

The Natural Approach

Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell developed the "Natural Approach" in the early eighties (Krashen and Terrell, 1983), based on Krashen's theories about second language acquisition. The approach shared a lot in common with Asher's Total Physical Response method in terms of advocating the need for a "silent phase", waiting for spoken production to "emerge" of its own accord, and emphasizing the need to make learners as relaxed as possible during the learning process. Some important underlying principles are that there should be a lot of language "acquisition" as opposed to language "processing", and there needs to be a considerable amount of "comprehensible input" from the teacher. Meaning is considered as the essence of language and vocabulary (not grammar) is the heart of language.

As part of the Natural Approach, students listen to the teacher using the target language communicatively from the very beginning. It has certain similarities with the much earlier Direct Method, with the important exception that students are allowed to use their native language alongside the target language as part of the language learning process. In early stages, students are not corrected during oral production, as the teacher is focusing on meaning rather than form (unless the error is so drastic that it actually hinders meaning).

Communicative activities prevail throughout a language course employing the Natural Approach, focusing on a wide range of activities including games, roleplays, dialogs, group work and discussions. There are three generic stages identified in the approach: (1) Preproduction - developing listening skills; (2) Early Production - students struggle with the language and make many errors which are corrected based on content and not structure; (3) Extending Production - promoting fluency through a variety of more challenging activities.

Krashen's theories and the Natural approach have received plenty of criticism, particularly orientated around the recommendation of a "silent period" that is terminated when students feel ready to "emerge" into oral production, and the idea of "comprehensible input". Critics point out that students will "emerge" at different times (or perhaps not at all!) and it is hard to determine which forms of language input will be "comprehensible" to the students. These factors can create a classroom that is essentially very difficult to manage unless the teacher is highly skilled. Still, this was the first attempt at creating an expansive and overall "approach" rather than a specific "method", and the Natural Approach led naturally into the generally accepted norm for effective language teaching: Communicative Language Teaching.

The Natural Approach

Created by Tracy Terrell (1983), the Natural approach involved the learners into TPR activities, but at the beginning level when "comprehensible input" is essential. Terrell believed that the learners would benefit from delaying production until speech "emerges," that learners should be as relaxed as possible in the classroom, and that a great deal of communication and acquisition should take place. The Natural aimed at basic communication skills, that is, everyday language situations like conversations, shopping, listening to the radio, and so forth.

The Natural Approach (NA) is a method of foreign language teaching which aims to apply the principles of natural language acquisition into class. The language acquisition theory underlying NA suggests that we acquire any new language in an amazingly simple way: by "understanding message language. So one need not to imitate all aspects of natural setting of language acquisition, but to provide crucial ingredient of naturalistic acquisition: comprehensible input (CI). Provided that learners are exposed to ample amount of CI, they can acquire a new language not only in the artificial classroom but even on Mars. Click on the links to see how to apply this simple and effective method in your own context.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Natural Approach (NA) is a product of Stephen Krashen, an applied linguist at the University of Southern California and Tracy Terrell, a teacher in California. Krashen's work on second language acquisition and Terrell's teaching experiences form the bases of the Natural Approach. The practices of this new approach have been published in "The Natural Approach" (Krashen and Terrell, 1983). The book contains theoretical sections by Krashen and sections on implementation and classroom procedures prepared mostly by Terrell. The most striking proposal of the NA theory is that adults still acquire second languages and that the ability to 'pick up' languages does not disappear at puberty. Thus, Krashen's contribution to Chomsky's proposition is that adults follow the same principles of Universal Grammar. The theory behind the NA implies that adults can acquire all but the abstract aspect of any foreign language, by using their ever-active LAD. What makes adults different from children is their abstract problem solving skills; they consciously process the grammar of a foreign language. Therefore, adults have two paths to follow: Acquisition and learning. However, children follow only one: Acquisition.

In their book, Krashen and Terrell refer to their method of picking up ability in another language directly without instruction in its grammar as 'the natural approach'. They consider their approach as a traditional one whereas many methodologists consider Grammar Translation Method as the traditional one. Krashen, even Grammar Translation Method is not as old and traditional as the method of acquiring a language in its natural environment, a method that has been used for hundreds of thousands of years.

The term 'natural' emphasizes that the principles behind the NA are believed to conform to the naturalistic principles found in successful second language acquisition. One may think that the Natural Approach and the Natural Method are similar. The Natural Method (or the Direct Method) and the Natural Approach differ in that the former lays more emphasis on teacher monologues, formal questions and answers, and error correction. Krashen and Terrell state that "the Natural Approach is in many ways the natural, direct method 'rediscovered' [and] it is similar to other communicative approaches being used today". The Natural Approach, like TPR, is regarded as a comprehension-based approach because of its emphasis on initial delay (silent period) in the acquisition of language. What is novel is that the NA focuses on exposure to input instead of grammar practice, and on emotional preparedness for acquisition.

