

## **Reading and Writing Magic**

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Most of us take for granted that we are able to read and write. However, you may not realise the amount of magic you create when you engage in these apparently mundane activities. In this chapter we want to invite you to look behind the scenes of your own reading and writing and discover the rich, imaginative world you automatically create when you scan written words or put pen to paper. These insights may catch you by surprise; they will also enable you to discover how to get more fun and mastery from these daily activities and how to pass them on to others. To give yourself a taste of what I mean, try this little experiment:

Think of a story that you have read and can remember vividly.

Recall the main characters' clothes, face, the colour of their hair, the sound of their voice, and also what you felt about them...

When you remember these details you are recalling not only the story but how you read it. The more you know about how you read and write the more pleasure and achievement you will draw from them.

That little exercise is based on the insights provided by the communication models of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). NLP tells us that the building blocks of our perception of the world are related to our senses and how we process

the input from them. We perceive reality by transforming our sense data into internal images, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations.

There is a good example of this link between perception and the senses in a novel by the French writer Marcel Proust. He was sitting at tea one afternoon eating a “madeleine”. Suddenly the taste of the little sponge cake evoked a flood of memories about his childhood. This was the beginning of a series of autobiographical books which have given him fame as a prominent French writer.

Using NLP will enable us to uncover the basis of our perceptions and so teach us how we think and learn. It does this by enabling us to explore the structure of our own subjective experience, just as Proust did through his writings. It empowers us to submerge into the inner, virtual world each of us creates as a way of understanding the outside world, and, more importantly, change that perception.

I use NLP for educational purposes. In this sphere an analogy of NLP is the example of a history teacher I know. He is currently spending a lot of his free time programming a Roman house in virtual reality. His aim is to be able to take his students for a virtual walk round the house so that they can explore it in 3D.

In a similar way NLP techniques enable us to understand our own inner learning processes. This will bring us much closer to learning to manage our own rich internal software: images, sounds and feelings. Bit by bit we will come to understand and even learn how to control the way we think and feel. In short we

will learn how to learn.

In this article we apply NLP models to reading comprehension and creative writing. My outcome for these activities is to teach English as a foreign language; however they are applicable to many fields of learning. They will help teachers present tasks in ways that stimulate each student to reconsider their own learning processes so involving them in their own learning. This means that they will motivate students by teaching them **how** to learn as well as what to learn. Apart from enabling students, NLP can help all learners to review, build upon experience, and prolong exploration themselves. After all, we are all learners.

## **Reading to learn**

As an introduction to how to improve reading comprehension skills you might like to try reading a short story. This is an activity which I created for my foreign language students and I invite you to follow the same approach they use:

1. First brainstorm possible story-lines from the title: Her Letters.

*(Brainstorming is an open-ended exercise where criticism is suspended in order to allow full creativity. The aim here is to elicit possible stories, not the real story.*

*What you are doing here is focusing on expectations about how the story might run as well as eliciting your background knowledge of stories: conflicts, characters, happy endings and so on. This is also a way of centering your attention on the*

*reading task at hand.)*

2. Now read the real story to verify whether your guesses were correct.

*(Remember that reading means transforming the written words into:*

- pictures (scenes, faces, movement...),*
- sounds (musical effects, volume, pitch of voice, timbre...),*
- feelings (love, warmth, temperature, texture...) and*
- smells (of wood, perfume, the night air...).*

3. You can share your rich representations with another reader after the reading.

Enjoy the story:

### **Her letters**

*Once upon a time there was a young boy who lived in a small town. He was very strong and good at wood-cutting, carpentry, growing plants, cookery and accounting but he wasn't very good at foreign languages. He went to school but had little interest in learning languages. Both his father and his mother had learned to read another language and they wanted him to learn too. The young boy refused to learn, saying it was too difficult. He liked to enjoy himself so every Saturday night he went to a dance in the local disco. One Saturday, near Christmas, there was a special dance, so he got all dressed up in his best clothes and walked to the disco in town. As he was dancing he suddenly saw a very pretty young woman who looked the same age as himself. He was surprised to see her*

*come over to him and invite him to dance. The young man accepted. They danced but couldn't talk much because she spoke a different language. When they separated at the end of the evening she promised to write to him every week.*

*Her promise made him nervous because he knew that he couldn't read her letters or reply to them but he could not admit this to his new friend. When the first letter arrived he was very excited and rushed to his mother asking her to read it for him. The letter was interesting but his mother asked too many questions about the young woman. He decided that the only solution was to learn to read his own letters. He sat with his mother for an hour every evening to learn to read the foreign language. The young man put so much effort into his work that in one month he was already beginning to understand many of his girlfriend's letters.*

*After three month's work he was finally able to read the letters by himself and didn't have to answer any more of his mother's questions.*

- You might like to verify the accuracy of your initial guesses.
- How did you imagine the scenes and characters of the story?

The woodcutter?

His home?

His girlfriend?

His mother reading the letters to him?

- Did you hear any sounds during your reading?

Music in the dance hall?

The couple trying to communicate on the dance floor?

The sound of his mother's voice, asking questions or reading the letter?

- Did the story evoke any feelings in you?

Empathy with the boy's plight?

Identification with the romantic joy he felt?

