

The Natural Approach for Primary English: A Case Study Based on Classroom Observation

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ABSTRACT

This study adopts a classroom observation-based case study to explore whether the Natural Approach resolves the "drill-and-silence" issue in English teaching for primary students, who learn three languages (local language as L1, Chinese as L2, and English as an additional L2). Taking an English teacher at a public primary school as the observation object, the study finds that her adaptive strategies, such as culturally anchored input, affective error correction, kinesthetic engagement, and thematic input-output cycles, align with Krashen's Input Hypothesis. These strategies reduced student anxiety, boosted voluntary participation, and alleviated "drill-and-silence." However, mid-term exam pressures forced temporary mechanical drills, as the Natural Approach requires more effort for localized materials and multisensory design. The study concludes that the approach is viable for learners in this region but needs systemic support to balance implicit acquisition and exam demands.

KEYWORDS

Natural approach; Language learning; *Input Hypothesis*; Primary students; Multilingualism

1 Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA)—a linguistic sub-field focused on post-first-language (L1) acquisition and its pedagogical applications—equips educators to design evidence-based teaching methods, rather than rigid drills (Ellis, 1985). Among SLA-informed approaches, the Natural Approach, developed by Tracy Terrell and Stephen Krashen (1977), aligns with Rod Ellis' pathway of grounding pedagogy in SLA findings. Rooted in Krashen's *Input Hypothesis* and Monitor Theory, it prioritizes low-anxiety, comprehensible input to boost engaging second language (L2) learning (Krashen, 1982).

Preliminary field research at a public primary school, Xizang Autonomous Region of China, revealed significant limitations in traditional primary English instruction. Teachers predominantly focus on grammar drills and vocabulary memorization, neglecting the cultivation of meaningful language application. For primary students encountering English for the first time—who must navigate it as a third language beyond their native local language and Chinese—this traditional approach exacerbate unique cognitive challenges, stemming from the distinct linguistic systems (e.g., phonetics, grammar, lexical logic) across the three languages. Following these observations, a subsequent interview with an English teacher at the same school provided critical insight: she shared that she had independently studied the principles of the Natural Approach and was proactively attempting to integrate them into her lessons to address these challenges. This effort to bridge theoretical SLA insights with classroom practice prompted me to focus my observational efforts on her English courses. Through a focused four-week classroom observation of her teaching, my understanding of the Natural Approach was further refined. However, the gaps between the approach's theoretical suitability for students in this region's needs and the actual classroom realities raise a critical research question:

Can the Natural Approach effectively resolve the "drill-and-silence" issue persistent in traditional primary English instruction for this population?

This study analyzes the Natural Approach through targeted classroom observations. It first anchors the discussion in SLA basics, then examines the approach's principles in primary settings, its effects on student engagement, and the observed challenges. By linking theory to practice, it offers actionable insights for applying the Natural Approach to primary English teaching for students in this region.

2 Literature review

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research serves as the theoretical foundation for designing effective language teaching methodologies, with Rod Ellis' (1985) three application pathways providing critical bridges between academic findings and classroom practice. In this framework, "second language" (L2) is broadly defined as any language acquired after the first language (L1), encompassing not only traditional L2 contexts but also multilingual acquisition scenarios in which learners navigate multiple linguistic systems (Ortega, 2012). This definition is particularly significant for primary students, whose acquisition of English occurs within a complex linguistic repertoire that includes a local first language and Chinese (another L2), creating unique cross-linguistic dynamics that require targeted pedagogical responses.

Ortega's (2012) inclusive definition of L2 challenges narrow interpretations of language acquisition, emphasizing that

post-L1 learning involves dynamic interactions between existing linguistic knowledge and new input. For learners in this region, this means that English acquisition is shaped not only by L1 (local language) transfer but also by prior exposure to Chinese, which complicates traditional SLA models focused on binary L1-L2 relationships. Research on multilingual transfer indicates that when multiple L2s are involved, learners often exhibit "cross-linguistic influence" across all acquired systems, with more recently learned languages frequently exerting stronger effects on new acquisitions (Cenoz, 2001). Such complexities highlight the need for a Natural Approach, which can positively influence multilingual cognitive processes. Its emphasis on meaningful learning over mechanical drills aligns with the core logic of the Natural Approach (Krashen, 1982).

3 Theoretical foundations

Developed by Terrell and Krashen (1977), the Natural Approach draws on Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Monitor Theory to create a low-anxiety acquisition environment for language learning. Its theoretical relevance to local language young learners lies in four core principles that address multilingual acquisition challenges.

