

The Overview of the Natural Approach

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Abstract

The Natural Approach is an educational method for teaching languages that emphasizes meaningful communication and acquisition of language skills in a naturalistic manner. It is widely used in language teaching. In this passage, the author interprets the Natural Approach, analyzes the principles, characteristics, theories, advantages of the Natural Approach by the literature method. The main purpose is that understanding the Natural Approach more deeply, and providing some theoretical references for how to use the natural teaching method in the future, so as to better combine theory with practice.

Keywords

The Natural Approach; Learning Language.

1. Research Background

The Natural approach was developed by Stephen D. Krashen and Tracy D. Terrell proposed it. In the early 1970s, a new interdisciplinary research field Second-language acquisition emerged in the United States. The central topic in this field is how people master the second language, including the psychological process of Second-language acquisition, learning strategies, environment and individual differences, and the impact on learning process and learning results. Among them, the famous American applied linguist Krashen's Second-language acquisition theory has the most profound and controversial impact. This theory consists of five hypotheses: the acquisition learning hypothesis and the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the Input hypothesis, and the effective filter hypothesis. The acquisition acquisition hypothesis is the foundation of this theory.

In 1977, Tracy Terrell, an assistant professor of Spanish at the University of California, USA, published an article entitled "A Natural Approach to Second Language Acquisition and Learning" in the Modern Language Journal on the basis of years of practical teaching and combined with new language teaching theories, The Natural approach was proposed for the first time. In 1983, Terrell and Krashen, a professor at the University of Southern California, launched the book "The Natural approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom", marking the formal establishment of the teaching method. The book makes a comprehensive reflection on the traditional foreign language teaching methods, and takes the Second-language acquisition theory as the framework, proposes a teaching method that can flexibly use various methods and has strong adaptability, and can completely acquire language communication ability under classroom teaching conditions.

2. Research Purpose

Through the literature method, the author interprets the Natural Approach, analyzes the principles, characteristics, theories, advantages of the Natural Approach. The main purpose is that understanding the Natural Approach more deeply, and providing some theoretical references for how to use the natural teaching method in the future, so as to better combine theory with practice.

3. Definition of “the Natural Approach”

Krashen and Terrell have 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, needless to say, without reference to grammatical analysis, grammatical drilling, or to a particular theory of grammar. Krashen and Terrell note that such “approaches have been called natural, psychological, phonetic, new, reform, direct, analytic, imitative and so forth” (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 9).

The Natural Approach is method of second language learning that focuses on communication skills and language exposure before rules and grammar, similar to how you learn your first language.

4. Four Basic Principles of the Natural Approach

The basic principles of the theory can be broken into four major stages of language acquisition.

4.1. Pre-production

The first stage in the Natural Approach is known as pre-production and is essentially a silent phase, where nothing seems to be happening. Children have this stage when they’re not really talking at all. It seems nothing is going on. Actually, so many things are happening. They’re listening. Picking up on meanings. Reading context clues. Interpreting and making guesses on what is being said. Making mistakes and honing their guesses.

4.2. Early Production

The next stage, early production, is when babies start uttering their first words, phrases and simple sentences. The focus is still on comprehension. But this time, the crux of the issue is “Are you being understood by the other person?” (Again, you don’t need perfect grammar for this.) Bothering with correct grammar comes late in the acquisition stage. In the Natural Approach, the early stages are replete with grammatically incorrect communication that aren’t really implicitly corrected.

When a child says, “I drinks,” mommy doesn’t give him a firm scolding. She finds it cute and then hands him a drink. But that child is slowly getting fluent with his first language. He’s communicating and using language to express what he wants, and all that’s happening without any direct grammar lessons.

4.3. Speech Emergence

Over time, the child’s singular words and short phrases will transform into lengthier ones. Thus enters the speech emergence stage. The sentences, while longer, are still relatively basic and are likely to contain a lot of mistakes in grammar, pronunciation or word usage. However, the progress is undeniable as more content is added to the speech. Moreover, it would seem that the child is inclined to actually work through and craft sentences for the sake of communication. At this point, the child’s level of understanding others’ speech is quite high.

