Natural Approach

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Framing the Issue

The natural approach (NA) is based upon Krashen's (1982) theory of second language acquisition and upon Terrell's (1977) experiences of teaching learners of Spanish. Their combined efforts resulted in the book *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom* (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), which explains the naturalistic principles underlying second language acquisition and outlines how to realize these principles within an instructed language-learning setting. NA aims to help beginners become intermediates, and the ultimate goal is that learners acquire the skills necessary for basic communication with another speaker in the target language. According to NA, providing learners with comprehensible input in the target language is essential to the acquisition process. Krashen argues that acquisition results from understanding messages and not from explicit instruction, which results in conscious learning of the target language.

Theoretically, the argument could be made that acquisition in NA does not require learners to produce the target language. However, the primary source of comprehensible input is speakers of the target who would most likely not participate in extended interactions with people who do not or cannot respond. Terrell (1986) thus argues that acquisition involves both the ability to comprehend and the ability to produce meaningful utterances in the target language. Acquisition begins with comprehensible input and the binding of form and meaning in form–meaning associations and continues with learners taking the opportunity to participate in meaningful two-way conversations, so that they can access and produce the target language. From this perspective, acquisition is complete when the learner can both comprehend and produce the target language.

Making the Case

Krashen's (1982) theory of second language acquisition provides the theoretical foundation for NA. According to his input hypothesis, acquisition of a target

language is dependent upon receiving comprehensible input in meaningful inter-actions. Interactions in a NA classroom, however, do not attempt to represent tar-get language use outside of the classroom. NA teachers aim to deliver input to their learners as in parent and child interactions, where language use corresponds to Krashen's input + 1.

NA makes a distinction between acquisition and learning. According to the acquisition–learning hypothesis, acquisition is the subconscious process that occurs when the learner is in a low-anxiety situation and he or she understands the mes-sage delivered in the target language within a communicative context. Learning, in contrast, is the product of conscious attention to a specific part of the target lan-guage. Krashen argues that the learning of rules has a limited value for beginning learners because (a) they need to know the rule; (b) they need to have the necessary time to apply the rule; and (c) they need to focus on a particular form, at the possible expense of successfully comprehending or producing the target language. McLaughlin (1987), however, argues that speech is a rule-governed activity reliant upon learned system-activated procedures. Gass and Selinker (1994) have also ques-tioned the viability of learners' being able to utilize two separate language systems.

Terrell (1986) notes that language teachers might resist the distinction between conscious and subconscious because, unlike in natural acquisition contexts, learn-ers in language classrooms pay conscious attention to the target language. Terrell (1982) suggests that conscious attention may play a role in NA acquisition activities. From her perspective, acquisition involves a mixture of conscious and subconscious attempts at connecting meaning to the form heard in a communicative context. Initially a new form may be recognized, but the meaning or multiple meanings may not be recalled. Later on the learner may be able to recognize and understand the meaning of the form in an interaction. The binding between the meaning and the form is complete when the form is associated with its meaning without delay or the use of translation. Conscious attention is not a prerequisite of this binding pro-cess, but it might aid acquisition by focusing the learner on a particular form, which may in turn increase the form's saliency when the learner encounters that form in subsequent communicative situations. Thus learning is not acquisition; rather a learned form is not acquired until it is encountered in a communicative context as comprehensible input, such that the binding process can begin to take place.

Krashen's natural order hypothesis suggests that there are a number of possible factors such as sematic transparency, redundancy, and saliency that interact among themselves to create a natural order of acquisition. The complex interaction of this interaction, however, is not well understood and thus it is difficult to select and control input, as is done in a grammatical-based syllabus to accelerate the acquisi-tion process. From the NA perspective, an interaction in the target language featuring comprehensible input automatically provides learners with the next structure to be acquired. An acquisition process based upon receiving input + 1 to progress through the natural order, however, requires a tremendous amount of input, which may not be available to learners in foreign language-learning con-texts. Moreover, learners from a specific L1 background may experience greater difficulty in learning a target language than do other learners (Zobl, 1980).

If acquisition follows a natural order, the need or necessity for direct error correction in the NA classroom does not exist. According to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, shifting the focus of a communicative interaction from understanding the message to the correctness of the message may increase the learner's affective filter and hinder the acquisition process. NA teachers must thus create a communicative situation where students feel comfortable and interested in target language interactions. Moreover, learners must be allowed to decide for themselves when they feel comfortable to start producing the target language.

When learners are ready to produce the target language, communicative interactions should ideally allow them to draw upon their acquired knowledge. Following the monitor hypothesis, one of the goals of NA is helping learners become optimal monitor users, a process whereby they use low-level monitoring to improve accuracy without interfering with the flow of an interaction. However, the speed of a normal conversation might prevent learners from monitoring their output to any great degree. Monitoring may play a more central role when learners have more time to complete a communicative task such as in writing or preparing a speech. In these communicative situations, learners have more of an opportunity to make corrections to an utterance before, or as, it is produced. Terrell (1986) argues that the monitoring process can be thought of in a different way. According to the binding–access framework, monitoring becomes a process in which learners access forms that they have learned, but not acquired. As a result, it is possible that a learner studies or memorizes a particular word and successfully produces it in one interaction, but when the same word is used in another interaction, the learner may not understand it because it has not yet been bound.

