly, individuals can be classified into three patterns, each characterized by specific traits, which are summarized in the following table.

Characteristics of Representational Systems

Characteristics	Visual Style	Auditory Style	Kinesthetic Style
Body posture	Tense and somewhat rigid	Relaxed	Very relaxed
Breathing	Shallow and rapid	Moderately slow	Deep and slow
Voice	Sharp tone, fast rhythm	Resonant, well-timed voice, moderate rhythm	Low voice, slow rhythm with frequent pauses
Reading style	Prefers visual descriptions; visualizes ideas and events	Enjoys dialogue; may hum while reading	Moves while reading; shows rocking or vibrating movements
Communication	Calm, speaks little; does not enjoy listening much	Enjoys listening and speaking	Frequently uses gestures and body movements while speaking
Emotional expression	Stares to express anger; brightens when happy	Expresses emotions verbally; may shout when happy or angry	“Explodes” with joy or anger; expresses emotions through movement
Frequently used words	<i>I see, I notice, I observe, I imagine, from my point of view...</i>	<i>I hear, I say, I keep silent, I speak, I shout...</i>	<i>I feel, I sense, I react, I relax...</i>

Eye Movements and Representational Systems

Eye movements help us understand the speaker's thinking processes and their sensory representational model.

- **Visual:** When a person looks upward—either straight ahead, to the right, or to the left—they are generally in a state of visual processing.
- **Visual Recall:** Looking up to the left indicates recalling an image that has been seen before.
- **Visual Construction:** Looking up to the right indicates constructing images that have not been seen before (e.g., imagining a red banana).
- **Auditory Recall:** Looking to the left side indicates recalling something that has been heard before.
- **Auditory Construction:** Looking to the right side indicates constructing sounds that have not been heard before.
- **Internal (Digital) Dialogue:** Looking down to the left reflects an internal dialogue, where the person is talking to themselves internally.
- **Kinesthetic:** Looking down to the right indicates the recall of feelings or bodily sensations.

Techniques of Effective Communication

1. Calibration

(*La calibration/calibrage*)

Calibration is defined as “the observation of the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements that characterize a person, based on one's own experience, at a specific moment” (Catherine Cudicio, 2004, p. 471).

It also refers to accurately perceiving the state of an individual or a group by reading non-verbal signals (Christine Sutherland, 2008, p. 32).

Calibration is therefore the ability to perceive and discriminate through observing body movements and attentive listening. This includes noticing body posture, breathing patterns, facial expressions, and the words used, which guide us in identifying the preferred representational system of the person we are communicating with. Calibration also involves observing eye movements.

All of this helps us determine the sensory channel through which the person is communicating. For example, when someone says, “*Is this clear to you?*” or “*Look, I will explain this to you,*” this indicates a visual system. Another person may say, “*Listen, I will tell you something,*” which reflects an auditory system, while someone who says, “*I feel that you did not understand me,*” is using a kinesthetic system. To achieve effective communication, it is sufficient to align ourselves with the same channel used by the speaker.

2. Synchronization (Pacing)

Synchronization refers to “adopting elements of another person's behavior in order to enhance rapport” (Joseph O'Connor & John Seymour, 1995, p. 244).

Pacing a person involves matching both their verbal and non-verbal processes. It is an effective way to “go with the flow” of the person with whom one seeks to communicate. According to *Bandler*, it is a powerful means of entering the other person’s model of the world.

This process involves subtle mimicry (discreet mimetism), such as matching general body posture, head position, facial expressions, tone and rhythm of voice, and breathing rhythm. Through this, a positive relationship and conversational harmony can be established.

A common example is a mother synchronizing with her child, particularly in language use. Establishing a good relationship is a skill that minimizes perceived differences between individuals at an unconscious level. We tend to like and feel affinity toward people who resemble us in thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors.

NLP experts recommend that when communication appears ineffective—meaning that the message does not resonate with the other party—synchronization should be employed.

3. Active Listening

(*L’écoute active*)

Inspired by *Carl Rogers’ theory*, active listening is considered a fundamental component of effective communication. It is effective when it is free from judgment and evaluation, allowing the other person to feel accepted.

Active listening means genuinely paying attention to the speaker without thinking about anything else. It involves full cognitive engagement, including attention, concentration, and understanding. This requires reformulating or paraphrasing the speaker’s statements to ensure accurate understanding. Paraphrasing makes the speaker feel that their message has been understood and that they are the focus of attention.

Active listening also requires avoiding interpretation. Words used by the speaker carry meanings specific to them, which may differ from the meanings attributed by the listener.