3.1 Comprehensible input prioritization

Krashen (1982) emphasizes that effective L2 acquisition requires exposure to "i+1" input—language slightly beyond learners' current proficiency but accessible through contextual cues. For students in this region, this principle translates to classroom activities, such as culturally contextualized storytelling or audio-visual materials that connect English content to familiar local language or Chinese cultural references.

3.2 Minimal early correction

This approach advocates limiting correction to communication-hindering errors to protect learner motivation and reduce the "affective filter"—emotional barriers that impede input absorption (Krashen, 1982). This is particularly critical, as many students exhibit reticence in English classrooms due to fear of mixing linguistic patterns from three typologically distinct languages.

3.3 Delayed grammar focus

Grammatical understanding is deepened through written homework with targeted feedback, addressing the need for explicit support in multilingual contexts where implicit acquisition alone may be insufficient (Ellis, 1985).

3.4 Semantic-oriented goals

Task-based activities prioritize idea expression over rigid grammar, fostering confidence in spontaneous use (Lyster, 2004). In classrooms, this principle manifests in collaborative projects (e.g., group descriptions of local festivals), where students focus on conveying meaning rather than producing error-free sentences, which could directly counter the "drill-and-silence" cycle by associating English use with successful communication rather than performance evaluation.

4 Practical challenges

Despite its theoretical alignment with multilingual learning needs, the Natural Approach faces amplified challenges in local language primary contexts.

4.1 Motivational dynamics in multilingual settings

While the approach suits young learners (Singleton, 1989), students in this region exhibit complex motivational profiles shaped by competing linguistic demands: Chinese proficiency is required for academic advancement, while English may be perceived as having limited immediate utility. This creates dissonance between the Natural Approach's reliance on intrinsic motivation and learners' pragmatic orientation toward language study. Teachers noted that connecting English activities to tangible outcomes (e.g., using English to share local language culture with foreigners) helps align the approach with students' extrinsic motivations.

4.2 Input-output imbalance

Overemphasis on input risks passive learning, while unguided output in multilingual contexts increases error propagation, particularly when students in this region transfer Chinese syntactic patterns to English (Hammarberg, 2001). Lyster's (2004) research on corrective feedback (CF) offers solutions, advocating for a "prompt-then-provide" approach where teachers first elicit self-correction (e.g., "Can you check the past tense here?") before providing explicit corrections, if needed. This strategy has proven effective in local language classrooms, as it addresses grammatical gaps while preserving learner agency, a critical factor in reducing silence.

These challenges highlight a significant research gap: existing SLA literature (e.g., Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 1985) rarely addresses the Natural Approach's applicability to young learners acquiring an additional L2 within multilingual repertoires. This underscores the need for contextually adapted implementations of the Natural Approach that account for complex linguistic interactions and culturally specific motivational factors.

5 Method

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the application of the Natural Approach in English classrooms for primary students, following Yin's (1984) framework for case study research, which emphasizes in-depth investigation of contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts. This research focused on answering "how" questions regarding the implementation of the Natural Approach, particularly its alignment with the multilingual cognitive patterns of learners in this region. Data collection primarily relied on two complementary methods: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, which allowed for triangulation to enhance the validity and richness of the findings. Classroom observations captured the dynamic implementation of instructional strategies, while interviews provided insights into participants' perceptions and experiences, addressing both observable behaviors and the underlying mechanisms of language acquisition.

5.1 Participants

The study was conducted in a primary school in the region, with one English teacher and her students as the participants. The Teacher A referred to as "Teacher A" in the following text, with 11 years of teaching experience, had implemented the Natural Approach for almost three years, integrating culturally relevant materials into her lessons. The participating students ($n=52$) were in the 4th grade, aged 9–10, whose first language (L1) was the local language (a SOV language), with Chinese (SVO) as their second language (L2), and English(SVO) as an additional L2. All students had received local bilingual education since primary school, resulting in unique cross-linguistic transfer effects, notably syntactic interference from both local language and Chinese in English learning. This multilingual background provided critical context for examining the adaptability of the Natural Approach.

5.2 Data collection

Data were collected over a 16-week semester following systematic procedures to ensure comprehensiveness. Classroom observations were conducted once or twice a week, with each session lasting 40 minutes, totaling 28 observed lessons. Observations employed a combination of real-time field notes and video recordings to document key elements of the Natural Approach, such as comprehensible input activities and error correction strategies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher three times (pre-observation, mid-semester, and post-observation), each lasting 45–60 min, to explore her instructional design decisions and challenges. Additionally, six student interviews were conducted in small groups to gather their perspectives on learning experiences, using a mix of local language and Chinese language to ensure clarity. All data were anonymized, and informed consent was obtained from the teachers and students to adhere to ethical guidelines.

