

A Comprehensive Review of the Natural Approach

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Abstract

The Natural Approach put forward by Terrell and Krashen in 1983 based on Terrell's teaching experience and Krashen's language acquisition theories as well as taking advantages of the Direct Method, TPR and the Communicative Approach aiming at developing students communicative skills has proven to be an effective way in the second language learning. This paper is a comprehensive literature review to the Natural Approach concerning its background, theoretical basis, principles, features, teaching procedures, advantages, and limitations.

Keywords

The Natural Approach; Second Language Acquisition; Input Hypothesis.

1. Introduction

The Natural Approach was firstly proposed by Tracy Terrell in America in 1977, and then, it attracted a wider interest by a large number of English teachers and methodologists after publishing the book *The Natural Approach* by Terrell and Krashen in 1983. This new philosophy of language teaching was an attempt to develop a language teaching proposal that incorporated the "naturalistic" principles in studies of second language acquisition, which has been tested to be an effective method in America and many other countries. This paper is a comprehensive literature review to the Natural Approach. Firstly, the background of the Natural Approach is introduced, involving the origins and the relationship with other approaches. In the second part, the theoretical basis are presented, which includes the Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. Then, the author enumerated the principles and features of the Natural Approach in the third and fourth parts respectively, followed by the fifth part which talks about the teaching procedures containing pre-production stage, early production stage and speech emergence stage. Afterwards, in the sixth part, the advantages and limitations of the Natural Approach are analyzed, and the last part comes to the conclusion[1].

2. Background

Tracy D. Terrell, a teacher who taught Spanish in America, put forward a foreign language teaching method and named it "Natural Approach" based on his experience of teaching Spanish in 1977. At that time, he had joined forces with Stephen Krashen, an applied linguist at the University of Southern California who has put forward the Second Language Acquisition Theories and elaborate a theoretical rationale for the Natural Approach. Then, in 1983, Stephen D. Krashen and Tracy D. Terrell published the book *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom*. This book declared the establishment of the Natural Approach. Since then it has attracted world-wide attention, and has proved to be effective in English teaching through years of teaching experiments[2].

The Natural Approach has evolved to some extent from the Direct Method. The term "natural", used in reference to the Direct Method, merely emphasizes that the principles underlying the

method are believed to conform to the principles of naturalistic language learning in young children. Krashen and Terrell note that “the Natural Approach is in many ways the natural, direct method rediscovered”. However, there are some important differences between the Natural Approach and the Direct Method. Unlike the Direct Method, the Natural Approach lays less emphasis on teacher monologues, direct repetitions, formal questions and answers and accurate production of target language sentences. In the Natural Approach there is a focus on content rather than form, and a focus on exposure, or input, rather than grammar practice; optimizing emotional preparedness for learning; a prolonged period of attention to what the language learners hear before they try to produce language; and a willingness to use written and other materials as a source of comprehensible input. Overt error correction is avoided and dialogues and pronunciation drills are equally avoided. In addition, even though the instruction is conducted in the target language, the student’s native language may be used in class to assist comprehension. Thus the Natural Approach is regarded as a comprehension-based approach in language teaching[3].

3. Theoretical Basis

Krashen and Terrell make continuing reference to the theoretical and research base claimed to underlie the Natural Approach and to the fact that the method is unique in having such a base. The theory and research are grounded on Krashen’s view of language acquisition, which includes The Acquisition / Learning Hypothesis, The Monitor Hypothesis, The Natural Order Hypothesis, The Input Hypothesis and The Affective Filter Hypothesis[4].

3.1. The Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis

The Acquisition / Learning hypothesis claims that there are two distinctive ways of developing competence in a second or foreign language. Acquisition refers to an unconscious process that involves the naturalistic development of language proficiency through understanding language and through using language for meaningful communication. Learning, by contrast, refers to a process in which conscious rules about a language are developed. It results in explicit knowledge about the form of a language and the ability to verbalize this knowledge. Formal teaching is necessary for “learning” to occur, and correction of errors helps with the development of learned rules. Learning, according to this theory, can not lead to acquisition.

