

# The Natural Approach: Approach, Design, and Procedure

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This analysis and examination of Tracy D. Terrell's Natural Approach (NA) to language teaching/learning will be conducted within the framework developed by Richards and Rodgers (1982). This framework provides criteria by which one can readily evaluate a teaching proposal in terms of its approach, design and procedure. Approach is defined as the theoretical principles which form the basis of a particular method. Design is concerned with the selection and organization of (course) content. Procedure deals with pedagogical considerations and the implementation of this content in the language learning classroom.

The NA will be examined in detail with respect to the interrelationships between approach, design and procedure. The examination is based on Terrell and Krashen's book, *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom* (1983). All references to Terrell are from this book.

## Approach

### The Nature of Language

Although Terrell does not explicitly state what his theory of language is, one can infer that it is based on a structural model. That is, a language is made up of structures and forms that need to be internalized. Though Terrell repeatedly stresses the need to focus on meaning and build communicative competence in learners, that competence is based on the assumption that language is a system of structural components put together to convey meaning. Teaching a language then means enabling learners to internalize and use these structures.

### The Nature of Language Learning

The aim of Terrell's method is the development of communicative competence in learners. His theory, following Krashen, rests on five hypotheses which make up his

theoretical model of language learning. These are (1) the acquisition-learning hypothesis, (2) the natural order hypothesis, (3) the monitor hypothesis, (4) the input hypothesis and (5) the affective filter hypothesis.

**The acquisition-learning hypothesis.** Krashen posits two distinct ways of developing language skills: learning and acquisition. Learning is characterized by conscious, explicit knowledge of the rules and grammar of the target language. One learns a language by focusing on the forms and structures of the language. Learning is normally fostered through formal classroom teaching.

Acquisition, on the other hand, is similar to first language learning. In language acquisition, the language is "picked up," and forms and structures are acquired subconsciously. One also develops an implicit knowledge or a native-like intuition of correct and incorrect use of the language. Formal teaching or undue attention to forms and grammar merely frustrates and hinders this acquisition process.

Children seem to acquire their first language subconsciously and with relative ease. Terrell posits that the ability to acquire a language is not lost when we become adults. Rather, an adult can and will acquire a language, given that all the requirements which make acquisition possible are provided for. Basically, acquisition focuses on meaning (the message) while learning focuses on forms and structures (components of the language system). Terrell claims that acquisition, rather than learning, will better enable learners to be communicatively competent in the target language. Fostering acquisition, in other words, is the whole thrust of the method.

**The natural order hypothesis.** This hypothesis states that the structures of a language can be arranged on a hierarchy of

difficulty. That is, certain structures tend to be acquired early and others later. A second, qualifying component of the hypothesis allows for individual differences; not all learners will acquire the structures in the exact same order.

**The monitor hypothesis.** This hypothesis posits that when acquired language is produced, it is monitored or edited by one's learned knowledge, conditions permitting. Explicit knowledge of the rules and structures of the language (gained through learning) is used to correct or edit what has been produced. This explicit knowledge of the rules of a language does not promote communicative competence but serves only as a monitor and makes repairs. As Terrell puts it:

When we produce utterances in the second language, the utterance is "initiated" by the acquired system, and our conscious learning only comes into play later (p. 30).

For the monitor to operate, however, three requirements need to be met:

1. The performer has to have enough time. For this reason, monitor use is typically restricted to the writing mode.
2. The performer has to be focusing on structure and form, instead of concentrating on the meaning of an utterance.
3. The performer has to have a conscious knowledge of the rules and grammar of the language. Strictly speaking one cannot monitor or make repairs on production unless one knows what rule has been violated and how one goes about making corrections.

Individual learners manifest different types of monitor use. *Over-users* are learners who monitor or self-correct constantly. These learners are so concerned with grammar and the correct way of saying things that they constantly edit and make repairs. *Under-users* are learners who never edit or monitor production. A seeming disregard for correctness characterizes their performance. *Optimal-users* are learners who edit and make repairs appropriately. They are characterized by an awareness of when and where to make repairs. In Terrell's

Natural Approach, helping learners to develop optimal use of the monitor is of primary importance.

**The input hypothesis.** According to this hypothesis, acquisition takes place only when comprehensible input is provided. Comprehensible input is indispensable for the activation of the acquisition process and the eventual internalization of the structures and grammar of the target language. Specifically, acquisition is facilitated "by understanding input that is a little beyond our level of acquired competence" (p. 32).

