

## Natural Approach and Second Language Acquisition: A Critical Review

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the nature of the acquisition and learning of a second language within the Natural Approach and its theoretical body that supports it, highlighting its problematic points. Thoroughly addresses five specific elements of this approach and theory and confronts them with a critical analysis of their shortcomings and defects.

**Keywords:** Natural Approach, acquisition, learning, second language.

### 1. Introduction

Expressions like "If you teach grammar, your students will hate you" can be heard from the teachers saying to their undergraduate and teaching English students at the university. Obviously, such an attitude expressed in those words was the result of the impact that the new theories of language teaching exerted on the teacher's way of thinking during the eighties. At the beginning of the nineties, students were prevented from being taught grammar in the classroom based on two arguments: first, it was necessary to abandon inappropriate teaching methods such as the Grammar Translation Method; and second, the new teaching theories had shown that a person could master another language, as a second language or as a foreign language, in the same way that a child learns his native language.

Although there was a general consensus on the first argument, the second was due to one of the many attempts to build a second language acquisition theory. The variety of theories that have emerged claiming to know how a person can master another language can be seen as a continuum, ranging from empirical to rationalist, with several theories involved. As Omaggio (1993 p. 73) commented empirical methodologies treated language learning as habit formation through mimicry, memorization, and repetition. Rationalist methodologies emphasized the meaning and understanding of the psychologically true rules of grammar. Among the latter, one of the models of more influential and more widely discussed learning, is that of Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell: the Natural Approach and the underlying theory.

The Natural Approach, proposed by Krashen and Terrell (1983), in general terms can be described as a method that sees the learning of a first and second language as similar. It is believed that its validity and effectiveness are due to the conformation of the naturalistic principles identified in the acquisition of a second language (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 179). In this sense, the theory that supports the method is the one developed by Stephen Krashen who sees two different ways of developing competence in a language either as a foreign language or as a second language: acquisition, which is a "subconscious" process, and learning that is a "conscious" process. This distinction, however, has been challenged a number of times after being proposed.

This article explores some of the biggest problems that have been identified in the acquisition-learning distinction, one is that "learning" cannot become "acquisition" and others related to these aspects. The position adopted here is cognitive in nature, one in which controlled processing, automation and restructuring are central processes throughout the learning continuum. Once that point of view has been established, it has procedural implications for the classroom.

This article is structured in five sections: first, a general description of acquisition-learning and related aspects is presented and then the major failures in such distinction are discussed in section two. Section three addresses the inadequacy of the inadequacy of the Natural Approach and its underlying theory. Section four proposes that the continuity of learning is constituted by cognitive processes, without appealing to processes consciousness or unconsciousness. Finally, section five discusses the implications and applications of cognitive processes in the classroom.

## **2. Acquisition and Learning**

The central hypothesis of the theory in the Natural Approach is that the acquisition of a language can only be achieved by the understanding of messages. According to Krashen and Terrell (1983: 18), to acquire a language is to 'pick it up', for example, to develop proficiency in a language as a result of using it in natural communicative situations. This hypothesis states that an adult can develop proficiency in a second language subconsciously in the same way that a child develops linguistic ability in his first language naturally, (Krashen, 1985: 1).

"Subconscious", in this framework, refers to the implicit knowledge of the language system. A person can use the language successfully, while this person may not be "aware" of the rules of the language he is using. If a mistake is made, the speaker knows there is a problem but may not know what grammar rule has been violated. But how does the acquisition take place?

Krashen says there is only one way to develop language acquisition: understanding messages or comprehensible input. The comprehensible input or  $i + 1$ , relates the language

that is one level beyond the current level of competence of the learner with respect to the internal processor of the language, or the Language Acquisition Device in Chomsky's terminology, which generates possible rules according to innate procedures (Krashen, 1985: 3). A crucial implication of this hypothesis is that the acquisition is based on what is heard or read, not because of what is produced that emerges on its own. Once the acquisition has been developed, you will be responsible for initiating oral expressions and fluency in the language. As can be seen, the acquisition plays a central role and can be seen as the goal of the instruction. This role is not the same as learning.

