STAGES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN THE NATURAL APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT
The paper explains Terrell’s stages of language acquisition in Natural Approach (NA). The main focus of the paper is on developing communication ability of students in TEFL classes. Techniques leading to building communicative skills are also included in the paper. However the techniques and stages presented in the paper are not the only one, teachers can devise their own techniques in the light of those discussed in paper.

INTRODUCTION
Tracy D. Terrel outlined a proposal for a “new” philosophy of language teaching called the “natural approach” (NA) in 1977. It is an approach in which real communication is the basis of class activities and within a very short time a learner can communicate with native speakers of that language. Approaches that do not inculcate the ability to communicate are grammar-translation, audiolingual, and the various eclectic cognitive-based methods. They produce skills that match exactly what is taught.

In the case of grammar-translation, students can translate from the target language to L1 and have a good knowledge of the syntax of the target language-especially if asked to perform on grammar tests. They can neither speak nor understand the spoken language. Audiolingual approach emphasizes excellent pronunciation. Students can do pattern drills, make substitutions and change morphemes using various sorts of agreement rules but they cannot participate in a normal conversation with a native speaker. Students taught through the various cognitive approaches can usually do well on grammar tests and can often even produce new sentences, although slowly and laboriously because they have concentrated on a cognitive understanding of the rules and must therefore apply them consciously when speaking.

Natural approach to language acquisition is based on three principles (1) the classroom activities must foster acquisition (activities which promote learning might be assigned as homework); (2) no correction of speech errors directly; and (3) the students can respond in either the target language, their native language, or a mixture of the two. The most important principle is that acquisition activities be provided in the class because these activities allow the development of communicative abilities in addition to fostering the kind of knowledge that result from conscious cognitive learning exercises. So to understand how the NA functions in the language classroom, it is advisable to examine in some detail the acquisition process and its implementation.

Acquisition
Research in second language study supports the hypothesis that acquisition (the unconscious formulation of grammatical principles) and learning (the conscious cognitive-based study of grammar) represent two systems for internalizing knowledge about language. Both aim at linguistic proficiency. However, in foreign language classes the student has little chance for acquisition outside the classroom, the instructor must provide this kind of opportunity in classes. Learning, rank second in the development of communicative competence and is more restricted, to outside-the-class activities. The important point is that activities promoting acquisition are indispensable for all students. Learning activities are more limited in their usefulness to beginners.

Whereas some experts believe that the acquisition process is not relevant in a language classroom. Streverns (1978) states, for example, that “first language acquisition and language learning and language teaching belong to different universes of discourse which overlap in only limited ways. To see language teaching as applied psycholinguistics

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is to misunderstand the relationships between a predominately intellectual activity and a predominately practical one” (Streverns p.180) Teaching languages as an intellectual activity is, to a great extent, responsible for the failure to impart even the most fundamental communication skills to normal students in foreign language classrooms. Research evidence confirms that student’s desirers to communicate must acquire this ability the way speakers acquire it in natural situations. Krashen proves that learned, rather than acquired, rules are of limited use to the student; for some, they serve as a monitor,” i.e., primarily an “editor” to make minor changes or corrections in utterances which for the most part are initiated by acquired knowledge. Research supports krashen’s hypothesis that this “monitor” can be activated only under restricted circumstances. The speakers must: (1) know the rule; (2) be focused on the form of what they are saying; and (3) have time to apply the rule.

Some learn language through learning rules while some through acquisition process. But language learned through rule can not be monitored for communicative purpose. To advice communicative compliance, language must be acquired. Most speakers can monitor regularly and systematically only on cognitive grammar tests. Some cannot monitor to an appreciable degree in normal communicative situations. Thus, if students learn rules through explanation, drill, and practice, and demonstrate that they can produce correct forms and syntax on grammar tests, such knowledge is usually not very helpful in normal communicative situations, particularly in beginning stages. Krashen’s monitor theory thus claim that oral proficiency is not related to high scores on standard grammar tests, a fact usually overlooked by language teachers who claim to have communicative competence as a goal but continue to evaluate progress only in the learning of grammar rules.