To enable NA learners to comprehend novel utterances, context and extra-linguistic information are provided. This is similar to first language acquisition, where "caretaker" speech deals with the "here and now" and topics of interest and relevance. According to the NA, teachers should not only provide students in second language learning classrooms with input that is a little beyond their level of acquired competence but also use visual aids and realia to provide context, and thus make the subject matter interesting and relevant. Terrell explains the importance of providing contextualized material for learners in these terms:

. . . by hearing everything in a clear context, the student is able to follow the communication without necessarily understanding all of the language *per se*. When this goal is attained, students will believe they can understand a new language. This is an important psychological barrier which must be broken through if the students are to be successful in language acquisition (p. 75).

**The affective filter hypothesis.** This hypothesis states that "attitudinal variables relating to success in second language acquisition generally relate directly to language acquisition but not necessarily to language learning" (p. 38). It recognizes the learner as a total human being, and acknowledges that acquisition or learning is not confined to the brain and mental processes but that affective factors are also involved. Stevick's "Psychodynamic Spiral" (1976:115) elaborates on this. Basically, the Psychodynamic

Spiral states that affective factors determine to a great extent, the depth or penetration of teacher-initiated interaction. Stevick explains,

. . . this same "depth" factor, far from being an additional, minor consideration to be taken into account only when weightier factors are equal, is in fact more to be reckoned with than technique, or format, or underlying linguistic analysis . . . .

The deeper the source of a sentence, the more lasting value it has for learning a language. But an utterance can only come from as deep within the student as the student himself has allowed the language to penetrate. Performance, whether it is productive or reflective, depends on the quality of previous learning. There is, I think, a terribly important difference between learning that is defensive, and learning that is receptive (1976:110).

To facilitate acquisition, learners should not only be receptive to input but be in a position to use it to interact confidently with speakers of the target language. Success in the acquisition process depends, to a large measure, on how "open" or receptive the learners are to input. Terrell hypothesizes that unless measures are taken to reduce learners' feelings of anxiety, threat, frustration, etc. the acquisition process is hindered. When these feelings (affective factors) are reduced, students are more open to input, thus facilitating the acquisition process.

These five hypotheses form the theoretical framework which is the basis of the NA. In developing teaching strategies that approximate first language acquisition, the NA posits that if the learner is provided with comprehensible input and if an environment conducive to receptive learning is assured, then the acquisition of a second language can be made more successful with less pressure and fewer demands on the learner.

### Design

Terrell is careful not to specify what the specific goals for each language course may

be. These are to be decided by the teacher, depending on the learners' needs. However, several criteria should hold constant for all NA teaching and be considered when course syllabi are being designed:

**Communication skills.** Every course should be taught with the primary goal of teaching learners to use the target language communicatively. With this in mind, classroom activities should be geared more toward developing communication skills instead of grammatical knowledge. The assumption is that students will use the target language with more grammatical accuracy if emphasis is put on communication rather than on grammar (forms and structures).

**Comprehension precedes production.** The ability to use the target language communicatively depends on the understanding of input. This understanding comes through the development of listening comprehension. The comprehension of input lays the foundation for successful acquisition.

**Production emerges.** Student production should not be forced, but rather it is expected to emerge on its own as the acquisition process progresses. When the language is produced, overt corrections should not be made. The acquisition theory states that learners will develop a "feel for" or intuitive knowledge of what is grammatically right and will monitor production accordingly. Correcting production errors and calling undue attention to surface form correctness hinders acquisition and fosters feelings of inadequacy and inhibition.

**Acquisition activities are central.** The language learning classroom is seen as a very good place for fostering acquisition. Class time should be devoted to providing activities that help this process. Learning activities may be used, but these are not to play as prominent a role as acquisition activities. Learning exercises are best incorporated as homework so that precious class time is not spent on them.

**Lower the affective filter.** The language teacher should always try to incorporate or use activities which lower the

affective filter since acquisition cannot take place if the filter is high.

### The Syllabus

Traditionally, a syllabus is a set of specific features of the language—whether grammatical, phonological, or lexical—predetermined by the teacher, the department of education, a textbook, etc. The syllabus is often determined by what administrators or teachers think is right for the learners without actually taking learner needs and interests into consideration.

In the NA, syllabus design is based on the results of needs analyses. That is, learner needs determine how and what is to be taught in the classroom. Needs analysis

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determines the topics learners are most interested in, the situations they use the target language in, etc.

In the Natural Approach, the syllabus is also communicatively oriented. Topics and situations where learners use the target language most are presented in games, role-plays, dialogs, etc.