4.4. Intermediate Fluency

Progress to fluency continues as more exposure to the language happens. The (meaningful) linguistic experience stacks up so fast so that when that child sits waiting for his first grammar class, he’s already chatting non-stop with his seatmates, with perfectly decent grammar, even before the language teacher arrives. This is the final stage, known as intermediate fluency. And when the lessons do come, the child is just getting to peek behind the scenes to see the specific rules (grammar) guiding his own language usage. All that’s explained to him is the rationale, the nuances of communication, behind the groupings of words he’s been using naturally all

along. It's all a review of what he already innately knows. And that's what Natural Approach is all about. It's looking back to first language acquisition and using the whole bag of tricks there in order to get the same kind of success for second (and third, fourth, fifth, etc.) language acquisition. Just because you're learning another language doesn't mean you have to reinvent the wheel. The expectations and the learning curve might be different for adults, but the underlying human, mental and psychological mechanisms are the same.

5. The Characteristics of the Natural Approach

5.1. Input

Input refers to what's being relayed to the language learner—the “packages” of language that are delivered to and received by the listener. The Natural Approach puts high emphasis on not just the amount but also the nature of the input received. Input is also known as “exposure.” For proper, meaningful language acquisition to occur, the input should also be meaningful and comprehensible.

5.2. Comprehension

In the Natural Approach, the initial focus really is on comprehension. The crux of the issue is, “Do you understand what is being said?” You don't need to notice subject-verb agreement for this. Understanding the meaning of something can be done in a variety of ways besides technical grammar breakdowns. Comprehension must precede production for true internal learning to be done.

5.3. Communication

When it comes to language acquisition, the Natural Approach places more significance on communication than grammar. In order for the child or learner to eventually produce their own sentences, it's more crucial that he or she is constantly exposed to meaningful communication than grammar lessons.

6. Theory of Language

Krashen and Terrell believe that the Natural Approach is an example of a communicative approach. The Natural Approach “is similar to other communicative approaches being developed today” (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 17). Indeed, a recent critic of Krashen suggests 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 essential its lexicon and only in consequently the grammar that determines how the lexicon is exploited to produce messages. Krashen and Terrell view language is a vehicle for communicating meanings and messages. Hence Krashen and Terrell state that acquisition can take place only when people understand messages in the target language (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 19). Yet despite their avowed communicative approach to language, they view language learning, as do audio linguistics, as mastery of structures by stages. “The input hypothesis states that in order for acquirers to progress to the next stage in the acquisition of the target language, they need to understand input language that includes a structure that is part of the next stage” (Krashen and Terrell 1983:32). Krashen refers to this with the formula $I + 1$ (i.e., input that contains structures slightly above the learner 's present level). We assume that Krashen means by structures something at least in the tradition of what such linguists as Leonard Bloomfield and Charles Fries meant by structures. The Natural Approach thus assumes a linguistic hierarchy of structural complexity that one masters through encounters with “input containing structures at the $I + 1$ ” level.

Language consists of lexical items, structures, and messages. Apparently, 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.

7. Theory of Learning

Krashen and Terrell make continuing reference to the theoretical and research base claimed to underlie the Natural Approach and the fact that the method is unique in having such a base. "It's 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 five theories are as follows.

7.1. The Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis

The Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis claims that there are two distinctive ways of developing competence in a second or foreign language. The first way that acquisition is the "natural" way, paralleling first language development in children. Acquisition refers to an unconscious process that involves the naturalistic development of language proficiency through understanding language and through using language for meaningful communication. The second type is "linguistic acquisition", which is a conscious process of learning language through the use of explicit language knowledge. This hypothesis not only distinguishes between the two ways and processes of mastering a language, especially a foreign language, but also believes that adults can acquire a second language, naturally mastering a foreign language just like children learn their mother tongue.

