

The Natural Approach to L2 Instruction: Teaching L2 without a Textbook and with Minimal Grammar

Alan N. Crawford, Emeritus Professor
California State University, Los Angeles

In the Natural Approach to learning a second language, students receive comprehensible input from the teacher; input in the language to be learned that is presented in such a way that it is understandable. Correction is avoided in a climate of low anxiety. The curriculum is thematic, rather than grammatical. Early production is not forced, recognizing students' silent period. Instruction is differentiated for students at the levels of pre-production, early production, and emergence of speech, although students at all levels participate in the same lessons. The classroom learning environment resembles the climate of infants and toddlers learning their mother tongue.

Keywords: Natural Approach, communicative, thematic curriculum;

Krashen's Hypotheses and Language Acquisition

The results of recent research have changed educators' conceptions of how a second language is acquired and how this acquisition is best promoted in the elementary and secondary classroom. There has been a major paradigm shift away from grammar-based approaches to language learning and toward those called communicative, which are also consistent with meaning-based or constructivist approaches to literacy (Crawford, 1994; Crawford, 2003).

Several important hypotheses underlie current practice in most communicative approaches to second-language acquisition (Krashen, 2004). In his input hypothesis, Krashen concludes that growth in language occurs when learners receive comprehensible input, or input that contains vocabulary and structure at a slightly higher level than what they already understand. The input hypothesis reflects Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. The context of the input provides clues to maintain the integrity of the message. According to the input hypothesis, a grammatical sequence is not needed. The vocabulary and structures are provided and practiced as a natural part of the comprehensible input that the child receives, much as the process occurs with infants acquiring their mother tongue. Krashen (1981) relates the input hypothesis to the silent period, the interval before speech in either the mother tongue or second language in which the child listens to and develops an understanding of the language before beginning to produce language.

Krashen's updated input hypothesis (Krashen, 1991) includes what he calls comprehensible input plus 1, or CI + 1. It is a part of language that students have not yet acquired, but that they are ready to acquire. The CI + 1 is a new element to be learned in what the teacher has already made comprehensible. It is contextualized, not

isolated, and it may include academic language or other new elements, such as a new language structure.

In his acquisition-learning hypothesis, Krashen highlights the difference between the infant's subconscious acquisition of the mother tongue and the conscious learning of a second language of the secondary student of French in a classroom. Students acquire language subconsciously, with a feel for correctness. Learning a language, by contrast, is a conscious process that involves knowing grammatical rules. The infant, of course, is almost always successful in acquiring communicative competence, whereas the secondary school foreign language learner is often not (Crawford, 1994; Crawford, 2003).

Gee (1992) elaborates on Krashen's concept of acquisition by adding a social factor reflecting Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" and also the concept of approximation. He describes acquisition as the subconscious process of practice in social groups, benefiting from exposure to language models, in a process of trial and error. Formal instruction is not needed. Gee's concept parallels how babies and infants learn their mother tongue at home.

According to Krashen's (2004) natural order hypothesis, grammatical structures are acquired in a predictable sequence, with certain elements usually acquired before others. He concludes that the orders for first- and second-language acquisition are similar, but not identical. He does not, however, conclude that sequencing the teaching of language according to this natural order or any grammatical sequence is either necessary or desirable.

In his affective filter hypothesis, Krashen (2004) concludes that several affective variables are associated with success in second-language acquisition. These include high motivation, self-confidence and a positive self-image, and, most important, low anxiety in the learning environment. It is therefore important that teachers avoid high-pressure instruction and especially humiliation of students who are acquiring English.

Other Basic Principles

Results from research have led to other major changes in educators' conceptions of how a second language is acquired and how this acquisition is best facilitated in the classroom, one of which is the obvious similarity between primary- and second-language acquisition. In both, primary- and second-language learners form an incomplete and incorrect interlanguage (Selinker, Swain, & Dumas, 1975), with most children moving through similar stages of development in this incomplete language.