6 Research findings

The analysis revealed four interconnected adaptive strategies that aligned with the core principles of the Natural Approach while addressing the unique challenges of multilingual contexts. These strategies collectively enhanced input comprehensibility, reduced learning anxiety, and promoted meaningful language use among learners in this region.

6.1 Culturally anchored comprehensible input

The study found that effective implementation of comprehensible input relied on dual scaffolding: localized materials and local language–English bridging. Observations showed that Teacher A consistently replaced generic teaching content with culturally familiar references, such as using images of yaks and local language mastiffs instead of giraffes, to ground abstract English input in students' lived experiences. This was complemented by the strategic use of local language as a meta-linguistic tool: when teaching vocabulary such as "yak," she paired English pronunciation (/jæk/) with the local language term and contextual explanations in local language.

Observation of in-class practice showed the effectiveness of this strategy: more than half of the students could correctly identify images when prompted in English, and most of them voluntarily repeated new vocabulary—indicators of successful input absorption. This aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, as local language scaffolding reduces cognitive load and lowers the affective filter, transforming artificial classroom content into meaningful input. Interviews with Teacher A revealed that this approach was intentionally designed to "connect English to what students already know and real-life experiences".

".....English used to feel like a 'foreign thing,' but when the teacher shows pictures of yaks and speaks a little in local language, I know what she's saying. I even raise my hand to repeat the word now." (student B)

".....My grandpa raised yaks in the past. After class, I told him 'this is a yak' in English—he laughed, and I want to learn more words like that." (student D)

6.2 Affective-oriented error correction

The findings indicate that error correction strategies were adapted to protect student motivation while ensuring accuracy, a balance critical for multilingual learners. Instead of immediate correction, Teacher A employed delayed feedback combined with bilingual prompts to address errors without disrupting the communication flow. In a Grade 3 lesson on food vocabulary, when a student said "I like noodle," she responded with contextual cues ("I like noodles too—look at all these noodles!") and clarified the plural rule in local language: "Add 's' when talking about many." Post-activity summaries using local language–English contrast cards further reinforced these corrections.

This method yielded significant behavioral changes: Student participation in voluntary speech increased in the second round of practice. Teacher interviews highlighted that 'usually native language prompts were key to ensuring low-proficiency students understood errors, reducing their fear of "mixed language mistakes"—a common anxiety among my students.' This strategy utilized the Natural Approach's "minimal early correction" principle.

".....In the last semester, I corrected every mistake immediately, and half the class stopped speaking. Now I wait...They don't shut down anymore." (teacher)

".....I used to be scared to speak because I thought I would say something wrong. But our Ms. A never says 'no'—she just talks gently with me, and I figure out the mistake myself later." (student A)

6.3 Kinesthetic semantic engagement

Observational data demonstrated that gesture dance integration transformed semantic-oriented activities into multi-sensory experiences, promoting active language use. In a Grade 4 lesson on body parts, Teacher A designed gesture movements (e.g., waving hands to represent "arm," tapping shoulders to indicate "shoulder," and bending elbows to signify "elbow") and paired them with English vocabulary. Subsequent "Guess the Body Part" games required students to describe or interpret these gestures in English, leading to flexible language use: All students spontaneously added adjectives like "long," "short," or "small" to body part descriptions, and the whole class became very active.

This approach addresses the "input passivity" challenge by converting receptive input into interactive output. As Teacher A noted in interviews, "Dance like this makes them(students) forget they're 'studying'—they just talk to guess." This aligns with the Natural Approach's emphasis on meaning over form, as students focused on task completion (guessing/describing) rather than on rigid grammar drills. Furthermore, the kinesthetic element also leverages primary school students' positive learning attitudes toward task-based classroom activities, making the language acquisition process engaging and effective.

".....Primary kids can not sit still for 40 minutes...When I wave my hands for 'arm' or tap my shoulders for 'shoulder,' they move and remember. These games makes them forget they're 'studying'—they just want to guess right..." (teacher)

".....The gesture game is my favorite! When my deskmate did the arm wave, I yelled 'arm?' in English...Ms. A praised me!" (student D)

6.4 Thematic input-output integration

Teacher X applied a 3-stage model (input→output→feedback) on the unit 4's lesson-"When is the School Art Show?" This reflects the role of Natural Approach. For input, she used a self-made campus activity video (familiar scenarios for comprehensible input) and step-by-step scaffolding ("first→April (the) first") to teach time expressions, which is key to the Natural Approach. The output included role-plays (inquiring about activity times) to prioritize meaningful use over drills. Feedback included student peer evaluation (low anxiety) and teacher prompts for weak learners, ensuring participation. This design validated Ellis' (1985) assertion that input-output integration enhances acquisition, with Teacher A's adaptation—using culturally relevant themes—making the model viable for multilingual contexts. Interview data emphasized that thematic consistency was critical: "When students talk about their own school, they have something to say."

