

The Natural Approach



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 one of the, "language teaching methods based on observation and interpretation of how learners acquire both first and second languages in nonformal settings."
- ❑ Krashen and Terrell saw the approach as a, "traditional approach to language teaching [because it is] based on the use of language in communicative situations without recourse to the native language."
- ❑ The approach focuses on input, comprehension, and meaningful communication and puts less emphasis on grammar, teacher monologues, direct repetition and accuracy.

The theory as well as the design and procedures in The Natural Approach are based on Krashen's language acquisition theory. The basic principles of Krashen's theory are outlined in his Monitor Model (1982), a model of second language acquisition consisting of five hypotheses:

- **1. *The acquisition-learning hypothesis*** makes a distinction between acquisition and learning. Krashen defines acquisition as, "unconscious process that involves the naturalistic development of language proficiency through understanding language and through using language for meaningful communication." Learning, on the other hand, is a conscious process in which rules of a language are developed; this process only occurs through formal teaching, and cannot lead to acquisition.

2. According to the monitor hypothesis, "the acquired system initiates a speaker's utterances and is responsible for spontaneous language use."

The learned system, by contrast, has the function of a, "monitor or editor that checks and repairs the output of the acquired system." This monitor can, "either operate post-hoc in the form of self-correction or as a last minute change of plan just before production." Moreover there are three conditions which have a limited effect on the success of the monitor: time, focus on form and correctness, and knowledge of rules.

3. The natural order hypothesis says that, "the acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order." This natural order can be found in first language acquisition as well as in second language acquisition.

4. According to the input hypothesis, "acquisition occurs when one is exposed to language that is comprehensible and that contains $i+1$."

The " i " stands for the acquirer's current level of proficiency. He is able to move to a higher stage by understanding language containing " $i+1$ " (where " $+1$ " stands for language which is slightly beyond the acquirer's current level of competence).

5. The affective filter hypothesis states that there is an "affective filter" which can act as a, "barrier that prevents learners from acquiring language even when appropriate input is available." With regard to second language acquisition affective variables can be attitudes or emotions like motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. A low affective filter is always desirable because a high affective filter, which can be found for example with anxious learners, "prevents acquisition from taking place."

Krashen also tried to explain variations in success in language acquisition with this hypothesis; in particular he used it to explain the advantages of children over adults regarding language acquisition

The learner's role changes and develops during a natural approach course because there are various stages the learner has to go through.

- The first stage is the pre-production stage where the learner is not forced to respond orally and is allowed to decide on his/her own when to start to speak.
- The next stage, the early-production stage, fosters short answers and the student has to respond to simple questions and to use fixed conversational patterns.
- In the speech-emergent stage the use of complex utterances emerges, for example in role plays or games.

Another important role of the language acquirer is the role of, "a processor of comprehensible input [who] is challenged by input that is slightly beyond his or her current level of competence and is able to assign meaning to this input through active use of context and extralinguistic information."

The natural approach classroom allocates a central role for the teacher; he has several important roles. First, the teacher provides a constant flow of comprehensible input in the target language and provides non-linguistic clues. Second, the teacher has to create a harmonious classroom atmosphere that fosters a low affective filter. Third, the teacher decides on the classroom activities and tasks regarding group sizes, content, contexts, and materials. Finally, the teacher is responsible to, "communicate clearly and compellingly to students the assumptions, organizations, and expectations of the **method**."

Krashen and Terrell point out the importance of explaining to learners what they can expect and what not of the language course.