

Using the Natural Approach in a Foreign Language High-School Classroom:

A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: The natural approach is a teaching technique built around the idea that language learners should be able to learn a second language in the same way that they learned their first language. The natural approach was introduced in the 1970's by Tracy Terrell. It is part of the communicative approach; a theory that, unlike the grammar-translation method, favors communicative skills over grammar. Many linguist and teachers disapprove of the method, although it has proven to be effective in some settings. This research paper tries to identify the factors that might influence the effectiveness of the natural approach in a secondary foreign language classroom.

From the situational language technique to the total physical response, foreign language teachers have a wide variety of teaching strategies from which to choose. In reality, most teachers implement bits and pieces of each of these teaching techniques in their lessons on a regular basis. Some teachers prefer a more conservative approach, where the direct instruction of vocabulary and grammar precede the use of the language in a natural and communicative context. Other teachers favor comprehension ability to written expression. In the end, what divides foreign language teachers is their teaching style, whether it is descriptive or prescriptive. The latter would be at the most conservative end of the spectrum. It consists in telling the students the grammar rules first, and then asks them to put these rules in a context. The descriptive approach however, rests upon the principle that students should be exposed to grammar within a context, and deduce meaning from it. In this approach, the teacher is to “teach” rather than to “tell.” Though the descriptive approach has been widely praised among secondary and elementary teachers over the past couple of years, it is important to realize that sometimes, a prescriptive approach can be inevitable in the context of a foreign language classroom. Nevertheless, some linguists like Tracy D. Terrell, or Stephen Krashen, predecessor of the Natural Approach, strongly believe in a total descriptive approach. The Natural Approach is a language acquisition method that prescribes the learning of a language in context. This theory is based on the hypothesis that “we acquire language when we obtain comprehensible input, when we understand what we hear or read in another language...acquisition is based primarily on what we hear and understand, not on what we say” (Krashen, 1). Therefore, this method focuses more on comprehension than expression.

The Natural Approach is meant to recreate an environment similar to what one might experience in the context of an immersion in a setting where people would speak a foreign language. The founding principle of this approach is that we all learned our mother tongue through verbal cues. In other words, we learned to understand language before we learned to speak it, and we only began to write it after we had already mastered the rudiments of the language. The natural approach tries to recreate this context, by introducing the students to auditory and visual cues before showing them the language in a written form. The students focus more on understanding the language and speaking it than writing it. To some educators, this theory seems to be weak and inappropriate, in the sense that it does not reside, nor does it insist on the foundations of a language: spelling and grammar. Consequently, some of the most conservative teachers refuse to implement this technique in their classroom.

Amongst the ones who feel uncomfortable with the natural approach, we also find students. Indeed, since most of the educational process is now in the form of reading and writing, switching to a mainly auditory method can create some anxieties within the student population. During my student teaching experience, I tried to use the natural approach as often as possible, and realized that though it had a great deal of positive effects on students' listening skills, it could also be a setback for students who relied mainly on reading and taking notes.

Research has shown that the natural approach was a valid method for foreign language instruction, but many linguists and teachers are still opposed to it. I have myself observed the beneficial potential of this method. However, some of my students tended to react negatively to this teaching technique. The natural approach attempts to use the way

through which we learned our native language, to teach a second language, but it does not take into account that a teenager's brain might not be as receptive to auditory stimulus as an infant's brain is. The schools rely mostly on written cues, and students get used to this method of teaching. Is it possible to go back to the natural way to learn a language after having been used to another technique for many years? The question that one may ask is: what are the factors that influence the effectiveness of the natural learning approach?

