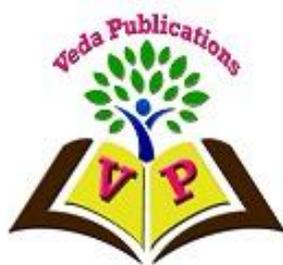




THE NATURAL APPROACH

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A glance at the history of language teaching methods shows that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) marks the beginning of a major paradigm shift within language teaching in the twentieth century, one whose ramifications continue to be felt today. The general principles of CLT are widely accepted around the world and have been the basis of diverse teaching practices later. The Natural Approach, Cooperative Language Learning, Content-Based Teaching and Task-Based Teaching are some of the current teaching methods claiming to embody basic principles of CLT. In this talk I propose to examine the features of the Natural Approach.

BACKGROUND

In 1977, Tracy Terrell, outlined "a proposal for a 'new' philosophy of language teaching which (he) called the Natural Approach" (Terrell 1977; 1982: 121). This was an attempt to develop a language teaching proposal that incorporated the "naturalistic" principles researchers had identified in studies of second language acquisition. The Natural Approach grew out of Terrell's experiences teaching Spanish classes, although it has also been used in elementary-to advanced-level classes and with several other languages. At the same time, he joined forces with Stephen Krashen, an applied linguist at the University of Southern California, in elaborating a theoretical rationale for the Natural Approach, drawing on Krashen's influential theory of second language acquisition. Krashen and Terrell's combined statement of the principles and practices of the Natural Approach appeared in their book *The Natural Approach*, published in 1983. Krashen and Terrell's book contains theoretical sections prepared by Krashen that outline his views on second language acquisition (Krashen 1981; 1982), and sections on implementation and classroom procedures, prepared largely by Terrell.



Krashen and Terrell identified the Natural Approach with what they call "traditional" approaches to language teaching. Traditional approaches are defined as "based on the use of language in communicative situations without recourse to the native language" – and, perhaps, without references to grammatical analysis, grammatical drilling, or a particular theory of grammar. Krashen and Terrell noted that such "approaches have been called natural, psychological, phonetic, new, reform, direct, analytic, imitative and so forth" (Krashen and Terrell 1983:9). The fact that the authors of the Natural Approach relate their approach to the Natural Method has led some people to assume that *Natural Approach* and *Natural Method* are synonymous terms. Although the tradition is a common one, there are important differences between the Natural Approach and the older Natural Method, which are discussed here.

THE NATURAL METHODS

Among the language teaching innovations of the nineteenth century were those by Marcel and Prendergast. The Frenchman C. Marcel (1793 - 1896) referred to child language learning as a model for language teaching, emphasized the importance of meaning in learning and proposed that reading be taught before other skills. The Englishman T. Prendergast (1806 - 1886) was one of the first to record the observation that children use contextual and situational cues to interpret utterances and that they use memorized phrases and "routines" in speaking. There was an interest in developing principles for language teaching out of naturalistic principles of language learning, such as are seen in first language acquisition. This led to what have been termed *natural methods* and ultimately led to the development of what came to be known as the Direct Method.

THE DIRECT METHOD

Gouin had been one of the first of the nineteenth-century reformers to attempt to build a methodology around observation of child language learning. Other reformers toward the end of the century likewise turned their attention to naturalistic principles of language learning, and for this reason they are sometimes referred to as advocates of a "natural" method. In fact, at various times throughout the history of language teaching, attempts have been made to make second language learning more like first language learning. Among those who tried to apply natural principles to language classes in the nineteenth century was L. Sauveur (1826 - 1907), who used intensive oral interaction in the target language, employing questions as a way of presenting and eliciting language. He opened a language school in Boston in the late 1860s, and his method soon became referred to as the Natural Method. Sauveur and other believers in the Natural Method argued that a foreign language could be taught without translation or the use of the learner's native language if meaning was conveyed directly through demonstration and action. Rather than using analytical procedures that focus on explanation of grammar rules in classroom teaching, teachers must encourage direct and



spontaneous use of the foreign language in the classroom. Learners would then be able to induce rules of grammar. The teacher replaced the textbook in the early stages of learning. Speaking began with systematic attention to pronunciation. Known words could be used to teach new vocabulary, using mime, demonstration, and pictures.

