Investigating the Relationship between Iranian EFL Teachers' Autonomy and Their Neuro-Linguistic Programming

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the relationship between English Language Teachers' autonomy and their Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP). To this end, a group of 200 experienced English language teachers at various language schools in Tehran, inter alia, Asre Zaban Language Academy, were given two questionnaires namely Teaching Autonomy Scale (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005); and Reza Pishghadam's Neuro-linguistic Programming Questionnaire (2011) among which 162 instruments were returned. After being verified, 129 questionnaires which had been thoroughly completed were selected and carefully examined. At the outset of the data analysis stage, the researcher was supposed to pick out the accurate correlational measure. In this effort, assumptions of linearity of the relationship between the variables and normality of the data were verified and, as a result, Spearman rho was employed. The findings of an in-depth data analysis revealed that the null hypothesis of the study was to a large extent supported. That is to say, exclusive of General autonomy which was positively and significantly related to NLP, other sub-categories of autonomy—Curriculum and Total, were not correlated significantly with NLP.

Keywords: curriculum autonomy, general autonomy, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), relationship, total autonomy

1. Introduction

With the spread of globalization, language learning and teaching, as many other skills, are gaining more and more prominence every day. This phenomenon, language learning and teaching, has two sides: teacher and learner who influence the process in different ways. Menken (2000) believes that half of all teachers may anticipate educating an English language learner during their career. Along the same lines, according to Vieira and Gaspar (2013), with regard to impact on education effectiveness, teachers arise as a significant factor accounting for about 30% of the variance on pupils' achievement.

According to Brown (2000) and Mitchell and Myles (2004), different theories in language learning have been studied through a variety of perspectives, many of which have shown that understanding significant elements in multiple and diverse perspectives, not in a single factor, is very critical. One of the approaches to communication, learning and personal development that has received much popularity has been Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP); it appears to be utilized to a large extent in education today whereas academic world is still silent regarding this subject (Tosey & Mathinson, 2010). NLP approach to learning and teaching emphasizes internal or mental factors as contrasted with external or environmental factors as many traditional behaviorists, Carey et al, diagnosed that there has been a growing and developing education literature referring to both adults and children right from the time of the publication of the earliest popular books on NLP and teaching and learning (Harper, 1982; Dilts, 1983a; Jacobson, 1983). According to Hardingham (1998), NLP has been seen as one of the resources to enhance effectiveness of language instruction. In addition, NLP claims to be efficacious in achieving excellence of performance, ameliorating classroom communication, raising self-esteem, optimizing students' motivation and attitudes, facilitating personal growth in students and even altering their attitude to life (Thornbury, 2001, p. 394). To this end—which might be deemed the common objective of the majority of those playing an outstanding part in the field of education, institutions at the early stages are obliged to prepare the ground through considering a combination of factors one of which could be empowering their teachers. Multiple

intellectuals engaged in the field of educational reform believe that empowering teachers is where we can commence solving the schools' problems (Melenyzer, 1990 & Short, 1994). Pearson and Moomaw (2006) stated that:

If teachers are to be empowered and regarded as professionals, then like other professionals, they must have the freedom to prescribe the best treatment for their students as doctors or lawyers do for their clients. This freedom is teacher autonomy (p. 44).

In line with that, pursuant to Masouleh and Jooneghani (2011), the term autonomy has sparked considerable controversy, inasmuch as linguists and educationalists have failed to conclude an agreement concerning what autonomy really is. In effect, it is argued that autonomy in language learning could be thought of as a desirable goal for philosophical, pedagogical, and practical reasons. Street (1988) believes teacher autonomy is "the independence teachers maintain in exercising discretion within their classrooms to make instructional decisions". (p. 4). This paper is an effort to inspect whether or not any significant relationship exists between the two sub-categories of autonomy and NLP.

2. Research Question

Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' autonomy and their Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP)?

3. Review of the Related Literature

3.1 Autonomy

Over the last few decades, the diversity of ideas in the field of teaching and learning has been obvious and could have been the reason to many of the current developments in this field. One of the subjects yet to be debated is autonomy, particularly, teachers' autonomy. Hill (1991) asserts that "little progress can be made in debates about autonomy until these different ideas are sorted" (p. 44). In the same line, Barfield et al (2002) stated that although researchers have clearly defined many aspects of learner autonomy, teacher autonomy requires a more focused and contextually sensitive definition.

Furthermore, it could be argued that autonomy is not a solid concept that has only one face but a complex one that is multi-faces; Hill and Holmbeck (1986) declared that two conceptualizations of autonomy "detachment from parents" and "freedom from social (largely parental) influence" have dominated recent research. Little (1991) held that autonomy is not a synonym for self-instruction; it means, autonomy is not limited to learning without a teacher; it does not entail an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher; autonomy is not another teaching method; and it is not a single, easily described behavior.