3.2. The Monitor Hypothesis

As is mentioned, adult second language learners have two means for internalizing the target language. The first is “acquisition” which is a subconscious and intuitive process of constructing the system of a language. The second means is a conscious learning process in which learners attend to form, figure out rules and are generally aware of their own process. The “monitor” is an aspect of this second process. It edits and makes alterations or corrections as they are consciously perceived. Krashen believes that “fluency” in second language performance is due to “what we have acquired”, not “what we have learned”. Adults should do as much acquiring as possible for the purpose of achieving communicative fluency. Therefore, the monitor should have only a minor role in the process of gaining communicative competence. Similarly, Krashen states three conditions for its use[5].

- 1) Time. There must be sufficient time for a learner to choose and apply a learned rule.
- 2) Focus on form. The language user must be focused on correctness or on the form of the output.
- 3) Knowledge of the rules. The performer must know the rules. The monitor does best with the rules that are simple in two ways. They must be simple to describe and they must not require complex movements and rearrangements.

3.3. The Natural Order hypothesis

The Natural Order Hypothesis claims that the second language acquisition follows a certain “natural” order, particularly when the sentence patterns and grammar rules are acquired. Research shows that some grammatical structures and forms are acquired before others when English is gained as the first language. A similar order is found when English is acquired as a second language in spite of some personal differences.

Ing→Aux→Irregular→Regular Past

Plural→Article→Past→3rd Sing.

Copula→Possessive

This hypothesis indicates that both native speakers and non-native speakers follow the similar process of developing their language. Errors are signs of naturalistic development processes, and during acquisition (but not during learning), similar development errors occur in learners no matter what their native language is.

3.4. The Input Hypothesis

This is the core of Krashen’s theory, which is well-known nowadays as the comprehensible input hypothesis. It claims that L2 acquisition takes place when learners are exposed to comprehensible input, i.e., input whose content is comprehensible to them but whose linguistic forms are slightly in advance of their current level of ability. According to this hypothesis, if a learner is at stage i , the input conducive to acquisition should contain $i+1$. If the input is at the level of $i+1$, Krashen claims, learners can understand most of the language but are still challenged to make progress. If the input is at a higher or lower level (e.g., $i+2$ or $i+0$), in contrast, no acquisition will take place. This hypothesis involves four main issues: First, the input hypothesis relates to acquisition, not to learning. Second, people acquire language best by understanding input $i+1$. Comprehension is helped by the situation or the context, extra-linguistic information and knowledge of the world. Third, the ability to speak fluently can not be taught directly, or rather, it “emerges” independently after the acquirer has built up language competence by understanding input. Fourth, enough comprehension input will provide $i+1$ automatically. To Krashen, L2 development is a matter of quantitative accumulation: the more comprehensible input one receives, the greater progress one makes in acquisition [6].

3.5. The Affective Filter Hypothesis

According to Krashen, learners’ emotional state, attitude and adjustable filter freely pass, impede, or block input necessary to acquisition. A low affective filter is desirable, since it impedes or blocks less of this necessary input. The hypothesis is built on research in second language acquisition, which has identified three kinds of affective variables related to second language acquisition.

1) Motivation. Learners with high motivation generally do better.

2) self-confidence. Learners with self-confidence and a good self image tend to be more successful.

3) Anxiety. Low personal anxiety and low classroom anxiety are more conducive to second language acquisition.

Affective Filter Hypothesis states that acquirers with a low affective filter seek and receive more input, interact with confidence and are more receptive to the input they receive. Anxious acquirers have a high affective filter, which prevents acquisition from taking place. It is believed that the affective filter rises in early adolescence, and this may account for children’s apparent superiority to older acquirers of a second language.

4. Principles of the Natural Approach

According to Terrell, it is possible for students in a classroom situation to learn to communicate in a second language. He briefly sketches principles to guide language teaching in the context of L2 learning.

1) The aim of the Natural Approach is to cultivate communicative competence. Language is viewed as a vehicle for communicating meaning and messages. It has the expectation that students will be able to function adequately in the target language, and will be able to convey their requests and ideas. They need not know every word in a particular semantic domain, nor is it necessary that the syntax and vocabulary be flawless, but their production need to be understood. They should be able to make the meaning clear but not be necessarily accurate in details of grammar.

