



The Implementation Of The Natural Approach In Teaching English To Young Learners (Teyl): A Literature Review

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article history: Received May 14, 2026 Revised May 27, 2026 Accepted June 10, 2026 Keywords: <i>Natural Approach, TEYL, comprehensible input, affective filter.</i>	<i>This study reviews recent literature (2021–2026) on implementing Krashen and Terrell's Natural Approach in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) within primary EFL classrooms. Utilizing a qualitative thematic literature review of 11 selected sources, the study identifies two main themes: Input-Rich Multimodal Mediation and Affective Comfort Versus Structural Constraints. Findings reveal that the approach is effectively operationalized through multimodal tools (visual storytelling, digital storybooks, TPR, songs, and games) that prioritize meaning-making over grammar rules. However, its implementation faces structural constraints such as limited instructional time, minimal exposure outside school, and rigid curricular pressures. The study concludes that while the Natural Approach remains pedagogically relevant, its success depends on local adaptation, teacher mediation, and institutional support.</i>

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Article Info	ABSTRAK
Article history: Received May 14, 2026 Revised May 27, 2026 Accepted June 10, 2026 Keywords: <i>Pendekatan Alami, TEYL, comprehensible input, filter afektif.</i>	Studi ini meninjau literatur (2021–2026) mengenai implementasi <i>Natural Approach</i> berbasis teori Krashen dan Terrell dalam <i>Teaching English to Young Learners</i> (TEYL) di kelas EFL dasar. Menggunakan metode tinjauan literatur tematik kualitatif terhadap 11 sumber terpilih, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi dua tema utama: <i>Input-Rich Multimodal Mediation</i> dan <i>Affective Comfort Versus Structural Constraints</i>. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan ini efektif diterapkan melalui media multimodal (penceritaan visual, buku cerita digital, TPR, lagu, dan <i>game</i>) yang fokus pada pemaknaan. Namun, keberhasilannya terhambat oleh kendala struktural seperti keterbatasan waktu, minimnya paparan luar kelas, dan tekanan kurikulum. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa <i>Natural Approach</i> tetap relevan untuk TEYL, namun efektivitasnya sangat bergantung pada adaptasi lokal, mediasi guru, dan dukungan kelembagaan.

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Introduction

Young learners are not simply smaller versions of adult language users; they learn through concrete experience, social interaction, repetition, and emotionally safe classroom participation. Recent TEYL scholarship in both general and Indonesian EFL contexts consistently shows that children's English development is shaped by mediation, classroom support, and the quality of exposure rather than by abstract rule explanation alone (Komariah et al., 2025; Nikolov & Timpe-Laughlin, 2021) In parallel, studies on online and post-pandemic English teaching have shown that primary-level instruction is often constrained by uneven access to learning resources, teacher readiness, and difficulties in aligning input-heavy instruction with classroom realities (Fahriany et al., 2022; Inan & Karaca, 2021). These conditions make TEYL a field in which pedagogy must be developmentally appropriate, context-sensitive, and grounded in how children actually acquire language.

Within this landscape, Krashen and Terrell's Natural Approach remains highly relevant because it offers a language-teaching logic that privileges comprehensible input, low anxiety, and delayed pressure for forced production. Its core assumptions are especially compatible with young learners, who often benefit more from meaning-focused exposure than from early grammatical analysis (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Recent studies support this alignment: classroom research on Total Physical Response shows that action-based input can strengthen learners' early uptake, while primary-school Natural Approach implementation has been reported to improve children's speaking development in supportive settings (Xie, 2021; Yayla & Belet Boyaci, 2023). Related work on oral communication and willingness to communicate also suggests that when instruction reduces anxiety and invites participation gradually, children become more willing to use English actively (Sato & Dussuel Lam, 2021).

The difficulty, however, lies in implementation. In many EFL primary schools, including Indonesian contexts, teachers must work within limited instructional time, modest exposure outside class, and strong curricular pressure to demonstrate measurable outcomes. Studies conducted after the pandemic indicate that online and blended English teaching for young learners has exposed persistent disparities in teacher preparedness, classroom interaction, and assessment practices (Dao et al., 2024; Fahriany et al., 2022). At the same time, many classrooms still operate under institutional expectations that prioritize written accuracy and test performance, even though young learners often need sustained oral exposure before such expectations are pedagogically realistic (Inan & Karaca, 2021; Nikolov & Timpe-Laughlin, 2021). This creates a practical tension between what the Natural Approach recommends and what school systems often demand.

