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The Natural Approach Impact in the process of EFL Teaching in Elementary

Abstract: The following article seeks to present a reflection about Natural approach and how it can contribute in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language Learning) process in Colombia, considering that the mentioned country is a monolingual state, where, although it is true that the number of English learners is increasing, it is still considered as a minority. For that reason, it is necessary a method that immerses students in the foreign language process, that makes them feel interested in learning, that does not make them feel anxious or distressed, and that helps them when facing a real conversation with a native English speaker. Natural Approach offers a stress-free environment, where teachers guide the learning process in a friendly way, making the exercise calm and positive. It also considers that English language acquisition occurs when students are exposed to a comprehensible input, rather than direct grammar instructions. As the title states, the present reflection article is based on the usage of Natural Approach as a method where learners can immerse in the target language, since it prioritizes oral communication more than grammar focus, however, it also recognizes the difficulties of implementing it in Colombia, due to different factors in the educational system, such as, lack of professors training, the continued existence of traditional teaching methods, teachers limited access to appropriate pedagogical materials, among others. Nevertheless, this reflection article pursues to identify and consider the Natural approach elements that can be used in teaching English as a foreign language, in order to achieve high proficiency and fluency.

Keywords: Natural approach, Colombian education, Foreign Language, Learning process, Teaching methods.

Resumen: El siguiente artículo busca presentar una reflexión sobre el enfoque natural y cómo este puede contribuir en el proceso de aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera en Colombia, considerando que el país mencionado es un estado monolingüe, donde, aunque es cierto que el número de estudiantes de inglés está aumentando, aún se considera una minoría. Por esa razón, es necesario un método que sumerja a los estudiantes en el proceso de aprendizaje del idioma extranjero, que los haga sentir interesados en aprender, que no los haga sentir ansiosos o angustiados y que los ayude cuando enfrenten una conversación real con un hablante nativo de inglés. El Enfoque Natural ofrece un entorno libre de estrés, donde los profesores guían el proceso de aprendizaje de manera amigable, haciendo que el ejercicio sea tranquilo y positivo. También considera que la adquisición del idioma inglés ocurre cuando los estudiantes están expuestos a un input comprensible, en lugar de instrucciones gramaticales directas. Como indica el título, el presente artículo de reflexión se basa en el uso del Enfoque Natural como un método donde los estudiantes pueden sumergirse en el idioma objetivo, ya que prioriza la comunicación oral más que el enfoque en la gramática, sin embargo, también reconoce las dificultades de implementarlo en Colombia, debido a diferentes factores en el sistema educativo, como la falta de capacitación de los profesores, la existencia continua de métodos de enseñanza tradicionales, el acceso limitado de los profesores a materiales pedagógicos apropiados, entre otros. Sin embargo, este artículo de reflexión busca identificar y considerar los elementos del enfoque natural que se pueden utilizar en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, con el fin de lograr un alto nivel de competencia y fluidez.

Palabras clave: Educación colombiana; Enfoque natural; Idioma extranjero; Métodos de enseñanza, Proceso de aprendizaje.

Introduction

In societies where there is a considerable number of bilinguals, like the United States Wippman (2022), many people have struggled to learn a foreign language at school, often unsuccessfully. In Colombia, the situation is not different in regards to EFL, different reasons could be causing it, like the lack of English language exposure, making it difficult to practice and learn it. Colombian traditional teaching methods can also affect this process in the way that it focuses more on vocabulary memorization and grammar rules, instead of advocating practical communication.

It cannot be forgotten that when learning a foreign language, fear or concern may arise, maybe in the way that non-English Colombian speakers could feel stressed out if they make a mistake when practicing or creating a conversation with a native English speaker. Another of the difficulties presented in Colombia is the lack of access to quality learning programs due to lack of educational materials or resources and also, sufficient teachers' training.

It should also be taken into account that Colombia, being an entirely monolingual country and with minorities who speak English (as a foreign language and not as a second language), does not have enough opportunities to practice it.

Taking into account what was previously written, it is necessary to define the Natural approach method in order to comprehend how it can contribute to the EFL learning. Terrell (1977), stated that Natural Approach is a learning method that is based in the way how students get close to their first language (by exposure and practice), also, he pointed out that Natural Approach helps foreign language learners to expand their learning process in a free-stress and friendly environment where they feel less overwhelmed, than if they were in a traditional class.

Despite the difficulties of the Colombian educational context, this reflective article aims to reflect on the natural approach elements that can be taken into account for English as a foreign language teaching-learning. Procel, et al (2023) supports the previous author in the way that language is not merely used to exchange ideas but a way to reflect a society's culture. Teaching English based on culture responds aiding critical thinking, and reinforces intrinsic motivation due to students recognize the cultural aspects of a society and how can they be part of it.

