

Taking the student-centered approach to another level

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This paper chronicles an on-going attempt to apply and extend some of the theory and methodology of recent developments in the field of second language acquisition to the teaching of English composition at the college level. It builds on the basic premises laid down in the pioneering work of Krashen (1982) and Krashen and Terrell (1983). In the "Natural Approach" as they put it, these teachers emphasize exposure or *input*, rather than practice as the preferred means of language acquisition. They also stress the value of emotional preparedness in a low stress environment. All of this falls under the rubric of teaching communication as the primary function of language.

The present study involves an attempt to take the above principles a step further; to see second language input from the point of view of the student--to get down into the trenches as it were and understand the battle as it is really being fought. Therefore, the first area of concern is in the area of motivation. It is held that students should first be clear about why they are going about the arduous task of studying a second language and just what they hope to gain from such an enterprise. To this end the course begins with a diagnostic evaluation exercise.

Course work itself involves teaching English composition through creative usage in paragraph development. Students write right away and keep on writing. A minimal amount of rules and explanations is provided at the beginning of each lesson and put into practice immediately. Thus, it is hoped that students will grasp the utility of the lesson and view the material as creatively empowering rather

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than as information to be digested and filed away for other-directed purposes. Lessons stress connections and relationships and have been designed to cohere synergistically. All aspects of a lesson, from explanations, to drills, to creative paragraph constructions support and encourage student efforts. The basic rationale is that in the inter-dependencies of student, language, and teacher the critical component is the student. There is not much that can be done if the student does not hold up his or her end of the enterprise. To this end we try to make course content interesting, relevant, and as easy as possible for students to participate. Furthermore, students proceed at their own pace via small step gains so that progress can be steady and that "sticking points" can be readily identified and addressed. In this way it is felt that the phenomenon of the discouraged learner ought to be a seldom, if ever, occurrence.

As is the case with the "Natural Approach", grammar is not taught directly but expected to emerge as a result of involved exposure to the target language aided by the low affective filter hypothesis and a wide exposure to pragmatic vocabulary. Lesson by lesson performance is rewarded by means of a point system. Two points are awarded for completion of basic tasks, an additional point for being on time and one more point for an optional extra credit assignment available at the conclusion of each chapter. In order to take advantage of the Japanese students' propensity to help one another pair work is encouraged at the beginning of each lesson dealing with explanations and comprehension exercises. The core of the program, on the other hand, involving paragraph composition is always an individual matter.

The paper concludes with the consideration of new strategy currently under development which allows students to help design their own individual course of study from four basic "tracks" as the term progresses.

1. Defining the problem

A. The Students

1. Strengths
2. Weaknesses

B. The Subject

1. On the nature of Language
2. Are we ready for a "philosophy of L2 acquisition"?

C. The Teacher

1. As Artist
2. As Mechanic
3. As Student

2. Natural Approach Theory

A. The importance of input over practice

B. The Learning/Acquisition distinction

C. The low affective filter

D. Relevance

E. Communication as the primary function of language

3. Present application of the theory

A. The Course

B. The Text

1. Purposes
2. Design
3. Successes
4. Failures

4. Future applications

A. Personalization

B. Tracks

C. Computer possibilities

D. An open-ended attitude