If you have answered any of the above questions, congratulations on your reading ability.

Imagining, hearing and feeling the story is important because this is the basis of comprehension. Research like that of Brian Tomlinson in Japan has found that those people who created pictures in their head while they were reading recalled the story better. He also found that it was easy to boost recall in others simply by reminding them to picture the scenes while reading.

NLP of course enlarges the technique of seeing in your mind's eye to include sounds and feelings. This extension has the advantage of helping all readers whether primarily visually, auditory, or kinesthetically orientated to improve their skills.

The importance of enhancing consciousness of these internal processes can

hardly be overestimated and Michael Grinder, author of several books on NLP in education, says:

"...learning to `see content in their minds'. This is the key to high school graduation and the ticket to `doing college'." (Grinder 1991)

### **Creative Writing Magic**

Let's now apply a similar technique to Writing activities.

I'd like you to scan your memory and think of a time when you had a great idea but, although it was on the tip of your tongue, you just could not put it into words... Have you got it? ... What exactly were you trying to do? ... I would guess that you were probably making a great effort to explain something or draft it on paper, that is, you were either speaking or writing.

The fundamental characteristic of Writing and Speaking skills is precisely that: putting your internal pictures, sounds, feelings, into words in such a way as to evoke the same in your reader. As Robert Dilts, a well-known author of books on many different aspects of NLP, says :

"The key question in written composition thus becomes, `How do you go about arranging these little marks on a piece of paper so that they will trigger a picture, feeling or set of sounds, that you have experienced, inside the mind of your reader?'" (Dilts 1995)

To illustrate this, let's do a practical example which you can join in on.

Everyone has the ability to dream and many of us daydream from time to time. (Think of how you drifted off during an unexciting speech or TV show recently.) Daydreaming, however, is not all negative and I'd like to show you here how to use it to your advantage:- Think of a place you like. I live on the Mediterranean coast just south of Barcelona. I like to be on the local golf course. It is high up and overlooks the sea. You can see the winter afternoon sun gradually descending in a glow and feel its soft warmth on your skin. The course is well kept and the smooth greens are a delight to walk on especially when you can smell the newly-mown grass.. The exercise is also invigorating and the salty breeze blows the cobwebs of work right out of my mind.

- Where is your favourite place? I'd like to help you recreate details of the sights, sounds and feelings attached to the place through these prompts:

***“Imagine your favourite place. Look round and notice the colours ...***

***Bring your picture nearer ... What can you see in the background? ... And in the foreground? ... On the left?... On the right?... Is the picture still or moving? Can you describe the shapes you see there?...***

***Now listen to the noises ... Describe the noises you can hear ... Are the noises loud or soft? ... Are they near or far? ... Which part of the picture are they coming from? Are they voices? ... Are there any smells in your picture? Is there***

*a taste associated with your memories?*

*What feelings do you have in your favourite place? ... Enjoy these feelings while remembering that you can always go back to them when you want.*

*Now you are feeling relaxed ... you gradually come back here ... you are ready to describe your place."*

Recall your favourite place and write down several paragraphs describing the sights, sounds, tastes, smells and feelings it evoked. As this is a description remember that four or five appropriate adjectives automatically lift the quality of a text.

If you found that activity stimulating you may want to try a variation of it.

### **Variation 1: Music**

- You are going to take an imaginary trip to a place.
- Observe it well so that you'll be able to describe it well later.
- To help recreate the place you are going to listen to some music.
- While listening, create a detailed picture of the place in your heads, filling in sounds and feelings about it.
- Play some instrumental music that you like, or perhaps a New Age song.-

Picture the scenes using the music then write your description.

### **Variation 2: Someone**

You can use the same type of introduction as above, only this time with the

outcome of describing a person.

- Sit comfortably and close your eyes if you wish.
- Think of the physical appearance, personality, voice, smell, and the your feelings about the person.
- When you have a rounded image of the person you are ready to write your description.

I often do these activities with foreign language learners. The relaxed state which some learners access while doing these activities appears to touch a creative cord in them. Many of the descriptions are prosaic but they are all intriguing to read, possibly because there is something deeply human in them. Here is an example of a rather extraordinary evocation written by Josep, 15 year-old boy, during a half hour writing period:

*Someone*

*Your name and my name written on a wall,  
on this wall full of hearts and signs,  
on this wall full of last desire,  
while she questions me: do you like me?  
on this wall of the dark room  
words that spoke of unbearable love*

*words that spoke of the love,  
a love that would only be with you.*

Here is another example. This time it is what 15-year-old Elena wrote in class using music.

*I was in a deep forest. I didn't know why I was there. All the elements of the landscape were so peaceful, so quiet and so green. I didn't remember anything that had happened before I was there. I was walking, but I didn't know why. It seemed like the set of a sweet fairytale of my childhood. And I wasn't the main character. I only was a light butterfly of the atmosphere. But, suddenly, I began to fall, I was going down, down and I couldn't stop. I opened my eyes and I realized I was in a dirty street. An empty syringe was on the ground.*

If you caught yourself imagining scenes, adding a soundtrack and feeling involved in the vignettes described while reading these pieces of writing then you have already begun to experience the magic of reading and writing.

Congratulations.

(More ESL [activities](#) with Nlp)

### FURTHER READING

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