# Bridging the Gap between Grammar Competence and Communicative Performance

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## Abstract

Traditional grammar-based approaches have failed to bestow on second language learners the desired level of language competence. There is a significant amount of evidence that established approaches to teaching English were unreliable guides to classroom instruction. However, the newly learner-centered formation has generated more productive and prolific teaching schools and strategies. The communicative teaching methodology is a learner-based approach's offspring that primarily promotes the speaking skill and promises enhanced outcomes. Throughout my six years experience at various universities in Lebanon and upon implementing the communicative approach on numerous English levels ranging from level 1 to 6, I found out that in the course of the adoption of the latter method, students were undoubtedly able to achieve better outcomes in speaking skills. Nonetheless, I evidently noted various weaknesses through constantly observing students engage in performance task-based activities, namely a noticeable decline in grammar acquisition and writing proficiency. Both pedagogy types, grammar-based and communicative approaches, were employed in a mutually exclusive manner. However, grammar is an important part of building communicative competence, and oral fluency is significant for building linguistic competence. In its focusing on oral fluency, a communicative approach may not be the best option for a student seeking to enhance his/her writing ability and understanding of grammar. The purpose of this research is to trace the gaps and suggest solutions.

**Key words:** SLA theories, Krashen and Terrell's "Natural Approach", student-centered vs. teacher-centered approaches, students' needs, teacher's role, material design.

**SLA Theories: An Overview**

Drawing attention towards the progression of some of the previous traditional pedagogies for second language acquisition is significant in the field of ESL. Earlier "grammar-based approaches" principally focused on dissolving the new language into fragments of word functions and sentence structures and eventually acquired through what is called rote learning. "Grammar-translation" was criticized for merely focusing on a conscious learning of grammar rules; However, ultimately avoiding oral communication in the target language through its exclusive focusing on "learning a foreign language [and] its grammatical rule system [that] should be learned and memorized and used when translating literature works and sentences from the target language to the mother tongue" (Kong, 2011, p. 1). A major weakness could consist of what Harlan (2000) mentioned concerning the extensive reference to the native language with insufficient emphasis on the use of the target language: "Typical exercises of this approach involve translating sentences from the target language into the native tongue in addition to analyzing the specific grammatical forms of the L2" (p. 7).

Due to the gaps found in the adoption of grammar-based approaches for a second language acquisition ranging from a little emphasis on communicative fluency to the sole focus on conscious grammar and vocabulary learning as well as on the extensive reference to the mother tongue, the subsequent "direct method" aimed at aiding pupils to become competent in their learning of a second language. The latter method "advocated a natural approach: a language much in the same way we learn our first language" (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p. 8). Hence, its weakness resided in its belief in mastering a second language similar to the manner in which it occurs in the first language. The "direct method" placed little emphasis on reading and writing skills and tended to diminish vocabulary input. Weak learners at beginner levels are unable to achieve the desired level of proficiency especially since they cannot resort to translation. Furthermore, Harlan (2000) states that the teaching process expects tutors to be qualified and professional in the utilization of the second language (p. 7). This might not occur in foreign countries where the majority of native speaking teachers do not have native-like skills and pronunciation.

The "audiolingual method" was developed as a response of the failure of grammar-based and direct-method approaches and after "the public became painfully aware of the failure of the

language teaching profession to train students in communicative abilities" (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p.13). Educators desired to uncover solutions for the inability of students to develop competence in communicative situations. Hence, it was suggested that pupils were never engaged in real communication which resulted in their failure to fluently grasp a second language. Audiolingual activities consisted of different steps sought to submerge students in oral practises: "…new materials both lexical and grammatical presented in the form of dialogs, a series of pattern drills in which the structures … introduced … would be manipulated… and … the student tried to apply the newly acquired structure in …semi-free conversations" (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p. 14). This strategy received critical reactions from those who favoured cognitive learning methodologies and rejected behaviourist ones. Both learners and lecturers perceived audiolingualism as an intolerably monotonous method (p. 14). In addition, while implementing audiolingual activities, students lacked the support of handouts or written references. Consequently, rules were forgotten and native language interference expectedly occurred. This is what Krashen and Terrell (1983) emphasized while reporting grave problems with audiolingual practises:

> "One of the first problems to be corrected was the insistence on the development of oral skills with no use of printed materials…. resulting in the transfer of native language habits of pronunciation into the target language…. [Eventually,] students invented their own systems of writing to record what they were to memorize and the entire experience was frustrating for both students and teachers alike" (pp. 14-15).

Audiolingualism received a lot of negative response with its major focus on sentence formation and meaning rather than on the new learned rule. Students tend to blindly repeat and memorize what is learned without fully grasping the rules. In addition, Krashen and Terrell (1983) adds that "there is even more serious criticism that can be made: even if the message or rule involved in understood and paid attention to, such drills are not real communication since they transmit no real message" (p. 15).

As indicated above, linguists have formulated an assortment of teaching approaches to an enhanced second language acquisition. Numerous instructional methods have been traditionally adopted, ranging from grammar-based to audiolingualism. These exclusive language pedagogies have been a fertile ground for criticism and condemnation. Traditional structural approaches are

viewed as solely focusing on grammar input disregarding other aspects of language learning, especially oral skills. Similarly, audiolingual or behaviorists' schools were discredited for being sufficient and effective teaching approaches that are orientated in a teacher-centered direction.

With the celebration of the new learner-centered approaches, attention was drawn towards the communicative language teaching (CLT) or communicative approach based on the perception that successful language acquisition occurs through the ability to communicate real meaning and be an active learner in the classroom. In addition, "the ever-growing need for good communication skills in English has created a huge demand for English teaching around the world" (Richards, 2006, p. 5). This supposition is derived from the fact that English has become a prominent and international language that is required in an assortment of domains. Yano (2003) says that English has gained its power due to "…the political, military, scientific and technological, and cultural power that the Anglo-American nations have had" (p. 78). Moreover, the current emphasis on oral skills derives from the belief that humans acquire new languages for the sole purpose of communicating efficiently or profitably in real life situations. The absence of grammar-based instructions characterizes communicative-based classrooms "as goals are focused on all of the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence…. At times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use" (Breshneh & Riasati, 2002, p. 439).

Communication-based approached were developed because of the failures of previous second language acquisition methods and grammar-based pedagogies solely focusing on the formation of orally competent second language speakers. Communicative activities largely engaged students in real communication in the target language and celebrate the reduction of the usage of grammar-based methods. Stephen D.  Krashen and Tracy D. Terrell's "Natural Approach" falls under the category of communicative pedagogies that received positive responses. Krashen and Terell (1983) assert that "the latest research in first and second language acquisition supports its tenets very strongly, and it is adaptable to many teaching contexts for students of all ages" (p. 17).

It is recognized throughout the teaching/learning methodologies that various mistakes were committed. Scholars initially presumed that conscious learning of grammatical rules "is a

pre-requisite to acquiring communicative competence" (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p. 16). That is, grammar occurs consciously and communication skills are unconsciously acquired thereafter. However, the latter assumption provoked abundant criticism and benefited communicative approaches that accredit the reliance on communicative activities to language accuracy and proficiency. It ultimately meant the death of grammar and the birth of vocalizations.

Grammar-based approaches were not the only exclusive and rejected, communicative approaches also received various criticism. It was generally acknowledged that CLT fails to consider language forms on the expense of language meaning. That is, learners may develop communication competencies, but they may do so at the expense of committing grammatical and writing errors. Ryan (2001) asserts that even though the communicative approach advocates fluency "…it does, however, create a problem of providing enough concrete feedback for learners to correct their mistakes…. This results in loss of motivation and interest…. they prefer and expect to receive some kind of concrete feedback as to how they are progressing in the course" (p. 1).