Arguing that 'autonomy, in the perspective of complexity, encompasses properties and conditions for complex emergence, Paiva and Braga (2008) contended it is inextricably linked to its environment'. (cited in Paiva, 2011, p. 63) Likewise, Masouleh and Jooneghani (2012) claimed that its dynamic structure governs the nature of its interactions with the environment in which it is nested.

Reviewing the literature on language teaching and learning, we face the fact that there are multiple basic ideas of autonomy. Some research, such as Smith (2000), identified four aspects of teacher autonomy: a capacity for self-directed teaching, freedom from control over teaching, a capacity for self-directed teacher learning and a responsibility to take actions and bear consequences.

3.2 Neuro-Linguistic Programming

NLP (Neuro-linguistic Programming) has been around in language teaching for a long time and it is growing more and more famous among EFL teachers and students day after day. It may be a new subject when the name is concerned but it is interesting to know that all those instructors who incorporate elements of community language learning, suggestopedia, music, drama and body language into their schedule of teaching are already drawing on NLP; according to Tosey and Mathison (2003), Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) was developed in the USA in the 1970's. It has achieved widespread popularity as a method for communication and personal development. In essence, NLP is a form of modeling that offers potential for systematic and detailed understanding of people's subjective experience.

According to Vikasa, B. (2006):

Neuro refers to our nervous system, the mental pathways of our five senses by which we see, hear, feel, taste, and smell. Linguistic refers to our ability to use language and how specific words and phrases mirror our mental worlds. Linguistic also refers to our "silent language" or postures, gestures, and habits that reveal our thinking styles, beliefs, etc. Programming is borrowed from computer science, to suggest that our thoughts,

feelings, and actions are simply habitual programs that can be changed by upgrading our "mental software (p.27).

Millroad (2004) held that it is "An approach to language teaching which is claimed to help achieve excellence in learner performance" (p. 28) and Richards and Rodgers (2001) claimed it as a supplementary technique in teaching second language.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

The participants of this research were comprised of 129 teachers in the 22-45 age range who were yet teaching English at different language institutes in Tehran, Iran, inter alia, Asre Zaban Language School. The selection was based on willingness to participate and teachers were selected non-randomly based on convenient non-random sampling. A supervisor from each institute was also involved in the study.

4.2 Instrumentation

4.2.1 Teacher Autonomy Survey (TAS)

Pearson and Moomaw's Teacher Autonomy Survey (2005), consists of 18 questions originally designed so as to elicit the extent to which teachers perceive themselves autonomous in the following areas: (1) instructional planning and sequencing, (2) personal on-the-job decision making, (3) selection of activities and materials, and (4) classroom standards of conduct. The options vary from "Definitely True" to "Definitely False" and "More or Less True" and "More or Less False" come in between. Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17 were utilized to form the General autonomy scale. On the other hand, the Curriculum autonomy scale was constructed by adding items 5, 6, 8, 12, 14 and 18. Moreover, items 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18 were recoded so that the high score denoted increased autonomy.

4.2.2 Neuro-Linguistic Programming Questionnaire (NLPQ)

The Neuro-linguistic Programming Questionnaire (NLPQ) was designed and introduced by Reza Pishghadam (2011). It consists of 38 sentences and has eight categories according to eight factors: Flexibility, Anchoring, Elicitation, Modeling, Individual Differences, Leading, Establishing a Rapport and Emotional and Cognitive Boosters. Each factor includes between 3 to 7 sentences regarding its title and the participants should find their own styles among the options. The 38 sentences have 5 options each for participants to select among: Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree and each option has a special score.

4.3 Procedure

The procedures in a descriptive study ought to be completely and accurately described so that its replication becomes possible for other researchers (Best & Kahn, 2006). At the outset of the study, in order to collect data, researcher administered two questionnaires concerning teachers' autonomy and Neuro-linguistic Programming among 200 teachers in disparate English language schools inter alia Asre-Zaban Language Academy in Tehran, Iran. The partakers were requested to respond to the survey during non-instructional times at their convenience, enclose and return them to the researcher within 1 week of receipt. The participants completed the questionnaires anonymously. Out of 200 questionnaires, 162 instruments were returned. After being painstakingly verified, 129 questionnaires, which had been thoroughly and accurately done, were selected. The responses of all participants were carefully examined and scored. Afterwards, so as to inspect the relationship between variables, the researcher performed an in-detail statistical analysis which is exhaustively and explicitly discussed hereinafter.