In order to understand what the natural language approach is, we have to look at the other techniques. One of the earliest methods was the grammar translation approach. It consisted of teaching grammar rules and practicing them until the learner would master the skill of implementing the rules in the context of a sentence. There was almost no oral expression involved. In the article "Grammar in the second language classroom: An ever-changing role," C. Lally explains that in early nineteenth century, the foreign language learner had a different goal than today. Indeed, the purpose of learning foreign languages rested merely upon the wish to translate classic texts that were written in a foreign language (Lally, 1996). In today's global society, foreign language learning is meant to help students become proficient enough in a language in order to be able to communicate with people from different countries. Since most classic texts are already translated, communication should be the focus of the foreign language classroom.

The first method that included a subsequent amount of communication was the audio-lingual approach. In the article "Accuracy versus communicative competency: The acquisition of grammar in the second language classroom," R. M. Hammond explains how the audio-lingual method emerged. Introduced in classrooms in the 1950's this method was built around the concept that people would learn more efficiently in a

conversational context (Hammond, 1988). It still relied on the grammar-translation format. The audio-lingual method was created by linguists during World War II, as a result of a request from the United States Army (Krashen, 1983). Indeed, soldiers only needed to acquire communicative skills to facilitate understanding of the enemy and between allies. The method was built mainly around verbal drills “ it consisted typically of two sessions_ one in which situational-based dialogs were practiced and memorized, followed by oral drills consisting of sentences illustrating the major syntactic patterns and form classes of the language” (Krashen, 1983).

Unfortunately, the audio-lingual method failed, and by the 1960’s, teachers went back to the grammar-translation approach. R. M. Hammond explains “ in spite of the large body of research in second language teaching methodology which has been introduced in recent years to support the value of communicative models of second language acquisition, many language teachers have been reluctant to adopt a new methodology” (p.415). The failure of the early communicative approach has hindered the implementation of other similar methods in foreign language classrooms.

There are many reasons why the natural approach does not reach the expectations of most foreign language teachers. These characteristics are stated by Tracy Terrell (1977), one of the forerunners of this method, in the article “A natural approach to second language acquisition and learning.” Instead of putting an emphasis on grammar, one of the pillars of every language, the natural approach tries to teach languages in an intuitive way, by immersing students in the foreign language. Relegating grammar to such an insignificant role discredits this method in the eyes of the most conservative linguists. Another element of the natural approach that worries both teachers and linguists, is the

absence of error correction. Terrell explains, “The preoccupation with grammatical correctness in early stages of L2 teaching is essentially a felt need of language teachers and is not an expectation of either language learners or most native speakers of L2, so with a few notable exceptions are usually quite happy to deal with foreigners making any sort of effort to speak their language” (1977). Although it may be true that native speakers might not be as preoccupied with grammar as teachers are; this lack of rigor towards grammar faces the disapproval of many. Terrell adds, “There is no evidence that shows that the correction of speech errors is necessary or even helpful in language acquisition. Most agree that the correction of speech is negative in terms of motivation, attitude, embarrassment and so forth, even when done in the best situations” (p.330). It is true that students in early stages of foreign language learning are very susceptible and are prone to get embarrassed easily. Nevertheless, not correcting mistakes early on might lead to difficulties in later stages of language acquisition.

There are two main reasons why not expecting student to use correct syntax and grammar would have a negative effect on students. First, many linguist believe that when a mistake is learned, it is usually irreversible. According to Higgs and Clifford (1982), “students who acquire a second language within a framework that stresses communicative competence before grammatical patterns are accurately learned will, for the most part, find themselves incapable of ridding themselves of inaccurate or incorrect grammatical patterns” (Hammond, 1988. p.408). This concept, also called fossilization, seems to be the main argument against the natural approach.

Another outcome of the natural approach would be the lack of assessable skills. Indeed, if students are not graded on their ability to respect and apply the rules of a

language, then how will they be assessed? It seems that the assessment of communication skills would be too subjective to be given any credit. As a result, while using the natural approach, a teacher would still have to assess his/her students in the traditional way. In the article “Who wouldn’t want to use the natural approach?”, M. G. Goldin expresses the ways in which using the natural approach while assessing in a traditional manner would disserve the students: “in typical courses, students are evaluated on their control of structures specifically taught in the classroom and structural errors result in a lower evaluation, regardless of their effect on ability to communicate” (p.338). If grammar is not a priority in the learning process, but is the major part of assessment, then the students will suffer the cost of not having been corrected on their mistakes.

