

## The Influence of Natural Approach in Learning Language Skills (English) on Borujerd University Faculty Members

Abdolreza Goudarzi<sup>1</sup>, Mohammad Parham<sup>2</sup>, Mohammad Jafar Mahdian<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Faculty members of Islamic Azad University, Borujerd Branch, Iran,

<sup>3</sup> Ph.D. Faculty member of Islamic Azad University, Borujerd Branch, Iran

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### ABSTRACT

Teaching a second or a foreign language has been the focus of language teaching for several decades. In fact, the more we become globalized, the more we will need English as an international language or a lingua franca. In the past, if there were some efforts in teaching languages, they were based upon traditional approaches, which did not produce satisfactory results. The aim of this research was to teach the four skills of English language through modified Natural Approach. The hypothesis of the study was that the faculty members of Borujerd Islamic Azad University had many weaknesses in using English language skills and there was a possibility that by implementing Natural Approach, these skills might get improved. In this quasi-experimental research, we selected the statistical sample from the faculty members of Borujerd Islamic Azad University. Then, based on their IELTS scores as the pre-test, we divided the sample into the experimental and control groups. After implementing the independent variables, we administered the post-test. The results showed that the total-average of experimental group was 4.38, which was about 2.10 larger than that of the control group, which was 2.28. Based upon the results gained, we concluded that Natural Approach was definitely more effective than the common Traditional Approach (Grammar Translation Method).

**KEY WORDS:** IELTS test, Traditional Approach, Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing

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### INTRODUCTION

“An international language is a logical requirement in an era of worldwide information-sharing and commercial exchange, for better or worse, the role has fallen to English” (Rossner, 1990:5). Due to the fact that the world has become a “global village”, in which distance and isolation can be dramatically reduced by electronic media (as television and Internet), the inhabitants of such a “village” need a common language to communicate with one another (McLuhan and R. Powers, 1992:ix). To make the global village a better place for living, scientists and scholars are paving the way for this objective. This will not come true unless university scholars and researchers share their findings and experiences through a common language.

For centuries, scholars studied languages with the aim of writing their grammar and it is amazingly the dominant method of teaching English in Iran. In doing so, they concentrated only on the written form of the language under study. Grammar Translation Method, the most-widely used one, persisted for centuries. According to this method, language consists of words and grammar used in reading, writing, and translating. Grammar Translation Method is currently the dominant approach in Iranian formal schooling. Another traditional approach, which is not currently used in Iran, is Direct Method. The main objective of this method is gaining ability in speaking and listening through naturalistic activities in the same way children acquire their mother tongue. In this method, there is a basic motto: No translation is allowed. The meaning is directly conveyed in the target language without going through the process of translation. Another widely used method is Audio Lingual, the goal of which is gaining proficiency in all four language skills through mimicry-memorization. Surprisingly, some of its techniques are currently used in Iranian schools based on grammar translation. Charles Fries (1945) in Michigan University pioneered the method by employing the principle of structuralism. The method was also deeply influenced by behaviorism. Another common language teaching method is Communicative Language Teaching one. It teaches language learners how to communicate with one another in the target language. According to this method, communication entails that language learners perform acts such as promising, inviting, and rejecting successfully. In fact, a learner who communicates with a foreign language should engage himself/herself in communicative activities as mentioned above. There are not enough knowledgeable and effective teachers to put this method into practice in Iran.

In Iran, learning English starts at the beginning of junior high school and continues to the end of senior high school (for about 7 years). However, the educational system for teaching English is so inefficient that those who are interested in learning English often go to classes in private language institutes. It becomes a serious problem in universities mostly at M.A. and Ph.D. levels, where nearly all sources are in English. In some cases, we see that in spite of the fact that the university applicants get high scores at university entrance exams, they have serious problems at using English.

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\*Corresponding Author: Abdolreza Goudarzi, Faculty member of Islamic Azad University, Borujerd Branch, Iran.

Email: argsunset2006@yahoo.com. Phone: +989166654951

Considering such weaknesses, some researchers have tried to solve the problem of English learning. Below, we refer to some of the researches so far done in Iran to show that not mastering English language is prevailing in Iran; in addition, we try to provide evidence that doing research in this field is necessary.

Ms. Shirin Abadi Khaah (2002) studied the influence of the language games on learning English. She selected two groups including experimental group (35 persons) and control group (35 persons). Before starting, she prepared a vocabulary test in order to identify the language knowledge of her sample. Then, in the experimental class, she gave lessons based on language games. Control group in the other class was taught English based on Traditional Approach. After taking a course including eight 75-minute sessions, both groups took another test. Comparing the results showed that there was a significant difference between the mean of experimental group and the mean of control group.

