THE NEUROLINGUISTIC APPROACH (NLA) TO SECOND OR FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: AN ATTEMPT TO ADAPT THIS METHOD TO DELF EXAM PREPARATION

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ABSTRACT. The neurolinguistic approach (NLA), a teaching method for French in particular, and for second or foreign language acquisition in general, transforms the conception of language learning processes and, therefore, teaching strategies. This note from the field provides an appraisal of the implementation of this method within a group of learners who, at the time, were demonstrating signs of lower self-confidence and engagement in their studies. It also provides an account of the author's attempt to adapt the strategies of the NLA to the exam context and requirements of the Diplôme d'études en langue française (DELF), which corresponds to the first four levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

L'APPROCHE NEUROLINGUISTIQUE (ANL) POUR L'ACQUISITION D'UNE LANGUE SECONDE OU ÉTRANGÈRE : UNE TENTATIVE D'ADAPTATION DE CETTE MÉTHODE À LA PRÉPARATION DES EXAMENS DU DELF

RÉSUMÉ. L'approche neurolinguistique (ANL), une méthode pour l'enseignement du français en particulier, et d'une langue étrangère ou seconde en général, transforme la compréhension des processus d'apprentissage des langues et, donc, les stratégies d'enseignement. Ce relevé de recherches donne un aperçu de la mise en œuvre de cette méthode au sein d'un groupe d'apprenants et d'apprenantes qui, à l'époque, manifestaient peu de confiance en soi et d'investissement dans leurs études. Il rend également compte de la tentative de l'autrice d'adapter le modus operandi de l'ANL au contexte et aux exigences du Diplôme d'études en langue française (DELF), correspondant aux quatre premiers niveaux du Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues.

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The neurolinguistic approach (NLA) was jointly developed by Claude Germain from the Université du Québec à Montréal and Joan Netten from Memorial University of Newfoundland. In Canada, the implementation of the NLA, under the label "Intensive French" (Netten & Germain, 2004, 2008), started in 1998 at the elementary school level.[1] In 2010, this method was implemented at South China Normal University (Germain et al., 2015) and, in 2014, at Da-Yeh University (Taiwan).

The NLA, a teaching and learning method for the acquisition of French, defines a new paradigm for the effective acquisition of communication skills in learning a foreign or second language (Netten & Germain, 2012) and addresses the limits of traditional methods. These conventional practices firstly help learners acquire knowledge about a foreign language; then, through specific exercises, they help them master that knowledge; eventually, learners are invited to engage in some kind of communication activities. Thus, the whole process proceeds from the development of written skills to the development of spoken skills (Netten & Germain, 2012). On the contrary, the NLA commences with the development of listening and speaking skills and moves on to reading and writing skills only once the communication functions have been mastered at the oral level. Phonetic and grammatical analysis thus constitute the very last phase of the learning cycle. In this way, the NLA attempts to reproduce as closely as possible the learning processes at work in native language acquisition.

In September 2016, I started implementing the NLA method with a group of first-year undergraduate students. At the end of their second year in May 2018, most of them (91.6%) passed the DELF A2 exam. The remarkable consequence of this success is that in September 2018, at the beginning of the new academic year, all students showed a considerable level of self-confidence and accepted to prepare for the DELF B1. Considering their initial hesitancy to play a more active role during class and the limited number of weekly hours devoted to learning French, it is reasonable to think that without the NLA we would have been unable to achieve this result.

It is important to point out that traditional methods for language learning are ineffective in enabling students to learn when, for various reasons, they are not fully engaged and find it difficult to undertake private study. On the other hand, since the NLA fosters communication, interaction, and self-expression; facilitates the memorization of vocabulary and the mastering of syntactic structures; and gives students an active role in the

creation of the lesson content (Germain, 2017, 2018; Gettliffe, 2020), it is more apt to animate interest among learners.

This note from the field provides an account of my attempt to adapt the NLA teaching strategies to the DELF exam context and requirements. It also presents the salient features of a method which offers learners the opportunity to confront a foreign language easily and pleasantly. The NLA does not involve conventional practices such as grammar exercises, memorization of lists of words, or conjugation of verbs; rather, it invites all learners to a continuous exchange, thus creating the conditions for a deeply inclusive and stress-free teaching and learning environment.