4. Framing (Mettre un cadre)

Framing requires clarifying to the person we are communicating with the way the process or task will be carried out, similar to a teacher in an educational setting who first presents a program and then explains the methods and procedures to their students.

Creating a positive relational context relies on the ability to establish a supportive and safe relationship with the person we are addressing. NLP assumes that, in order to listen effectively and interact intelligently, the individual must first be placed within a “frame”, which primarily involves providing a sense of security.

Example: Consider an internship in an institution. If individuals do not have sufficient information about the schedule (working hours, break times, leaving times, etc.), they may feel uncertain or anxious. Consequently, they will seek clarification and ask questions on the first day. Providing clear framing from the beginning ensures a sense of safety and reduces uncertainty, facilitating better engagement and communication.

5. Beliefs

NLP assigns great importance to beliefs, as understanding the influence of beliefs on behavior is essential for achieving harmonious communication.

Table: Relationship Between Event/Action, Belief, Feeling, Assumption, Internal State, Behavior, and Judgment

Event / Action	Belief	Feeling	Assumption	Internal State	Behavior	Judgment
An event or action occurs	The individual’s belief about the event	The emotional response triggered by the perception	The assumption about the meaning or cause of the event	The internal psychological or emotional state	The observable behavior resulting from the feeling	The evaluation or judgment of self, others, or the event

Explanation: beliefs may not always reflect reality, but they shape perception, feelings, and behavior.

In this model, an event or action generates a perception, which in turn triggers a feeling, leading to a behavior. As stated in the NLP principle, “the map is not the territory”, meaning that beliefs are not always accurate.

If we adopt the principle that every person has a positive intention behind their behavior, we focus on identifying that intention. It is often helpful to ask the speaker about their positive intention if we feel discomfort during communication. Taking the time to do so can prevent many conflicts.

Similarly, issuing judgments or criticisms is generally unproductive, as it wastes both energy and time.

6. Perceptual Position (La Position de Perception)

The NLP concept of “perceptual position” encourages us to “put ourselves in others’ shoes”, which is often easier than offering criticism. In communication, misunderstandings frequently arise because we fail to see the world from the perspective of others. Just as an object viewed from the back does not appear the same as when viewed from the

front, our mental perceptions differ depending on our personal viewpoint. Each individual has a subjective perception of the world around them.

Richard Bandler and John Grinder developed the Perceptual Position technique to resolve conflicts by shifting one's perspective—that is, imagining oneself in the position of the other person.

To achieve effective communication, the following techniques are essential:

- Calibration
- Synchronization (Pacing)
- Active Listening
- Framing (Setting the Frame)

It is also important to pay attention to individual differences, as each person processes information according to their own model, and all models are considered important to identify and understand.

Conclusion: In conclusion, a deep understanding and application of NLP techniques contribute significantly to reducing professional conflicts in most institutions across various fields. Studies, such as Sahebalzamani (2014), have highlighted the efficacy of NLP-based programs in improving job satisfaction and the overall quality of life. Furthermore, it is argued that NLP strategies can modify undesirable behaviors through effective communication with oneself and others. Mastering these communication skills fosters harmony and understanding among administrative and educational staff, reduces work stress, and enhances achievement motivation. Ultimately, these techniques support the core mission of psycho-pedagogical centers: providing specialized psycho-educational care for individuals with intellectual disabilities to achieve their psychological, social, and vocational integration. The effectiveness of the proposed solutions remains contingent upon their actual application in the field. Moreover, these NLP techniques can be generalized to other interactive contexts, including all levels of education, commercial transactions, and various social and family relationships.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical standards for research in the social and educational sciences. The research is based on professional field observations, theoretical analysis, and applied methodological reflection, without involving experimental intervention, vulnerable populations, or the collection of sensitive personal data. No psychological testing, medical procedures, or intrusive methods were employed. All interpretations were made with respect for professional confidentiality, institutional integrity, and the dignity of individuals working within psycho-pedagogical centers. As the study does not involve human subjects directly or the use of identifiable personal data, formal ethical approval was not required.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed substantially to the development of this manuscript.

- **Dr. Souad Merghem** contributed to the conceptualization of the study, the theoretical framework, and the drafting of the manuscript.
- **Dr. Hassina Yousfi** contributed to the methodological orientation, analysis of communication practices in psycho-pedagogical settings, and critical revision of the manuscript.
- **Prof. Amel Bourouba** supervised the scientific direction of the research, contributed to the interpretation of findings, and reviewed the manuscript for intellectual and academic coherence.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, without any financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could influence the objectivity or integrity of the study.

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