

An Overview of the Application of Natural Approach in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Jie Guo

China West Normal University, Nanchong 637000, China

Abstract: As a traditional pedagogy, the Natural Approach still plays an important role in teaching English nowadays. English language learning emphasizes meaningful input, and the theoretical basis of Natural Approach on second language acquisition fits this point. Therefore, this paper is divided into four parts to study the application of Natural Approach in English, the first part is the background of the study; the second part gives a more detailed introduction to Natural Approach; the third part elaborates on the application of Natural Approach in the development of English language skills; and finally, it summarizes the current status of the research on this pedagogy.

Keywords: The Natural Method, English language, teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

In order to make language acquisition easier for learners, language researchers and education researchers have summarized many practical language teaching methods through a lot of research and practice. As the fields of linguistics, psychology and education continue to develop, language teaching methods are also evolving. Modern teaching methods pay more attention to the learner's subject position and emphasize personalized, cooperative and independent learning. At the same time, with the continuous progress of technology, multimedia and network technology are also widely used in language teaching, providing learners with more abundant and convenient learning resources. With the passage of time, these methods have emerged: Oral Approach, Situational Language Teaching, Audiolingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching, Total Physical Response, the Silent Way, the Natural Approach, Suggestopedia and so on. However, for centuries, foreign language teachers have had a dream: how to learn a foreign language in the same way as they learn their mother tongue. Montaigne in the 16th century, Gouin and Sauveur in the 18th century all did research in this area, with remarkable results, and called it the Natural Method. Then, In 1977, Tracy D. Terrell, a California scholar, took the teaching of Spanish as an example for a long period of analysis and research, and then analyzed the problems related to the acquisition of a second foreign language in practice, and finally put forward the concept of natural approach. Therefore, in this article, the application of natural approach in English teaching will be introduced in order to generate some insights for English teachers.

2. The Natural Approach

(1) The Concept of NA

All individuals are born with the ability to learn a language. This is an innate ability and is known as the "language acquisition mechanism" (2016, Zhou). An analysis of bilingualism in infants shows that this innate ability to learn language provides a strong support for language learning, ensuring that children can learn many different languages at the same stage without interfering with each other. The

Natural Approach belongs to a tradition of language teaching methods based on observation and interpretation of how learners acquire both first and second language in non-formal settings. Such methods reject the formal (grammatical) organization of language as a prerequisite to teaching.

In 1977, Tracy D. Terrell, a California scholar, conducted an intensive and sustained study based on the practice of teaching Spanish. Through a detailed analysis of the teaching of Spanish, he further explored in a practical way the key issues in the acquisition of a second foreign language. These findings eventually led to the formulation of the Natural Approach, which provides new perspectives and methods for teaching and learning a second foreign language (2016, Wu). Meanwhile, The Natural Approach, proposed by Tracy D. Terrell, has brought important theoretical and practical implications to the field of second language acquisition. The approach emphasizes teaching language in contexts close to natural language use rather than traditional, structured, classroom-centered teaching methods. Here are some key points about the Natural Approach (2008, Li):

a) Learning environment: The Natural Approach believes that language learning should take place in a non-institutionalized environment that is closer to real-life scenarios of natural language use. In such an environment, learners have more opportunities to communicate with each other, rather than just practicing grammar and vocabulary in the classroom.

b) Natural input: The Natural Approach emphasizes "natural input", i.e. learners are exposed to and learn the language through authentic, unmodified language materials (e.g. movies, TV programs, music, books, etc.). This kind of input not only helps learners to understand the actual use of language, but also provides rich language materials to promote language learning.

c) Communication-oriented: The Natural Approach emphasizes that the purpose of language learning is to be able to communicate effectively. Therefore, learners are encouraged to engage in a great deal of linguistic communication rather than focusing only on grammatical and lexical accuracy in their teaching activities. This communication-oriented approach helps to develop learners' fluency and self-confidence.

d) Self-discovery: In the Natural Approach, learners are encouraged to learn the language through self-discovery. This means that learners need to acquire language knowledge and skills through a process of trial and error and correction in an authentic language environment. This self-discovery approach helps to develop learners' independent learning and problem-solving skills.

e) Cultural Awareness: The Natural Approach also emphasizes the combination of language learning and cultural learning. Learners need to understand the cultural background and social customs of the target language in order to better understand and use the language. This development of cultural awareness helps to enhance learners' intercultural communication skills.