5. Results

5.1 Testing Null Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between teachers' autonomy and their NLP (Neuro-linguistic Programming).

5.1.1 Assumption of Linearity

In order to test above null hypothesis, correlational measures needed to be employed. Pearson product moment correlation and Spearman rho were two options; however, to choose between these two measures, some assumptions needed to be checked in advance. The first of these was the linearity of the relationship between NLP and autonomy, which was done by drawing the scatter graph (Figures 1 to 3). As the figures display, it seems that the two variables' data are to some extent aligned along a straight line; however, the lines are not very diagonal. Therefore, despite the linearity of the relationship, a low correlation coefficient is expected between the two variables.
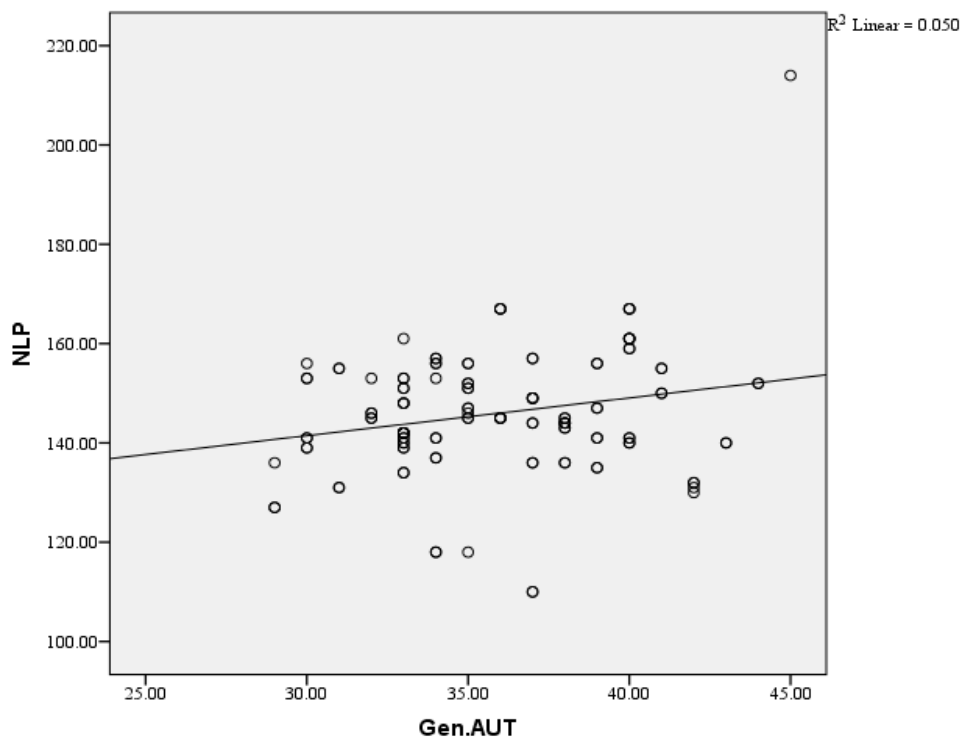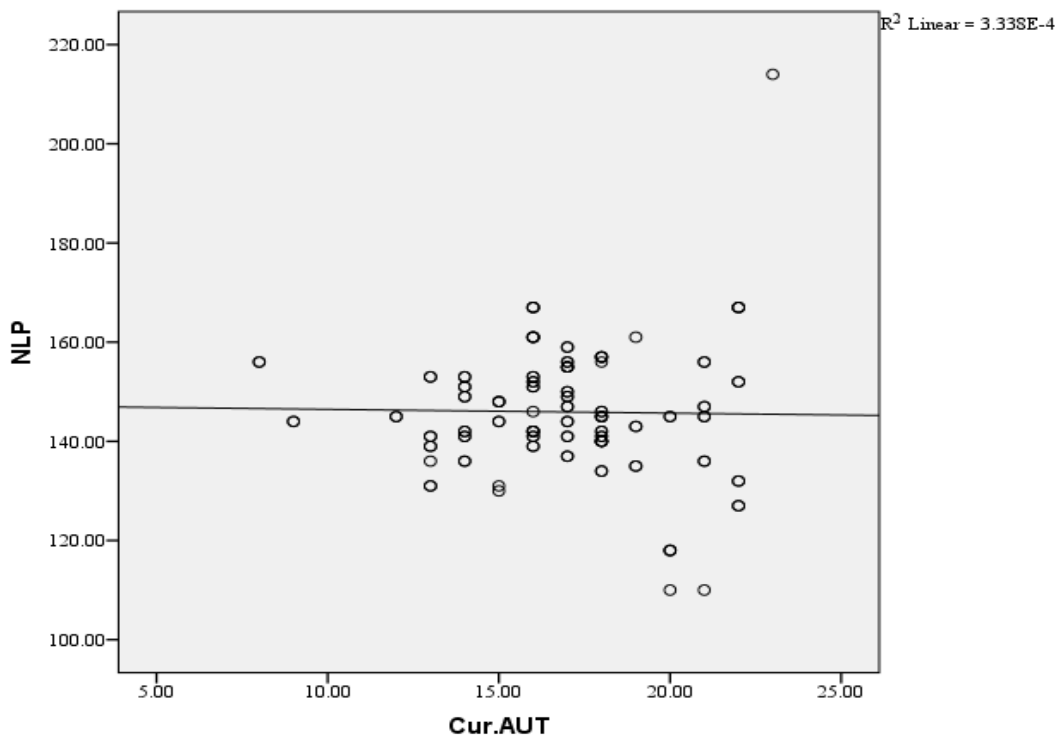
Figure 1. General autonomy scatter plot

