

Beyond Words: A Communicative and Intercultural Approach to Language Teaching and Learning with the Use of NLP

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Abstract

There are many Tsuru Bunka University students taking English classes such as Discussion, Debate, and Communicative English who aim to become ESL (English as a second language) instructors. As a part of their preparation, it is important to highlight that proficiency in grammar, reading, and writing are not enough to make a language instructor, but strategies for working in diverse classrooms with diverse groups of students are also needed. NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) presents a framework that supports the learning experience. Paying special attention to intercultural communication competence in the language learning curriculum will enable the novice language instructor to optimize his or her teaching practice. This article argues for the importance of language learning, discusses education practices, and describes ESL classes in the Japanese context. When teaching languages, NLP

techniques such as rapport, modeling, framing and reframing, and anchoring, along with intercultural communication competence, can be helpful tools for increasing classroom effectiveness and making a positive impact on classroom dynamics.

As many of the students at Tsuru Bunka University aim to become ESL (English as a second language) instructors, it is important to highlight strategies such as NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) and, as well as the need to incorporate intercultural communication competency as part of the language learning curriculum. This article argues for the importance of the need to learn language learnings, discusses education practices, and describes ESL classes in the Japanese context. It also argues that NLP techniques such as rapport, modeling, framing and reframing, and anchoring, in connection with intercultural communication competency, can be helpful tools for increasing classroom effectiveness and making a positive impact on classroom the dynamics of the classroom.

Introduction

Certain characteristics of Japanese traditional culture are highly prized in the context of the education system. These include perseverance, diligence, hard work, respect, and manners. Children are taught to have the right mental attitude for achieving their goals and are encouraged to engage in complex group activities and routine cleaning tasks. Education in Japan is aligned with its collectivist culture, which means that individuals tend to see themselves as members of a group and

put the needs of the group before their personal needs. Because of this, Japanese education emphasizes “a greater pressure toward uniformity and homogeneity” (Sato, 2004) and minimizes the importance of personal opinions. This mindset is deeply embedded in Japan’s cultural and education systems, shaping group members’ perception of how things should be done and what is expected of them. As a result, communication in the classroom tends to take the form of one-sided instruction, similar to Paulo Freire’s description of the banking system education in which “the individual is a spectator, not re-creator” (1972, p. 247).

In Freire’s context, teachers are considered sources of information and students merely receptors. However, all around the world, the goal of education is being re-evaluated to fit the demands of a rapidly changing environment. Accordingly, the methods and approaches for learning and teaching English as a second language (ESL) have changed greatly over the years (O’Neill, 2008). In the context of teaching and learning communicative English in Japan, teachers and students need to work together and communicate openly without fear of making mistakes. Yet, lack of communication in class is one of the main challenges facing many students and educators in Japan (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). At the university level in Japan, most students already have a basic knowledge of English from their high-school classes. However, while students have been given a solid foundation in grammar and vocabulary, they lack communication skills and often feel too timid to speak in public. There

are also many students whose English ability may not be advanced enough to communicate freely, or to comprehend and keep up with classroom discussions (Chapple, 2015).

The popularity of the English language in Japan and worldwide is rooted in the global influence of the United States. In a world that is no longer dominated by armed forces, the use of language and the propagation of popular culture from the US and other Western countries constitutes a form of soft power. The internationalization of markets and the use of English as the “official” language in the business world has also boosted the global demand for English language learning. Consequently, there has been a growing interest in the flow and transmission of culture, and the process of communication between people from different countries and languages.

In the context of globalization, the Japanese Ministry of Education has been determined to improve internationalization (*kokusaika*) by focusing on English language education. As a result, more and more classes are being taught in English (Schneer, 2007). Beyond the acquisition of a new set of language skills, learning English in higher education increases students’ understanding of how language works and fosters a greater awareness of how the mother tongue functions. At the same time, by promoting an appreciation of the customs and values of other cultures, language education helps students to develop a new perspective on their own culture. Given the goals of modern language education, English classes with

an emphasis on communication can be very useful in preparing domestic students for study abroad or global careers where the expression of opinions and understanding of diversity will be both encouraged and expected. Emphasizing communication skills can also help young people to overcome their fears, anxieties, and limitations.