2) Comprehension is ahead of production. Students' ability of listening and reading are came into being before the emergence of ability of speaking and writing. Krashen and Terrell (1983) believe that people can acquire language only if they understand the information of target language. That is to say, the basis of the ability of language output is acquisition of language information. Only language users comprehend the information could they acquire the language. So the order is comprehension, acquisition, and output. Therefore teachers should provide massive comprehensible language input for students at first in teaching procedure and help them understand the input information.

3) The Natural Approach emphasizes gradual formation of oral English. It attaches great importance to listening input. Speaking is regarded as the output of listening. Speaking ability is acquired before other language abilities. When a beginner uses target language to express, they choose simple words and phrases. They sometimes mix the target language with their mother tongue. But the mixed language will disappear soon in a classroom environment with low effective filter and abundant language input.

4) Acquiring activity is the center of the Natural Approach. The Natural Approach demands students to acquire the target language through communication. They must be given chances to use the language. The teacher should choose and adjust a large range of classroom activities by arranging group size, content, and the procedure of the activity. Techniques recommended are often borrowed from other methods and adapted to meet the requirements of the Natural Approach, such as the command-based activities from Total Physical Response, mimes, gestures and context in the Direct Method to elicit questions and answers, and group work activities which are often used in the Communicative Language Teaching.

5) The affective filter should be reduced. If the affective filter is high, students can't acquire the input language information. The value of classroom activities is measured by the affective filter degree and comprehensive language input. On the condition of sufficient language input, teachers try to create low affective filter language acquiring environment. Therefore, teachers should design activities which are vivid and interesting. At the same time, they should also encourage students to express their feelings, opinions and viewpoint and create a relaxed and friendly teaching and learning environment without any focus on grammatical structures, which can reduce the affective filter and promote learning.

5. Features of the Natural Approach

5.1. Student-Centered

In the Natural Approach classroom the student/acquirer is the center of all teaching activities. The language acquirer is seen as a processor of comprehensible input, which is slightly beyond his/her current level of competence and is able to assign meaning to this input through active use of context and extra-linguistic information. Learner's roles are seem to change according to

their stage of linguistic development, and it is learners' own decisions on when to speak, what to speak about, and what linguistic expressions to use in speaking. Learners have four kind of responsibilities in the Natural Approach Classroom: The first is providing information about their specific goals; The second is taking an active role in ensuring comprehensible input; The third is deciding when to start producing speech and when to upgrade it; The last one is deciding with the teacher the time to be devoted to learning exercise. In the Natural Approach classroom, teachers perform the following roles: Firstly, the teacher is the primary resource of comprehensible input in the target language. Secondly, the teacher should create a classroom atmosphere that is interesting, friendly and in which there is a low affective filter for learning. Finally, the teacher must choose a rich mix of classroom activities to meet students' needs and interests. At the same time, in terms with the syllabus, according to Krashen and Terrell, the purpose of a language course will vary according to the needs of the students and their particular interests. Therefore, it is obvious that the Natural Approach is learner-centered.

5.2. Content-Centered

In a class applying the Natural Approach, all the classroom activities focus on content of communication. At the beginning and intermediate levels, communicative content is more important than form. The classroom activities aim to stimulate students' desire to communicate, and communicative activities must be carried out through all the class time. The explanation and practice concerning language forms was finished outside the classroom. At the same time, teachers should provide necessary materials and instructions and do some motivation works, such as tests and exams. However, it is the learner who decides how to use the language knowledge to improve his or her language ability.

5.3. Error-Allowed

The Natural Approach holds the principle that affective filter should be reduced, which means that during the second language acquisition, we should provide a supporting and relaxed environment for the acquirers to reduce their anxiety and boost their confidence. According to Terrell, correction is "negative in terms of motivation, attitude, embarrassment, and the like, even when done in the best of situations". For the acquirers at the beginning level, speech errors are almost inevitable. If the student's speech errors are constantly being corrected, they will soon learn that they respond adequately only in very severely restricted contexts. As a result, most students avoid trying to communicate anything that goes beyond simple direct answers. Terrell suggests that error correction be done only in written assignments that focus specifically on form and never during oral communication. A student should be encouraged to say new and interesting things by means of the knowledge that he/she will never be embarrassed in front of his/her peers.