On the other hand, according to brain research, the natural approach would be the most logical way to learn a language. In a study conducted in 1996, A. Peltzer-Karpf analyzed the similarities between learning a native language and learning a second language later in life. This study was published in an article called “Early foreign language learning: The biological perspective” and concluded that “the main differences between first and second language development to be taken into account are: the state of neuronal development, age-specific cognitive capacities, the system of the second language, the input (quality/quantity/duration of contact), and personal factors (motivation social integration)” (Peltzer-Karpf, 1996. p.5). According to these findings, there are fundamental differences between learning a first and a second language, and they rest mainly upon the development level of the brain and the amount of input. A high school student has a brain that is more developed than an infant, and reacts differently to input. In this sense, it might seem easier for a high school student to learn a language.

However, when we look at the input, an infant has a constant input of language through his/her parents, whereas a student will only have up to an hour a day. These two factors are variables that may offset the theory from which the natural approach emerged.

Brain based research has also shown that the older a learner is, the more difficulty he/she will encounter to learn communication skills (Goldin, 1977). Still, research shows that motivation has an even greater impact on the ability to learn a foreign language than communication skills. If a learner is exposed to high quality input that is motivating, he/she will have more chances to become proficient, “a child’s progress will largely depend on the quality and quantity of the input provided by a given program and on his/her biological prerequisites” (Peltzer-Karpf, 1996. p.5).

The natural approach has been criticized for its lack of emphasis on grammar, and the unstructured assessment of students’ progress that it advocates. Many linguists and teacher have learned not to choose communicative skills over grammar, in part because the audio-lingual method was a failure. However, brain research suggests that the natural approach could be the most logical way to become proficient in a language, for it would foster communication in a meaningful way. Nonetheless, the natural approach seeks to expose a student to a language in the same ways that an infant is exposed to his/her mother tongue. The maturity level and the amount and quality of input are variables that might influence the effectiveness of the natural language approach in the classroom.

In theory, the natural approach seems to have both advantages and drawbacks. While the former resides mostly on the capacity to communicate with speakers of a foreign language, the latter refers generally to academic achievement. The research that has been conducted takes test scores into account, but does not relate to the way students

react to the natural approach. As a student teacher in a high school foreign language classroom, I have observed how the use of the natural approach affects students, both on an academic and personal level. Since I have used this method as a teacher, I can only relate to what students felt and how they reacted through my observations, therefore the latter might not be as objective as if I were a student myself. However, I will try to stay as impartial as possible while stating the pros and cons of the use of this method, and the impact it had on the students.

One of the main attributes of the natural approach is the effect it has on student's pronunciation of words. In fact, when students see a word, they try to read it intuitively, which rarely leads to accurate pronunciation. During my teaching experience, I have tried to give the word prior to having taught the students how to say it, and I have also taught them how to say a word before giving them a visual of the word. For example, the students were given the sentence "Ça va bien?" and they had to ask the question to their partner. The word "bien" has a silent "n" but the students were unaware of this. They accentuated the "n" in the sentence. I taught the word again, and it took a couple of days until most of the class would pronounce it correctly. It is important to consider that some words in the French language will present pronunciation difficulties regardless of how they are taught, but most words like "bien" do not sound exactly like they "look" and the students have to learn the sounding of words as well as their spelling.