Promoting the Right Environment for Learning

Classrooms can be seen as prototypes of society. A teacher is like the leader of a country; in this role, the teacher can choose to be either a dictator, forcing students to memorize facts and behave in a uniform way, or a leader, working to maximize learning while respecting students' differences and supporting them to achieve their goals. Ideally, in a classroom, the teacher and students should be familiar with the same cultural norms and should naturally develop a common understanding. However, many Japanese classrooms reflect another scenario, in which the teachers have difficulty motivating students and students feel frustrated at being forced to behave in a way which is unfamiliar to them (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). This generates a state of confusion for some students, as they are not sure exactly how or why things are being done a certain way. Many teachers have been educated in a traditional style. As such, they are not accustomed to coexisting with cultural differences or with students expressing personal opinions confidently and directly. As Weisburgh emphasizes, "Adult educators, historically, model their teaching after the classroom lecturers they

remember from their childhood." (1990). This background may leave little room for discussion of how students who share a different culture and understanding can overcome personal fears of expression in the classroom. Given these limitations, ensuring there are instructors from a variety of backgrounds can contribute to the diversity in Japanese higher education classrooms and improve the practice of communicative English.

Despite being an expert on the subject being taught, an instructor needs to draw on a variety of strategies to maintain a good and professional teacher-student relationship and to ensure that each student's needs are being met (Marzano & Toth, 2013, p. 47). However, the reality of teaching is that every new class brings new issues, on top of which teachers must carry out administrative work. As a result, teachers can easily start to feel burned out. Unfortunately, it seems that few institutions understand how demanding the work in any classroom can be and how important it is to support teachers' growth. NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) offers instructors a way to learn new strategies for teaching and keeping better control of their classes.

NLP and Its Use in the ESL Classroom

In the 1970s, the psychologist Albert Mehrabian suggested that nonverbal cues had an extremely substantial impact on communication, as such cues could make faster impressions than speech itself (Vrij & Mann, 2005, p. 64). Therefore, good instructors need to have more than knowledge of the subject; they need to develop an awareness of

their verbal and nonverbal expressions and make use of techniques and methodologies that better transmit knowledge to a broader range of students. One such technique used by teachers around the world is NLP. Developed by Richard Bandler and John Grinder at the University of California in Santa Cruz in the mid-1970s, NLP is about “excellence, and how people act, talk and communicate” (Byram, 2000, p. 441). NLP is often described as the study of the relationships between the brain, language, and behavior (Bradbury, 2003). Bandler and Grinder were both interested in how certain people were able to communicate more effectively and exert a greater influence than others (Hanes, 2006). They studied highly successful therapists such as Virginia Satir (family therapy), Fritz Perls (gestalt therapy), and Milton Erickson (language patterns), identifying the communication techniques they used to facilitate positive change in others. Among the various techniques available, here, I highlight rapport, modeling, reframing, and anchoring.

Rapport

Rapport is a complex phenomenon that can be defined as responsiveness to the self or others (O’Connor, 2004). It can also be defined as a positive, harmonious, and sympathetic attention or relation to another person. Rapport is one of the most prominent features of unconscious human interaction and is often one of the first elements to emerge in any relationship. Rapport can be experienced as a commonality of perspective, being in tune with each other, and sharing a mutual understanding that is facilitated in part by communication that occurs easily.

In a one-on-one situation, people who have good rapport with each other tend to reflect and match each other in posture, gesture, and eye contact in order to connect energetically. This technique of mirroring involves mimicking subtle behaviors in the other person, such as speech patterns, body language, language patterns, and pace, tempo, pitch, tone, and volume of speech.

As educators, facial expression is the first tool used to build rapport with students and to set them at ease. For example, when teachers smile in class, students unconsciously have a feeling that the teacher is happy to see them; this in turn produces a pleasant feeling and creates an overall congenial atmosphere. Teachers’ body language should be alert and confident, avoiding hands on hips, folded arms, or feet together. Teachers should also treat all students equally and be courteous to everyone. This might be a challenge, given that many teachers have favorite students in class (usually the students with the same communication style as the teacher).

Rapport, therefore, is about mutuality and not domination. For rapport to develop, teachers should avoid authoritarian behavior. Instead, they should endeavor to be more of a coach and equal learning partner, building trust with their students (Cottringer, 2003). When a teacher has a positive rapport with students and shows genuine interest in their learning, it tends to improve students’ academic work and motivates them to stay on task (Wittler, 2004).