7.2. The Natural Order Hypothesis

The hypothesis holds that the acquisition of Language construct is carried out in a predictable order. Although different students learning the same language differ slightly in the order in which they acquire Language construct, the basic order is roughly the same. They always acquire some structures first, then others.

7.3. The Monitoring Hypothesis

The Monitoring Hypothesis suggests that we call upon learned knowledge to correct ourselves when we communicate, but that conscious learning have only this function.

Three conditions limit the successful use of the monitor: language users need to have sufficient time, focus on form, and knowledge of rules. Therefore, the role of consciously acquired language knowledge in the formation of second language ability is limited, and the 'monitoring' role of explicit knowledge is difficult to play in the natural language communication environment.

7.4. The Input Hypothesis

The Input Hypothesis explains the relationship between what the learner is exposed to of a language and the language acquisition. It includes 4 main issues.

First, the hypothesis relates acquisition, and not to learning.

Second, people acquire language best by understanding input that is slightly beyond their current level of competence:

An acquirer can move" from a stage I (where I is the acquirer's level of competence) to a stage I+1 (where + 1 is the stage immediately following I along some natural order) by understanding language containing I+1.(Krashen and Terrell 1983: 32)

Third, the ability to speak fluently cannot be taught directly; rather, it emerges" independently in time, after the acquirer has built up linguistic competence by understanding input.

Fourth, if there is a sufficient quantity of comprehensible input, I+1 will usually be provided automatically.

7.5. The Affective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen sees the learner's emotional state or attitude as an adjustable filter that freely passes, impedes, or blocks input necessary to acquisition. Emotions refer to motivation, confidence, and anxiety. The stronger the motivation, the stronger the self-confidence, and the lower the anxiety, that is, the lower the emotional filtering, which is more conducive to the development of second language ability; On the contrary, high emotional filtering not only hinders learners from obtaining input, but also hinders their understanding of existing input. In other words, in order to acquire a second language, the learner must be emotionally open to the second language.

8. Design of the Natural Approach

The objective of the Natural Approach "is for beginners and is designed to help them become intermediates." It has the expectation that students will be able to function adequately in the target situation. They will understand the speaker of the target language (perhaps with requests for clarification), and will be able to convey (in a non-insulting manner) 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 does need to be understood. They should be able to make the meaning clear but not necessarily be accurate in all details of grammar. (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 71)

For the syllabus of the Natural Approach, Krashen and Terrell (1983) approach course organization from two points of view. First, they list some typical goals for language courses and suggest which of these goals are the ones at which the Natural Approach aims. They list such goals under four areas:

- (1) Basic personal communication skills: oral (e.g., listening to announcements in public places)
- (2) Basic personal communication skills: written (e.g., reading and writing personal letters)
- (3) Academic learning skills: oral (e.g., listening to a lecture)
- (4) Academic learning skills: written (e.g., taking notes in class)

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).

9. Procedure of the Natural Approach

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 discussed. To illustrate procedural aspects of the Natural Approach, we will cite examples of how 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.

- (1) Start with TPR (Total Physical Response) commands.
- (2) Use TPR to teach names of body parts and to introduce numbers and sequence.
- (3) Introduce classroom terms and props into commands.
- (4) Use names of physical characteristics and clothing to identify members of the class by name.
- (5) Use visuals, typically magazine pictures, to introduce new vocabulary and to continue with activities requiring only student names as response.
- (6) Combine use of pictures with TPR.

(7) Combine observations about the pictures with commands and conditionals.

(8) Using several pictures, ask students to point to the picture being described.

(Krashen and Terrell 1983: 75-7)

In this way, the instructor use key vocabulary items, appropriate gestures, context, repetition, and paraphrase as a constant flow of “comprehensive input” to help acquisition.

10. The Advantages of the Natural Approach

The Natural Approach is an educational method for teaching languages that emphasizes meaningful communication and acquisition of language skills in a naturalistic manner. Here are some advantages of using the Natural Approach:

Authentic Language Use: The Natural Approach encourages learners to use and understand language in real-life contexts. This approach prioritizes natural and meaningful communication, exposing students to authentic language usage rather than relying on artificial drills or memorization.