Krashen and Terrell (1983: 26) argue that the second way to develop proficiency in a language is through learning. Learning defined as 'knowing about' the language, or 'formal knowledge' of a language. While acquisition is subconscious, learning is conscious. Learning refers to the 'explicit' knowledge of the rules, being aware of them and being able to talk about them. This type of knowledge is quite different from the acquisition of the language, which could be labeled as 'implicit'.

While the acquisition is responsible for language fluency, learning is responsible for monitoring the acquired system. "Learning, conscious knowledge, serves only as an editor, or monitor. Appeals to learning to make corrections, to change what will be expressed in the acquired system before we speak or write and sometimes after speaking or write, as in self-correction (Krashen, 1985: 2). From this point of view, learning has an extremely limited function, that of self-correction. Such a function can only take place where three conditions meet: time, concentration in form, and knowledge of form.

Krashen states that explaining grammar is directed entirely by learning, not acquisition. Krashen and Terrell (1983: 27) state that that research on language acquisition in children strongly suggests that teaching [grammar] does not facilitate acquisition. Krashen (1993, p.765) is more emphatic towards the position that the effects of direct instruction are typically short-lived and do not become part of the acquired competence. The effects of teaching of grammar still seem to be peripheral and fragile.

At this point, it would be of interest to question to what extent the distinction between the dichotomy acquisition learning has some validity.

### **3. Problems in the Acquisition-Learning Distinction**

#### **3.1 Acquisition**

The problem of the theory that underlies the natural approach begins with the presumption that an adult acquires a second language in the way in which a child acquires a first language. Without delving into the matter, Krashen parallels acquisition with the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) proposed by Chomsky. This leads to wondering why, if both children and adults have access to the same Language Acquisition Device, adults do not learn a language with the same ease and in the same amount of time, just as a child does. As

noted by McLaughlin (1987) and Gregg (1984), the Language Acquisition Device was intended to describe the initial stage of a child while an adult is not in an initial stage with respect to language. Within the Universal Grammar Theory, the LAD has to do with setting parameters, not in the sense of understanding subconscious or conscious knowledge of grammar rules. Also, if both children and adults acquire a language in the same way, what are the implications for an L2 classroom?

Assuming that adults can acquire a language in the same way as a child, the teacher's task in the classroom will be to provide comprehensible input, not to teach. It seems that if a child acquires his native language by hearing that language a lot, and without thinking about it, the child would gradually "pick it up" until he used it efficiently. In the same way, Krashen implies that an adult who moves to another country follows the same process. If that is the case, then all teachers have to do is to expose their students to language, and the acquisition will take place. This means that teachers do not have to teach, nor do students have to learn. Harmer's point of view (1987, p. 6) is much more appropriate, who states that students who come to classes are in a different situation from children who acquire their first language, or from adults who acquire the language while they are really living in a community where the language is spoken. Harmer points out that most students do not have the time to pick up language gradually as a child does, therefore, students can benefit from conscious learning. But what does conscious or unconscious learning really mean under Krashen's analysis?

The distinction between "subconscious" and "conscious" processes has been the subject of much criticism. The meaning of these two terms is still a source of disagreement. For example, someone might assume that "unconscious" refers to a pseudo-passive mental state, in which the material revolves over and through the apprentice as seen in the suggestion method (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 103). Of course, Krashen was not referring to such a strange process, but since he never developed a well-founded definition for both terms, any kind of conjecture could be possible.

What exactly does Krashen mean by conscious or subconscious? Gregg (1984, p. 82) questions the distinction in the following way: specifically, does 'subconscious' mean 'not accessible to the conscious' or simply 'not conscious at any given time'? Does the 'inability to become unconscious' consciously imply? If by definition the "subconscious" is inaccessible, and conscious 'learning' is always accessible, then Krashen's proclamation that 'learning' does not become 'acquisition' is of course trivially true, but not interesting.