This study negates the precision of the communicative approach in beginning levels for an accurate and proficient master of English taking into consideration three English sections at Balamand University; two beginning levels and one advanced. Grammar was once deserted and communicative competence at other times; consequently, how does one bridge the gap between language knowledge and language use? Can Krashen and Terrell's "Natural Approach" replace older approaches discrepancies and therefore become the preeminent model for second language acquisition? Does mere exposure to communication activities lead to a perfect mastery of a second language without the aid of grammar rules? This qualitative study answers these questions and offers solutions for teaching/learning problems in ESL classrooms.

Krashen and Terrell's "Natural Approach" was undoubtedly a prominent approach in second language acquisition. The theory comprises five hypotheses:

**The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis:**

The "Natural Approach" distinguishes between two learning and skill developing processes when exposed to a new language namely: acquisition and learning. "Acquiring a language is 'picking it up,' i.e., developing ability in a language by using it in natural,

communicative situations" (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p. 18).  As acquisition happens subconsciously, language learning occurs in a cognizant manner that requires knowledge of grammar rules.

**The Natural Order Hypothesis:**

Depending on the learner's circumstances, language comprehension and language production require time. Language production happens steadily: "Gradually more complex constructions are acquired as the acquirer obtains more comprehensible input…" (p. 20). Krashen and Terrell assert the necessity of engaging the learner in grammar-based and grammar input sessions before he/she starts to develop speaking skills or communication output. Hence, neither learning nor acquisition can occur without grammar usage. "The first principle of the "Natural Approach" is that comprehension precedes production…" (p. 20).

**The Monitor Hypothesis:**

Language learning, Krashen and Terrell believe, has to interfere as what they call a "Monitor" which interferes in learning to make modifications and corrections. In other words, language output is verified by the comprehensible input the learner has grasped through grammar tutoring. This proved to be a successful and helpful method in written tests where students have an adequate amount of time to reflect about grammar rules and not on the delivered message. However, the monitor process cannot occur in verbal situations that necessitate a speedy comportment and focus on what is said rather than on grammatical rules that are not normally acquired at beginning levels. Also, a problem occurs when beginner learners heavily rely on monitoring their speech. "This overuse of the Monitor results in hesitancy and subsequent difficulty in participating in conversation" (Krashen and Terrell, 1983, p. 19). Therefore, monitoring ones language is primarily useful in written situations or in grammar tests and never in communicative ones.

**The Input Hypothesis:**

Oral fluency does not transpire before learners engage in the "silent period" stage where they build grammar competence. Communication competence occurs only after receiving a great deal of language input and understanding. In essence, learners have to be progressively exposed

to listening and reading activities before becoming competent speakers and writers. Acquisition cannot occur before the completion of the earlier stage that is a perfect comprehensible input. It is "only when the language input is absorbed or internalized by the learner, acquisition can take place" (Wu, 2010, p. 137).

**The Affective Filter Hypothesis:**

Acquisition is the use of language in communicative situations with a focus on the delivered message. Krashen and Terrell distinguish factors that contribute to an ideal acquisition. First, a low affective filter is required for a successful acquisition. "Factors that contribute to a low affective filter include positive orientation to speakers of the language, acquiring in a low anxiety situation, and at least some degree of acquirer self-confidence" (p. 20).

Eventually, when learners reach the acquisition level, production necessitates a communicative environment. Krashen and Terrell (1983) emphasized the indispensable inclusion of communicative-based syllabus and courses. At this stage, the classroom purpose must be communication without any reference to grammar rules. "Our claim is that grammar will be effectively acquired if goals are communicative. Ironically, if goals are grammatical, some grammar will be learned and very little acquired" (p. 21).

