A: Natural methods

This first section looks at a number of methods that are loosely characterized as being 'natural' – in the sense that they replicate, or aim to replicate – the processes by which first languages are acquired, or by which second languages are picked up without any formal instruction.

1 **Total Immersion**
2 **The Natural Method/Approach**
3 **The Direct Method**
4 **The Oral Method**
5 **The Reading Method**
6 **The Audiolingual Method**
7 **Total Physical Response**

1 Total Immersion

What more natural way of learning an additional language than immersing yourself in the culture that speaks it? It is also the most widely practised way: more people have acquired a language through total immersion than by any other means.

The background

It may seem odd to begin a book on methods with a 'zero-method'. After all, total immersion pre-dates the concept of 'method' by several hundreds of millennia. Ever since people first moved – or were forced to move – away from their local speech community, they have come into contact with other languages. And, given time and motivation, they have learned them – often to impressive levels of ability. Hence, total immersion supplies the benchmark against which the success of all other methods can be measured.

Take 'Julie', for instance. Julie was a British woman who married an Egyptian and settled in Cairo aged 21. She never attended classes in Egyptian Arabic, and could not read or write in it, but within just two and a half years she was able to 'pass' as a native speaker of the language. How was she able to achieve this? Probably because she was totally immersed in Arabic. As the researchers who studied her (Ioup et al 1994) describe it:

> Nine days after arrival, her husband was unexpectedly called to military service and she was left with non-speaking-English relatives for 45 days. Since there was no one to assist her in English, she relied on context and gesture to interpret utterances and express meaning. Thus, at this initial stage her language acquisition situation resembled the environment for child L1 acquisition.

By the time her husband returned she was able to communicate with her in-laws using simple sentences and idiomatic expressions and, after six months, she was fairly fluent. The immersion process continued when she took a job in an Egyptian school, and, after three years in Egypt, she no longer used English with her husband or children: Arabic had, effectively, become the home language (although her children did grow up bilingual).

Julie's case is only exceptional in that, despite being a late starter, she achieved a degree of proficiency in her second language that is relatively unusual in adults. But the situation of being suddenly immersed in a language and having to pick it up 'naturalistically' is one that is familiar to most immigrants, even if they don't always 'pass' as native speakers. And, while it may be arguable whether immersion is a 'method' as such, there is a widespread view – supported by stories such as Julie's – that, if you have to learn a second language, then the best thing you can do is hop on a plane and go to the country where the language is spoken. Many 'off the shelf' methods, such as the **Natural Method** (see chapter **2**), in fact, attempt to simulate the immersion experience.

Of course, not all naturalistic (i.e. non-instructed) learners are successful. In another seminal case study of an immigrant's command of English, 'Alberto', an adult Costa Rican who had been living in Boston for a year and a half, was incapable of producing anything more than very basic ('pidginized') English. This was attributed to his lack of integration into the dominant English-speaking culture. Conversely, in another case study (Schmidt 1983), an adult Japanese immigrant ('Wes') living in Hawaii, who was seemingly well integrated, also showed little language development over the three years he was studied. He did, however, achieve impressive levels of communicative effectiveness, such that many who knew him rated his English favourably. (English teachers, on the other hand, were less impressed!)

How does it work?

Total immersion on its own seems to be less effective than total immersion *plus*. That is to say, as well as round-the-clock exposure, there needs to be some 'push' for greater precision, and there needs to be some focused attention on form. (It's probably the lack of both that accounts for the limited language development in the case of both Alberto and Wes.)

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For example, to help her cope with the initial experience of total immersion, Julie kept a notebook in which she jotted down any words or expressions she could make sense of. She started to include grammatical information, such as verb endings, too. But, at this initial stage, of most use were formulaic 'chunks', which gave her a toe-hold into real communication. She also took (grateful) note of the corrections and re-phrasings that her relatives offered her when communication broke down.

In similar vein, another self-taught learner, the Chilean Marcos Kreutzberger (better known as the TV personality Don Francisco) devised a number of proactive strategies for learning English when he was 'immersed' in New York, aged 19. On the streets of the city, for example, he would seek out 'older people who didn't seem to be in a hurry', and, on the pretext of asking directions, initiate a conversation. He would write down any new words that might come up in a personal lexicon for later recycling. He supplemented this routine by watching TV, reading newspapers 'and trying to translate everything that was going on' (Kreutzberger 2007). He adds:

> The system really worked for me. After 90 days I could navigate pretty well, and after a year I felt I had enough ability to join in conversations and understand almost everything being said.

Does it work?