The role of correction is also similar in both primary- and second-language acquisition. Approximation is a related process in which children imitate more proficient English speakers in all of the dimensions of language, oral and written, and test hypotheses about it. Approximation underlies oral and written language in that children are acquiring new understandings and skills within the context of authentic wholes. Terrell (1982) and Krashen and Terrell (1983) conclude that correction should be viewed as a negative reinforcer that will raise the affective filter and the level of

anxiety among English language learners. When errors do not interfere with comprehension, correcting them has no more place in the ESL program than it does when infants acquire their mother tongue. Errors are signs of immaturity, not incorrectness; they will disappear naturally as a part of approximation in the developmental process of language acquisition (Crawford, 1994; Crawford, 2003).

The implications of Krashen's hypotheses and of related similarities between first- and second-language acquisition are that approaches to second-language acquisition should do the following:

- Provide comprehensible input
- Focus on relevant and interesting themes instead of grammatical sequences
- Provide for a silent period without forcing early production
- Avoid correction
- Maintain a low level of anxiety

The Natural Approach

Terrell's (1977) original concept of the natural approach provided for three major characteristics:

1. Classroom activities were focused on acquisition, that is, communication with a content focus leading to an unconscious absorption of language and a feel for correctness, but not an explicit knowledge of grammar.
2. Oral errors were not directly corrected.
3. Learners could respond in the target language, their mother tongue, or a mixture of the two.

Krashen and Terrell (1983) later added four principles that underlie the natural approach to language acquisition:

1. Comprehension precedes production, which leads to several teacher behaviors: teacher use of the target language, a focus on a theme of interest to the children, and maintenance of the children's comprehension.
2. Production emerges in stages ranging from nonverbal responses to complex discourse, with children able to speak when they are ready and speech errors not corrected unless they interfere with communication.
3. The curriculum consists of communicative goals, with topics of interest comprising a thematic syllabus, not a grammatical sequence.
4. Activities must result in a low level of anxiety, a lowering of the children's affective filter, which the teacher accomplishes by establishing and maintaining a good rapport.

Terrell's (1981) Natural Approach is based on three stages of language development: preproduction (comprehension), early production, and emergence of speech.

Preproduction stage: In the preproduction stage, topical, interesting, and relevant comprehensible input is provided by the teacher, speaking slowly and maintaining comprehension with gestures. Children may respond with physical

behaviors, shaking or nodding their heads, pointing at pictures or objects, and saying yes or no. It is important that input is dynamic, lively, fun, and comprehensible. Because the emphasis at this stage is on listening comprehension, responding in the mother tongue is also acceptable.

Classroom props allow for relevant expansion of this and subsequent stages of the natural approach (Crawford, 1994; Crawford, 2003). Any manipulative or concrete object is helpful, including flannel boards and puppets. Large colorful illustrations, such as those in big books, are also useful.

Early production stage: In this stage, the child begins to produce one-word utterances, lists, and finally two-word answers, such as “big dog” and “in house.” Some of the latter, such as “me want” and “no like,” are grammatically incorrect or incomplete. According to Crawford (2003), teachers should view these responses as immature, not incorrect. In the presence of good models, these errors will disappear in time, just as they do among infants developing their mother tongue at home.

Several types of questions can be used to elicit one- and two-word responses that are within the reach of children as they move into the early production stage:

<u>Question Format</u>	<u>Illustrative Question</u>
Yes/no	Do you like hamburgers?
Here/there	Where is the picture of the cat?
Either/or	Is this a pen or a key?
One word	How many dogs are there?
Two words	What fruits are in the picture?

As in the preproduction stage, these strategies should be integrated into activities that permit a variety of responses, ranging from physical responses from those not ready for production, to brief oral responses from those who are. As the children begin production, conversations should increasingly require one-word responses. Within the same conversation, the teacher can address questions calling for longer responses to those children who are ready. Teacher questions and commands here are in italics, and student responses are in brackets:

- Kjell, show us your picture.
- What is in Kjell's picture? [A sandwich.]
- Yes, it is a sandwich. What is on the sandwich? [Ketchup.]
- Is there an apple on the sandwich? [No. Laughter.]
- What else is on the sandwich? [Meat, mayonnaise.]
- How does it taste? [Good.]
- What do you like with a sandwich? [Cookies. Soda.]
- I like chips with mine.