During the following lessons, I tried to present the words in a spoken way first, had the students repeat it correctly before I would show them the words in written form. It usually takes a day for the students to assimilate the pronunciation of a word. During the first lesson introducing a word, I would say the word out loud and put it in a context,

or act it out, so that the students could create meaning for the word. They were never asked to translate it to English, they only had to assimilate the action or image with the word. This technique comes directly from the natural approach, where students have to derive meaning from a context. It takes more preparation time for the teacher to put the words on a stage. I use this expression because during these lessons, I felt like a comedian. I had to use my voice, gestures, and sometimes props to get the students to guess the meaning of words. Not only does it take more time for a teacher to prepare such lessons, but it takes more courage also. In a way, this might be the reason why some teachers would rather “tell” than “teach.” It is much easier to present the students with a list of vocabulary and tell them to learn it, than it is to put the words in a context. However, not only does acting words out facilitate the learning process, but it also gives the students some visuals that are linked to the words. It is easier to remember something when a relatively marking event is paired up with it. In the lower levels, most students seemed to enjoy this contextualization of words. However, in the upper-level course, there were more students that would rather be given a vocabulary list. The reason for this may be that they are more mature and feel like they are too old for playing a guessing game. Or it could be that they want the lesson to be more time efficient. There is so much stress put on students in school, with teachers rushing to finish chapters because they need to cover an entire book in a semester. The students can certainly feel this stress, and some of them just want to get it over with and take in as much as they can, as fast as possible.

I have noticed that teaching the students how to pronounce a word before they see it in written form will increase their ability to pronounce it well. Nevertheless, my

teaching experience only lasted three months, and I had six groups of students. This is too short of a period of time, and such an insignificant part of the student population that I could not possibly draw conclusions on the effectiveness of the natural approach on pronunciation. Nonetheless, my mentor teacher told me “don’t show them the word until they pronounce it right, otherwise they will never say it the right way.” This teacher has years of experience, and she has seen a very large number of students.

There is another positive effect of not showing the word to students until they have learned how it sounds. It appeared that a number of my students had a photographic memory, and will be able to remember words only if they see it in a written form. Most other students will also feel uncomfortable if they don’t see the word shortly after they have heard it. I believe that this is due to the fact that we always try to associate two elements together, because it is easier to remember them that way.

When introducing new words to the students, I would not show them the words until the next day. During the first lesson, they would learn how to pronounce the words by repeating after me. They would learn its meaning by looking or listening to the cues, and then they would use the words orally. In lower levels, the students would often do an activity where they associate the word with an image. When they see the image they have to say the word. This image does not give them the visual cues that they would like, which would be the word. It gives them another visual, that will help them memorize the meaning of the word. A large number of students felt very uncomfortable with this activity at first, because it demands focus, and the use of an immediate memory. Indeed, I have notice that if there is no visual, it takes more effort to remember a word. This gymnastic of the brain is certainly beneficial for the student, because it helps in the

learning process. As the students make an effort to recall the sound of a word, they are more likely to remember it in the long run.

Now that we have looked at the pronunciation of the words, it is important to look at the big picture, the formation of sentences. The natural approach calls for an immersion in the language. This means that the teacher is supposed to interact with the students in the foreign language, as much as possible. The students are constantly immersed in the language. They are learning without noticing it. When the teacher speaks, there is a logical order in every sentence. The repetition of this order will sink into the students' memory, and they will associate sentences with this order. They are learning grammar almost unconsciously. This is probably the element of the natural approach that relates the most to the experience of learning one's first language.

I have noticed that when students learn grammar first, they tend to construct their sentences according to the rule. Usually a grammar rule looks like this "subject + verb + noun" when a student builds a sentence according to the rule, he/she will pause where there is a plus sign. They are picturing the formula in their head, and putting elements together in a chronological manner. The sentences that they create do not sound natural. In a way, the students almost sound like androids that have been programmed to put words in a certain order.

When a teacher uses the natural approach and interacts with students in the foreign language, he/she models the language, and presents it in a natural way. The students absorb it and are more likely to emulate the fluency of the teacher. In the natural approach, students are introduced to whole sentences first. They learn the logical order of words by assimilating these sentences. The students deduce their own pattern for the

sentences that they hear. There is no plus sign. There is less hesitation because they imitate normal speech.

