

Exploring the Natural Approach: A Personal Perspective on its Merits and Limitations in EFL Teaching

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Abstract

The Natural Approach is an educational method for teaching language that emphasizes meaningful communication and acquisition of language skills in a naturalistic manner. It is widely used in English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. Based on previous research, the paper highlights instances where the approach fostered a conducive learning environment and facilitated authentic communication among learners. Meanwhile, there also exist the challenges related to curriculum coverage, assessment, and individual learner differences. By integrating theoretical underpinnings with practical insights, this reflection underscores the value of a balanced methodology that adapts the Natural Approach alongside complementary strategies. The conclusion acknowledges the need for ongoing teacher reflection and adaptability in optimizing language learning outcomes, and future research directions involving the synthesis of the Natural Approach with other pedagogical models.

Keywords

The Natural Approach; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Comments

1. Introduction

The Natural Approach, a teaching methodology innovatively introduced by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell in the late 1970s (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) is grounded in the principles of language acquisition akin to how children learn their first language. Central to this approach are five hypotheses (Krashen, as cited in Xie, 2000) (acquisition-learning, natural order, monitor, input, and affective filter) that emphasize unconscious “acquisition” alongside conscious “learning”, the significance of comprehensible input, the role of the “Monitor” in editing output, the predictable sequence of grammatical structure acquisition, and the impact of emotional factors on learning. As Terrell (1977) asserts, the essence of the Natural Approach lies in cultivating communicative abilities in academic environments, suggesting that even within classroom confines, learners can achieve

meaningful communication. While applauded for its focus on communication and learner autonomy, practical considerations such as integrating grammar instruction and managing individual learner differences need careful consideration and adaptation (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). The Natural Approach, therefore, represents a student-centered paradigm shift in EFL pedagogy, advocating for an environment that nurtures organic language growth, but its effective implementation calls for a balanced integration of strategies tailored to individual learner profiles.

In this paper, the Natural Approach's merits and shortcomings are presented with its implementation in the classroom. Ongoing teacher reflection and adaptability are crucial to optimizing EFL teaching outcomes, ensuring that the learning journey remains student-centered, dynamic, and effective in nurturing capable and confident communicators in English.

2. Literature Review

The Natural Approach, formulated by Tracy Terrell and Stephen Krashen, diverges from traditional methodologies like Grammar-Translation and the Direct Method. While Grammar-Translation focuses on grammar rules and translation exercises, and the Direct Method insists on immediate target language use and error correction, the Natural Approach prioritizes comprehensible input and a low-anxiety learning environment (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Central to this approach is Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which posits that language acquisition occurs through exposure to slightly challenging input ($i+1$) (Krashen, 1982). Error correction is minimized to reduce learner anxiety, and the use of the first language is accepted initially, unlike in the Direct Method (Terrell, 1977). The Monitor Hypothesis further distinguishes the Natural Approach by asserting the limited role of conscious learning in spontaneous speech (Krashen, 1982). Overall, this methodology integrates communication, comprehension, and learner-centeredness, offering a distinct alternative to more structured, form-focused teaching practices (Loewen, 2015).

Speaking of its application, as Di (2010) illustrates that the Natural Approach integrates seamlessly with various teaching strategies and prioritizes a relaxed, non-threatening classroom atmosphere conducive to learning. Furthermore, Huang (2001) further elucidates the application of the Natural Approach within the Integrated English course, highlighting the alignment of Krashen's theories with cognitive psychology. Additionally, many scholars have also researched the application of the Natural Approach in different grades.

3. Comments and Views on the Natural Approach

Based on an analysis of the Natural Approach to second language acquisition, there are personal comments and views on it. While its emphasis on natural communication and stress-free learning environments fosters organic language growth, thereby

presenting numerous merits, the approach has its own limitations, which necessitate careful consideration in assessing its overall efficacy.

3.1. Merits of the Natural Approach

The Natural Approach has been influential in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching due to its emphasis on the natural processes involved in acquiring a second language, like how children learn their first language. This approach is founded on several key principles that contribute to its merits, particularly in fostering a stress-free learning environment, promoting meaningful communication, and acknowledging individual learner differences.