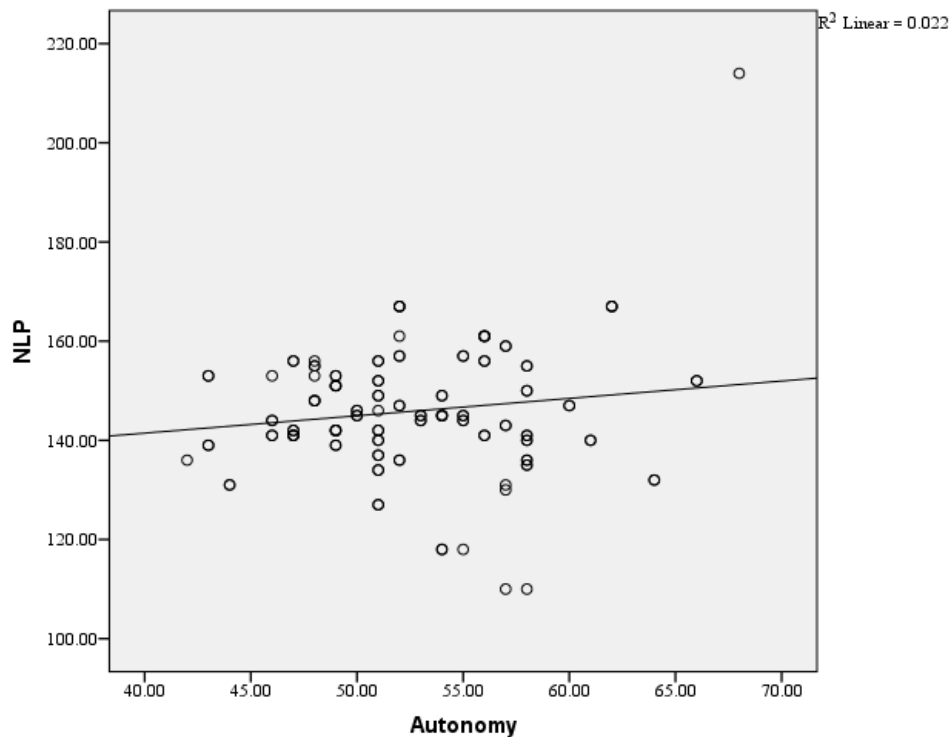Figure 2. Curriculum autonomy scatter plot

Figure 3. Total autonomy scatter plot

5.1.2 Assumption of Normality

The next assumption is to do with the normality of the data, which was investigated employing Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality, whose results in Table 1 indicate that the data were not normally distributed ($p < .05$).

Table 1. Tests of normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
General Autonomy	.115	129	.000	.971	129	.007
Curriculum Autonomy	.123	129	.000	.961	129	.001
Total Autonomy	.100	129	.003	.979	129	.042
NLP	.100	129	.003	.905	129	.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction.

With regard to the fact that data were not normally distributed, the choice of statistic became Spearman rho, whose results in Table 2 show that there is almost no significant relationship between the two variables. In fact, NLP is only correlated significantly and positively with General autonomy with small to medium effect size ($p < 05$). In other words, the null hypothesis is mainly supported; that is to say, except for General autonomy, there is no significant relationship between teachers' Total and Curriculum autonomy and NLP (Neuro-linguistic Programming).