For Julie and Marcos, immersion was clearly successful. For Wes less so, and for Alberto hardly at all. What made the difference? As mentioned, the use of deliberate strategies to filter and record the input, to pay attention to corrections, and to plan subsequent exchanges, all seemed to play an important part in the success of Julie and Marcos. Just as important may have been their willingness to take risks, which, in turn, may have been driven by sheer necessity: in Julie's case in particular, she had no choice but to learn Arabic.

Of course, Julie and Marcos were successful *speakers* of their target languages. But we don't know a lot about their reading and writing skills. Whereas total immersion can lead to very high levels of proficiency in oracy (speaking and listening), literacy skills typically lag behind. This is because, outside of an academic context, learners simply

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don't get the exposure to written text, or the practice producing it, that literacy requires.

What's in it for us?

The idea that classroom instruction can be adapted so as to replicate the conditions of total immersion is a seductive, but ultimately doomed, one. For a start, we have seen that only highly motivated and resourceful learners may truly benefit from a total immersion experience. More realistically, it is virtually impossible to recreate the all day, every day quantity of exposure that total immersion provides. On the other hand, technological innovations have exponentially increased contact opportunities outside the classroom. Training learners in the strategies that enable them to take advantage of these opportunities may be one way forward. These could include using online means to interact with speakers of the target language through websites such as 'HelloTalk' (www.hellotalk.com), for example.

Ioup, G., Boustagoui, E., Tigi, M., & Moselle, M. (1994) Reexamining the critical period hypothesis: a case of a successful adult SLA in a naturalistic environment. *Studies in SLA,* 16: 73–98.

Kreutzberger, M. (2007) Don Francisco's Six Steps to Better English. In Miller, T. (ed.) *How I learned English,* Washington, DC: National Geographic.

Schmidt, R. (1983) Interaction, acculturation and the acquisition of communicative competence. In Wolfson, N., & Judd, E. (eds.) *Sociolinguistics and Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

2 The Natural Method/Approach

Total immersion works because, like first language acquisition, it is 'natural'. That, at least, is the argument made by proponents of the so-called natural methods.

The background

It's fair to say that the history of language teaching has swung back and forth between just two poles. On the one hand, there have been methods that take the position that additional languages have to be *learned* – through the application of some kind of mental effort. This is because additional languages are not picked up on our mother's knee, as it were. At the other extreme are the methods that are grounded in the belief that, given the right conditions, additional languages *can* be acquired in the same way we acquired our mother tongue. Because they attempt to replicate at least some of the conditions of uninstructed acquisition, these latter methods are loosely grouped together as 'natural methods'. Over time, one or two have explicitly labelled themselves as being the Natural Method, or the Natural Approach.

Perhaps the strongest argument supporting natural approaches is not that we learned our first language naturally, but that many, many people have learned a second language naturally – that is, without formal instruction but solely through contact with speakers of the language – in a manner often referred to as naturalistic learning (see chapter **1 Immersion**). For early scholars, naturalistic learning was equated to 'learning through conversation'. As the enlightenment philosopher John Locke put it, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693): 'The Original way of Learning a language by Conversation, not only serves well enough, but is to be prefer'd as the most Expedite, Proper, and Natural'.

One of the first attempts to formalize such a philosophy for the teaching of modern languages was instituted by a teacher of French. In a book

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called *Causeries avec mes élèves* (*Conversations with my students,* 1874a), Lambert Sauveur describes the first lesson: 'It is a conversation during two hours *in the French language* with twenty persons who know nothing of this language. After five minutes only, I am carrying on a dialogue with them, and this dialogue does not cease'. Sauveur opened a language school in Boston and before long his conversation-based method had attracted a great deal of attention and became known as the Natural Method.

Almost exactly a century later, Tracy Terrell, a teacher of Spanish in California, proposed a 'natural approach' to teaching second languages. Drawing on the distinction made by Stephen Krashen between *learning* (i.e. conscious study), on the one hand, and, on the other, *acquisition* (i.e. unconscious 'absorption' of the language through exposure and use), Terrell argued that communicative competence could be achieved in the classroom, not through learning-type activities, but through activities that fostered 'natural' acquisition. Such activities would be *communicative*, in that the focus would be entirely on meaning – initially simply understanding meaningful input, and then producing meaningful output. Perhaps more firmly grounded in research than Sauveur's method, the Natural Approach nevertheless shares many of its basic principles.

How does it work?

In his *Introduction to the Teaching of Living Languages Without Grammar or Dictionary* (1874b), Sauveur explains the principle underpinning his 'conversations':

> I raise quickly my finger before you, and show it to you. Do you not understand, whatever your language may be, that that means *there is the finger*? And if I point my extended forefinger towards the table or the door, do you not understand that I say, *There is the table; there is the door*? And if, on showing you the finger, I say in my French language *Voilà le doigt* , do you not understand that the French pronounce these words to indicate that thing?

