

On Krashen's Monitor Model Theory

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Abstract

Krashen's Monitor Model theory is held to be the most ambitious theory of SLA (second language acquisition). Through a detailed analysis, the focus of discussion is laid on the impact that the theory has made in L2 (second language) research and its innate restrictions that give rise to many disputes and controversy.

Keywords: Krashen; Monitor model; SLA; Teaching and learning

1. Introduction

Krashen's Monitor Model theory evolved in the late 1970s and was welcomed by many L2 teachers in the United States due to his ability to "pack his ideas in a way that makes them readily understandable to practitioners (McLaughlin, 1987:19)". However, criticism from L2 researchers and theorist abounds.

2. Monitor Model theory

The theory is a comprehension-based account of SLA, with which Krashen argued that experimental and other data are consistent. It consists of five basic hypotheses.

2.1 Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis

This hypothesis proposes two independent ways of developing L2 abilities—"acquisition" and "learning". Krashen (1985:1) defines "acquisition" as "a subconscious process children utilize in acquiring their first language" and "learning" as "a conscious process that results in 'knowing about' language". Acquisition, in his view, comes about through meaningful interactions in a natural communication setting, in which speakers are primarily concerned with meaning instead of form and show no explicit concern with error detection and correction (McLaughlin, 1987:20). For him, it is not the setting, but the conscious attention to rules that distinguishes language acquisition from language learning.

2.2 Monitor Hypothesis

It states how acquisition and learning are used in language production. According to Krashen (1982:15), "learning" and "acquisition" are used in very specific ways in L2 performance. He claims that people's ability to produce utterances in another language comes from their acquired competence, the subconscious knowledge, while learning, the conscious knowledge, serves only as a Monitor which people appeal to when they try to make corrections or self-corrections (Krashen, 1985:1). His position is that conscious knowledge of rules does not help acquisition, but only enables the learner to "polish up" what has been acquired through communication.

2.3 Natural Order Hypothesis

It is based on morpheme research findings (Duly and Burt, 1974; Fathman, 1975; Makino, 1970, cited in Krashen, 1987), stating that people acquire language rules in a predictable "natural" order, which does not seem to be determined solely by formal simplicity and is independent of the order in which rules are taught in language classes (Krashen, 1985:1). This "natural" order of acquisition is presumed to be the result of the acquired system, operating free of conscious grammar and seems to be independent of the learner's age, L1 background, and conditions of exposure (McLaughlin, 1987:30).

2.4 Input Hypothesis

It claims that humans acquire language in only one way, i.e., by receiving “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1985:2). Specifically speaking, people progress along a natural order by understanding input that contains the input a bit beyond their current level of competence. He regards this hypothesis as “the single most important concept in SLA”, in that “it attempts to answer the critical question of how we acquire language” (1980 cited in McLaughlin, 1985:36). For Krashen, comprehensible input is the route to acquisition, and information about grammar in the target language is automatically available when the input is understood.

2.5 Affective Filter Hypothesis

It claims that although comprehensible input is necessary for SLA, another factor also affects acquisition, i.e., the affective filter which “is a mental block that prevents acquirer from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive for language acquisition” (Krashen, 1975:3-4). When the acquirer is unmotivated, lacking in self-confidence, or anxious, the affective filter is up. The acquirer may understand what he or she hears and reads, but the input will not reach the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). When the acquirer is not concerned with the possibility of failure in SLA and when he considers himself to be a potential target-language speaker, the filter is down and the input will reach the LAD. He also suggests that the filter is the lowest when the acquirer is so involved in the message that he temporarily “forgets” he is hearing or reading another language.

Krashen summarizes his theory with a single claim that learners acquire L2 only if they obtain comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input “in” (Krashen, 1985:4).