Emergence of Speech Stage: During the emergence of speech stage, children begin to produce structures that are richer in vocabulary, longer and more complex, and more correct. This production proceeds from three-word phrases to sentences, dialogue, extended discourse, and narrative.

Planning and Teaching Natural Approach Lessons

Natural Approach lessons can be planned according to the suggestions below. With practice, teachers soon learn to teach lessons with minimal advance preparation.

Figure 1 *Lesson plan for Natural Approach lesson based on conversation poster (Georgia-Caucasus)*



Topic/theme: The market

Objectives:

- Students will be able to compare sizes
- Students will be able to express some verbs as gerunds (-ing ending)

Instructional materials: Conversation poster depicting the market

Vocabulary:

- Review from previous lesson:
 - flowers, purse, tools, pink, bald
 - Commands and questions taught previously:
 - Point to....

- Where is...?
 - Who is wearing...?
 - Raise your hand if....
- New vocabulary for the lesson:
 - Gerunds made from verbs, assuming that this occurs in L2/L3: sleeping, selling, laughing, pushing, buying, looking, etc. (if not, then just the active verb forms, but without mentioning gerund or verb at all)
 - Comparative and superlative: big, bigger, biggest (using the five ceramic pots for sale)
- New commands and questions:
 - For students at pre-production stage (responding with gestures, yes/no):
 - Point to the man who is sleeping.
 - How many men are wearing hats?
 - Is the little boy with his mother happy? Is his mother happy?
 - Where is the warmest coat? If it is green, raise your hand. If it is orange, point to it.
 - How many men are smiling? How many women are smiling?
 - For students at early production stage (responding with one or two words, lists):
 - How many people are sleeping at the market?
 - I see three of something for sale that are assorted colors. What are they?
 - If the woman with the red purse is wearing glasses, raise your hand; if the sleeping man doesn't have a watch, stand up. (nested command)
 - I see three of some things for sale in the market. Name them. Which man is the biggest?
- For students at emergence of speech stage (responding with phrases and sentences):
 - Why do you think the man is sleeping?
 - How many sharp tools do you see? What do you do with sharp tools?
 - What do you think is in the big box that the man is pushing on the cart? Why do you think so?
 - Why do you think the little boy is smiling?
 - Do you think the lady looking at the sweater will buy it? Why or why not?

How to plan and prepare a Natural Approach L2 lesson:

Using the demonstration lesson above as a model, you can organize your lesson following these steps:

- Step 1: Select a theme or topic
- Step 2: Select a conversation poster or other stimulus for the lesson, such as a walk around the school, a Science experiment, students' clothing, or other subject of interest. Conversation posters can be used in any sequence.
- Step 3: Write one or two objectives for the lesson; you can include a grammatical element, but you won't teach it as grammar. You don't need to mention the tense or part of speech. Focus on correct usage, not on knowledge of the grammar.
- Step 4: Choose several vocabulary words, questions, and commands from previous lessons to review.
- Step 5: Based on your theme, the aims of the lesson, and the needs of the students, choose a few new vocabulary words and one or two new commands and questions to introduce. Prepare a strategy to introduce them.
- Step 6: Prepare model questions and commands for the main part of the lesson. You will need three or four for each of the three groups in your class: pre-production, who will respond with gestures; early production, who will respond with one or two words; and emergence of speech, who will respond with complete sentences, although they will be short and often not perfectly correct. You will then be mixing and recombining review vocabulary, questions, and commands with new ones to generate more opportunities for the students to respond.
- Step 7: Using vocabulary, questions, and commands from your lesson plan, quickly review at the end of the lesson.

Planning suggestions for the teacher:

- There is no fixed sequence for themes in a thematic curriculum. You can select any topic for any lesson.
- Try to use a variety of stimuli to keep students interested-conversation poster one day, hats the next, an illustrated read-aloud story the day after that, and so on.
- The same conversation poster can be used many times at intervals of several weeks; each time it is used at a higher level than before.
- The questions and commands for teaching the lesson should not be used in the exact order of the lesson plan. You should skip around, combining and recombining vocabulary, questions, and commands in different orders.
- You should direct appropriate commands and questions to each student according to their proficiency. You can use the previous lesson plan for this.