Assuming a class of beginning learners, Terrell identifies three levels of acquisition activities one should use in syllabus design. The first is the personal-identification stage. Activities selected for this stage lower the affective filter and provide comprehensible input. Opportunities for learners to know and get along with each other are also provided. At the next stage, provision is made for the generation of input according to experiences. Activities are chosen mainly on the basis of their ability to provide input and let learners use the target language. Learner production at this stage may include sentences and short discourse as compared to no production or one- or two-word

responses in the previous one. The final stage is the "stating opinion stage." Activities for this level encourage learners to use the target language for voicing opinions about politics, civil rights, marriage, etc. Production usually consists of longer and more complex discourse.

### The Role of Learners

The role of learners is primarily determined by the stage of the acquisition process they are at. At the initial (preproduction or silent) stage, learners assume a passive role, absorbing and digesting input. Class activities include responding to teacher commands with action or working with pictures, enabling learners to identify objects and items the teacher is referring to. An important component of this stage is the building and expansion of basic vocabulary since comprehension depends to a large extent on vocabulary recognition. Learner participation in these activities may involve single individuals, pairs, small groups, or the class as a whole—depending on the nature of the activity.

Since the content of learning activities is based on learners' needs, the learners, to some extent, control the topics and the situations used in classroom activities. The learners' progress in the acquisition process is self-determined, and they evaluate their own progress. They are primarily responsible for monitoring production, for generating and initiating input, and for acquiring vocabulary and constructions in the target language.

### The Role of Teachers

The teacher's role is multi-faceted, ranging from that of input provider, to material constructor, to activity supervisor. Another important role the teacher assumes is that of reducing and alleviating feelings of stress, tension and anxiety.

The teacher's role may also vary depending on the stage of the acquisition process the learners are at. At the "preproduction stage," the teacher is primarily a provider of input. S/he has to make sure that the in-

put is understood by the learners and that it "includes a structure that is part of the next stage." Another primary role the teacher takes is to gradually build learners' knowledge and recognition of vocabulary since this is important in serving as a basis for the acquisition of new forms and structures. In the classroom, the teacher is the director, manager, and central focus of activities. S/he decides the content of learning and how it is to be presented.

At the "early production stage," the teacher is still the central source of input. In addition to what s/he does in the pre-production stage, however, the teacher also provides activities and visual aids that not only supply context but also encourage the use of acquired structures. Still, learners are allowed to produce speech only when they feel they are ready, without being forced.

At the "extending production stage," the teacher provides input through games, role-plays, dialogs, etc. These are all teacher-produced. By providing students with activities that reduce teacher-frontedness and require more student involvement and production, the teacher takes a more peripheral role than is assumed in earlier stages.

In addition, the teacher has to make sure that the activities lower instead of raise learners' affective filters. The teacher also has to be aware of individual variations in age, interest, progress, and needs. It can be seen that the demands on the teacher are tremendous. With no ready-made materials or exercises, there must be a lot of teacher preparation. Though Terrell offers many suggestions for carrying out activities in the classroom, these are not specific enough to be offered without teacher adaptation and supplementation. Stevick (1980:265) agrees that such preparation is critical.

I think that all three of the "ways" we have looked at would agree that sticking entirely to preexisting materials limits the depth of the goals at which one can aim, and that this shallowness in turn limits both the quality and the quantity of learning. But as we move away from ready-made materials the demands on the

teacher increase, and it is also true that as we aim for deeper goals the demands on the teacher increase. Any of the methods at which we have been looking, therefore, asks of the teacher a level of craftsmanship which must be unusually high, and which must be maintained day after day.

### The Role of Materials

NA materials are often teacher-produced but must always be appropriate for the acquisition stage learners are at. They should also be interesting and relevant to student needs. Pictures, visual aids and realia provide context and extra-linguistic information for the acquisition activities. They accompany teacher-produced input and encourage learner output.

### Procedure

As has already been mentioned, classroom activities are basically games, dialogs, role-plays, etc., accompanied by visual aids. The topics and situations used for these are determined by learner needs. However, activities will vary according to the stage in the acquisition process students are at.

### Preproduction: Developing Listening Comprehension

Activities at this stage include the use of Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) method where the teacher gives commands and the learners respond accordingly.

Another activity that may be used at this stage is the elicitation of responses through the use of pictures. In such exercises, the teacher describes the picture to the learners. After this initial description, specific questions are asked and the learners point to or identify the particular objects.

Throughout these activities the teacher concentrates on giving comprehensible input. The teacher does not prod the learners to use the target language until they are ready to do so. The use of these activities is expected to "provide comprehensible input, maintain focus on the message and help lower the affective filter" (p. 79).