Simply by extending this idea almost indefinitely, Sauveur was able to weave conversations out of the 'here-and-now', with the learners responding minimally at first, but participating more fully as they

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became familiar with the material. The ultimate aim was that the learners would be able to interact with one another with minimal reliance on the teacher. Although the conversations were available in print form, Sauveur discouraged teachers from using the book in class: ‘Give the pupils the book to read at home as preparation for your teaching, but forbid them to open it in the class; their ear alone must be occupied there’.

In similar fashion, Terrell’s approach involves exposing learners to ‘comprehensible input’, e.g. in the form of commands (see chapter **7 Total Physical Response**) and question-and-answer routines using real objects or visuals, to which the learners (unlike Sauveur’s learners) are allowed to respond using their L1. Production is withheld until learners feel ready, and grammar explanation and error correction (being associated with learning and not with acquisition) are discouraged. Activities likely to cause stress or anxiety are also avoided, since, according to Terrell (1977) ‘affective (not cognitive) factors are primary forces operating in language acquisition’.

Does it work?

Apart from the attention that Sauveur’s method attracted at the time, its effectiveness was not really put to the test: we only have his word for it. He reports, for example, a class whose conversation, after four and a half months of five two-hour lessons a week, was ‘so animated and so interesting’ that, listening to them, he thought he was back in France. Certainly, compared to the prevailing grammar-translation methodology of the time, his Natural Method must have been a breath of fresh air. So, too, in its own way, was Terrell’s Natural Approach, contrasting as it did with the forced production and rigorous correction associated with audiolingualism. However, in its outright rejection of learning-type classroom procedures, such as error correction, the Natural Approach might have let the pendulum swing too far in the direction of acquisition. The classroom, after all, is not a ‘natural’ context for language learning: apart from anything else, the amount of real exposure and practice that individual learners get is inevitably limited. At best, so-called natural approaches might serve as a relatively stress-free introduction to a language, after which more conventional methods might take over.

What's in it for us?

Despite those caveats, there is a lot to be learned from natural acquisition, whether of the first language or of an additional one. Basing language learning on 'conversations' (however we define these) makes a certain sense. As a number of researchers have observed, the grammar of first language acquisition *emerges* out of the conversations that the child has with his or her caregivers. Grammar is not a prerequisite for these conversations. It follows, therefore, that an approach to second language learning that foregrounds conversation might provide a fertile environment for the emergence of the second language grammar – especially if the conversations are 'enhanced' with explicit attention to the formal features of the language. So-called 'instructional conversations' are central to approaches that view learning as socially constructed, and mediated by talk – 'so that the knowledge that is created carries with it echoes of the conversations in which it was generated' (Mercer 1995).

Mercer, N. (1995) *The Guided Construction of Knowledge*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Sauveur, L. (1874a) *Causeries avec mes élèves*. Boston: Schoenhof and Moeller.

Sauveur, L. (1874b) *Introduction to the Teaching of Living Languages Without Grammar or Dictionary.* Boston: Schoenhof and Moeller.

Terrell, T. (1977) A natural approach to second language acquisition and learning. *Modern Language Journal,* 61: 325–336.

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3 The Direct Method

'What is the method … that I allude to?' asked Otto Jesperson in 1904, in attempting to pin down the way that the Reform Movement had transformed language teaching. 'The method is by some called the "new" or "newer"; … by others the "reform-method," again the "natural," the "rational," the "correct," or "sensible" …; the "direct" comes a little nearer… .' In fact, it was the 'direct' that stuck.

The background

In *The Confidential Agent* by Graham Greene (1939), the agent of the title, known simply as D., has to make contact with another spy, Mr K., who works in a language school in London. Mr K. teaches Entrenationo – an invented language like Esperanto. The director of the school, Dr Bellows, welcomes D. before taking him to his private lesson with Mr K. On the way, Bellows warns D.: 'We teach by the direct method. We trust – to your honour – not to speak anything but Entrenationo'. This is confirmed by Mr K. when the lesson starts: while loudly teaching words from a wall-chart and numbers using wooden blocks, he whispers: 'We are forbidden by the rules to talk anything but Entrenationo. I am fined one shilling if I am caught'. This, of course, makes the exchange of secrets with K. somewhat difficult, especially since Dr Bellows periodically enters the room to check that the rules are being followed.

As exaggerated as this scene is, it does capture the flavour of the Direct Method in its heyday, especially as practised by large language teaching franchises, such as the Berlitz chain. Maximilian Berlitz is, of course, the name that is indelibly associated with the Direct Method: he opened his first school in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1878, and, at the time that Greene was writing *The Confidential Agent*, there were Berlitz schools in most major cities in Europe and the Americas.