Thus the Natural Method is another term for what by 1900 had become known as the Direct Method. It is described in a report on the state of the art in language teaching commissioned by the Modern Language Association in 1901 (the report of the "Committee of 12"):

In its extreme form the method consisted of a series of monologues by the teacher interspersed with exchanges of question and answer between the instructor and the pupil - all in the foreign language.... A great deal of pantomime accompanied the talk. With the aid of this gesticulation, by attentive listening and by dint of much repetition the learner came to associate certain acts and objects with certain combinations of the sounds and finally reached the point of reproducing the foreign words or phrases Not until a considerable familiarity with the spoken word was attained was the scholar allowed to see the foreign language in print. The study of grammar was reserved for a still later period. (Cole 1931:58).

The term *natural*, used in reference to the Direct Method, merely emphasized that the principles underlying the method were believed to conform to the principles of naturalistic language learning in young children. Similarly, the Natural Approach, as defined by Krashen and Terrell, is believed to conform to the naturalistic principles found in successful second language acquisition. Unlike the Direct Method, however, it places less emphasis on teacher monologues, direct repetition, and formal questions and answers, and less focus on accurate production of target-language sentences. In the Natural Approach there is an emphasis on exposure, or input, rather than 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.

THE NATURAL APPROACH

View of language: Krashen and Terrell see communication as the primary function of language, and since their approach focuses on teaching communicative abilities, they refer to the Natural Approach (NA) as an example of a communicative approach. The Natural Approach "is similar to other communicative approaches being developed today" (Krashen and Terrell 1983:17). They reject earlier methods of language teaching, such as the Audiolingual Method, which viewed grammar as the central component of language. According to Krashen and Terrell, the major problem with these methods was that they were built not around "actual theories of language acquisition, but theories of something else; for example, the structure of



language" (1983: 1). Unlike proponents of Communicative Language Teaching, however, Krashen and Terrell give little attention to a theory of language. Indeed, a critic of Krashen suggested that he has no theory of language at all (Gregg 1984). What Krashen and Terrell do describe about the nature of language emphasizes the primacy of meaning. The importance of the vocabulary is stressed, for example, suggesting the view that a language is essentially its lexicon and only inconsequently the grammar that determines how the lexicon is exploited to produce messages. Terrell quotes Dwight Bolinger to support this view: "The quantity of information in the lexicon far outweighs that in any other part of the language, and if there is anything to the notion of redundancy it should be easier to reconstruct a message containing just words than one containing just the syntactic relations. The significant fact is the subordinate role of grammar. The most important thing is to get the words in" (Bolinger, in Terrell 1977: 333). Language is viewed as a vehicle for communicating meanings and messages. Hence Krashen and Terrell stated that "acquisition can take place only when people understand messages in the target language" (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 19).

Natural Approach then, has a view of language that consists of lexical items, structures, and messages. Obviously, there is no particular novelty in this view as such, except that messages are considered of primary importance in the Natural Approach. The lexicon for both perception and production is considered critical in the construction and interpretation of messages. Lexical items in messages are necessarily grammatically structured, and more complex messages involve more complex grammatical structure. Although they acknowledge such grammatical structuring, Krashen and Terrell feel that grammatical structure does not require explicit analysis or attention by the language teacher, by the language learner, or in language teaching materials.

View of learning: Krashen and Terrell make 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. "It is based on an empirically grounded theory of second language acquisition, which has been supported by a large number of scientific studies in a wide variety of language acquisition and learning contexts" (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 1). The theory and research are grounded on Krashen's views of language acquisition, which are collectively referred to as *Krashen's language acquisition theory*.

Five main hypotheses sum up the NA's main tenets. They are:

1. The Acquisition or Learning Hypothesis
2. The Monitor Hypothesis
3. The Natural Order Hypothesis
4. The Input Hypothesis
5. The Affective Filter Hypothesis.