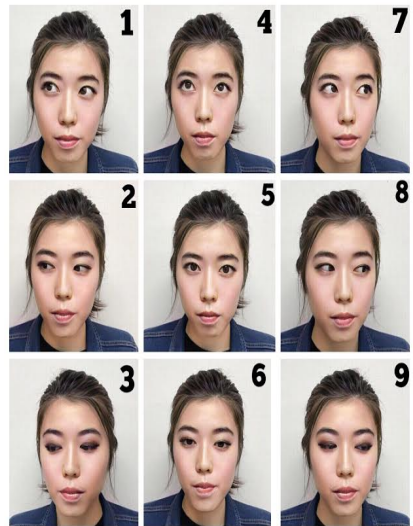
VAKOG

Early researchers of NLP noticed that people experience the world through their senses (or modalities) and store those experiences in their brains as visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory representations (the VAKOG senses, also known as *the representation system* (Byran, 2000) or *preferred representation system* (Madonik, 2001)). A person's representation system is involved in nearly everything he or she does, including learning, remembering, planning, fantasizing, and problem solving. Many teachers have noted how students' modality strengths and weaknesses should be taken into consideration, as students learn more effectively when instruction is modified to match their preferred modality patterns. Since the 1970s the preferred representation system has been used in education and according to surveys students have learned more when the instructor matches their preferred system¹.

In English, one can identify students' preferred representation system by observing the sensory metaphors they use, for example: "I see what you mean" (visual); "I hear you" (auditory); or "I feel you", "I feel I can do it" (kinesthetic). However, in Japanese, the language is more established and standardized, with less freedom to choose metaphors. This makes it a bit more challenging to identify students' learning styles. One

approach is to observe students' eye movements (see figure 01), as differences in people's body movements are linked to how they are thinking. In NLP, these movements are referred to as eye-accessing cues (Demmin, 2003) because they are the visual cues that let the observer know how people are accessing information. When people look up, they are generally connecting with pictures. Moving one's eyes downward and to the right is connected to kinesthetic sensations, feelings, and one's own self-talk. Moving one's eyes left and right horizontally at the line of sight invokes the auditory channels. Being able to discern the preferred visual, auditory, and kinesthetic sequences of the person with whom we want to communicate can help us to convey our message to that person in his or her own language style, making for more effective communication.

Fig. 01



¹ NLP World. (2017). *NLP training - VAKOG*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nlpworld.co.uk/nlp-training-vakog/> [Accessed 25 Oct. 2017].

- 1- Upper Left: External Internal Memory (Imagining something in pictures)
- 2- Lateral Left: Auditory Memory (imagining something in sounds)
- 3- Lower Left: Emotional Memory and feelings (kinesthetic processing)
- 4- Up: smell
- 5- Central Focus: Sensory Synthesis
- 6- Down: Taste
- 7- Upper right: Construction of visual images and symbols (Remembering Something in pictures)
- 8- Lateral right: Construction of sounds and words (Remembering something in sounds)
- 9- Lower right: Emotional memory and body sensation recall (Talking to one's self)²

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This approach often produces amazing results, even though it is only a model. In order to gain confidence in reading eye-accessing cues, teachers should start by asking questions and observing students' subsequent eye movements. If students keep looking up during the conversation, they are accessing visual memories. In this case, a greater sense of rapport could be gained by providing visual information. Similarly, if students are looking to the sides, they may be accessing auditory information, i.e. remembering or imagining sounds. Auditory thinkers spend a lot of time looking down and to the left while thinking. Kinesthetic thinkers, on the other hand, will look down and to the

² Hypnosis, K. S. (n.d.). Understanding NLP - Part 1. Retrieved November 08, 2017, from <https://www.klusster.com/portfolios/koreysnyder-s-portfolio/contents/393>

right and tend to move more slowly than others. A teacher who talks too quickly to someone who is a kinesthetic thinker will not communicate well. As these examples suggest, when a teacher is more aware of how students are accessing the information being taught, it will facilitate the teaching/learning process. Therefore, it is very important for teachers to adapt to students' visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learning styles in order to communicate and transmit information effectively.