".....The video was of our class's sports meet! When we did the role-play, I said Our sports meet is on May fifth'—I remembered that day, so the English sentence was easy. I didn't need to look at the book..." (student C)

".....When Ms. A asks us to talk about our own school life, I told my partner 'I read books in the library on Monday'—she said 'me too!' We talked in English for 5 minutes!" (student E)

These findings collectively demonstrate that the Natural Approach can be effectively adapted to local language primary classrooms using contextually responsive strategies. By anchoring input in local culture, prioritizing affective safety, leveraging kinesthetic engagement, and structuring input-output cycles, Teacher A addressed core SLA challenges while upholding the method's emphasis on comprehensible input and meaningful communication.

Collectively, the four adaptive strategies highlighted the effectiveness of the Natural Approach in tackling primary students' multilingual learning hurdles—culturally rooted input, emotion-focused error correction, kinesthetic engagement, and thematic input-output cycles not only sparked students' interest in English but also alleviated the "drill-and-silence" issue, turning classrooms into more interactive and joyful spaces. However, mid-term exam outcomes exposed a practical challenge: approximately 30% of students still struggled with structured tasks such as grammar fill-ins and sentence translation. These areas received less targeted support under the Natural Approach, which prioritizes implicit language acquisition over explicit, drill-based practice. To improve final exam performance, Teacher A temporarily adopted "drill-and-silence" methods in review classes—she organized focused grammar drills (e.g., repeated practice of "on + date" usage), vocabulary dictations, and rigid sentence pattern memorization, guiding students to reinforce exam-related knowledge through mechanical repetition.

7 Discussion

The findings confirm the Natural Approach's theoretical and practical adaptability to local language primary English classrooms: its core principles—comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) and minimal early correction—directly address multilingual cognitive challenges (Cenoz, 2001) and the previously identified "drill-and-silence" issue. For instance, culturally anchored input and gesture-based engagement aligned with Krashen's Input Hypothesis by lowering the affective filter, which grounds abstract English in students' lives), while delayed bilingual correction protected motivation, which is critical for learners navigating three linguistic systems.

Cross-class comparisons with other Grade 4 English classes further supported these insights, revealing marked differences in engagement. Teacher A's students showed higher enthusiasm, including more frequent voluntary responses and broader participation. To triangulate the observations, a post-observation survey measuring English learning preferences was conducted across the three Grade 4 classes. Results showed that Teacher A's class had the highest preference rate, confirming that the Natural Approach not only mitigates the "drill-and-silence" issue but also fosters more positive learner attitudes than traditional instruction.

However, the mid-term exam-driven shift to "drill-and-silence" reveals a critical tension: the Natural Approach's focus on implicit acquisition clashes with exam-centric demands for explicit grammar/vocabulary mastery. This echoes Ellis' (1985) argument that SLA pedagogies must balance input-output integration with context-specific needs; for students in this region, this means adapting the approach to include targeted, low-anxiety drills, such as game-based grammar practice that reinforces exam skills without reverting to rigid repetition.

Limitations include the small sample and short observation period, but the study highlights that the Natural Approach can work for learners in this region if tailored to their linguistic repertoires and the local educational context, offering a path to resolve the "interest-performance gap" in multilingual primary English teaching.

8 Conclusion

This study answers the core research question affirmatively: the Natural Approach can effectively alleviate the "drill-

and-silence" issue in local language primary English instruction—especially critical for students bearing the cognitive burden of three languages (local language as L1, Chinese as L2, English as additional L2). Unlike traditional explicit teaching that adds to their linguistic load via rigid grammar drills, the Natural Approach's implicit acquisition (e.g., culturally contextualized input, gesture-based engagement) aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, letting students absorb English through lived experiences rather than forced memorization, thus reducing anxiety-driven silence.

The mid-term exam-driven return to "drill-and-silence" does not reflect flaws in the Natural Approach, but rather its higher instructional costs: unlike traditional methods that rely on simple drills, it requires teachers to develop localized materials, design multisensory activities, and build bilingual scaffolding efforts that are far more time-consuming. Although Teacher A was willing to use it for implicit acquisition, she was ultimately constrained by the exam-oriented environment, which prioritizes short-term test scores over long-term communicative competence. This confirms the viability of the Natural Approach for learners in this region while highlighting the need for systemic support to reconcile its advantages with real-world educational demands.

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