1. This hypothesis sees *acquisition* and *learning* as two distinct ways of developing competence in a language. Acquisition is the natural way for a child to build her language competence. It is for the main part an unconscious process, and enables her to develop language proficiency through being involved in its use for communication. Learning, on the other hand, is a conscious process that relies on gaining the mastery of rules. It results in explicit knowledge about the forms of language. However, what this hypothesis mainly emphasizes is that consciously gained knowledge of rules (that is, learnt knowledge) does not become acquisition. It also does not have the same value or potential for use as acquired competence.
2. NA's second hypothesis moves forward from the first. With its belief that the source of a speaker's utterances is the acquired system (that is, what is not learnt consciously), it states that whatever is consciously learned can only serve one purpose, which is to help monitor (or correct) what is expressed. Learning (as opposed to acquisition) thus has only a minor corrective role. In practice even that role is restricted by, among other things, the limitations of time, opportunities for use and knowledge of rules.
3. The natural-order hypothesis lies in the understanding that the acquisition of grammar (both morphology and syntax) follows a predictable order within a process of natural development. This order is said to be true of both first and second language acquisition. An important corollary to this is that the errors that learners make form part of this organic development, and should therefore be seen (and welcomed) as marking natural stages in the development of communicative competence.
4. NA's fourth hypothesis rests in the belief that language is best acquired by the learner's getting exposed to a sufficient quantity of comprehensible input. For this to happen the input should be not just rich but such that, at any particular time, it is slightly beyond the current level of the learner's competence. As Krashen and Terrell put it: "An acquirer can 'move from stage i (where i is the acquirer's level of competence) to a stage $i+1$ (where $i + 1$ is the stage immediately following i along some natural order) by understanding language containing $i + 1$ " (1983:32).
5. The final hypothesis states that learners with a low affective filter acquire language better as they are able to receive more, interact with it with greater confidence and thus have a higher degree of receptivity to the input. A low-stress environment is thus a potentially richer source of language acquisition.

Two points of view are mentioned regarding the syllabus in NA. Krashen and Terrell note that the Natural Approach is primarily "designed to develop basic communication skills - both oral and written" (1983: 67). They then observe that communication goals "may be expressed in terms of situations, functions and topics" and proceed to list four pages of topics and situations "which are likely to be most useful to beginning students"



(1983:67). The second point of view holds that "the purpose of a language course will vary according to the needs of the students and their particular interests" (Krashen and Terrell 1983:65).

As well as fitting the needs and interests of students, content selection should aim to create a low affective filter by being interesting and fostering a friendly, relaxed atmosphere, should provide a wide exposure to vocabulary that may be useful to basic personal communication, and should resist any focus on grammatical structures, since if input is provided "over a wider variety of topics while pursuing communicative goals, the necessary grammatical structures are automatically provided in the input" (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 71).

Teaching and learning techniques recommended by Krashen and Terrell are often borrowed from other methods and adapted to meet the requirements of Natural Approach theory. These include command- based activities from Total Physical Response; Direct Method activities in which mime, gesture, and context are used to elicit questions and answers; and even situation-based practice of structures and patterns, Group-work activities are often identical to those used in Communicative Language Teaching, where sharing information in order to complete a task is emphasized. What characterizes the Natural Approach is the use of familiar techniques within the framework of a method that focuses on providing comprehensible input and a classroom environment that cues comprehension of input, minimizes learner anxiety, and maximizes learner self-confidence.

With regard to Learner roles, there is a basic assumption in the Natural Approach that learners should not try to learn a language in the usual sense. The extent to which they can lose themselves in activities involving meaningful communication will determine the amount and kind of acquisition they will experience and the fluency they will ultimately demonstrate. The acquirer is challenged by input that is slightly beyond his or her current level of competence and is able to assign meaning to this input through active use of context and extralinguistic information. Learners' roles are seen to change according to their stage of linguistic development. Central to these changing roles are learner decisions on when to speak, what to speak about, and what linguistic expressions to use in speaking.

The Natural Approach teacher has three central roles. First, the teacher is the primary source of comprehensible input in the target language. "Class time is devoted primarily to providing input for acquisition," and the teacher is the primary generator of that input. In this role, the teacher is required to generate a constant flow of language input while providing a multiplicity of nonlinguistic clues to assist students in interpreting the input.