In addition to the VAKOG senses, individuals' personal and cultural experiences, values, and beliefs influence their perception of the world and are stored in their memory. Students may also be more left-brained (meaning they are more rational and analytical) or more right-brained (meaning they are more open to creative and intuitive explanations, discussions, and experiential learning). Both groups of students must be accommodated in the classroom (Cottringer, 2003).

Modeling

In NLP, successful behavior should be observed, replicated, and modeled. Modeling is one of the foundations of NLP (Powell, 2011), based on the presupposition that if someone else can do something extraordinary, anyone can. Modeling involves the discovery of what makes another person perform so well in order to achieve an outcome. This discovery can occur through close, trained observation that anyone should be able to undertake. However, the key is to identify the thought strategies and patterns being used, not merely to copy certain behaviors.

Whether on a conscious or unconscious level, the first step in attempting a new task is to access our memory archives for information on others who have successfully completed a similar task. For example, at the beginning of my teaching career, I used to model myself after one of my university professors who was both likeable and inspiring. He had a very pleasant voice and always smiled. Every time he spoke it was as if he was sharing some good news. On my first day in the classroom as a teacher, I tried to speak in a similar tone and kept smiling as he had. As a result, I felt more confident to keep going and improve my teaching skills and personal teaching style.

The three steps to successful modeling are as follows: 1) Gather information by focusing on “what” the person does (behavior and physiology); “how” they do it (internal thinking strategies), and “why” they do it (supporting beliefs and assumptions) – as a side note, it is necessary to consider how to gather the information in a way that is respectful to the subject being modeled. 2) Identify what elements are significant or relevant and what exactly the subject does that makes a difference. 3) Design and organize patterns into a model for use in a certain context (Powell, 2011). Once the information on how to apply a particular skill is obtained, the learning can be transformed into a model from which others can also benefit. NLP modeling is an excellent process that can accelerate the learning of skills. In cooking, a recipe is a model for how to create a particular dish. In architecture, drawings are models of how to create buildings, large

structures, and other edifices. Educators can also make use of modeling to gain valuable teaching skills they lack.

Framing and reframing

Framing is how we make sense of something and how we structure our experiences (Casale, 2012). As we experience something, we automatically decode what has happened and, depending the context, might frame the situation positively or negatively. Memories can be good or bad, but they are not responsible for our emotions. One part of the brain (the hippocampus) is responsible for the storage, retrieval, and reproduction of long-term memories, while another (the amygdala) is responsible for producing emotions (McGonical, 2012). It is possible to change the emotion associated with a memory because emotions are not stored in the memory; they are merely reactions to memories.

Reframing involves a change of perspective – placing something in a different setting, context, or frame in order to change its meaning. It is possible to reframe a situation because its content or meaning is determined by its context or what one chooses to focus on. The person experiencing the event can look at it and interpret it in various ways without changing the event itself. In the case of a student who feels extremely disappointed because of a low grade on an assignment, framing and reframing can be a useful tool to encourage the student. In the NLP approach, there is no such thing as failure, only feedback. It is essential that students understand that a mistake is not synonymous with failure.

In the case of the student who is disappointed because of a low grade, the teacher should ask the student to look at the situation from a third-person perspective, to distance him- or herself from the situation and to frame it as if it were a picture. The low grade is only one learning experience among many; like every situation in life, it can be seen either positively or negatively. Therefore, the more important question is what the student learned from the situation and what he or she could do differently in the future. Teachers can tell students that each one of us has a little museum full of pictures that represent our experiences and can teach us a lot. In the case of framing and reframing, teachers help students to put situations into perspective. For example, if a student comes to class with a preconceived negative idea about the subject, such as “this is too difficult and I can’t learn it,” the teacher should help the student to reframe and jettison the negative belief. By using positive language to reframe situations, teachers can create a more positive environment in their classrooms. Students should be encouraged to continually grow their capacity to accentuate the positive, as this ability will put them in control of their life and increase their self-esteem.

Anchoring

An anchor is a stimulus that always evokes the same reaction and desired feelings (Sciropoulos, 2005). It can function either consciously or unconsciously and can be observed or take the form of a change of inner state. An anchor is a way of conditioning and

stimulating the brain to be in a given state, as well as creating a routine. Routines are a fundamental part of our lives that we consciously or unconsciously depend upon in our daily actions and behaviors. A teacher can use various anchors to set the mood of the class, to transmit key messages, and to be less repetitive in giving instructions. Since the concept and the signal are connected and anchored to one another, in many situations, words become unnecessary.