Krashen claims that variation in grammatical accuracy among adults are because of monitor theory. There are “underusers,” who learned competence is low. “Overusers” emphasize correctness which interferes with communication. “Optimal users” monitor their speech and improve their level of grammatical accuracy, but not to such an extent that it interferes with smooth communication. A fourth category was suggested by Carlos Yorio at the 1978 TESOL convention in Mexico City. “Superusers,” who are consciously able to apply learned rules quickly and efficiently in a way that listener can not notice the monitoring at all. Many language teachers fall in this category, so they feel that this mode of production (supermonitoring) is the most efficient way to learn another language. But unfortunately, many, perhaps most, students are not capable of performing with the mental gymnastics of their supermonitor instructors.

Some assert that learned rules can be acquired through practice. This assumption seems to refer to the three-part technique of cognitive approaches: explanation, practice, and application. Advocates of cognitive approaches, Chastain believe that comprehension of the rule must precede its use. The learning of a grammatical principle can precede its acquisition. Whether it facilitates acquisition probably depends on the learning style of the acquirer (Chastain 1976). The conscious understanding of grammar rules is not prerequisite to acquisition. Most adults learn grammar, but can acquire rules readily, although usually imperfectly, and can interact native speakers of the target language.

Research indicates that acquisition takes place under certain conditions. In a communication situation: (1) the focus is on the message; (2) the acquirer must understand the message; and (3) the acquirer must be in a low-anxiety situation.

Claim that the focus must be on the message in a communicative situation means that, for the most part, acquisition will not take place during traditional grammar exercises or drills because they do not provide any opportunity for meaningful communication. Whereas natural approach is based on activities which are used to build communicative competence.

The second condition implies that acquisition does not take place only when students understand the speech. Therefore, the input supplied by the speech must be made comprehensible. Hatch
(1979) gives the following tips for the speech to be understood by listeners: slower rate, (clear articulation, diminished contractions, long pauses, extra volume, and exaggerated intonation); understandable vocabulary (high-frequency vocabulary, less slang, few idioms, high use of names of referents instead of proforms); marked definitions (explaining a term that the speaker doubts the learner will know, repetitions, gestures, pictures); simplification of syntax vis-à-vis the meaning (simple propositions, focus on topics, repetition and restatement, less proverb modification, helping the learner complete utterances); discourse techniques (giving a possible answer within the question, yes-no question, tag questions).

The third condition is that the students receive comprehensible input in a low-anxiety environment.

A low-anxiety situation can be created by involving the students personally in class activities. Specific techniques vary from group to group because of the different personalities, interests, and aims of students and instructors. Natural Acquisition Approach uses three activities, which corresponds to three stages of language instruction for of language instruction for beginners. They are: (1) comprehension (preproduction); (2) early speech production; (3) speech emergence.

**Comprehension (Preproduction)**

Children acquiring their first language learn to comprehend before speaking (Frazer, Bellugi, and Brown 1966). In fact for all speakers, competence in comprehension gives birth to competence in production. Winitz and Reeds (1973) estimate that in first language acquisition “comprehension antedates sentence generating by about a year. This sequence of development—comprehension first, production second—is a functional property of the human brain which should not be violated in language instruction.” Comprehension in a new language, is achieved in early stages by learning how to make intelligent guesses. The major components are: (1) a context; (2) gestures and body language cues; (3) message to be comprehended; and (4) a knowledge of the meaning of the key lexical items in the utterance. Grammatical signals are not usually crucial to the comprehension task of beginning students. Snow (1979) notes that “children figure out rules underlying syntactic by using the cues provided by the meaning of the adult’s utterance” and that this implies that “children must be able to determine what an utterance means on the basis of nonsyntactic information since the syntax is precisely what is to be learned.” Following Snow describes the process for children exactly as natural approach suggests for adults: “Knowledge of the meaning of important lexical items plus knowledge of what is likely to be said about those entities or actions given the situation enable the child to guess correctly what the utterance means. This implies of course that the child must be a good guesser, but also that the adult must say the kinds of things the child expects to hear” (Snow, 369)