How to teach a Natural Approach L2 Lesson

Using the demonstration lesson above as the model, you can follow these steps for teaching the lesson.

- Step 1: Quickly review vocabulary, questions and commands from earlier lessons.
- Step 2: Quickly introduce the new vocabulary, questions, and commands. Use the conversation poster, dramatization, objects in the classroom, or other resources. Don't worry if everyone doesn't learn them immediately. You have the entire lesson to repeat them. When you introduce a new vocabulary word, don't insist that the students repeat the word three times. Your purpose is to have them remember the meaning of the new word-they will learn to say it later in the lesson or in another lesson. Remember to use your knowledge of students' stages, pre-production, early production, and emergent speech, to plan what you say to each student. Call on everyone to respond together early in the lesson as you teach new elements. As they learn the new elements, start calling on the boys, then the girls, then those in the first row, the second row, and finally individuals according to their stages.
- Step 3: Use the appropriate category of question or command according to each student's stage.
- Step 4: When you have used them all, begin to mix one question type with a different vocabulary word, then a command type with yet another vocabulary word. Mix and recombine the vocabulary, questions, and commands. Some can be repeated several times. Keep the lesson lively and keep it moving quickly. Make the lesson humorous wherever you can. Avoid correcting students errors-call on someone else, then come back to the student who made the error so that they can try again.

Teaching suggestions for the teacher:

- Teach new vocabulary, questions, and commands in the context of language, not in isolation.
- Use only the language of instruction in the lesson, for example, only Spanish if you are a teacher of Spanish.
- Translanguaging among students is very effective. Translanguaging by teachers (speaking in the students' mother tongue to explain) is not effective. Students quickly learn to wait for L1 instead of listening to L2.
- Maintain students' comprehension by repeating, dramatizing, modeling, speaking more slowly. Find a way to make them understand.
- Remember that only some of what the teacher says is written in the lesson plan. The teacher must mix and recombine review vocabulary, new vocabulary, review commands and questions, and new commands and questions, repeating

all lesson elements many times, but in many different combinations. Most Natural Approach lessons will be about 30 minutes.

Summary and Conclusions

Students in traditional language learning classrooms are often unable to communicate orally in their second language. They are usually able to read and write, and to perform well on tests of grammar. The Natural Approach leads students to be able to communicate orally with excellent listening comprehension and with correct usage that reflects good grammar. The absence of textbooks and consumable workbooks makes the Natural Approach a desirable choice in current school fiscal environments.

References

- Crawford, A. (2003). Communicative approaches to second language acquisition: The bridge to second language literacy. In G. García (Ed.), *English learners: Reaching the highest level of English literacy* (pp. 152-181). Newark, DE: International Reading Association,
- Crawford, A. N. (1994). Communicative approaches to second language acquisition: From oral language development into the core curriculum and L2 literacy. In C. F. Leyba (Ed.), *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework* (2nd ed.) (pp. 79-131). Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University, Los Angeles.
- Gee, J. P. (1992). *The social mind: Ideology and social practice*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Krashen, S. D. (1981). Bilingual education and second language acquisition theory. In California State Department of Education (Ed.), *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework* (pp. 51-79). Sacramento, CA: Office of Bilingual Bicultural Education, California State Department of Education.
- Krashen, S. D. (1991). The input hypothesis: An update. In J. E. Alatis (ed.), Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics (1991), *Linguistics and language pedagogy: The state of the art*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Krashen, S. D. (2004). *Principles and practices in second language acquisition*. New York, NY: Pergamon Press.
- Krashen, S. D., & Terrell, T. D. (1983). *The natural approach: Language acquisition in the classroom*. New York: Pergamon/Alemany.
- Selinker, L., Swain, M., & Dumas, G. (1975). The interlanguage hypothesis extended to students. *Language Learning*, 25, 139-152.
- Terrell, T. D. (1977). A natural approach to second language acquisition and learning. *Modern Language Journal*, 6, 325-337.
- Terrell, T. D. (1981). The natural approach in bilingual education. In California State Department of Education (Ed.), *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework* (pp. 117-146). Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University, Los Angeles.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.