Second, the Natural Approach teacher creates a classroom atmosphere that is interesting, friendly, and in which there is a low affective filter for learning. This is achieved in part through such Natural Approach



techniques as not demanding speech from the students before they are ready for it, not correcting student errors, and providing subject matter of high interest to students.

Finally, the teacher must choose and orchestrate a rich mix of classroom activities, involving a variety of group sizes, content, and contexts.

The primary goal of materials in the Natural Approach is to make classroom activities as meaningful as possible by supplying "the extralinguistic context that helps the acquirer to understand and thereby to acquire" (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 55), by relating classroom activities to the real world, and by fostering real communication among the learners.

The primary aim of materials is to promote comprehension and communication. Pictures and other visual aids are essential, because they supply the content for communication. They facilitate the acquisition of a large vocabulary within the classroom. Other recommended materials include schedules, brochures, advertisements, maps, and books at levels appropriate to the students, if a reading component is included in the course. Games, in general, are seen as useful classroom materials, since "games by their very nature, focus the students on what it is they are doing and use the language as a tool for reaching the goal rather than as a goal in itself (Terrell 1982: 121).

PROCEDURE

We have seen that the Natural Approach adopts techniques and activities freely from various method sources and can be regarded as innovative only with respect to the purposes for which they are recommended and the ways they are used. Krashen and Terrell (1983) provide suggestions for the use of a wide range of activities, all of which are familiar components of Situational Language Teaching, Communicative Language Teaching, and other methods. Procedural aspects of the Natural Approach include examples of commands, names of body parts, introduce numbers and sequence, using names of physical characteristics and clothing to identify members of the class by name, using visuals and pictures to introduce new vocabulary etc. Such activities are to be used in the Natural Approach classroom to provide comprehensible input, without requiring production of responses or minimal responses in the target language.

CONCLUSION

Although the Natural Approach is not as widely established as CLT, Krashen's theories of language learning have had a wide impact, particularly in the United States. Also the issues the Natural Approach addresses continue to be at the core of debates about teaching methods.



The NA appeals to language teachers and practitioners mainly because much of what it brings out and emphasizes makes sense to them. No one can for example, doubt that a lot of language gets learnt through rich and varied exposure to listening and reading. None can therefore doubt the importance of providing a rich and rewarding reading and listening environment. That whatever is comprehensible, that is, easily understood, promotes learning better than what is not, should be equally obvious. Much earlier, Michael West (1926) had, for example, highlighted the importance of making reading materials comprehensible by showing how too many new words or new meanings of old words on a printed page went against a learner's attempts at independent reading. That a less anxious learner (with a low affective filter) should normally do better and learn faster ought also to be normally true, although in at least some cases a degree of pressure may help motivate some learners into further effort. The broad essentials of the NA seem thus to have support in teacher experiences and learner successes. So too do many of the activities that belong to the approach in practice.

But two other things claimed by NA advocates raise doubts. One, it makes claims to being based on a verifiable theory related to each main hypothesis. This needs further proof because as of now there is insufficient support, if not growing suspicion, of a few of these. Tickoo points out few of the NA's barely supported assertions are: that conscious learning (as opposed to unconscious acquisition) does not contribute to language competence; that comprehensible input (even with no help from any output) constitutes all that is needed to learn language for effective communication; that there is a natural order to learning which is both known and unchangeable; and that attention to form (grammar) does not promote language acquisition (2003). A lot of research has gone into showing that, in each case, the opposite of what the NA upholds may also be true in many circumstances.

The Natural Approach belongs to a tradition of language teaching methods based on observation and interpretation of how learners acquire both first and second languages in nonformal settings. As Newmark and Reibel said, "an adult can effectively be taught by grammatically unordered materials" and that such an approach is, indeed, "the only learning process which we know for certain will produce mastery of the language at a native level"(1968:153). In the Natural Approach, a focus on comprehension and meaningful communication as well as the provision of the right kinds of comprehensible input provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for successful classroom second and foreign language acquisition. Like Communicative Language Teaching, the Natural Approach is hence evolutionary rather than revolutionary in its procedures according to Richards and Rodgers (2001). Its greatest claim to originality lies not in the techniques it employs but in their use in a method that emphasizes comprehensible and meaningful practice activities, rather than production of grammatically perfect utterances and sentences.

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