5.4. Syllabus of Topics and Situations

The syllabus underlying the Natural Approach is topical and situational. It is a semantic or notional syllabus, consisting of a series of "topics that students will find interesting and the teacher can discuss in a comprehensible way. The syllabus of the Natural Approach consists of communicative goals, which means that the focus of each activity is organized by topic, not grammatical structure. Students can use situations and topics in oral communication with speakers of the target language. Needless to say, the relative weight of acquisition activities is to be over that of learning activities. Similarly, the syllabus puts less emphasis on practice of specific grammatical structures.

6. Teaching Procedure

In the Natural Approach, the teaching procedure is divided into three stages, which includes pre-production stage, early production stage and speech emergence stage. All stages are conceptualized and to reduce students' affective filter by providing vivid and interesting activities to motivate students so that the comprehensible input can be accepted and learners language competence can be developed.

6.1. Pre-production Stage

At this stage, the teacher provides comprehensible input, maintains focus on the message and helps lower affective filters. This pre-production stage allows students an opportunity to begin the acquisition process. Teachers are required to supply activities consisting of listening comprehension practice with no requirement for students to speak in the target language. Terrell explains that this phase of instruction lasts about four to five classroom hours for college students, but may last several months for younger children. Comprehension is achieved through conceptualized guessing, Total Physical Response (TPR) activities, the use of gestures and visual aids. So this stage is also called "comprehension stage". Although learners remain silent during the first stage, this does not mean that they are inactive. What they do at this stage is to understand the teacher's talk that focuses on objects in the classroom or on the content of pictures.

6.2. The Early Production Stage

The Early Production Stage will appear after students master about five hundred words. Language expression begins with answering questions in one word or in choice form which is similar with one-word utterance of children when they just begin to speak. Another form of language output activity is finishing sentence-form questions. Learners give more than one word answers. Questions from the "yes-no questions" to "Either-or questions", then move to "special questions", which is a gradual improvement process. At this stage students often make mistakes. However, instead correcting those mistakes, teachers should pay attention to the meanings of their expression so that the students will not be frustrated by the mistakes and be well-prepared emotionally for the next stage. Charts, pictures and advertisements are utilized to proceed to the third stage where acquisition activities are emphasized.

6.3. Speech Emergence Stage

The aim of this stage is to enable students to acquire oral skills for their practical needs. This stage involves some more complex activities.

1) Affective-humanistic activities. These activities are designed to involve students' feelings, opinions, desires, reactions, ideas and experiences. They include dialogues, interviews, preference rankings, personal charts and tables and activities using imagination. Although quite varied, all of these activities focus on meaning not form, and attempt to lower the affective filter.

2) Problem-solving activities. In these activities, students are involved in finding a correct answer to a question, problem or situation. Comprehensible input in these activities is supplied by the teacher when providing explanation and by students when they are working together in small groups. One type of problem-solving activity is called "tasks and series".

3) Games. In the Natural Approach, games are not a "frill" but an important element in the acquisition process. They are regarded as acquisition activities because of their value in providing comprehensible input. Students can acquire a second language rapidly in these carefree games.

4) Content activities. These are activities which focus on learning something other than language, such as the academic subject of mathematics, science, etc.. Examples of content

activities include slide shows, panels, individual reports and presentations, “show and tell” activities, music, film, film strips, television reports, news broadcasts, guest lectures, readings and discussions about any part of the target language or culture.

7. Advantages and Limitations of The Natural Approach

7.1. Advantages of the Natural Approach

The Natural Approach Theory holds many advantages that contribute significantly to language acquisition in English classroom. Here are the key advantages of the Natural Approach.

Firstly, it emphasizes the comprehensible input. The Natural Approach focuses on providing learners with large comprehensible input and meaningful communicative activities rather than production of grammatically perfect utterances and sentences. Learners are first exposed to language input before they are expected to produce it. This gradual approach builds a solid foundation for language output, which begins with TPR activities, providing learners with a lot of comprehensible listening input related to actions. In later stages, it continues to use activities associated with other methods, especially the Direct Method and the Communicative Approach.