Mr. Mohammad Hassan Tahririyan (1990) studied the English syllabus plan in Iranian universities. The aim of this research was to find the weak points and the good points of the syllabus plan by interviewing the students. The sample group was selected from five big universities in Iran. The findings showed that there was a plan but no good content. Moreover, because of the reason that they were not in homogeneous groups, the results were not very clear. However, the most important result refers to the lack of the students' English knowledge.

Mr. Karim Savari (2005) studied the effective factors in learning English in Mahshahr Islamic Azad University. The sample group included 173 students (96 women and 77 men) that were selected in a random-cluster manner. The data were gathered by questionnaires and the reliability of them was measured by Alpha Coefficient, which was 0.96. Findings showed that the reasons of this weakness from the students' points of views were professors, learning tools, learning content, learning time, and students' activities.

We just quoted the results of a few studies among hundreds of other related studies to indicate that not even a single research focused on Natural Approach in Iran. To this effect, we decided to put this approach into practice in an academic setting, namely, Borujerd Islamic Azad University. Through library and field research, we found out that in the past 25 years, Borujerd Islamic Azad University enjoying 170 full-time faculty members has, disappointingly, presented only 35 articles in international conferences and published less than 50 ISI papers. Furthermore, based on the statistics reported, the library sources in English are seldom used by the faculty members (*Department of Research of Islamic Azad University of Borujerd, 2011*). Therefore, this evidence can indicate that the faculty members of Borujerd Islamic Azad University probably have problems at using English language skills.

Therefore, to improve English language skills, we, as the researchers, decided to put Natural Approach with some modifications into practice with the faculty members of Borujerd Islamic Azad University. The modification we applied to Natural Approach was to give the meaning of difficult words in Farsi before doing every activity in printouts. In this way, we made it possible for the learners to focus on using the skills communicatively with full understanding.

The main question of this research is:

- To determine the effects of Natural Approach in learning language skills on faculty members of Borujerd Islamic Azad University.

In addition, the minor research questions are:

- To determine the level of language skills of the faculty members
- To identify the reasons of their weaknesses in learning language skills.

The main hypotheses of this research are:

- The faculty members of Borujerd Islamic Azad University are weak at English language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
- By using Natural Approach, we can probably improve these skills.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Natural Approach is a method first introduced by Terrell and Krashen (1983). They identified five principles for this as follows:

- The first principle is that the goals are communicative.
- The second is that comprehension precedes production.
- The third is to permit students to begin producing language in stages.
- The fourth is that language teachers should stress acquisition activities rather than learning activities in the classroom. That is, students should attend to meaning instead of form, and they should learn to comprehend language before they begin to produce it.
- The fifth is that classroom activities should be of a type that tends to lower the students' affective filter. (*Chastain, 1976: 99*).

Based on the above principles, the main goals of this approach are introduced:

The goals of a Natural Approach class are based on an assessment of students' needs. We determine the situations in which they will use the target language and the sorts of topics they will have to communicate information about. In setting

communication goals, we do not expect the students at the end of a particular course to have acquired a certain group of structures or forms. Instead, we expect them to deal with a particular set of topics in a given situation. We do not organize the activities of the class about a grammatical syllabus (*Krashen and Terrell, 1983 in C. Richards, 2001: 185*).

Now we give an example for the class procedure in learning a foreign language based on Natural Approach method of teaching:

The class starts with command based activities from TPR. Different classroom objects, body parts, numbers, and actions (verbs) are taught through commands, such as *knock three times on the door* or *give me a pencil before you leave*. After a few sessions, learners gradually get involved in easy and interesting conversations related to real life situations. The teacher speaks only in L2, but the students may speak in their L1 as well as in L2. Textbooks, magazines, pictures, newspapers and realia may be used to introduce new linguistic items. The primary purpose of all classroom procedure is to provide comprehension input for learners and lower their anxiety (*Rashchi, 2002: 54*).

For making the class situation in learning L2 close to that of the real situation where L1 acquisition occurs, Krashen and Terrell, University of California, focused on the procedure of L1 learning and asked whether we have noticed how easily one can speak their mother tongue or not. When one is going to say something, words and phrases come to their minds automatically. A huge part of this procedure is unconscious. Something appears in our mind automatically, and if we so desire, we can utter it. The following model shows how such a thing happens:

1. We receive input – by reading or listening to a sentence. If we comprehend this sentence, it will be saved in our mind; in fact, we internalize language.
2. When we are going to say or write something (when we want to build or create output), our brain will search for a sentence we have heard or read – a sentence that is matched or lined with what we want to say. Then, we will produce it (the exact sentence or a sentence like it), and finally, we will say our sentence. This procedure is unconscious and our brain does it automatically.