Krashen operationally describes 'conscious knowledge' with 'rules' and 'unconscious knowledge' with judgments based on 'feeling'. However, the problem is, as McLaughlin (1987) points out, that it is impossible to know if apprentices are operating on the basis of 'rules' or 'feeling'. The point is that there should be an objective way to determine what acquisition and learning are, since this has not been provided by Krashen. A reasonable question to ask is how to think or how subconsciousness is assumed in the Natural Approach.

The Natural Approach assumes that much of the instruction will be directed towards something that is happening subconsciously in the minds of the students. However, if this presumption is confronted with what really happens in the classroom, it will prove to be a problem. In principle because once again it is not clear how the teacher can measure or test if his students are executing or understanding a message about the basis of feeling or the rules. A second reason is that students simply seem to function consciously in the classroom.

Terrell (1986, p.221) admits that the terms proposed by Krashen "could" be useful in explaining the acquisition of a second language in a natural environment; but they turn out to be really problematic for the instructors of the L2 classrooms. Terrell goes on to say that students normally pay conscious attention during classroom instruction, and that concentration in the language, although the desired goal, is difficult to achieve in a foreign language classroom. To make it more difficult, it is not only the difference between consciousness and subconsciousness that is problematic in the Natural Approach, but also the way in which acquisition is believed to develop.

The statement that students will acquire a second language just by hearing and reading that part of the language that is a little beyond the level of proficiency is very ambiguous. But for Krashen and Terrell, the ability to speak "emerges" as the result of being exposed to  $i + 1$ ; In other words, success in learning another language is attributed to input only. For the classroom teacher L2, how does the teacher determine the current level of proficiency "i" of each student? How can he or she determine what the next level is? That would impose a burden on the teacher, requiring evaluation of each case to determine the appropriate  $i + 1$  to which said student has to be exposed. Since it is obvious that not all students will have exactly the same level of proficiency, the  $i + 1$  will necessarily have to be different, otherwise, what is  $i + 1$  for a student will be  $i + 2$  or greater (or less) for others, which is not desirable under this presumption. The other question that follows, How can a person acquire a language that contains structures that have not yet been acquired?

The answer to this last question is given explicitly. Krashen and Terrell (1983: 32) state that we can understand structures that have not yet been acquired through context and extra-linguistic information. As Gregg (1984) comments, such a statement is surprising. It is true that a student will understand a message without understanding all the structures, in fact, that happens all the time. However, a student understands that John was beaten by Mary and Mary was beaten by John have basically the same meaning, could it be said that the student has acquired the rule of passive sentences? Moreover, how can extra-linguistic information convey the rules of the third person singular -s, or the location of the indirect object? This does not seem to be totally clear.

As noted above, according to Krashen and Terrell the ability to speak "emerges" as the result of  $i + 1$ . One of the arguments that support this statement is the "period of silence" that precedes the acquisition of a second language in children. In the Natural Approach, this is

taken seriously since students are not required to speak until they feel "ready." Apparently, students are pseudo-passive, processing inputs actively and unconsciously until suddenly speech emerges. However, it can be argued that the period of silence is not proof of the development of competition. How does a teacher know if a student remains silent because he or she is unconsciously processing inputs or because the student does not understand anything? This last situation could be described as silent incomprehension. As McLaughlin (1987: 37) comments, Krashen's argument for the role of understandable inputs ... must compete with other possible explanations for the period of silence (anxiety, personality differences, etc.) It is obvious that  $i + 1$  attributes little credit to apprentices and their own involvement in the learning process.

It is questionable how only understandable inputs can make speech emerge. McLaughlin (1987: 50) states that unless the learners try to speak, it is not very likely that they will get the kind of feedback they need to analyze the structure of the language. Moreover, as Brown (2000) points out, the idea that speech emerges as a consequence of  $i + 1$  is promising for those bright and highly motivated students; however, we are left without significant information from Krashen's theories about what to do in the other half (or more) of our language students for whom speech does not emerge and for whom the period of silence could last "forever" (p. 281). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that even within the Natural Approach it is possible to assign a role for production as the input for acquisition. If, as Krashen proposes, learning increases the production of correct oral expressions of a given structure, then it is reasonable to assume that oral productions can be used for further acquisition. Of course, this is rejected and irrelevant in the theory discussed because it would go against the acquisition-learning distinction: that learning does not become acquisition.