The natural approach would sound almost magical if it worked for everybody. Unfortunately, some students are less responsive than others. During my student teaching experience, I have noticed that a significant number of students had a feeling of distress when they found out that most of the instruction would be performed in French. Students in the upper-level were astonished because the teacher who taught intermediate French never spoke to them in French. How were they going to be able to understand? Indeed, the other French teacher in the school never spoke French. We had to start easing the students into the immersion slowly. Using repetition and paraphrasing, and translating when some students really did not understand. The important directions were given in English, so that all students could follow. I never refused to speak English to a student he or she did not understand. It was challenging at first, but little by little, I cut down on the translation, and increased the number of visual and verbal cues so that the students could create meaning on their own. After the first month, eighty percent of class-time was in French. The success of this was also reflected by the students at an individual level. Two of the students were very worried about having to be taught in French. They were lost most of the time and wanted everything to be translated in English, in case they had not understood directions correctly. About a month after I started teaching mostly in French, I received an email from one from the students' mother. She said that she was very pleased because her daughter was so excited about French class that her daughter and her friend (the other student) were speaking in French throughout dinner the night before. If students feel comfortable enough to use the language in situations like these, then they

have learned the language in the natural way. When students are taught the language with grammar rules and sentences that are out of context, they do not have the tools or the vocabulary to speak in everyday life.

The natural approach is also criticized because of its deliberate lack of assertion when it comes to correcting mistakes. It is true that correcting a student in front of the whole class may deter this student from participating further. However, it may be even more embarrassing for a student to use a wrong word for the rest of his life, than to be taught correctly at first. Everybody makes mistakes, and the classroom climate is one of the most determining factors in students' participation. I do not believe that correcting a student is inappropriate, as long as it is done with respect. During my teaching experience, I would repeat the sentence correctly if a student made a mistake. It really did not embarrass them because it was a very subtle way to let them know what the correct form of the sentence should be. I believe that it is important to correct mistakes because if left unnoticed, the other students might start making similar errors. However, some mistakes do not need to be corrected on the spot, especially if the activity involves spontaneous speech. During activities where students are sharing what they have done on the weekend, or when there is a dialogue between two students, mistakes should not be pointed out. In natural speech, people make grammatical mistakes. As long as the people involved in the conversation can understand each other, it is important to let them continue. It may be extremely hard for some teachers to let mistakes go, but this does not mean that they should never be corrected. In my opinion, the natural approach does not prohibit error correction, it just suggests that it be done during a period when the students are not using spontaneous speech.

When teachers use the natural approach, they need to be careful not to leave students behind. Some students will need a lot more cues than others, and it is important to take the time to give everybody the opportunity to construct meaning. Unfortunately, sometimes there is no time for extra cues. It seems like the natural approach takes more time, and more effort for teachers. If it is not time-efficient, is it possible to say that the natural approach is effective? The grammar-translation approach is more time-efficient, it demands less effort from teachers, but the students have to work a lot harder, because it takes time and effort to learn something out of context. Also, there were still a significant number of students who were used to being given grammar rules and vocabulary sheets. Most of them were in the “A” range. They were good at memorizing, and did not like to waste time on creating meaning for words. To students who were not as strong academically, the visual and verbal cues revealed to be helpful. Concerning the instruction being done mainly in the foreign language, a large number of students would rather be taught in English, because it demands less effort on their part. The grammar-translation method and the natural approach are on two opposite end of the spectrum. One would say that using both of them at once would allow teachers to get the best out of each technique. However, the natural approach demands a complete immersion of the students into the foreign language. It seems that for this approach to be effective, it needs to be embraced entirely. The question remains, would it be possible to get the best out of each method and to create one that would suit the needs of each students and their learning style?

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