Although recent TEYL studies have become more visible, the literature remains fragmented. Much of the post-2021 work is distributed across digital storytelling, gamification, synchronous online instruction, and classroom engagement, while direct synthesis of the Natural Approach in primary-school TEYL remains limited (Liu et al., 2024; Sabari & Hashim, 2023). Existing studies often discuss techniques that resemble the Natural Approach, such as visual support, storytelling, movement, or playful input, but they rarely examine the approach as a coherent pedagogical framework for TEYL in the post-pandemic digital era (Xie, 2021;



Yayla & Belet Boyaci, 2023). As a result, there is still no sufficiently focused thematic review that traces how the Natural Approach is being operationalized for young learners across recent empirical studies and what this means for current EFL practice.

This paper addresses that gap by synthesizing empirical literature from 2021 to 2026 to identify how the Natural Approach is being adapted in contemporary TEYL classrooms, especially through multimodal input, movement-based learning, storytelling, and affectively supportive interaction. Its novelty lies not in revisiting Krashen and Terrell as a historical theory, but in re-reading that theory through recent child-centered and digitally mediated classroom realities (Dao et al., 2024; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Liu et al., 2024). Accordingly, this review is guided by two research questions:

- (1) How is the Natural Approach operationalized in modern TEYL contexts based on empirical studies from 2021 to 2026?
- (2) What are the key pedagogical benefits and systemic constraints identified by recent literature regarding its implementation?

Method

This study uses a *Qualitative Thematic Literature Review* design. This design is appropriate because the purpose of the study is not to test an intervention in a classroom, but to identify, organize, and synthesize recurring patterns across published studies so that a coherent picture of the Natural Approach in TEYL can be built from secondary data. Recent educational review scholarship emphasizes that systematic and thematic reviews are useful when the researcher needs to map a field through explicit searching, screening, and synthesis procedures rather than through primary data collection (Ghamrawi et al., 2025; Goddard et al., 2022; Kri et al., 2021). In this sense, the present study treats the selected articles as the data corpus and uses them to construct a thematic account of how the Natural Approach has been interpreted and applied in primary-school English learning.

The data collection process followed a structured search strategy. Articles were identified through Google Scholar, ERIC, and ResearchGate using combinations of the keywords : “Natural Approach,” “Comprehensible Input,” “TEYL,” “young learners,” “digital storytelling,” and “gamification.” The search was limited to the period 2021–2026 so that the review would reflect the most recent post-pandemic TEYL literature. The inclusion criteria were: (1) empirical studies using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods; (2) studies focused on children aged approximately 5–12 years or primary-school learners; (3) articles written in English or Indonesian; and (4) full-text accessibility. This kind of transparent search-and-screen procedure is consistent with educational review guidance, which recommends clearly defined inclusion criteria, reproducible searching, and evidence-based selection of sources to strengthen rigor and credibility (Ghamrawi et al., 2025; Kri et al., 2021).

The research instrument in this study is the researcher as the human instrument, supported by a Data Synthesis Matrix or documentation table. In qualitative inquiry, the researcher functions as the primary interpretive instrument, while the matrix helps systematize article information such as authors, year, context, participants, methods, main findings, and thematic contribution. This arrangement is in line with qualitative research logic, which recognizes the researcher’s role in selecting, reading, interpreting, and connecting data while maintaining analytic sensitivity throughout the review process (Braun & Clarke, 2022) The matrix is used not as a mechanical substitute for interpretation, but as an organizing tool that makes comparison across studies more explicit and traceable.



Data analysis was conducted through Thematic Analysis, following a short but disciplined sequence of familiarization, coding, and theme generation. Braun and Clarke (2022) describe thematic analysis as a flexible yet rigorous way to identify patterned meaning across qualitative material, while Naeem et al. (2023) show that thematic analysis can be operationalized through a systematic progression from familiarization to coding, theming, and interpretation. In this study, familiarization was carried out by reading the abstract, method, and findings sections of the selected articles repeatedly to identify the main claims of each study. Coding involved marking repeated ideas such as “kecemasan,” “media gambar,” “TPR,” “input visual,” and “kendala waktu.” These codes were then grouped into broader themes to answer the two research questions, namely the modern operationalization of the Natural Approach in TEYL and the benefits and constraints of its implementation.

Results And Discussion

Input-Rich Multimodal Mediation

The first major theme emerging from the reviewed literature is Input-Rich Multimodal Mediation, which explains how the Natural Approach is operationalized in contemporary TEYL contexts. Across the selected studies, comprehensible input is no longer delivered solely through teacher talk but is increasingly mediated through a combination of visual, narrative, physical, and digital resources. This pattern reflects the central principle of Krashen and Terrell’s (1983) Input Hypothesis, which emphasizes that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to language that is understandable and slightly beyond their current level of competence. In primary-school settings, such input is commonly supported through pictures, storytelling, gestures, movement, and interactive technologies that help learners derive meaning from context. For example, Yayla and Belet Boyacı (2023) found that the implementation of the Natural Approach significantly improved the English-speaking skills of fourth-grade students by creating communicative situations in which learners focused on meaning rather than grammatical accuracy. Similarly, Srasri et al. (2026) reported that combining the Natural Approach with Total Physical Response (TPR) produced substantial improvements in primary students’ oral performance. Xie (2021) further demonstrated that TPR supports language acquisition by connecting verbal input with physical actions, thereby enabling children to comprehend language in a low-pressure and developmentally appropriate manner.