This model is very simple. Our brain does not really search for complete sentences, but parts of them, and then by using these parts, it can create and build long and more complex sentences. Therefore, our brain uses several sentences (heard and read before) for building main sentences. The more sentences our brain receives (input), the more it can create or build more complex, and longer sentences (output).

The English learning method explained above is called “input hypothesis” (*Krashen and Terrell, 1983: 32*). This model explains L1 acquisition by a child. A child listens to his/her parents. His/her brain receives and collects sentences and gradually becomes experienced in building and creating sentences until the age of 4 or 5 that he/she can speak fluently.

Based on the above model, for learning a new language, there should be an equal emphasis on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, the one, which is mostly focused upon in our system of education in Iran, is the skill of reading though it has practically proved to be inadequate in today’s globalized world. Fortunately, in Natural Approach, which is under focus in this study, there is an equal emphasis on the four language skills. In spite of the fact that Natural Approach is based on the natural order of learning and the methods currently used in Iran have practically proved to be ineffective, why language-learning system in Iran has ignored using such an approach. Therefore, this research tries to put this method into practice with faculty members of Borujerd Islamic Azad University. As we proposed, this weakness may be alleviated through this approach.

Regarding the main objectives and the research questions of this study, the methodology is practical due to its aims; and it is quasi-experimental due to its method. Having decided upon the statistical population and the proficiency level of the subjects through IELTS (pretest), we divided the subjects into two homogenous groups. Both control and experimental groups were then taught the same materials by the same teachers for 100 hours. We tried to keep all variables constant except for the teaching method, which was the independent variable under study. For the experimental group, Natural Approach was used, and for the control group, Traditional Approach, a common language teaching method, dominating the formal educational system in Iran.

The statistical population of this research covers all full-time faculty members of Borujerd Islamic Azad University in 2011. The number of faculty members is 170. The sample was randomly selected out of the mentioned number consists of 64 full-time faculty members.

In this research, we chose IELTS test because it is a standardized test with an acceptable validity and test reliability. To be sure about the results, we measured the amount of Alpha Coefficient, which was 0.94 that confirms the test reliability and test validity. After studying the literature from different available sources, we administered the first IELTS test (pretest) in order to identify the level of language skills of the faculty members. For each group, the teacher started his work based on the same syllabus. The experimental group was taught each of the four major skills in twelve two-hour sessions based on Natural Approach. The control group was also taught the same materials at the same time, but with a different teaching method (Traditional Approach). At the end of the course, again both groups took IELTS test or the posttest.

## RESULTS

We used SPSS software (version 16) for analyzing the data.

The main hypothesis of the study was:

The scores gained based on Natural Approach would be higher than those gained based on Traditional Approach.

**Table 1 (comparison between explanatory data taken from Traditional and Natural Approaches)**

Method of teaching	Level of test	Mid	Mode	Highest	Lowest	SD	Mean
Traditional Approach	Pretest	2	2	4.5	0.5	1.05	2.08
	Posttest	2	1	5	1	1.14	2.28
Natural Approach	Pretest	2	2.5	4.5	0.5	1.06	2.08
	Posttest	4.5	4	7.5	2.5	1.11	4.56

As we see in table 1, there was no significant difference between the mean values for these two groups in the pretest. However, after implementing the teaching method or the independent variable, there was a significant difference between the mean of the experimental group and that of the control group.

Before administering the test, its normality should be established. For this purpose, we used Kolmogorov – Smirnov test.

Based upon the results obtained, the significance for all cases was higher than 0.05; therefore, the results were normal. Now, for comparing the scores within each case, considering their normality, we used paired sample t-test for both groups for the pretests and posttests covering listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The reason for using paired sample t-test was that the standard deviation of the statistical population was not available, and we did not have any change in the sample.

The hypotheses were as follows:

**Null hypothesis:** There was no significant difference between experimental and control groups.

**Alternative hypothesis:** There was a significant difference between experimental and control groups.

The results were as follows:

**Table 2 (Comparison between pretests in both experimental and control groups)**

difference Mean	T	Significancy
0	0	1

According to table 2, since the mean for both groups was the same, the difference between them was zero. Moreover, because the significance was higher than 0.05; therefore, the hypothesis was not rejected. It means that there was no significant difference between experimental and control groups. In other words, they were at the same level of language proficiency.