NLA THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The NLA is a method which bases its didactics on the achievements of the cognitive neurosciences (Paradis, 1994, 2004, 2009; Segalowitz, 2010). Its core concept can be easily grasped when considering that being able to speak a second or foreign language requires the development of an implicit, non-conscious, automatic use of the language (the type of memory known as procedural memory). Such an automatic use of the language cannot be developed by grammar explanations, exercises, or the memorization of lists of words and conjugation tables. The kind of language awareness that type of training produces is incapable of helping a learner speak a foreign language because the *explicit knowledge* (rooted in the declarative memory) that it generates cannot be transformed into a non-conscious *implicit ability* (Paradis, 1994, 2004). Yet it is this implicit ability that enables us to speak a language with relative fluency.

Even though teachers and researchers have become aware that being able to speak a second or foreign language requires this ability, it is generally assumed that an explicit knowledge of the language (i.e., vocabulary and phonetic / grammar rules) is needed in order to learn how to communicate with natural fluency (Netten & Germain, 2012). This means that it is assumed that explicit knowledge of the language, plus exercises, produces implicit and automatic language skills (i.e., procedural skills). Nevertheless, according to Paradis' (1994, 2004, 2009) neurolinguistic theory of bilingualism, implicit competency (based on procedural memory) and explicit competency (based on declarative memory) are two disjointed aspects of neuronal functioning. This implies that knowing grammar rules does not result in speaking a language, and speaking a language does not result in grammatical awareness. In other words, explicit knowledge of a language does not generate an implicit, non-conscious, automatic command of it.

With the NLA, Netten and Germain (2012) have elaborated a method which allows all types of learners to progressively master a foreign or second language. The first characteristic of this approach is that the acquisition of a number of communication abilities precedes the development of reading and writing skills. The objective is to progressively form a procedural memory in which automatic use of the language is rooted. It is crucial, therefore, to devote a sufficient amount of time to first construct an oral, implicit, non-conscious, automatic communication ability using and reusing a relatively narrow range of language structures. It is also important to work and interact within genuine communication contexts, that is, contexts in which each communication function is elaborated from the actual life and experiences of all participants. Only subsequently does it become possible for a learner to tackle, through reading, the explicit aspects of the language (such as grammar) in order to finally apply this knowledge, jointly with the oral ability previously built, to writing training.

The second key characteristic of the NLA is related to teaching materials, which in this method are gradually created by both the teacher and the learners during their working sessions. This makes it possible for courses to always use authentic documents incorporating the experiences of both teachers and learners (cf. *pôle social* in Gettliffe, 2020). The automatic use of a language cannot be sufficiently developed using teaching materials unrelated to students' lived experiences (such as those proposed in language textbooks) and, for this very reason, are inadequate for triggering a genuine desire for communication.

Very briefly, I will provide here an account of an integrated cycle of a foreign language learning process using the NLA method.

In the classroom, students are seated in a U-shaped arrangement, and they have nothing on their tables: no pens, notebooks, books, or phones. They are there only with their ears and their attention. The teacher starts a learning sequence with an affirmation — for example, one might say to a group of first-year students focusing on an elementary teaching unit about introducing oneself, "I am French. I am not Taiwanese." The teacher repeats the statement three or four times and then asks a student, "And you? Are you French?" Having listened to the teacher's affirmation, the student will be able to answer, "No, I am not French. I am Taiwanese."

During a 50-minute teaching session, a group of 20 or 25 motivated students would easily learn this type of "communication function" and master both the affirmative and negative use of it, together with the question itself. Following a very simple sequence of teaching strategies, the

students would be able, in a relatively short period of time, to use naturally and fluently a particular language structure. The whole sequence allows the group of learners to progress within a genuine conversational context where everyone is given the opportunity to ask / answer questions, express their opinions, and talk about the answers and opinions of classmates. At the end of a teaching session, the teacher can choose whether or not to write down (on screen or blackboard) the entire communication function.