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Introduction

The Natural Approach was developed by Tracy Terrell and Stephen Krashen, starting in 1977. It came to have a wide influence in language teaching in the United States and around the world.

Approach

Theory of language

The Communicative view of language is the view behind the Natural Approach. Particular emphasis is laid on language as a set of messages that can be understood.

Theory of learning

The Natural Approach is based on the following tenets:

- Language acquisition (an unconscious process developed through using language meaningfully) is different from language learning (consciously learning or discovering rules about a language) and language acquisition is the only way competence in a second language occurs. (The acquisition/learning hypothesis)
- Conscious learning operates only as a monitor or editor that checks or repairs the output of what has been acquired. (The monitor hypothesis)
- Grammatical structures are acquired in a predictable order and it does little good to try to learn them in another order. (The natural order hypothesis).
- People acquire language best from messages that are just slightly beyond their current competence. (The input hypothesis)
- The learner's emotional state can act as a filter that impedes or blocks input necessary to acquisition. (The affective filter hypothesis)

See: Krashen and Terrell 1983 for more details.

Design

Objectives

Here are some of the objectives of the Natural Approach

- it is designed to help beginner become intermediates
- It is designed to depend on learner needs

The syllabus

The syllabus for the Natural Approach is a communicative syllabus.

Types of learning techniques and activities

- Comprehensible input is presented in the target language, using techniques such as TPR, mime and gesture.
- Group techniques are similar to Communicative Language Teaching.

- Learners start to talk when they are ready.

Procedure

The Natural Approach adopts techniques and activities from different sources but uses them to provide comprehensible input.

Context for this page:

- **Fact module:** The Natural Approach
- **In overview module:** A brief survey of language learning methods
- **In modular book:** Ways to Approach Language Learning, by Carol J. Orwig
- **In bookshelf:** Language Learning

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The Natural Approach: Krashen and Terrell

What does the research say???

Most view the natural approach as generally implying that the teaching of grammatical rules and the use of error correction techniques are discouraged. However, it is much more complex as communication activities, contextualized acquisition opportunities, and humanistic learning techniques dominate the Natural Approach classroom.

Krashen, Stephen. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Pergamon Press, 9-32.

Stephen Krashen's five Hypotheses:

1) **The acquisition-learning distinction** states that adults have two distinct and independent ways of developing competence in a second language: **acquisition and learning**.

Acquisition is a subconscious process that is similar to the way that children develop ability to speak in a first language.

Learning is the conscious knowledge of grammar rules and their application to verbal production in a second language.

2) **The natural order hypothesis** maintains that acquisition of grammatical structures of a language (ie. morphemes) proceeds in a predictable order when the acquisition is natural.

3) **The monitor process** states that acquisition is the sole indicator of all second-language utterances and is therefore responsible for fluency, while learning (the conscious knowledge of grammatical rules) functions as the "editor" or "monitor" for the output. It must be noted that the "monitor" can function only after sufficient time is spent in the second language.

4) **The input hypothesis** maintains that one acquires more language when exposed to comprehensible input--that contains structures that are "a little beyond" the individuals current level of competence but comprehensible through the proper use of context. According to Krashen, early speech is not grammatically accurate but accuracy will develop over time.

5) **The affective filter hypothesis** states that the acquirer must be motivated, self-confident (have a good self-image), and a low level of anxiety. According to Krashen, when learners are "put on the defense" the affective filter is high and comprehensible input cannot "get in".

Krashen's implications for positive classroom practice:

- 1) The main function of the language classroom is to provide comprehensible input in an environment rich in high motivation and low anxiety (a low affective filter).
- 2) The language classroom is most useful for beginning language students who cannot easily utilize the informal environment for comprehensible input.
- 3) All input must be comprehensible, interesting and relevant to the students' life, not grammatically sequenced, provided in sufficient quantity and delivered in an environment where students are "off the defensive".
- 4) Error correction should be minimized as it is of some use when the goal is learning but of NO use when the goal is acquisition. It should never be used in free conversation as it raises the affective filter.
- 5) Students should never be required to produce speech unless they are ready to do so because speaking fluently cannot be taught, but "emerges" naturally in time through experiences with enough comprehensible input. A silent period is to be expected in all second language learners.



Terrell, Tracy D. (1977). *A Natural Approach to Second Language Acquisition and Learning*. *The Modern Language Journal*, 61, 325-37.