**Methodology**

Due to a long record of students facing grammatical errors and speaking difficulties, in addition to unsatisfactory results in both grammar and writing, I observed as an English instructor at Balamand University that teacher-centered or grammar-based and student-centered or communicative approaches are incorrectly implemented and at inappropriate levels. To solve this situation, I found it essential to implement Krashen and Terrell's "Natural Approach" on three sections, two beginning (ENG01-ENG02) and one advanced (ENG06),  during three consecutive years, which have led to better results in speaking, listening, reading and writing skills when compared to old sections' results in test 1, midterm and final exams. The sections comprise 15 students of approximately the same age (19-21).

Students overall have difficulty conveying messages using the new language; and if they do, a lot of L1 intervention could occur. This is a natural thing to ensue when learning a second language, a process that occurs gradually through comprehension and, thereafter, through

production. Wong and Barrea-Marlys (2012) speak that "some teachers draw attention towards the significance of implementing grammar-based approaches; on the other hand, others support the notion that pupils need to be betrothed in communicative-based activities to improve their speaking skills" (p. 63). The case was that grammar-based approaches were unable to produce fluent speakers; likewise, single-handedly, communicative approaches could not guarantee proficient and grammatically competent learners. Kong (2011) report that, when exposed to communicative-based activities, students "feel that they have failed to really grasp a necessary number of language points and therefore their output has been influenced by their insufficient input…; as a result, despite their enthusiastic speeches their communication has nothing to rely on, just like … a tree without roots" (p. 77). Engaging students in communicative situations is not the ideal way to second language acquisition since mastering L2 does not occur in the same way L1 is learnt. Moreover, "the teachers would try not to stop the learners repeatedly to correct their grammatical errors so that they can achieve the goal of speaking effortlessly" (p. 443). In other words, communicative approaches provide more importance to fluency at the expense of accuracy.

To solve the above mentioned controversy, I found it crucial to follow Krashen and Terrell's systematic way of teaching English as a second language that requires the passing through both learning and acquiring processes. Teaching ought not to exclusively be teacher-centered or grammar oriented; neither should it heavily rely on communicative activities at the expense of language structures. The only pedagogy that serves to bridge the gap is Krashen and Terrell "Natural Approach" which is characterized by a combination of the espousal of both grammar and communication skills in a sequential and regimented manner.

In beginning levels, namely Basic English 1 and Basic English 2, students need to be exposed for two successive semesters to what Krashen and Terrell named it the "silent period". Students listen and learn through receiving extensive grammatical and vocabulary input and applying them, consequently, in non-verbal exercises. At this pre-production level, apprentices monitor the correct usage of their comprehensible input in writing until fully acquired. The teacher's role at this level is to ascertain that all students equally listen and understand the lesson deductively. Students are not pressured to speak at this point. In addition, simplified language and gestures are employed to help students absorb the message. To break the routine and avoid boredom, the usage of real objects and pictures is necessary occasionally. Moreover, when it

involves speaking, students can answer yes/no questions or merely be asked to follow simple instructions. In beginning levels, students can be engaged in cooperative activities such as group or pair work where they can communicate using simple language and are less intimidated to ask questions.

In English VI, students' progress expanded rapidly. They demonstrate an awareness of grammar rules and were linguistically competent to apply their skills in communicative situations. Kong (2011) asserts that it is impossible to develop fluent speaking skills before grasping a great deal of grammar rules (p. 78). Hence, it was essential that students go through ENG01 and ENG02 before they reach this level where they are eventually engaged in a language acquisition level. Having a grammar solid basis, students are at this point merely exposed to communicative activities where they unconsciously apply and learn grammatical rules with limited teacher intervention. Lesson learnt are inductively explained and a student-centered approach is implemented. Students at this level express themselves fluently and effectively using the target language. They develop communicative competence when exposed to oral activities. Communicative competence "refers to the speaker's ability to use the appropriate language in the right context for the right purpose" (Saleh, 2013, p. 1). In addition, communicative activities are found to be fun, encouraging students to participate and be active in the classroom. At communicative-based classrooms, teachers' intervention should be limited: "the teacher is not a model for correct speech and writing …. The teacher is facilitator/advisor, answering questions, monitoring their performance, note making of their errors, and co-communicator" (Breshneh & Riasati, 2002, p. 442). Furthermore, it could be perceived that students at this level, unlike those in beginning ones, have built enough self-esteem to freely and confidently express their thoughts and participate without being anxious about errors.