After a variable number of teaching hours, the students and the teacher would have accumulated a great deal of information about one another concerning countries and nationalities, cities where they were born, places where they live, campus location, accommodations and roommates, and so forth, thus providing a sufficient base for them to start with the reading process.

The teacher then proposes a text related to the content that has emerged during the "conversation training" — in my case, throughout the first and second semesters I wrote texts using the entire range of communication structures and information elaborated during the listening / speaking phase. I did so in order to provide the students with relatively simple learning materials.

Before reading the text, it is useful to quickly reactivate orally the main communication functions which will appear in the document. Next, the text is utilized as a material for the study of phonetics and grammar, which are, in this way, confronted in an applied and, therefore, meaningful context. Students are invited to analyze what they notice in the text about the correlations between sounds and spellings (study of phonetics), and about the correlations between syntactic constructions and the sense of sentences (study of grammar). The teacher guides, expands, and explains. Whatever has been discovered and conceptualized during this procedure is written down by all students in two different notebooks devoted to phonetic and grammar analysis. Thus, the students are playing an active role at all moments of the learning process.

Having done so, the students and the teacher can proceed towards the writing phase. In the first instance, a text is written together about the teacher; the students themselves suggest the content according to what they remember about the teacher and according to the questions the teacher asks them. Then, each student writes a similar text about themselves, followed by a text, on the same topic, written about another member of the group.

At this point, we arrive at the end of our language learning "stream," which is, to use the term of the NLA founders, a circle, the "literacy circle" (Germain, 2018, pp. 21–22). The final step is, therefore, a second reading phase where students read each other's texts. This final step is an excellent opportunity for students to develop, while consolidating their reading skills, a constructive discussion attitude.

The constant in-class conversation that NLA encourages between learners and teacher enhances students' self-confidence and motivation (Ricordel & Truong, 2019), promotes constructive attitude towards discussion, sustains students' willingness in asking questions, and helps them overcome timidity and the fear of making mistakes.

PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS: A *COUP D'ESSAI* TO ADAPT THE NEUROLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO DELF EXAM PREPARATION

Considering that listening and reading skills are implicitly trained when working on speaking and writing, I decided, for this first attempt, to focus on oral and written productions. For the latter, the DELF B1 involves a piece of writing of at least 160 words in the form of a letter, a report, an article, or an essay. It also contains an oral test in three sections: an interview (*entretien dirigé*), a role-play (*exercice en interaction*, played with the examiner), and an expression of opinion (*expression d'un point de vue à partir d'un document déclencheur*).

When adapting the neurolinguistic approach to DELF exam preparation, two principles must be respected: the authenticity of the conversational context and the literacy circle, which suggests the need to develop the four competencies in an integrated cycle going from listening / speaking to reading / writing.

My very general idea was to select a suitable topic from any of the above-mentioned types of exercise and utilize it to construct a standard (even though shorter) NLA teaching unit. Of the DELF B1 exercises, role-play at first appeared to be a challenge to integrate into NLA. Nevertheless, after a few weeks, we noticed that it could be incorporated at the end of a teaching unit and feature as its final project. To give a basic example here, if the teaching unit is about gardening (with a variety of subtopics, such as organic agriculture, vegetarian diet, aromatic herbs for cooking, shared gardens, etc.), the final project for students to execute would be a role-play (the teacher can choose to participate or not) enacting one of the multiple aspects and situations evoked in the course of the literacy circle. Used as such, role-play exercises do not constitute a teaching strategy but a mode of testing (Germain, 2018). According to what I could observe, students

usually disliked pretending and found it embarrassing to play roles in front of their classmates. On the other hand, they enjoyed quite a lot, and proved themselves imaginative and resourceful in performing, a script they had invented and written, especially if they were asked to do so at the end of a learning cycle (teaching unit) and felt confident about the competencies they had acquired.