Foreign Language Learning considers that human beings only recognize themselves in front of another, statement that involves communication as an important element. Peirce (1995) approached some challenges that learners may have in their learning process, and declared about the importance of creating interactive learning environments where students have several opportunities to practice the target language in controlled spaces that guided by teachers. Besides, he deals with learner autonomy and motivation pointing out the importance of learners' anxiety minimization. Natural Approach supports what has been previously authored, considering that one of its aims is to create interactive environments where students feel safe when practicing the foreign language, thus, to motivate students to participate into teachers'-controlled learning spaces, increasing learners' autonomy. In Colombian learning context, using motivation is highly important to reach Colombian learners' interest, reducing anxiety and encouraging them to participate in classes, strategies that may help Colombian learners to develop communicative competences.

Brown (2000), stated that learners may have diverse struggles when learning a new language, affecting student's perception during this process. Learning can bring new perspectives that help students recognize a new culture. Still, a clarity and differentiation about learning and acquiring a language has to be done. Learning a language is the formal process and conscious effort to recognize and use an idiom, and acquiring a language is to immerse students into the target language, in this case, in English as a foreign language. Inside the Colombian context, English is often learned rather than acquired, due to Colombian established curriculum, that points that traditional methods must be used, considering that Colombia is a monolingual country, and that a complete subconscious and implicit process is hardly possible. However, Natural Approach in Colombia can be considered in a way to adapt curriculum just to facilitate an immersive environment where Colombian learners can feel less overwhelmed and motivated to learn a new language.

In the same way, Crystal (2004) points out that even though English language learning requires vocabulary memorizing, grammar rules learning, and sentence structures, it must be approached in the way parents tend to correct the content of children's speech, focusing on ideas rather than grammar. Bonar (2005) supports that through practice and intrinsic motivation, English language can be learned easily. Furthermore, Kormos and

Sáfár (2008), state that is necessary to fill the learning existing gaps by focusing on practice, recognizing the importance of communicative abilities to use language efficiently. According to what has been previously mentioned, this reflection article aims to analyze the use of the natural approach in Colombia and how it can help learners, offering a way to adapt the present curriculum to new learning perspectives. In addition, it can be said that the present article is not the only study that has approached Natural Approach in monolingual contexts, Amiruddin and Jannah. (2021) points on its application in Indonesia, and the possibilities it offers to develop communication skills in a more natural and effective manner.

REFLECTION:

Albert Einstein once mentioned “Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think.” Krmangalam (2023), With this, he tried to highlight the huge impact of the process of learning a foreign language. This quote also spotlights the importance of critical thinking abilities when performing a conversation, thus, it highlights the need to empower students to use speech in a functional as they have practiced enough to feel stress-free in a real conversation.

In the EFL teaching process, professors must use methodologies and approaches that help students acquire enough skills in the usage of the foreign language. So, Krashen (1985) stated a comprehensible input that would help students’ language learning, improving students’ skills, that engage them in a complete and assertive conversation with a native speaker.

In order to complement Natural approach with the current curriculum in Colombia, it is important to mention some of the methods that are commonly used in the schools. In the first instance it is the Grammar Translation Method, that has been traditionally used in many educational systems throughout the country, possibly due to the familiarity that Colombian curriculum has with it and the resistance to changing it, since it is considered a traditional method. Thus, can also be noticed the limitation of resources in the public sector (public schools), which are constantly facing financial, material or even human resources limitations, fact that affects the usage of new methods that could improve the foreign language learning perspectives. Thence, the following question is added, how can a method empower students to communicate without the fear of making mistakes and giving logical answers, inside a limited context?

Inside Colombian context, Natural Approach could be considered useful to immerse students into the foreign language, taking into account that EFL in Colombia promotes grammar rules memorizing than oral communication. With the usage of Natural Approach in Colombian schools, students could have the opportunity to receive a meaningful input that help them to produce an output that can be used when a real conversation with a native speaker occurs. Elements such as focusing on communicating more than grammar, helping students to feel free to express making mistakes and combining current curriculum with real situations bring strategies to apply in a monolingual context, and establish a central point in the EFL process.

Ellis (2008) supports that knowledge is acquired using perception (senses) and memory. With the distinction of using the body senses to develop their learning skills, as Ellis suggests, students can start to immerse in the target language, being able to recognize what surrounds them, more than specific topics or verbal tenses. Schmidt (1990) considers the previous factors and involves the act of making mistakes in the process. Schmidt suggests that showing errors affects negatively the process of the target language learning, so students cannot have useful feedback where guiders tell them what was wrong. Based on the previous analysis another question is added: Are errors necessary in the process of acquiring English language?