The Natural Approach brings new ideas and methods to the field of second language acquisition. It emphasizes language learning in an authentic language environment, values natural input and communication-based teaching methods, and encourages learners to acquire language knowledge and skills through self-discovery. This teaching method helps to develop learners' language fluency, self-confidence and intercultural communication skills.

In its formation and development, the Natural Approach has drawn extensively on the essence of a wide range of pedagogical approaches, which include, but are not limited to, direct, auditory and communicative methods. It is this diversity of influences that has given NA its strong adaptability and flexibility, enabling it to be implemented effectively in a variety of teaching environments and learner groups.

According to Krashen and Terrell (1983), NA is closely related to the Direct Method in several ways, and can even be said to be a reinterpretation and further development of the Direct Method. The Direct Method used to occupy an important place in language teaching by emphasizing teaching directly through the language itself, avoiding translation and the use of the mother tongue. However, while inheriting this core idea of Direct Method, NA has also expanded and innovated it.

First, in terms of language input, the Direct Method focuses on a single language input, emphasizing language mastery through repeated imitation and mechanical practice. NA, however, focuses more on the quality and diversity of language input. It believes that only when learners are exposed to enough and rich enough language materials can they truly understand and master the language. Therefore, NA emphasizes the use of materials suitable for learners' level and interest as the source of language input, so that learners can naturally absorb and internalize the language in authentic contexts.

Secondly, in terms of teaching methods, the direct method tends to use fixed teaching steps and patterns, such as question and answer, translation, etc., and focuses on the accuracy of the language form. NA, on the other hand, pays more attention to learners' subjectivity and creativity. It encourages learners to learn and use language through interaction, cooperation and inquiry, focusing on the realization of the meaning and function of language. This teaching method can not only stimulate learners' interest and motivation, but also cultivate their independent learning ability and innovative spirit.

Finally, in terms of assessment methods, the Direct Method

usually adopts traditional tests to assess learners' language proficiency, such as grammar tests and vocabulary tests. NA, on the other hand, pays more attention to formative assessment and process assessment. It assesses learners' language proficiency and development potential by observing their performance, participation, and cooperation ability in the learning process. This kind of assessment is more comprehensive, objective and fair, and can better reflect the learners' real level and progress.

To summarize, NA draws on the Direct Method while reflecting on and expanding it in depth. It pays more attention to the quality and diversity of language input, the flexibility and creativity of teaching methods, and the comprehensiveness and fairness of assessment methods. These features make NA a teaching method that is more in line with modern language teaching concepts and learners' needs.

(2) The Theories of NA

Krashen and Terrell make continuing reference to the theoretical and research base claimed to underlie the Natural Approach and to the fact that the method is unique in having such a base, "It is based on an empirically grounded theory of second language acquisition, which has been supported by a large number of scientific studies in a wide variety of language acquisition and learning contexts".

The theoretical foundations of the natural method cover two main areas: language theory and learning theory. Firstly, in terms of language theory, linguists in the 1970s reassessed the traditional pedagogy and emphasized the importance of language proficiency development as proposed by Chomsky. They argued that language is not just a collection of symbols, but also a tool for expressing meaning, and therefore, more attention should be paid to the meaning and fluency of language in the teaching and learning process. This shift led to a renewal of the concept of education, making teaching more learner-centered. Against this background, the Natural Approach to Teaching came into being, which emphasizes communication as the primary function of language and advocates the automatic acquisition of grammatical rules through practical activities so as to improve the learners' communicative competence in language (Zheng, 2020).