If the foremost purpose of learning a new language is to understand meaning and utilize forms fittingly, then grammar can be considered an inseparable aspect while developing communicative competence (Wong & Barrea-Marlys, 2012, p. 62). Grammar has to be initially learnt in order for communicative acquired skills to take place in later stages. This view is supported by Rivers and Temerley who distinguished two phases of language progression "*the progressive development view*, and the *immediate communication view*. The former holds that 'ability to speak the language derives from the systematic study of grammar ...: language use can

occur only after the learner has learnt the grammar and vocabulary of the language" (Bygate, 1987, p. 56).

It is vital to distinguish between knowledge and skill; for the latter to occur, learners need to possess certain knowledge. This is applicable to various fields in life. Bygate (1987) says: "What knowledge does a car driver need? Clearly he or she needs to know the names of the controls; where they are; what they do and how they are operated" (p. 3). Moreover, "is it possible to be a good cook but not know many recipes" (p. 4). Eventually, this knowledge is thereafter practised when the driver starts to guide the car. Similarly, learners need to learn grammar and vocabulary before stepping into the speaking level. This process is best exemplified in Krashen and Terrell's "Natural Approach" for a second language acquisition.

## Conclusion

It is customary to assume that the chief purpose of learning a second language is communication. However, to acquire speaking skills, pupils need to be prepared by being initially exposed to grammatical rules. Krashen and Terrell "Natural Approach" came to fill in the gaps found in grammar-based and communicative approaches through a system of that combines both methodologies gradually. Grammar-based approaches best fit in beginning levels; however, communicative approaches can be perfect pedagogies in more advanced ones. Saleh (2013) asserts that "communicating effectively in a language requires the speaker's good understanding of linguistic, sociolinguistic and socio-cultural aspects of that language" (p. 2). Hence, grammar is an undeniable prerequisite skill to communication.

## Recommendations

The eventual case regarding the instructional methodology is the teacher's perception and decision. Instructors play the first and foremost role in picking the most appropriate approach to teaching a second language and preparing students to be skillful readers, listeners, speakers and writers. "How this preparation is done, and how successful it is, depends very much on how we as teachers understand our aims" (Bygate, 1987, p. 3). Tutors can be selective in the strategies they follow in the classroom. They are also responsible of ensuring a classroom environment that is low in anxiety and intimidation. They initially need to trace students' needs and weaknesses-whether in schools and universities- and, thereafter, apply the most suitable teaching

methodology. Harlan (2000) emphasized that "teachers must be aware of current issues in SLA research in order to come to an educated consensus in choosing the proper instructional materials for the students..." (p. 20).

Grammar does not necessarily mean that teachers are preachers-like and students are parrots-like. Grammar can be fun as well. Pekoz (2008) emphasizes the necessity of producing grammar instruction in a vivid and interactive manner; this can be accomplished through "the while-grammar stage [which] should facilitate noticing of the new grammar point, and provide meaningful input through contextual examples, pictures and texts" (p. 1). Teachers can create a pleasurable environment in the grammar-based classroom and relate language rules to real life situations.

Moreover, principles and coordinators in turn have to choose the correct text-books that meet students' needs. They need to investigate the extent to which second language textbooks comprise the implementation of appropriate approaches. In beginning levels, books can heavily include grammar rules and exercises. However, in more advanced levels, textbooks ought to be rich in communicative activities that are more productive and fruitful at this stage.

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