Errors should be part of the process, since feedback exists. When feedback is not provided, students start to fossilize failures, taking into account that it is always necessary to help students being aware of their mistakes in their learning situations. Answering the question, errors are completely necessary due to learning a new language is a process, the same way acquiring mother tongue was.

Krashen and Terrell (1983) pointed out that mistakes are part of the process considering that students can learn from every failure, as an opportunity to grow up. As educators, teachers must consider the student's effort in this process, since the principal aim of this method is to offer a low-anxiety and low-stress environment. Evaluation can be taken into account through observation and data collection. Teachers will check and grade the students' progress and their ability to communicate.

Krashen and Terrell (1983) also mentioned that language acquisition is based on what we hear, understand and what we are immersed in (input), not only on what is produced (output). It highlights the pursue of Natural approach to bring students into a

situation where they can immerse themselves in the language, standing out that the mentioned method is easy to use and easily adapted to children, because it is focused on the oral abilities that students will reach.

Natural Approach has some principles, ensuring a process where students will integrate the knowledge. Principles and features that include that students learning is effective when they are exposed to the target language, with teachers designing safe environments where the learner can be mistaken, being low-stressed and be corrected when necessary.

As learners become more comfortable with the language, the teacher will put more emphasis on fluency and effective communication rather than on perfect grammar. Then, students will take the initiative to make an oral production where they could express what they have learned previously. Krashen and Terrell (1983) suggest that grammar is acquired by natural student exposure in a controlled environment where there could be integrated teacher's adapted materials.

Krashen and Terrell (1998) expressed that language and context are important because it is an interactive situation between students and guiders. They also expressed that a teacher is a supportive guide to help and improve students to develop their skills, causing a genuine and intrinsic motivation inside the learner. Based on it, teachers must find a way where students could achieve their goals in a space where they acquire foreign language skills, in a manner that they could feel comfortable. As it is known, every student is different, since each one has a combination of factors that can influence their foreign language learning, such as different skills, learning disabilities or special needs, and finally every student has an individual goal, whether it is personal development or education; elements that affect motivation and effort. Having considered why every student is different, it is crucial for every teacher to recognize and respect every student's process.

Reflecting on an adequate learning process where learners can reach their maximum objectives in order to be a competent citizen in a globalized and fast evolving world, it is widely recognized that students' needs are evaluated according to the competences of a changing world. Taking into consideration the previous readings, the usage of this method must be analyzed. Some of the expected results of this reflection article are to let teachers and students know how this approach can be used in order to help and improve students' skills.

Taking into account that it is essential to consider that Natural approach was created and extended by teachers and for teachers, that is to say, that the audience of reflecting article would-be professors and their experience thorough the educational background. In the other hand, it has to be taken into account that the main character of this process is the student, so teachers will use and develop this approach in function of our students.

The main objective of the present research is to make a contribution to teachers to reach their students and turn them into competent citizens in their chosen learning field. Simultaneously, the article attempts to provide educational strategies recognizing the possibilities Natural approach gives to EFL learning process. Finally, and concluding, we want to inspire teachers to use the mentioned approach as a way to immerse students in a real and comfortable context.

Natural Approach, like any methodology has its own limitations, since is focused more in language immersion and oral production than in grammar, having this method a lack of writing skills that could affect when learners are doing an academic writing or just taking superficial notes. Natural Approach prioritizes oral communication, reason why educators must develop assessments and evaluations that apply the other abilities without missing the main objective, naturalizing the use of English in a comfortable way.

From this reflective article, it can be concluded that using natural approach in EFL teaching is beneficial in several aspects, even in monolingual contexts in a way that it prioritizes the development and improvement of communicative skills by allowing and motivating students to practice and engage in conversations without being frequently corrected graded. It has to be referred (as was stated above) that Colombia is a monolingual country, with a low number of bilingual schools, fact that highlights the need to adapt the possibilities Natural approach brings into Colombian contexts. According to Rajados (2019) when stated that are only 111 bilingual schools in all the country, concentrating the 45% of the bilingual school market in Bogotá (the capital city), there is an evident demand to make adjustments to the current possibilities and resources in the classrooms.

Natural approach helps learners feel more confident when using language because they are not being forced to learn grammar rules, can confidently make mistakes, causing the professors give them feedback instead of scolding, teaching them

in a correct and kind way. In the selected method, teacher's work preparation is functional, bilingual or not, to create confident environments. Professors must organize authentic materials, plus activities based on real situations that help students contextualize their daily activities with the EFL process, making it more relevant and meaningful. Natural approach provides a set of elements that can be applied and exploited by teachers that may not know how to increase autonomy and disposition to speak in their classes.

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