Secondly, it stresses the development of communicative skills. The Natural Approach emphasizes the development of communicative skills in both spoken and written form in English. Learners are encouraged to use the language in real-life situations, fostering fluency and confidence in communication. The Natural Approach also directs learners' attention to the meaning rather than focusing on form or grammar, which encourages learners to pay attention to the activities and the communication, thus promoting their communicative skills.

Thirdly, students are highly motivated in the Natural Approach. One of the theory basis of the Natural Approach is the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which believes the negative affective factors, such as anxiety, will impede the comprehensible input into the acquirers' brain. Thus, in a class of the Natural Approach, the teacher will exert effort to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, design various interesting activities that meet the needs of different students, boost students' self-confidence and protect their self-esteem, and with a low affective filter, the students are more likely to engage in language learning.

7.2. Limitations

The Natural Approach, while having its merits, also has several drawbacks that should be considered when implemented in language classrooms.

Firstly, grammar instruction is neglected. The Natural Approach emphasizes language acquisition through natural exposure, and aims at developing acquirers' communicative skills while overlooking the grammar analysis in the classroom. Krashen and Terrell states that the acquirers should be able to make the meaning clear but not necessarily be accurate in all details of grammar and they also noted that they do not organize the activities of the class about a grammatical syllabus and should resist any focus on grammatical structures. Although the purpose is to focus on meaning rather than form and lower the affective filter, the neglect of grammar instruction can bring about problems in language acquisition, especially in a learning context where the target language is not sufficient, which can lead to learners struggling with precise grammatical structures in situations where accuracy is crucial, especially in written work and advanced language use, and if learners frequently make mistakes without receiving any corrective feedback at the beginning, the fact is that they will find it hard to correct them later.

Secondly, there is a potential for slow progress. Since the Natural Approach relies on a gradual, natural process of language acquisition, progress can be slower compared to more structured and focused teaching methods. Learners may not see significant improvements in their language skills as quickly as they would with more traditional approaches that focus on explicit

grammar rules and vocabulary acquisition. This can be discouraging for learners who are seeking rapid progress.

Thirdly, it may have difficulty in evaluating learning outcomes. The Natural Approach focuses on fluency and naturalness in language use, which can be difficult to measure with the traditional assessment tools. Teachers and learners may find it challenging to accurately assess progress and determine if the approach is effective or not, which can be difficult to make informed decisions about adjustments to the teaching approach.

Fourthly, it makes demands for learners and teachers. In the Natural Approach classroom. Krashen and Terrell states that it is learners' own decisions on when to speak, what to speak about, and what linguistic expressions to use in speaking, and the learners will take responsibilities such as providing information about their specific goals and deciding when to start producing speech and when to upgrade it. For learners who lack motivation and the ability of autonomous learning, the Natural Approach may not be effective as they may not actively engage in the necessary language practices. In the Natural Approach, according to Krashen and Terrell, the teacher has three central roles: the primary source of comprehensible input, creating a low affective filter class environment and design rich classroom activities, which requires teachers to have a high level of proficiency in the target language and teaching skills. Additionally, teachers must be skilled in classroom management to maintain the classroom discipline to ensure that learners stay focused and actively participate in the learning activities rather than chat with their group members.

8. Conclusion

This paper has introduced the Natural Approach in respect of its background, theoretical basis, principles, features, procedures and its advantages and limitations. Terrell and Krashen proposed the Natural Approach based on Terrell's teaching experience and Krashen's language acquisition theories as well as taking advantages of the Direct Method, TPR and the Communicative Approach. As is discussed above, there are many good traits of the Natural Approach, for example, it is learner-centered, paying attention to develop students' communication competence and reducing learners' affective filter etc. Lots of experiments and researches have proved that it is effective when applied in EFL, which is a breakthrough to the development of SLA theories. However, just like many other language teaching approaches, the Natural Approach is also imperfect. The application of the Natural Approach will bring about many serious problems, such as the neglect of grammar, teacher training, materials development, evaluation and so on. Therefore, when a teacher is trying to apply the Natural Approach in class, it is sensible to take students needs, teaching objectives and other factors into fully consideration to develop students' language abilities.

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