3.Favourable Comments

McLaughlin (1987:19) claims that Krashen should be given credit for attempting to bring together research findings from a number of different domains. The impact of Monitor Model on the SLA field is profound since it exerts a most broad influence and its explanation is most comprehensive (Johnson, 2004:46). As a result, it gives rise to further studies on the input in SLA process. Gass (1988) goes on further to distinguish input from intake and proposes a process model. Sharwood (1993) coins “input enhancement” to refer to any overt attention to draw learners’ attention to formal properties of language, for which he analyses “positive input enhancement” and “negative input enhancement”. Verspoor and Winitz (1997, cited in Verspoor, Lowie and De Bot, 2008:62) present data to suggest that it is possible for intermediate ESL learners to improve their receptive English vocabulary, grammar and reading skills just as much through a pure listening comprehension approach as through an approach that involves output and meaningful interaction in a classroom setting. In addition, according to Krashen (Krashen and Terrell 1983, cited in McLaughlin, 1987:19), the Monitor Model theory, supported by a large number of scientific studies in a wide variety of L2 acquisition and learning contexts, is seen to provide empirical validation for a particular method of elementary language instruction — the Natural Approach.

4. Restrictions

Upon scrutiny, the limitations of the Monitor Model theory are easy to identify. As McLaughlin (1987:55) points out, it does not score well in his four criteria for evaluating theory, i.e., definitional precision and explanatory power, consistency with what is currently known, heuristic richness in its predictions, and falsifiability. Some scholars took issue with Krashen regarding whether learnt knowledge can be turned into acquired knowledge given appropriate practice. Others (White, 1987:108) argue that the model lacks precision and merely explains what contribute to performance rather than explore what the learner does with regard to input. The restrictions of the five basic hypotheses will be listed in turn in the following.

First, the acquisition-learning distinction is not clearly defined by the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis and it is impossible to determine which process is operating in a particular case.

Second, the Monitor Hypothesis takes learning as a Monitor whose function is only to “make changes in the form of our utterance, after it has been ‘produced’ by the acquired system” (Krashen, 1982:15). This implies that learning is available only for use in production rather than in comprehension, for which he did not provide any evidence.

Third, the case for the Natural Order Hypothesis is unsoundly based on the morpheme studies, which is questionable. Given the differences of specific languages and individuals, Krashen’s claim that an invariant natural order is always found is simply impossible.

Fourth, the Input Hypothesis seems to have more problems than the others. No definition is given of the key concept, “comprehensible input”. While emphasis is laid on input, little attention is paid to output. Also, there is a problem of the Input Hypothesis concerning the elimination of incorrect forms (McLaughlin, 1987:46). If a learner has learnt incorrect intermediate forms, there is no way in Krashen’s system for these forms to be changed, except through more comprehensible input. From common experience, one may easily oppose the notion. Moreover, this hypothesis highlights the fact that acquisition must be learner-defined. If only the learner “knows” his or her current state of linguistic competence, it is pointless for teachers to manipulate the input. However, in actual practice carefully modified comprehensible input is largely provided by teachers.

Finally, Krashen has provided no coherent explanation for the development of the affective filter and no basis for relating the affective filter to individual differences in language learning (McLaughlin, 1987:56). This hypothesis is incapable of predicting with any precision the course of linguistic development and its outcome.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Krashen’s Monitor Model theory has had a great impact on the practice of language teaching and has given rise to further studies on the input in SLA process, among which is the Natural Approach. Popular as it is, the theory has been seriously criticized on various grounds by researchers and theorists because it seems too great a leap from a small base of evidence (Gregg 1984; McLaughlin 1987) and some of its claims run counter to common experience and intuition. Krashen has not even provided a definite and operable criterion for “comprehensible input”. Nor has he produced sufficient evidence for his theory frame. However, despite its apparent shortcomings, the contribution of Krashen’s Monitor Model theory to the SLA field should be acknowledged because it has planted the seeds for a fruitful discussion regarding the complex process of SLA and has prompted some research in the area on the roles of input, output and formal grammar instruction (Johnson, 2004:51). Thanks to Krashen’s controversial stand regarding the roles of input and grammar instruction, the SLA field has substantially improved in its ability to understand and explain the processes of SLA. For these reasons, Krashen’s Monitor Model theory should be given recognition.

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Biography

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