Motivation and Engagement: By providing opportunities for learners to engage in communicative activities, the Natural Approach fosters motivation and increases student engagement. Learners are encouraged to express themselves freely, building self-confidence and a positive attitude towards language learning.

Reduced Anxiety: The Natural Approach focuses on creating a supportive and relaxed classroom environment where learners feel comfortable taking risks with their language abilities. This can help reduce anxiety and enhance learning outcomes, as students are more willing to participate actively without fear of making mistakes.

Contextual Learning: This approach encourages learning through meaningful and contextualized situations, enabling students to understand and use language in practical and relevant ways. By connecting language to real-world scenarios and personal experiences, learning becomes more memorable and effective.

Cultural Understanding: The Natural Approach incorporates cultural elements and context into language learning. Through exposure to authentic materials and discussions on cultural topics, learners gain a deeper understanding of the language's associated customs, traditions, and cultural nuances.

Facilitates Fluency: The Natural Approach prioritizes the development of fluency by encouraging learners to communicate and express themselves in the target language from the beginning. By focusing on meaningful communication rather than grammatical accuracy, learners can develop their language skills in a more fluid and natural manner.

Emphasizes Listening Skills: The Natural Approach places great emphasis on the development of listening skills as a foundation for language learning. By exposing learners to authentic spoken language and providing ample listening practice, this approach helps students improve their ability to understand and interpret spoken language effectively.

Overall, the Natural Approach has several advantages that make it an effective method for language acquisition. It promotes meaningful communication, engagement, reduced anxiety, contextualized learning, cultural understanding, incremental language acquisition, fluency.

11. How to Learn a Language with the Natural Approach

Create an immersive environment: Surround yourself with materials in the target language, such as books, movies, TV shows, podcasts, or music. Immerse yourself in the language as much as possible to develop familiarity with its sounds, rhythms, and vocabulary.

Focus on listening and understanding: Spend a significant amount of time listening to native speakers of the language. Use audio resources, podcasts, or even conversational partners to expose yourself to natural spoken language. Aim to understand the overall meaning rather than getting caught up in individual words or grammar structures.

Engage in meaningful communication: Begin speaking and interacting in the language as soon as you feel comfortable. Seek out opportunities for conversation with native speakers or language exchange partners. Additionally, participate in language meetups, join online forums, or enroll in conversation-based language courses.

Acquire vocabulary naturally: Learn new words and phrases by encountering them in context rather than focusing on memorization. Contextualized exposure allows your brain to make connections and associate meaning with words more effectively. Read or listen to materials that interest you, and pay attention to how words are used naturally.

Develop reading and writing skills: Once you have built some foundation, start reading books, articles, or websites in the target language. Take note of unfamiliar words and look up their meanings. Practice writing by journal, engaging in online conversations, or exchanging emails with native speakers. Gradually improve your reading and writing skills over time.

Embrace errors and corrections: Don't be afraid to make mistakes; they are a natural part of the language learning process. View corrections as opportunities to improve rather than criticism. Emphasize meaning over accuracy in the initial stages of communication, gradually refining your language use as you progress.

Keep a language learning routine: Consistency is key in language learning. Set aside regular study time each day or week and stick to it. Establishing a routine helps maintain your motivation and progress steadily.

Remember that the Natural Approach primarily focuses on meaningful communication and immersion rather than explicit grammar drills. By embracing the natural flow of the language, you can develop a solid foundation and achieve fluency in an enjoyable and effective way.

12. Conclusion

Above all, 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 non-formal settings. Such methods reject the formal (grammatical) organization of language as a prerequisite to teaching. They hold with Newmark and Reibel that "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).

The Natural approach has its unique advantages, but it is also not suitable for the actual situation of foreign language teaching. Therefore, in teaching practice, it is necessary to choose the best and use it to avoid overall absorption or negation.

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