Anchors can be verbal or nonverbal. Given that there will likely be students who are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners in the classroom, it is a good idea to design and utilize various styles of anchors. For example, teachers can designate a certain location in the room for when they want to get the attention of the class, another for when it is necessary to discipline the class, and yet another for when it is time to assign homework. In each case, the action must be unique to the location and used consistently. As students become accustomed to these connections, the work of the instructor will be easier.

Some anchors may need to be explained to elicit an immediate response. For example, in classes where students are very noisy and chatty, it may be a good idea to start the class with music. About five minutes before the lesson starts, the instructor can play some music. On the first day, the instructor should explain that, while the music is playing, the class has not yet started and students are free to chat, take a nap, check their phones, etc. However, as soon as the music stops, the lesson begins and their full attention is

required. As the music ends, everyone knows it is time to be quiet and there is no need to continuously ask students to pay attention. The truly distinctive effect of anchors is that they become rituals that tie the class together through a shared understanding of what is expected.

Establishing goals

In order to avoid minor behavioral problems, it is necessary to set the overall tone of the class on the first day and raise students' awareness of their goals. One of the basic elements of NLP is that knowing what one wants is an important part of obtaining one's goals. Many university students attend classes just because they are supposed to, yet they do not have a specific goal or give much thought to what they will do with their university degree. Such students tend to become distracted and disturb the class more often.

On the first day of class, after a brief introduction, the instructor should present the class rules. This is particularly effective here in Japan where people are generally used to established rules. Once students know the rules of the classroom, they will feel more comfortable and secure knowing what is expected. Students are often concerned about what they need to do to pass the class. Giving students all the information on the first day will avoid later anxiety. These rules should be applied to all students. In classes that include international students, instructors should take the time to make sure that the class rules are clear.

Students should understand the importance of having a positive attitude in

class and the difference between having a participative attitude and being a passive learner. As for attitude, teachers should reinforce that questions are welcome and all classmates are part of the same team, and as a team everyone should be supportive, courteous and respectful toward each other. Educators who have a good understanding of the NLP model should always emphasize and focus on the positive.

After introducing the rules, the instructor can give students a piece of paper for them to write down what they expect from the instructor and from the class (with the option of anonymity). After collecting the answers, the instructor reads them out loud to the whole class (without disclosing the names, if given; the instructor is building rapport and does not want to embarrass students). Most likely there will be comments like "I expect your class to be very short with no homework and no tests." Comments like this can be very positive because they give teachers the chance to talk about personal responsibility and reinforce the class rules. As the instructor reads, he or she could add bits of dramatization, such as "Oh, that is such a great idea! Thirty-minute lessons would be wonderful! No homework and no tests sound good to me. I won't have to spend time correcting tests and homework!" Then, after a brief pause, as if remembering something important, the instructor could say, "Oh wait, I cannot do that because when I was hired, I made a *promise* that I would teach for the whole period, and make sure you are learning. If I only teach for thirty minutes I will be breaking the agreement I made." It is

important for students to understand that homework and tests are just practice to assess their learning. In this example, the word ‘promise’ is emphasized because it carries so much weight in Japan; once people make a promise, they will do their best to keep it.

Once the rules are understood, the instructor should move on to stimulating the students’ motivation by asking questions such as: What are your dreams? What do you see yourself doing 10 years from now? How can this class help you to achieve your personal and professional goals? Many students are puzzled by these questions because they might have assumed that the class would just start from the first page of the textbook rather than with an exploration of their personal goals. It is worth spending the first day explaining the rules and helping the students put the class into perspective. Students should be reminded of these questions over the course of the semester as a way to keep them on track. After all, taking a class in which one has no interest or desire to learn can become a tedious and pointless exercise. After this talk, the instructor should introduce the subject of the class and reinforce that grades will be given according to merit.

Unfortunately, many students do not show up on the first day of class. If students do not show up until the second or third day of class, they will not have received the same orientation as the students who came on the first day. Therefore, they may feel at a loss. The instructor should think about these latecomers and provide a way to convey the same message to them. This could take the form of a handout, which

they would then be required to respond to in writing, outlining their feelings toward the class rules and the class in general.