Pedagogical Implications

The implementation of NA in a language classroom involves three different stages. The first stage is preproduction. At this stage the focus is on developing learners' ability to comprehend the target language. Without the added pressure of having to produce the target language, the learners' efforts can be directed toward binding (or associating) meaning and form for a large number of words. The second stage is early speech. Learners begin to provide one-word responses in the target language. The third stage focuses upon speech emergence. Learner output expands to more extended production. At all three stages, most of the classroom time is devoted to acquisition activities that provide learners with comprehensible input in low-anxiety situations, where the focus of interactions is on meaning as opposed to form.

At preproduction stage, comprehension is paramount. NA teachers can help learners comprehend the target language through gestures, visuals, and "here and now" talk. NA teachers can also ask learners to perform certain actions or act out events using Asher's (1969) total physical response (TPR) approach. The challenge, however, is ensuring that the TPR situations and related vocabulary are representative of the type of communicative situations relevant and interesting to

learners. Addressing learner communicative needs not only increases learner attentiveness to meaning–form associations in the input; it also solidifies these associations within a meaningful context. NA teachers can also use slower speech, clear articulation, long pauses, and exaggerated intonation to draw learners' attention to keywords in the input.

There may be, however, some forms that are particularly resistant to the binding process because either they lack saliency in the input or the meaning of the input can be understood without attending to its form. In addition, some forms may not occur frequently enough in a foreign language-learning setting to permit the completion of the binding process. NA teachers may try to overcome shortages of comprehensible input by creating materials that increase the frequency of particular target forms. However, this approach may not be effective, because it is not clear which forms are being bound when a learner receives comprehensible input. As a result, NA teachers may find a greater return on their effort if they focus on developing their learners' level of listening comprehension. Teaching comprehension strategies such as contextual guessing will assist comprehension and the acquisition process. Rapidly developing learners' target language vocabulary is another important goal at preproduction stage. From the NA perspective, the quantity of information that the lexicon possesses outweighs any other part of language and thus is essential for comprehension.

The preproduction stage should last as long as the learners require. Terrell (1982) suggests that learners in elementary school may need several months of comprehensible input. Learners in secondary school may begin producing one-word responses in the target language after a month or so, while postsecondary learners may need four or five classes before they can be required to begin producing the target language. At the early-speech stage, learners demonstrate their comprehension with a one-word response that not only enables them to continue focusing on comprehending the input but also gives them an opportunity to access target language words that have already been bound. Acquisition at the early-speech stage thus becomes a two-step process where comprehensible input results in binding and learners access these bound forms to express ideas in meaningful contexts. By providing learners with frequent meaningful opportunities to access bound forms, NA teachers can help strengthen the accessing process, which in turn facilitates a more fluent target language use. Meaningful practice, however, should ideally guide learners away from the need to use their first language or the monitor mode, where they access learned knowledge and words that have not yet been bound.

In the beginning of the early-speech stage, learners start with yes–no questions followed by one-word answers from either–or questions. Then learners progress to single- or two-word answers. NA teachers can require more output from learners by preparing sentences with a missing word followed by open-ended sentences. Learners can then work together supplying each other with comprehensible input in an open-ended dialogue or with a series of interview questions that are accompanied by frames for responses. Activities may also include speech routines that meet learners' immediate communicative needs. These routines in some cases

might not provide immediate input for language acquisition, but as learned knowledge they can act as a short-term substitute that could later assist the binding process.

At the speech emergence stage there are a number of different approaches available that provide learners with comprehensible input and opportunities to access and produce forms that have already been bound. Terrell (1982) argues that no instructional hour should be without some kind of activity where the target language is used for fun. Games and recreational activities aim to lower learners' affective filters as learners attempt to produce extended stretches of speech. Another approach aiming to reduce language-related anxiety while increasing learner interest is through humanistic–affective activities. NA teachers can, for example, ask learners to describe themselves and their family. After that, learners progress to sharing their experiences, feelings, opinions, and values in the target language. The goal of these activities is to develop a genuine interest in learners about one another, which hopefully creates a level of comfort that is conducive to target language use. As learners provide information about themselves, NA teachers can strengthen the meaning–form binding process by constantly trying to make an association between new vocabulary and the learners participating in the interaction (Terrell, 1980). For example, if "skiing" is a favorite pastime of a learner, NA teachers do not simply teach or repeat the word "skiing" in isolation, but rather they try to personalize the action of skiing through the learner, by commenting "Oh, Chris likes skiing" or by asking another learner "Did you know that Chris likes skiing?" NA teachers can also use information problem-solving activities to prompt learners use the target language to determine a solution to a specific problem or issue that they might face outside of the classroom. Finally teaching content in the target language is another way to appeal to learners' interests while keeping them focused on information rather than on a conscious study of the target language.

Even if NA teachers design early-speech stage and speech emergence stage activities to target learners' acquired knowledge, inevitably learners will attempt to access and produce forms that have not yet bound. Although these attempts do not contribute to acquisition, they assist the development of learners' strategic competence. The production of unbound forms should not be treated as an opportunity for direct error correction either. From the NA perspective, direct correction of speech errors does not facilitate acquisition but rather creates affective barriers, which in turn disrupt the acquisition process. NA teachers prefer offering learners indirect correction, where the corrected form is used in an extended response to the learner. The intent of this type correction is not to prompt learners to repeat themselves with the corrected form, but rather to give them more comprehensible input. Acquisition according to the NA time frame is a long-term process. Learners, for example, must repeatedly hear common verbs used in meaningful interactions over the course of several years before these verbs become completely bound. Then, with extensive experience acquired in meaningful interactions, the learners' access and production of the target language will increasingly become more fluent and accurate.

SEE ALSO: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Teaching Listening Strategies; Teaching Speaking in EFL Environments; Total Physical Response; Vocabulary Development and Teaching Speaking

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Suggested Readings

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