Firstly, the Natural Approach prioritizes a low-anxiety learning context where students feel comfortable to communicate without fear of making mistakes. This ‘affective filter’ hypothesis, a cornerstone of Krashen’s theory, suggests that learners are more receptive to acquiring language when they are relaxed and engaged. By focusing on creating a supportive classroom atmosphere without emphasizing error correction, learners are encouraged to use English spontaneously, which can enhance their confidence and motivation.

Furthermore, the Natural Approach integrates real-life communication tasks, prioritizing meaning over form initially. By engaging in authentic conversations and activities, learners see the practical value of the language, which increases motivation and facilitates transfer of learning to real-world situations. This focus on communication encourages learners to use English communicatively rather than merely reproducing decontextualized grammar rules or vocabulary lists.

Another significant merit lies in its adaptability to different learner needs and styles. The approach acknowledges that learners have individual preferences and learning rhythms. Teachers adopting this method often employ a variety of techniques and materials tailored to learners’ interests and abilities, ensuring a personalized and engaging learning experience. This flexibility can lead to higher levels of engagement and more effective language acquisition.

Lastly, the Natural Approach integrates cultural understanding as an integral part of language learning. It recognizes that language and culture are intertwined and promotes cultural awareness alongside linguistic competence. This holistic view not only enriches the learning experience but also enhances learners’ ability to navigate cross-cultural interactions effectively.

3.2. Limitations of the Natural Approach

The Natural Approach, despite its contributions to fostering communicative abilities and promoting a relaxed learning atmosphere in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, also has its own limitations. First of all, the approach’s emphasis on listening and speaking, while valuable for developing fluency, may inadvertently underplay the importance of grammatical accuracy. The grammar rules, though not the central focus, are crucial for structuring coherent and accurate communication. Ig-

noring formal grammar instruction altogether risks students being unable to correct structural errors that can impede effective communication. Additionally, the assumption of a “natural sequence” in language acquisition, as expounded in the works of Krashen, assumes that learners will acquire linguistic structures in a predictable order. However, this premise has been challenged for oversimplifying the complex nature of second language acquisition. The rigid adherence to such a sequence may neglect individual learners’ unique needs and progress, potentially hindering rather than facilitating their learning.

Another limitation exists in the vagueness of the concept of “comprehensible input”. While it is a cornerstone of the Natural Approach, defining what exactly constitutes comprehensible input can be subjective and variable across different learners. Teachers, especially non-native speakers, may struggle with consistently delivering input that is both engaging and tailored to each student’s comprehension level.

Moreover, the reliance on students taking charge of their own learning, deciding when to start speaking and what to say, might not align well with learners from cultures or educational backgrounds where teacher-directed learning is the norm. This is particularly relevant in the Chinese context, where years of exam-oriented education have cultivated a tendency among students to expect explicit guidance on what and how to learn.

4. Classroom Practices

The Natural Approach, as detailed across the provided resources, emphasizes creating an environment in the classroom that fosters natural language acquisition like how children learn their first language. The implementation of this approach in the classroom could involve following key strategies:

4.1. Use of Engaging and Relevant Themes

Lessons are designed around themes and topics that pique learners' interest and connect to their lives. By making content personally relevant, students are encouraged to engage actively with the language material. For instance, students might discuss objects in the classroom or describe classmates using descriptive vocabulary, which not only familiarizes them with new words but also relates to their immediate surroundings and peers.

4.2. Incorporation of Authentic Materials

To immerse students in real-life language scenarios, authentic materials like newspaper articles, songs, videos, and games are integrated into lessons. These materials expose learners to a variety of language styles and contexts, enhancing comprehension and promoting authentic language use. Activities may include watching situational English videos, listening to music, or participating in role-plays, thereby enriching the learning experience.

4.3. Focus on Communicative Activities

The approach encourages the use of communicative activities where learners practice the language in meaningful and functional ways. This includes group discussions, debates, problem-solving tasks, and simulations that require the application of language to achieve specific communicative goals. By providing opportunities for students to express themselves freely and creatively, such as expanding upon sentence patterns like “I like ___”, they develop fluency and build confidence in using the target language.

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