Intercultural communication

When dealing with all kinds of students with various styles of learning, NLP can help to improve communication in the classroom. However, instructors need to consider other differences among students, such as social, ethnic, racial, cultural, and so on (Raines & Ewing, 2006). In fact, an instructor’s success depends on his or her ability to teach the specialist subject effectively to students from various cultures. Considering that cultural diversity is not only a major factor in human relationships, but has also become a major source of social conflict and political debate (König, 1999), international and intercultural education can contribute greatly to the process of world peace. In order to rethink and relearn what it is to live in a culturally kaleidoscopic world, the first step would be to analyze a basic definition of intercultural communication. According to Jandt (2001), “Intercultural communication refers to face-to-face interactions among people from diverse cultures” (p. 38). Intercultural communication as a field of study emerged from the sociopolitical, economic, and ethical issues related to migration and immigration, and the urgent need to negotiate and mediate differences (Rojas & Rojas, 2016).

Besides having a good understanding of the English language, its grammar and vocabulary, and getting high scores in tests, students also need to achieve intercultural competence to be able to

communicate confidently in a multicultural context and be aware of various styles of communication in a pluralistic society. English language classes should emphasize intercultural communication and not focus narrowly on a linguistic approach with no cultural background information. Indeed, many aspects of language are culture-specific (Stroińska, 2001, p. 6). In order to bring intercultural awareness into the classroom, instructors must have similar awareness and empower themselves to develop strategies for combining language skills and intercultural communication competence.

Unfortunately, many instructors have little or no training in diversity and cultural issues, and may bring their personal biases into the classroom. Educators who are truly committed to teaching should first become aware of their own personal limitations and develop a broad understanding of diverse patterns and lifestyles. They should also know their core values as individuals in order to minimize biases. By 'core values' I mean the ethical and ideological ideas one holds to be true. It is critical that educators evaluate themselves for personal biases, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices. Recently, much attention has been given to the role of self-evaluation and understanding personal values. In 1998, psychologists at Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington developed a Hidden Bias Test named *Project Implicit*, which was used to measure unconscious bias and help stop prejudice and discrimination (Pack, 2007). Across the United States, aspiring

teachers across subjects are given standard training in social and cultural diversity, respect for differences, and incorporating a multicultural/global perspective into their curriculum (Holland, 2003, p. 8). Teachers in Japan should have similar training in order to develop the intercultural competence to deal with diverse groups of students.

Conclusion

Teaching ESL revolves around the four basic skillsets of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, students should also be encouraged to think for themselves, to develop confidence without being ashamed of making mistakes, and to fully enjoy the communication process. The process of learning a foreign language always involves intercultural levels of engagement between the language and cultures concerned. The world is slowly waking up to the obvious – that each one of us is unique and we can no longer be expected to think or function in exactly the same ways as others. Each of us has a different approach to and purpose in life, one that is ours alone to fulfill. Unfortunately, social pressures have often denied or constrained the opportunity for individuals to improve their abilities and talents. As educators, we must provide a positive and safe environment in which our students find it possible to be their unique selves, learn enough to fulfill their dreams, and develop an internationally-oriented mindset characterized by acceptance, respect, and sociability. These goals can be easily attained in a multicultural and diverse environment.

In addition to the content taught, one of the purposes of our classes is to facilitate students' own personal growth, maturity, and development toward who they really are. NLP offers tools that can maximize our potential as teachers and help our students to fulfill their own potential. With NLP, we can develop new skills and ways to communicate with people from various cultural backgrounds and to identify people's preferred representational systems. Such systems are clearly recognizable when one knows what signs to look for. The instant recognition that comes with time and practice enables teachers to effectively communicate with students both verbally and nonverbally.

As an educator who researches and advocates for diversity and multiculturalism, I can also say that NLP has helped me to listen actively and be fully present both in and out of the classroom. Learning and applying NLP in my daily interactions has given me a similar experience to that of consultant Graham Yemm: "For me, one of the most powerful applications of NLP was using it on myself. It helped me to know myself even better, to recognize that I could develop even more flexibility in my actions and interactions and to take more responsibility for my own thoughts and actions" (2006).

I firmly believe in the NLP model as an educational and intercultural tool. I also believe that educators can make an enormous impact on society by starting in the classroom. Diversity and multiculturalism are not merely passing fads, and Japan is becoming more and

more international and broader in its social outlook.

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