*(continued on page 17)*

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*(continued from page 15)***Early Production**

Activities at this stage encourage learners to use the target language. Production at this stage is often marred by errors, but these shouldn't be corrected. Focus is on meaning instead of form. Activities involve using pictures and asking *yes-no* questions. The teacher may move on to use *either-or* questions when assured students are comfortable with using the language. Later, simple *wh*-questions requiring short answers can be employed.

What do you see in this picture? (Man). Yes, there is a man. Where is he? (Beach). Yes, he is sitting on the beach. What is in front of him? (Students do not know the word). That's a sailboat. Is it large or small? (Small). Is it in the water or on the beach? (In water). Yes, it is floating (new word, use mime to explain) in the water. Can stones float? (No). Can people float? (Some). Right. If you know how to swim (new word, use mime), you can float (p. 80).

Other activities employ charts or graphs for problem solving.

This is a chart of the schedule of classes for four students. What are the names of the students on this chart? (Natalia, Abdul, Helmut, Ito). What time is the morning break? (9:45). Right, the morning break is at nine forty-five. Do classes begin at 8:30? (Yes). Is that earlier or later than our classes begin? (Earlier) (p. 81).

**Extending Production**

Learner production at this stage is extended to longer discourse. Activities include, among other things, open-ended dialogs, prefabricated patterns, and open sentences. The main objectives of activities at this stage are to promote fluency and communicative competence. Several types of activities may be used:

*Open-ended sentences*

In this room there is a \_\_\_\_\_.  
I am wearing a \_\_\_\_\_.  
In my purse there is a \_\_\_\_\_.  
In my bedroom I have a \_\_\_\_\_.  
After class I want to \_\_\_\_\_.

*Open dialogs*

Where are you going?

To the \_\_\_\_\_.

What for?

To \_\_\_\_\_.

*Prefabricated patterns*

I like to \_\_\_\_\_.

You like to \_\_\_\_\_.

He likes to \_\_\_\_\_.

She likes to \_\_\_\_\_.

(pp. 84-85)

Students progress after the "extending production" stage is encouraged and developed through the use of acquisition activities where attention continues to be focused on the content of the utterance instead of on the form.

Although the above activities stress the learning of the speaking/listening skills, the reading and writing skills can also be developed using the NA. When these skills are taught, developing an unconscious knowledge of the rules of the language and making the learning experience natural and uncomplicated for the learners continue to be stressed.

**Evaluative Comments**

In the incessant search for the "right method," an all too common tendency is to get caught up and swept along with what, at the moment, appears to be the most appealing method. However, a more circumspect approach should be followed. Tantalizing though Terrell's method may be, one needs to consider a number of points before wholeheartedly embracing the Natural Approach.

One point in Terrell's favor is that the NA gives the language teacher the opportunity to adapt, develop, and implement materials according to students' needs. More often than not, material producers assume they know exactly what is best for students in terms of materials and teaching procedures and then proceed to dictate these to the teacher without allowing for variation, in teachers, classes, and students. Nevertheless, flexibility is not the same as individualization. Assuming that all learners in a group

will progress at the same rate and reach Terrell's three stages (preproduction, early production, and extended production) at the same time, the NA does not allow for individual learners' differences.

A further limitation is that, although Krashen and Terrell provide much explicit guidance for using the Natural Approach with beginning-level learners, they say very little about how or what to teach at the intermediate and advanced levels.

Another question that remains to be answered relates to the level of teacher-produced input. In NA theory, comprehensible input is critical for acquisition, yet how does one know which structures the learners are to be provided with? From the examples of "teacher talk" provided in the book, communication interactions seem to be guided by the topic of conversation rather than by the structures of the language. The decision of which structures to use appears to be left to some mysterious sort of intuition, which many teachers may not possess.

The claims that the NA produces better results than other methods need to be taken with a grain of salt. Although the NA claims to be based on research evidence, much of this research (and the interpretation of its findings) remains open to question. For instance, the successes reported anecdotally may be due to teachers' and students' emotional involvement rather than NA methodology. Only one study claiming that the NA produces superior student performance reports empirical research evidence. This study needs to be examined in detail and its results replicated in other, true experimental

studies. It would also be useful to examine each of the components of the NA in an experimental fashion to determine which of them contribute most to student success. In the meantime, although Terrell's teaching strategies are practical, classroom-oriented, and interesting, we are still left with the questions: Does the Natural Approach really work? Does it work better than other methods?

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