This pattern is further reinforced by studies examining digital storytelling and storybook-based instruction. Recent literature suggests that narrative-based learning environments provide young learners with meaningful and comprehensible exposure to language while simultaneously increasing engagement and motivation. Gómez-Martín et al. (2025), in their systematic review of storytelling and digital storytelling, concluded that story-based instruction positively contributes to learners’ comprehension, motivation, and language development across educational levels. Likewise, Putra et al. (2026) found that illustrated digital storybooks offered through the Let’s Read application enhanced vocabulary acquisition and learner engagement because the combination of text, images, and interactive features facilitated meaning-making. Similar findings were reported by Hendratno et al. (2025), who showed that readability-controlled digital storybooks significantly improved elementary students’ reading comprehension. Abu Abbas and Li Li (2025) also demonstrated that storybooks helped primary learners improve their understanding and pronunciation of action words. Taken together, these studies indicate that contemporary implementations of the Natural



Approach rely heavily on visual scaffolding and narrative support to transform linguistic input into meaningful learning experiences. Rather than presenting language as isolated grammatical forms, teachers create contexts in which children encounter language through stories, images, and authentic communicative situations.

The same tendency is evident in research on gamification and interactive learning environments. Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the role of educational games in creating engaging and supportive conditions for language learning. Gunawan's (2025) review of gamification in TEYL reported that game-based learning generally contributes to higher levels of participation, motivation, and classroom engagement. More specifically, Fadlol et al. (2026) found that digital game-based learning significantly reduced speaking anxiety among elementary EFL learners while simultaneously increasing their willingness to communicate. From the perspective of the Natural Approach, these findings are particularly important because games function not only as motivational tools but also as mechanisms for delivering comprehensible input in emotionally supportive environments. Through repeated exposure, contextualized tasks, and meaningful interaction, learners are able to process language naturally without excessive concern for grammatical correctness. Consequently, the reviewed literature suggests that modern implementations of the Natural Approach are characterized by multimodal mediation in which visual resources, storytelling, physical activity, and game-based learning work together to facilitate language acquisition among young learners.

Affective Comfort Versus Structural Constraints

The second major theme identified in the literature is Affective Comfort Versus Structural Constraints, which addresses both the pedagogical benefits and the systemic challenges associated with implementing the Natural Approach in TEYL contexts. One of the most consistent findings across the reviewed studies is the positive effect of low-anxiety learning environments on children's language development. This finding directly supports Krashen and Terrell's (1983) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which proposes that learners acquire language more effectively when emotional barriers such as anxiety, fear, and low self-confidence are minimized. Across different instructional settings, researchers have repeatedly reported that children become more willing to participate when learning activities are perceived as enjoyable, meaningful, and non-threatening. Fadlol et al. (2026), for instance, found that digital game-based learning significantly reduced speaking anxiety among elementary learners. Similarly, Yayla and Belet Boyacı (2023) observed that students participating in Natural Approach-based instruction demonstrated greater confidence and willingness to use English during classroom interactions. Xie (2021) also reported that TPR creates a relaxed learning atmosphere in which children feel comfortable experimenting with language because physical actions reduce the pressure associated with verbal performance. These findings suggest that the most immediate pedagogical contribution of the Natural Approach lies in its ability to create emotionally supportive conditions that encourage language use and participation.

Additional evidence of affective benefits can be found in studies that utilize songs, games, and interactive learning activities. Meisuri et al. (2025) reported that songs and interactive games improved vocabulary retention, pronunciation, classroom participation, and learner confidence among children aged six to eight years. Similarly, Rohmah (2024) demonstrated that online video games and school-based activities provided meaningful opportunities for language acquisition because learners interacted with English in authentic



and personally relevant contexts. Such findings indicate that affective comfort is not merely a supplementary outcome of language instruction but a central factor influencing acquisition itself. When children feel safe, motivated, and interested, they are more likely to attend to linguistic input, engage in interaction, and gradually develop communicative competence. Therefore, the reviewed literature strongly supports the argument that lowering the affective filter remains one of the most significant strengths of the Natural Approach in contemporary TEYL classrooms.