In his famous guide, Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language Fries (1945) takes the opposite view. “in learning a new language, then, the chief problem is not at first that of learning vocabulary items. It is, first, the mastery of the features of arrangement that constitute the structure of the language.” Neither informal observations of second language acquisition nor formal studies of the same have supported this view of the priority of phonology and grammar over the lexicon. As Bolinger (1970) so clearly put it, “the lexicon is central . . . grammar is not something into which words are plugged but is rather a mechanism by which words are served. . . . The quantity of information in the lexicon far outweighs that if any other part of the language, and in there is anything to the notion of redundancy it should be easier to reconstruct a message containing just the words than one containing just the syntactic relations.” Natural Approach is based on Asher’s Total Physical response in which the teachers ask students to perform certain action, such as close your eyes.
Another Technique, which is useful in the first few days of class, makes use of the students’ names and descriptions. The following is an example of “teacher talk,” that is, comprehensible input: What is your name? (Saleha.) Everyone look at Saleha. Saleha has long, black hair. What is the name of the student with long, black hair? (Class responds with name only.) What is your name (selecting another student)? (Hasnan.) Look at Hasnan. Does Hasnan have long hair? (Use gestures to contrast long-short.) (Class responds, no.) Is his hair black? (No.) Hasnan is the student with short, brown hair. What is the name of the student with long, black hair? (Saleha.) And the student with short, brown hair? (Hasnan.) This activity can be continued using physical characteristics (positive attributes only) and clothing colors and some simple descriptions.

This activity not only serves as comprehensible input but also serves as a means for the teacher and students to learn each other’s names.

Another technique used extensively from the first contact hour makes use of pictures and focuses on the learning of names. The instructor introduces pictures by describing what is in the pictures. Each student is given a different picture. The questions addressed to the class consist of information about the picture which can be answered with the name of the student who is holding the picture. Who has the picture with the two birds? Who has the picture with the man reading a book?

**Early Speech Production**

Early speech production should be practiced when students have developed a recognition level of 500 words. Early productions encourage the use of acquired knowledge and avoid the use of “L1 plus monitor” mode. Early opportunities for speech should therefore consist of questions which require only single word answers. Either-or questions are especially used. Is this a pen? Is this Pen black or red?

Several activities other than question-answer encourage early speech production via the acquisition mode. The open sentence model provides a sentence frame with a single word missing: My brother is __________. He works in __________.

Early speech production of all students will contain errors. NA proposes that direct correction of speech errors be avoided.

**Speech Emergence**

Classroom activities in the third stage depend greatly on the goals of the course, both in terms of the situations and functions for which the language will be used, and in terms of the particular language skills desired, oral skills, reading and writing skills. Four sorts of activities are suggested to promote acquisition. Their focus is always on the content of communication rather than on its form.

**Games and Recreation Activities**

Games have always been used to focus the student on what they are doing and use the language as a tool for reaching the goal (participating in the game) rather than as a goal itself. No instruction hour, even with adults, should be without an activity in which the target language is used for some sort of fun.

**Content**

The target language is used to explore some content area. In language classrooms this area can be cultural similarities and difference or some aspect of the history of the language or peoples who speak the language. Immersion programs such as those in Canada make use of content to teach academic subject matter (Swain 1978). The Important point is that content activities, qualify as an acquisition activity since they use language as a tool for learning something else. Focus is necessarily on the information being transmitted rather than the means (the target language). Popular activities in this category include slide presentations, movies, photographs, and so forth.

**Humanistic-Affective Activities**

These include activities, which have personal appeal to the student’s values, ideas, opinions, goals, and feelings as well as their experiences. In these the focus is on the message being conveyed rather than the form of the language used to
convey the messages. Christensen, Galyean, and Moskowitz have developed this sort of activity, and are used extensively in the NA in the third stage.

**Information and Problem-Solving Activities**

In this activity, students are given a problem to find a solution. The student must determine a solution to the problem. These activities are especially useful in preparing students for workplace communication. For example, students are given an advertisement from an educational institute and ask to plan admission. Charts of information are useful, and many English as a second language texts use this technique extensively. A school timetable might include indications on what is done, by whom, and when. Questions center around information. Who teaches English to class 8th on Monday?

There are, of course, activities in which more than one of the categories is relevant. One can construct with the class, for example, a chart of daily activities of the students themselves. This activity is both problem-solving and affective.

**CONCLUSION**

Although the basic principles of the NA have not changed, its focus has expanded considerably. If the goal of the course is the ability to communicate using the target language, grammar rules must be acquired, since rules which have been learned are available only for monitoring. Comprehension is the basic skill which promotes acquisition and therefore should precede speech production. Production (speech and writing) is not taught directly, but rather emerges in stages from response by gestures to complete discourse. Both comprehension and production experience are provided by a series of affective acquisition activities, the main purpose of which is to promote acquisition by (1) providing comprehensible input, (2) lowering anxieties, and (3) creating opportunities to convey messages.

**REFERENCES**