On the other hand, in terms of learning theory, Krashen's theoretical monitoring model of second language acquisition provides a strong theoretical support for language learning. Among them, the acquisition learning hypothesis divides the language system of foreign language learners into the learning system and the acquisition system, which are independent but complementary to each other. The learning system focuses on learning language rules in a formal teaching environment, while the acquisition system is similar to the process of children learning their mother tongue and acquiring language naturally in a natural language environment. The natural sequence hypothesis, on the other hand, is based on the practical study of the sequence of lexical acquisition, which states that the acquisition of a second language follows a certain predictable sequence, i.e., the stage-by-stage development of the language, as does the acquisition of the mother tongue. This hypothesis emphasizes the natural and gradual nature of language learning and also points out that errors are inevitable in the learning process. Finally, the input hypothesis, i.e., the $i+1$ hypothesis, emphasizes the importance of comprehensibility of input materials for language learning. This hypothesis suggests that in order to

facilitate language learning, the input materials should be slightly above the learners' current level so as to stimulate learners' interest in learning and challenge their linguistic competence.

3. The Application of Natural Approach in Teaching English

Natural Approach is an instructional method that emphasizes learning a foreign language in the same way as acquiring a native language, focusing on the development of learners' language skills through natural input and authentic communication. Although the Natural Approach was initially applied primarily to younger English language learners, because of its emphasis on the core principles of natural input and authentic communication as the key to language teaching from start to finish, more and more researchers and educational practitioners have begun to apply this approach to learners of all ages, including middle and high school students and college students. At the heart of the Natural Approach is the creation of a near-native environment in which learners acquire a foreign language in a natural way. In this approach, the teacher is no longer a mere transmitter of knowledge, but becomes a guide and facilitator in the learning process. Learners are encouraged to use the foreign language in real or simulated communicative situations and to acquire language knowledge and skills through practice.

In listening, speaking, reading and writing classes, Natural Approach can be applied flexibly to meet different learning needs. In listening lessons, teachers can play real language materials, such as movie clips and news reports, so that learners can feel the rhythm and intonation of the language in real contexts and improve their listening comprehension. In speaking lessons, teachers can organize activities such as role-playing and group discussion so that learners can practice oral expression in simulated communicative scenarios and improve oral fluency and accuracy. In reading lessons, teachers can guide learners to read authentic language materials, such as novels and essays, so that learners can improve their reading speed and reading comprehension while understanding the content of the text. In writing lessons, teachers can let learners practice writing according to authentic situations, such as writing emails, writing diaries and so on, in order to develop learners' writing and language expression skills. This part will specify the application of natural pedagogy in listening, reading and writing lessons respectively.

(1) Natural Approach Applied in Listening and Speaking Classes

Under the influence of the Natural Approach, there have been many researches about English listening teaching. Brown and Yule (1983) point out that there are four factors which affect the listening comprehension. They are speaker, listener, the complexity of the content and support provided in terms of pictures, diagrams, or other visual aids. Afterwards, Anderson and Lynch (1988) also note that there are four conditions which can improve English listening ability. They are the organized information, the common topic, the explicit and sufficient information, and the familiar expressions (Zheng, 2020). For English learners, practicing listening is crucial to achieving a level of speaking fluency that is understandable to native speakers. Among the many ways to practice, Imitation can be considered as one of the most basic and effective ways to practice. Teachers can improve students'

listening and speaking skills through the following steps:

a) Choose suitable listening materials

First of all, teachers need to select suitable listening materials for students to ensure the authenticity of the content and the authenticity of the language. Meanwhile, the difficulty of the materials should match the students' language level so that they can understand and imitate effectively.

b) Guiding students to understand the plot of the discourse

Before playing the listening materials, teachers can briefly introduce the background information or propose related topics to help students better integrate into the context. During playback, teachers can pause at appropriate times to explain new words, phrases or complex sentence structures to ensure that students fully understand the discourse.

c) Mimicking Pronunciation and Intonation

After understanding the context, students need to start imitating the native speaker's pronunciation, intonation, pauses and sentence breaks. Teachers can play the material several times and let students repeat it until they can accurately imitate the native speaker's pronunciation and intonation. In addition, teachers can also use recording devices to let students record their own imitation audio and compare it with the original voice in order to find out and correct deficiencies in pronunciation and intonation.

d) Creating real dialog scenes

After the students have mastered more accurate pronunciation and intonation, the teacher can guide the students to the next stage - creating their own dialogues. Teachers can propose relevant dialog situations according to the previous topic and let students role-play in groups. During the dialogues, teachers should encourage students to actively use the vocabulary and grammatical structures they have learned, while focusing on the naturalness of speech, intonation and expression.

e) Feedback and Evaluation

At the end of the dialog, teachers should give timely feedback and assessment. First, teachers can comment on students' pronunciation, intonation, pauses and sentence breaks, point out the problems and give suggestions for improvement. Secondly, teachers can evaluate the vocabulary, grammatical structure and expressive ability used by students in the dialogues to help students find deficiencies and improve them. Finally, teachers can encourage students to use English in their daily life to consolidate what they have learned and improve their speaking skills.