### 3.2 Learning

As noted earlier, according to Krashen and Terrel (1983), there is no overlap between acquisition and learning. It sounds contradictory when they indicate that there are two ways to develop competence in a language, seeing learning as one of the two ways; however, they subsequently declare that learning has an extremely restricted function - that of a monitor or editor - and that learning does not become part of the acquired competence. There is no point in saying that one thing leads to the development of competition and say, at the same time, that it does not. Gregg (1984) argues that Krashen's assertion goes against the intuitive belief that some rules can be acquired through learning.

Following the same lines, Krashen (1993: 765) looks at the role of grammar as peripheral and fragile. The argument finds support in the fact that a child learns a language without learning grammar. While this is true, Krashen misses the point of the role of grammar. Ur (1991: 77) states that the important question is not whether the teaching of grammar is necessary and / or sufficient to learn a language, but it does help to acquire it or not. Similarly, James (1983), cited in Baltra (1992: 575), indicates that the problem is not whether to teach grammar or not, but how much grammar to teach and how to teach it.

Lightbown and Pienemann (1993) present various pieces of evidence that contextualize instruction focused on form can be not only beneficial but essential under certain conditions and for certain characteristics of a second language. Krashen's response to these studies is that they are not enough evidence since they present only percentages and unanalyzed data. Krashen (1993: 725) concludes by saying he does not regret it. In my opinion, research says that the effects of direct instruction are typically short and do not become part of an acquired competence."

As quoted above, Terrell admits that the acquisition-learning distinction, as described, is problematic for the classroom. Trying to improve the situation, Terrel (1986, p. 214) proposes a process he calls 'linking'. Linkage [says Terrel] is the term that he proposes to describe the cognitive and affective mental processes of union between a meaning and a form. As described, the linking process guides the "understanding" stage in the Natural Approach. Terrel goes on to say that the link between meaning and forms plays a role in the acquisition of the first language. The interesting part of this linking process is that instead of saying that it is a 'subconscious' process, Terrel refers to it as concrete conscious associations. As an example of how the process is carried out, Terrel (p. 221) describes his own experience in acquiring Greek.

Terrel goes further by saying that not only the 'link', but also the 'access' to the language is important for the acquisition. By 'access' Terrel means the opportunities ... to express ideas in meaningful contexts (p.217). And he adds by definition then, the acquisition is complete only when the student can understand and produce the language in question (p. 220). This seems to represent a big change from the previous statement where input, not the product, was the only factor that determined the acquisition of a second language.

Terrell also redefines his position on learning. After re-examining the distinction between learning and acquisition, and trying not to completely disagree with Krashen's theory, Terrell (p.223) adopts a position like this:Krashen rejects the proposition that learning becomes acquisition, while observing that something learned can be acquired later. I have no evidence to clarify claims or counterclaims for the acquisition of the second language. However, in the context of the Natural Approach, the question is easy to answer: learning helps in some cases to acquisition, in others, prevents it.

#### **4. The Natural Approach**

It seems obvious that the theory of acquiring a second language under the Natural Approach is simply inadequate. Neither it can clearly describe the process of language acquisition, nor is it a suitable theory to be applied in the L2 classroom. If Terrel has no evidence for affirmations or counter-claims for the acquisition of the second language, then neither does it have a method supported by "principles" identified in "successful" second-language research as proclaimed by the Natural Approach. Baltra (1992) argues that problems found in the theory proposed by Krashen and Terrel should not affect the Natural

Approach. Baltra's argument is that teaching is an art; therefore, defects in theory should not affect what teachers intuitively believe will work in the classroom.