Basic Principals of the Natural Approach (Tracy Terrell)

- 1) Beginning language instruction should focus on the attainment of communicative competence (immediately) rather than on grammatical perfection.
- 2) Instruction needs to be designed to modifying and improving the students' developing grammar rather than at building language experiences based upon grammar-one rule at a time.
- 3) Teachers should provide students with the opportunities to acquire language naturally rather than in a forced classroom environment.
- 4) Affective factors should precede cognitive factors during language learning experiences.
- 5) Acquisition of vocabulary is the key to comprehension and oral production. According to Terrell, a student with a large enough vocabulary can comprehend and speak a great deal of L2 even if his/her knowledge of gramatical structure is nonexistent.

Terrell, Tracy D. (1982). *The Natural Approach to Language Teaching: An Update*. *The Modern Language Journal*, 66, 121-32.

Terrell's implications for positive classroom practice:

Three types of classroom activities dominate the lesson in the Natural Approach:

1) **Comprehension (preproduction) activities:** consist of listening comprehension practice with no requirement for the students to speak in the target language. Terrell explains that this phase lasts about four to five classroom hours for college students but can last for several months for younger children.

--achieved through conceptualized guessing, Total Physical Response activities, use of gestures and visual aides, and finally through personalized student input. An example Terrell used in beginning classrooms was student descriptions where students were asked to stand up when they were described (hair color, clothing, height, other physical attributes).

2) **Early speech production** occurs once students have a recognition vocabulary of about 500 words. Production activities begin with questions that require only single-word answers or with questions that provide the answer in the form of a choice. This type of production resembles that of a young child who first begins to speak in single-worded (holophrastic) utterances. The sentence completion response also follows this pattern—a personalized question is asked and the answer is provided except for one word which the student supplies.

3) **Speech emergence** occurs after the early speech production phase and can be encouraged through the use of learning activities (games), humanistic-affective activities and information or problem-solving activities.

*Terrell believed that it was potentially harmful to the students' speech development if the teacher corrects errors during these three phases of language acquisition.



Is it possible to make learning languages child's play?

A child's aim, when learning its mother tongue, is to speak it fluently. This also applies to a student in a class using the Natural Approach. The aim is to develop communication skills.

For a child the learning process is subconscious. It acquires the communication skills not by learning grammatical rules, but step by step by listening and understanding. The *Natural Approach* method of acquiring language skills was created by the linguists Tracy D. Terrell and Stephen Krashen in the late seventies of the 20th century, and is based on this "natural way" of picking up a language. A vital prerequisite for understanding the *Natural Approach* is the ability to distinguish between learning in the traditional sense and acquiring a language, focusing on instinctiveness (as for example a child does).

The *Natural Approach* is based on the following five principles:

1. The aim of the *Natural Approach* is to foster the communicative competence, not grammatical perfection.
2. At the beginning of class, the emphasis is on listening. The teacher presents the students with a variety of easy to understand material (input). This input is always one level above the student's communicative competence. This way, the students develop the ability to speak in the foreign language. Competence in a language cannot be learned. It has to be acquired. In class, the teacher should try not to use the students' mother tongue at all.
3. The production of speech, as a response to listening, is developing over several stages:
 - a nonverbal answer
 - a one-word answer
 - a two or three-word answer
 - a short-sentence answer
 - a compound-structured answer

At the beginning of the process of acquiring the language, the students speak without grammatical correctness. Slowly, because of additional reception and production, their ability to communicate verbally enhances. In class, grammatical mistakes that do not hinder the process of communicating are not corrected.

4. Activities that enhance the process of language acquisition are the main part of the class (input). The main focus is not on grammatical exercises. The amount depends on both the age and receptiveness of the students. For adults the ratio is 20 per cent of grammatical exercises to 80 per cent. This part of conscious learning serves as a monitor. This helps the students to check what they say or write for grammatical mistakes. In class, the students are not expected to make use of the monitor function.

5. The *affective filter* is especially useful. The aim is to keep this filter as small as possible, in order to achieve the best results. In other words, the less pressure there is on a student, the smaller the *affective filter* is. This is achieved by focusing on topics that are interesting to the students; topics they are able to relate to and are willing to share their opinion on. Another way of keeping the affective filter small is the fact that no student is forced to speak in the foreign language. This creates an atmosphere in the class room that is perfect to acquire a foreign language.

The common belief to the day is that knowing the grammatical rules of a foreign language is the prerequisite for communicative / communication skills. In a class based on the Natural Approach, the students express their opinion in a given situation and share their ideas. For these students the foreign language is communication tool.