Natural Approach Applied in Reading and Writing Classes

The natural approach to teaching English literacy skills emphasizes the creation of a learning environment that is close to real life, focuses on reducing students' learning stress, and emphasizes the practical meaning and application of language. This approach is particularly effective in the development of reading and writing skills. First of all, the natural approach focuses on integrating literacy skills into real-life contexts. This means that during the teaching process, teachers will design a variety of literacy activities that are closely related to life, such as simulated email exchanges, news report writing or story creation. Such teaching methods help students understand and use English literacy skills more naturally, and also enhance the fun and practicality of learning. Then, the natural approach emphasizes a low-stress learning environment (2021, Du). Teachers will strive to create a

relaxed and supportive classroom atmosphere that encourages students to actively participate in literacy activities rather than overemphasizing errors and corrections. This low-anxiety learning environment helps students to build up their self-confidence and become more courageous in trying and expressing themselves, thus accelerating the improvement of literacy skills. Furthermore, natural pedagogy emphasizes the meaning and function of language. In literacy teaching, teachers will guide students to focus on the actual content and meaning of the text, rather than just pursuing grammatical and vocabulary accuracy. Such a teaching method helps students understand the text more deeply, improve their reading comprehension, and express their thoughts and opinions in writing. Finally, the natural approach uses an inductive method to teach literacy skills. This means that teachers will provide a large amount of reading materials for students to read and imitate. Through continuous practice and accumulation, students will gradually master the basic rules and skills of reading and writing in English. At the same time, teachers will also encourage students to do a lot of writing exercises to improve their writing skills through continuous attempts and revisions.

4. Conclusion

There are three main viewpoints on the study of Natural Approach: first, accepting and learning. Second, confusing and questioning, mainly puzzled by the $i+1$ input theory, it is difficult to grasp exactly what level of input is comprehensible, and according to the interviews with some of the English teachers, this completely critical viewpoint exists as well. Thirdly, they are critically receptive, advocating a combination of the two, combining theory with practice to show the way for deaf English in China at present.

Krashen and Terrel emphasize that teachers should not focus on correcting errors at any stage of language

development. It is normal for students to make all kinds of mistakes in the process of learning a second language. Teachers should not be in a hurry to preach precise phonetics and grammar. What is important is to create a learning environment where students do not have to often worry nervously about their mistakes. As English teachers, we need to use natural teaching methods appropriately and combine them skillfully with other teaching methods to maximize the advantages of teaching methods.

References

- [1] Zhou Wei. The natural teaching method of foreign language in college English teaching[J]. Heilongjiang Science, 2016, 7(16): 117-118.
- [2] Tong Dandan. A study on the application of natural pedagogy in oral English education for self-study exam[D]. Liaoning Normal University, 2012.
- [3] Wu Baoqin. Analyzing the application of natural pedagogy in English training--taking Fuyang ABS English training school as an example[J]. Journal of Northwest Adult Education College, 2016(04):42-44.
- [4] Li Yahang. An Experimental Study on the Application of Foreign Advanced Foreign Language Teaching Methods in Classroom Teaching[J]. Journal of Hunan Mass Media Vocational and Technical College, 2008(05): 110-113. DOI:10.16261/j.cnki.cn43-1370/z.2008.05.008.
- [5] Du Yin. The effect of natural teaching method on junior high school students' English speaking level[D]. Yangzhou University, 2021. DOI:10.27441/d.cnki.gyzdu.2019.001992.
- [6] Zheng Wenwen. Research on the application of natural teaching method in middle school English listening teaching [D]. Henan University, 2021. DOI:10.27114/d.cnki.ghnau.2020.001791.
- [7] Xu Chaozhong. Research on the application of natural teaching method in English teaching in upper elementary school [D]. Liaocheng University, 2017.