The problem with Baltra's argument is that he relies totally on the intuitions and skills of the teachers. Not all teachers are skilled and creative enough to bring a range of unique activities to promote the acquisition of a second language regardless of any language theory. Many of the activities and books used in different schools reflect the position taken by a particular theory. It is unreasonable to assume that teachers act only under their intuitions or abilities, without the influence of beliefs on how a language is acquired. Berne (1990) conducted a comparative study between the proficiency-oriented method and the Natural Approach teaching French and Spanish respectively. Berne's findings showed that the method adopted by the department of French and Spanish determined teaching activities in the classroom at a higher rate than books or curriculum.

The point is that if the theory that supports the Natural Approach is not adequate, the method itself is not adequate either. Why should this be so? It is simply because the procedures in the Natural Approach obey a second language acquisition theory that has proven to be problematic and unstable. It is unfortunate that the acquisition of a second language cannot simply be defined in some hypotheses. If the "principles" are problematic, so is the method. But if neither Krashen's theory nor the natural approach is suitable for the L2 classroom, what is a possible alternative? In the next section this idea is developed in more detail.

## **5. A Cognitive Perspective**

It starts from a cognitive point of view just in the same way that has been presented in McLaughlin (1987) and Brown (2000). In this framework, learning a second language is seen as the acquisition of a complex cognitive ability. To become proficient in a language, the learner has to process information through various language sub-skills such as controlled and automatic processing and restructuring.

On the one hand, the controlled process refers to "limited-capacity and temporary" (Brown, 2000: 282). In this sense, when a response has not yet been learned, the memory nodes are activated temporarily. This activation is under the control of attention; in other words, for an answer to happen the apprentice has to pay full attention to the process (McLaughlin, 1987: 135). McLaughlin also indicates that a skill can only be learned if it is under a controlled process; therefore, the controlled process is believed to set aside the jumping stones for acquisition. How different is this from behavioral theory? Omaggio (1993) and Ellis (1990) state that Cognitive Theory and Behaviorism contrast in the following point: while behaviorism creates the language is the result something imposed from outside, Cognitive Theory sees language as the result of internal mental activity. From this perspective, the beginner is the person who uses various strategies to think, understand,

remember, and produce the language instead of simply receiving stimuli from the environment (Omaggio, 1993: 55).

On the other hand, the automation process refers to the process of making a routine of the skill through practice. The activation of nodes in automation is the result of the constant tracing of the same input to the same activation pattern over several attempts. Once an automatic response is learned, it happens quickly and is unlikely to be suppressed or changed. Language automation is achieved by restructuring.

In the acquisition of a second language, trainees have to devise a new structure to interpret the new information and to organize the information that has already been stored. McLaughlin (1990: 118) defines restructuring as a process in which the components of a task are coordinated, integrated, or reorganized into new units, thus allowing the old components to be replaced by a more efficient procedure (cited in Brown 2000: 283). Thus, the restructuring could explain the interlanguage variability, whereby the apprentices adjust the internalized system to accommodate the new input; however, variability is beyond the scope of this article, and will not be discussed. What deserves to be discussed here is how all this conceptualization can be regarding the L2 classroom. After all, the concern is to find an effective way to help learners process and store a second language.

## **6. The L2 classroom**

Ur (1991) emphasizes the importance of organizing the language practice to contribute significantly to the learning of another language. Similar to McLaughlin's opinion of language learning, Ur describes the process of learning a language similar to the process of learning a skill like swimming. Ur defines the process in three stages that consist of: verbalization, automation, and autonomy. During verbalization, the teacher explains the meaning of a word and the rules of the language in context. Once this has been done, the teacher puts the students to practice the language under study while monitoring their performance. At first, students may need some help, but eventually they will do it correctly without thinking. At this point, students have reached the stage of automation. When students begin to perceive or create new combinations in the language through additional practical activities, they would be performing autonomously. Now, how can we integrate these three stages into an L2 classroom?

According to Harmer (1991) who proposes a sequence of five stages to introduce and teach productive skills: presentation, obtaining, explanation, practice, and production. A good presentation of the language is essential for students to perceive and understand the language. The goal at this stage is to demonstrate not only how the language is structured, but also how it is used in context. Seen from this perspective, the presentation is similar to the linking process described by Terrell above. Ur points out that the advantages of an effective presentation are the attention of the students; the perception of the use of the language and the materials; the understanding of the material and the connection with what they already know

(the schemas) and retention of the information in short-term memory (1991: 12). Once the presentation has occurred, the second stage is obtained.