Table 2. NLP, general, curriculum and total autonomy correlations

			NLP	General Autonomy	Curriculum Autonomy	Total Autonomy
Spearman's rho	NLP	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.205[*]	-.028	.103
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.020	.757	.246
		N	129	129	129	129
	General Autonomy	Correlation Coefficient	.205[*]	1.000	.245[**]	.807[**]
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.020	.	.005	.000
		N	129	129	129	129
	Curriculum Autonomy	Correlation Coefficient	-.028	.245[**]	1.000	.728[**]
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.757	.005	.	.000
		N	129	129	129	129
	Total Autonomy	Correlation Coefficient	.103	.807[**]	.728[**]	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.246	.000	.000	.
		N	129	129	129	129

[*]. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

[**]. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Among various variables related to English language teachers, the researcher, in the present study, opted to delve deeply into teachers' autonomy and their use of NLP techniques and investigate whether or not any significant relationship could be detected between them. In this effort, after inspecting 129 questionnaires which were accurately completed, data analysis was conducted. What ensued from performing an in-depth analysis mainly supported the null hypothesis. That is to say, NLP is only significantly and positively related with General autonomy with small to medium effect size (p < 05). Simplistically put, exclusive of General autonomy, there is no significant relationship between teachers' Total and Curriculum autonomy and NLP (Neuro-linguistic Programming).

Taking the findings of this study in terms of NLP into consideration, a study conducted by Hosseinzadeh and Baradaran (2015) on the relationship between English language teachers' teaching styles and their Neuro-linguistic Programming revealed that teachers' Expert, Formal Authority, Facilitator, and Delegator teaching styles and their NLP were significantly and positively related; a closer look at the descriptive statistics of these teaching styles also revealed that the moderate category of the above teaching styles are of higher NLP in comparison to their low categories. Moreover, a study by Pishghadam, Shayesteh, and Shapoori (2011) suggested that teachers' NLP and their success were significantly correlated; the findings also revealed that teachers who utilized NLP techniques in their classroom were more successful in comparison to those who had never put these techniques to use. Furthermore, taking the second variable of this study, i.e. teachers' autonomy into account, a study done by Baradaran and Hosseinzadeh (2015) on the relationship between teachers' Curriculum and General autonomy and their teaching styles indicated that there was a significant and negative relationship between Expert, Personal Model and Delegator styles and Curriculum autonomy, simply put, the low categories of the above teaching styles were of higher Curriculum autonomy while in terms of General autonomy, no significant relationship was detected. In the same lines, Hosseinzadeh and Baradaran (2015) in another research, on the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' teaching styles and their Total autonomy, concluded that there was no significant relationship between teachers' Expert, Personal Model, Formal authority, Delegator and Facilitator teaching styles and their Total autonomy. In addition, the findings of the current study, particularly in respect of General autonomy, are to some extent in line with a study conducted by Pearson and Moomaw (2005) which revealed that teachers' autonomy was correlated with on-the-job stress, professionalism and empowerment; in that, as the Curriculum autonomy increased, on-the-job stress decreased, but only little correlation was found between job satisfaction and Curriculum autonomy; the study also indicated that as General autonomy increased, so did empowerment and professionalism, but no relationship was detected between autonomy and teaching level (elementary, middle and high school).

In conclusion, the present study was an effort to contribute to the betterment of the field of teacher education. In the light of the findings of this survey, it materialized that Curriculum autonomy and Total autonomy were not significantly correlated with Neuro-linguistic Programming while General autonomy was proved to be positively and significantly related.

In addition, the current study sustained the following limitations which are expected to be removed in the future studies.

First, the participants were selected according to available sampling. The study should be replicated using procedures that allow a higher degree of randomization and ultimately more Generalizability.

Second, all the partakers of this study were Iranian; therefore, the results might not be Generalized to teachers of other nationalities.

As to the pedagogical implications, this study was expressly conducted to place the primary emphasis on teachers and their major attributes, the dearth of which has always been sensible throughout the research. Providing the importance of NLP and autonomy is well recognized, English language instruction could be facilitated and done more fruitfully. Teachers, by implementing NLP elements in full, can create a much more welcoming and friendly atmosphere which results in the amelioration in learners' learning.

On the other hand, the role that teachers' autonomy plays and its impact on the quality of their teaching, decision making and the whole instructional system is to a large degree superior to several other factors; pursuant to ETUCE (2008), it is the teacher who knows the classroom reality best and is able to make the best and most sound decisions with respect to the pupils. Considering the existence of a positive and significant relationship between General autonomy and NLP, in accordance with the findings of the present study, this message could be conveyed that English language school owners, directors and teachers shall pay a greater heed to teachers' internal and mental factors and also their autonomy which might consequently lead to a superior-quality instruction.

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