Despite these benefits, the literature also highlights a range of structural constraints that limit the effectiveness of the Natural Approach in EFL settings. A recurring issue concerns the limited amount of English exposure available to children outside the classroom. Rohmah (2024) found that learners often acquired substantial amounts of English through extracurricular activities and digital environments rather than through formal instruction alone, suggesting that classroom exposure is frequently insufficient. Shahbazi and Salinitri (2023) similarly observed that while virtual learning environments can support language development, successful implementation often depends on parental involvement and access to appropriate technological resources. These findings indicate that opportunities for natural language acquisition may be restricted when learners have limited access to English beyond formal schooling.

Another significant challenge relates to institutional and curricular demands. Rahman et al. (2025) identified persistent issues in Indonesian TEYL implementation, including policy inconsistencies, unequal teacher preparation, and limited access to quality learning materials. Likewise, Xie (2021) pointed out that exam-oriented educational cultures and the lack of authentic language environments often hinder the successful application of child-centered approaches such as TPR and the Natural Approach. Similar concerns are echoed in studies on digital storytelling and educational technology, which emphasize that technological tools can only be effective when teachers possess the pedagogical knowledge required to integrate them meaningfully into classroom practice. Consequently, the primary obstacle to implementing the Natural Approach does not appear to be the theoretical framework itself but rather the broader educational ecology within which instruction occurs.

Taken together, these findings provide a comprehensive answer to the second research question. The literature demonstrates that the Natural Approach offers substantial pedagogical benefits, particularly through reducing anxiety, fostering confidence, and creating conditions conducive to meaningful language acquisition. However, its implementation remains constrained by structural factors such as limited instructional time, inadequate exposure to English outside school, curriculum pressures, and unequal access to resources. Therefore, the most realistic application of the Natural Approach in contemporary TEYL contexts is not a rigid adherence to the original model but a locally adapted version that combines comprehensible input, multimodal learning resources, affective support, and contextual responsiveness. Such adaptations enable teachers to preserve the core principles of the Natural Approach while addressing the practical realities of primary English education in EFL environments.

Conclusion And Implications

This literature review shows that the Natural Approach remains pedagogically relevant in TEYL, not as a rigid legacy method, but as a flexible framework for organizing early English exposure around meaning, comfort, and understandability. Across the reviewed studies, the



approach is most visible in multimodal classroom practices such as TPR, digital storybooks, illustrated narratives, songs, and game-based learning, all of which help children receive English as comprehensible input rather than as abstract grammar content (Yayla & Belet Boyacı, 2023; Xie, 2021; Hendratno et al., 2025). The review also confirms that the most consistent benefit of these practices lies in their affective value: when children feel safe and engaged, they are more willing to participate, speak, and sustain attention during English learning (Meisuri et al., 2025; Fadlol et al., 2026). At the same time, the synthesis makes clear that the approach is not self-sustaining; it works best when teachers and institutions provide enough input, time, and contextual support for acquisition to unfold naturally (Rohmah, 2024; Shahbazi & Salinitri, 2023).

The pedagogical implication is that TEYL practitioners should treat English not as a subject that must immediately produce accuracy, but as a developmental space for guided exposure. In practical terms, this means using picture books, digital stories, short oral routines, physical response activities, and low-pressure games to create repeated input that children can understand and enjoy (Putra et al., 2026; Abu Abbas & Li Li, 2025; Pradini & Adnyayanti, 2022). For curriculum developers, the implication is even broader: early primary English should prioritize oral familiarity, listening comprehension, and willingness to communicate before imposing heavy written demands or grammar-centered evaluation. This orientation does not exclude literacy, but it asks for a more gradual sequence in which confidence and comprehension are built first, especially in EFL settings where children receive very limited exposure outside school (Hendratno et al., 2025; Meisuri et al., 2025).

This study still has limitations that open room for further research. First, it is limited to a relatively small corpus of 11 core studies, so the synthesis is strong enough to identify patterns but not broad enough to claim exhaustive coverage of TEYL globally. Second, the review is restricted to studies published in English and Indonesian within 2021–2026, which means some potentially relevant work in other languages or earlier empirical traditions may not be represented. Third, many of the reviewed studies focus on short-term outcomes such as vocabulary, motivation, speaking confidence, or immediate classroom engagement, while few examine long-term acquisition, sustained oral development, or progression into literacy. Future studies could therefore explore longitudinal Natural Approach interventions in Indonesian primary schools, compare urban and rural EFL contexts, and investigate how home exposure, digital media, and teacher scaffolding interact over time to shape children's language growth (Yayla & Belet Boyacı, 2023; Rohmah, 2024; Fadlol et al., 2026).

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