Obtaining refers to the stage where the teacher has the opportunity to determine to what extent students order the structure that is introduced. Obtaining is of vital importance since it determines the following stages. If students have some knowledge of the language under study, there is no need to explain what they already know or do a lot of controlled practice. It might be better to move quickly and use the language in a more communicative activity. However, it generally happens that most students do not have much language proficiency, and practice is necessary.

According to Harmer's model, before practicing the language, there is a need to explain and clarify to students the doubts they may have. In this regard, Ur's comments are that teachers often need to give explicit descriptions or definitions of concepts or processes (and grammar). If the explanation is clear or not, it will largely determine the success or failure of the lesson (1991: 16). The concrete vocabulary such as nouns, verbs, and vocabulary does not represent much difficulty in explaining, the grammar itself. That depends on the teacher's beliefs and intuitions to opt for a deductive or inductive approach to grammar teaching. I think the most important idea here is that students recognize and understand structures and vocabulary, and how they are put into practice in the language as the preamble to the stage of automation or practice.

The practice stage provides opportunities for students to use language in a range of contexts that are possible to be found in the culture of study. Omaggio (1993: 79) suggests that controlled activities allow beginners to learn the language and at the same time apply their knowledge to deal with real-life situations. In addition, Ur (1991: 27) recommends that the individual practice procedure should ideally be integrated into a series of activities that help the student to progress from a strongly controlled practice and supported by the teacher at the beginning to a reception and automatic production and eventually autonomous of the language at the end. It has been suggested that various methods offer a variety of activities that prove useful in the practice stage. Activities such as those found in traditional methods such as the Audiolingual Method and the Teaching of Situational Language (eg, repetition, filling in empty spaces, find someone who ..., etc.) can serve as pre-communicative activities in which the objective is focused on the shape of the tongue. In this way, traditional procedures are not rejected, but reinterpreted and expanded (Richards and de Rodgers, 2003: 171).

Since the goal is to help beginners to become autonomous in the language, the creative practice of the language should be encouraged at the end of the instruction. This constitutes the objective of the fifth level proposed by Harmer. Under the Communicative Approach, the range of functional communication and social interaction activities that can be used at this stage is limited. The purpose is to involve students in communication in which

the goals are information sharing, negotiation of meaning, and interaction (Richards and Rodgers, 2003: 165). Activities such as comparisons, descriptions, puzzles, role-plays, tasks, etc., can be focused on negotiating meanings and sharing information.

### Conclusion

From the perspective presented here, the acquisition of a language is conceptualized as a continuum, from a controlled process, at one end, to an automatic one at the other end. As discussed before, the new information would be accommodated in the interlanguage of learners restructuring the system. The cognitive point of view proposes the interesting implications for the acquisition of the second language in the L2 classroom and is an alternative to the shortcomings presented in the Natural Approach and its underlying theory. It must be said, however, that the Natural Approach is correct in highlighting the importance of movement from traditional methods such as the Grammar Translation Method or the Audiolingual Method to a meaning-oriented method. What is less commendable is the statement that the Natural Approach and its underlying theory are conclusive for the acquisition of a second language, to the extent of postulating dogmatic statements such as 'learning does not become acquisition' or 'acquisition can only occur when people understand messages in the target language.' Unfortunately, the theory, and by implications of the Natural Approach, is marked by serious defects, and therefore, lack of explanatory and adequate power.

Currently, language teaching should not be categorized into this or that method. Instead, teachers should have access to a variety of designs and methodological techniques to teach a second language in a variety of contexts. The author's position is that there are no unbreakable recipes or truths regarding the acquisition of a second language. It is important to understand that each context, student, etc. is unique. As Brown (2000: 14) states that using a cautious, progressive, eclectic approach, you can build a theory based on principles of learning and teaching a second language.

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