Having said so, the essential skills students have to develop in order to take the speaking and writing DELF B1 tests are related to four kinds of expertise:

- introducing yourself, your family, home, studies, leisure activities, centres of interest, and answering the examiner's questions about past experiences, short- and long-term projects, social media, and about any other subject related to everyday life, tasks, and objectives;
- interacting with the examiner (role-play) regarding recurrent and ordinary situations;
- interpreting and explaining a written document, commenting on it, and giving your personal point of view; and
- writing on a theme, which is generally related to the types of speaking test topics, in four different models — letter, report, article, and essay (the report can present extra difficulties when the candidate is asked to write it using given notes).

To construct my teaching units, I first selected the most suitable topics, that is, topics which would allow us to set a genuine conversational context regardless of their initial purpose (oral or written) in the DELF B1 manual. I therefore excluded topics which would prevent us from talking about our personal experiences and from expressing our true points of view. Moreover, I did not hesitate to modify a topic in order to make it more appropriate to serve our objectives.

I will briefly elucidate my approach here by taking the example topic of gardening. The initial exercise (a speaking test) from the DELF was a kind of injunction addressed to the candidate: "You love gardening. Explain the reason for your passion giving details on your practice." In order to respect NLA's principle of authenticity, I transformed it, and we started a teaching unit on gardening with a teacher's statement (which provides a model of the language structure the learners have to produce): "I love gardening because I need to keep contact with nature. My house has a big garden with olive and orange trees." This was followed by the usual

question: "And you? Do you like gardening? Why? Has your house got a garden?" The question was asked to many students in order to gather as much information as possible and to identify the most interesting (conceptually, lexically, and grammatically) answers on which we would successively work in depth. All students became rapidly able to ask the question themselves. This first step — constituting corrections, vocabulary choices, and meaning improvements — took us two periods of 50 minutes.

For the second step, I did not ask students to work in a dyad, as the NLA suggests, because we had already shared our habits and practices about gardening. My objective was to help students memorize the most useful and pertinent language structures which had arisen during the first step. To do so, and in accordance with NLA strategies, I asked students about their classmates' attitudes towards gardening. I have to underline here that at this stage answers can be quite long and articulate:

> I enjoy gardening very much because I love flowers. My house has a tiny garden with a Japanese cherry tree under which I like to make my drawings. I devote at least one hour a day to gardening. When my flowers blossom, I take lots of pictures and I post them on my favourite social media.
>
> I like gardening but, since I don't have a garden, I cultivate a few plants on my balcony. When it is not raining or too hot, I very much enjoy practising yoga on my balcony, smelling my aromatic herb plants. I use them to prepare special dishes in my parents' restaurant. I would very much like to have a big vegetable garden with many fruit trees. I would produce organic vegetables because I think it is very important to promote organic agriculture.

The large variety of learners' answers always offers the opportunity to further investigate the reasons for their choices and, therefore, to enrich the conceptual and lexical layers of the topic.

When all learners seemed to have well understood and memorized each other's positions about gardening, we proceeded to the writing phase. According to the NLA, the reading phase should be inserted here; however, as I have stated above, I decided to delimit my experimentation to speaking and writing skills. I started writing a text on the blackboard concerning a couple of learners' gardening habits. In conformity with NLA teaching methods, I asked questions to students whose answers would reveal what they remembered and would help me develop my piece of writing. To this they all contributed in turn. At the end of the process, which involved digressions on grammar and phonetics, we had developed a text reflecting all learners' gardening habits (and, of course, their reasons for disliking gardening), which contained the entire range of ideas,

suggestions, and wishes that emerged during the speaking training. This text constituted our reading aid.

Before finishing with this literacy circle, I selected a few elements from the conversational phase apt to trigger a role-play (*exercice en interaction*). Since some students showed interest in shared gardens, I asked them to prepare and to perform a role-play between someone who owns a garden but does not have time to tend it and someone else who is looking for a garden in which to grow organic vegetables. The students explored many possibilities according to their French language skills, their own experience, and their imagination.

In closing, NLA teaching strategies allowed me to constructively face my students' difficulties and to help them learn French with enjoyment. For the next step, I hope to find a way of adapting NLA teaching strategies to DELF reading and listening tests — the objective being to merge both in a coherent system.

NOTES

1. "Intensive French" is run for pupils attending their last year of elementary school, aged 10 or 11 (Grade 6).

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