**Table 3 (Comparison between posttests in both experimental and control groups)**

Differences Mean	T	Significancy
-2.28	-13.7	0

According to table3, in the posttest, because the mean for experimental group was higher than that of the control group; therefore, the difference between them was negative. Moreover, because the significancy was lower than 0.05; therefore, the hypothesis was significant. It means that there was a significant difference between the experimental group and control group for the posttest, and we could say that the experimental group had improved significantly.

**Table 4 (Comparing Total test for Natural Approach and Traditional approach)**

F. statistic	Significancy of F. statistic	T. statistic	Significancy of T. statistic
0.021	0.88	-4.34	0

In this case, we performed the variance-equality test for both Traditional and Natural approaches through a test with the F. statistic, which is indicated in table 4.

The hypotheses were as follows:

**NULL hypothesis:** The variance of the two methods was the same.

**Alternative hypothesis:** The variance of the two methods was not the same.

Since the significancy was higher than 0.05; therefore, the hypothesis was not significant; in other words, there was no significant difference between experimental and control groups in the case of variance.

Now, for comparing the two approaches, we used independent sample t-test with the assumption of equal variances for both Traditional and Natural approaches. Since in this test, the significancy was lower than 0.05; therefore, the Null hypothesis was rejected. It means that there was a significant difference between the scores obtained for two approaches; and the mean for Natural Approach scores was much higher than that of Traditional Approach.

Now for comparing the results of four tests, according to the normality and the number of variables that were more than two, we used variance analysis test.

The hypotheses were as follows:

**NULL hypothesis:** The results of all four skills test were the same.

**Alternative hypothesis:** The results of the four skills test were not the same.

The results are shown in the table of variance analysis as follows:

**Table 5 (variance analysis of the four tests)**

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean Square	F.statistic	Significancy
Between groups	141.05	3	47.02	39.54	0
Within groups	147.45	124	1.19		
Total	288.5	127			

Because the significancy was lower than 0.05; therefore, the hypothesis was significant. It means that there was a significant difference between the scores of the four tests.

## Conclusion

There are different language teaching methods for teaching language skills around the world. One of these approaches which has not yet been used in Iran’s educational system is Natural Approach. “The Natural Approach belongs to a tradition of language teaching method based on observation and interpretation of how learners acquire both first and second language in none-formal setting. Such methods reject the formal organization of language as a prerequisite to teaching” (*C. Richards, 2001: 190*).

Because the different methods used in Iranian schools and universities are traditional in content or approach or both at the same time and all these practices have practically proved to be inefficient, we decided to put the Natural Approach, which has long been neglected, into practice. This motivated us to start the present research with the following hypotheses:

1. The faculty members of Islamic Azad Borujerd University are weak at English language skills.
2. There is a possibility to improve the English language skills of the faculty members through Natural Approach.

After determining faculty member’s proficiency level through a pretest, IELTS test, we analyzed the data and found out that the mean for the whole population (64 faculty members) was 2.08. This figure proved that the faculty members of Borujerd University are weak. Then, they were randomly divided into two homogenous groups including experimental and control groups. Both groups received a 100-hour language instruction with the same materials and teachers in four months. The only difference, the determining factor, or the independent variable was the teaching method. In fact, for the experimental group, we employed Natural Approach and for the control group, Traditional Approach was employed. After finishing the course, we administered the second proficiency test, IELTS test, which was the posttest. The results were then analyzed and the mean for the control group, which was 2.28, did not change significantly, but the mean for the experimental group, which was 4.56, showed a significant difference. This result is undoubtedly indicative of the effectiveness of Natural Approach in teaching English in Iran.

This mean difference was significant for the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Using inferential statistics with t-test showed that there was a significant difference between the control group and the experimental group at 0.05.

We also used the test of variance analysis for comparing the scores in the four tests. Since the F. statistic was 39.54 and the significancy at 0.05 was zero; therefore, our hypothesis concerning the variation in test scores was strongly confirmed.

Since the result of variance analysis was significant, we used post hoc Tukey test for grouping the samples, and it was evident that the mean for the experimental group, 4.56, was much higher than those of the other three tests.

In sum, the use of Natural Approach in teaching English can solve many problems of the faculty members in learning English language skills. As we have practically shown, in a short period, during 4 months and approximately in 100 hours of teaching, all faculty members improved in a range of 100 percent, which is a valuable result.

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