

Krashen's Monitor Model Theory: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

Krashen's Monitor Model Theory is grounded on his view of language acquisition. Krashen expounds his theory with five central hypotheses that respectively deal with what distinguishes language acquisition from language learning, what natural order prevails in the acquisition of certain grammatical structures, how learning monitors and/or edits acquisition, how humans can come to acquire language, and how affective factors obstruct or optimize the acquisition. All these hypothetical assertions hint at Krashen's penetrating insight into the complex phenomenon of language acquisition. However, despite having been recognized by both linguists and psychologists as the most comprehensive theory of language acquisition till date, Krashen's theory has continued to draw numerous critical responses from multiple angles (Mitchell, Myles & Marsden, 2012). That conscious learning is not conducive to language competence, that comprehensible input amply accounts for language acquisition, that there is a generally predictable and invariant order of acquisition, and that focus on language forms restricts acquisition are some, among a lot of, loosely held assertions that put Krashen's theory in question (Tickoo, 2009), pose a potent challenge to the substantiality of the theory, and call for a rigorous scrutiny to redress the deficits thereof. Yet, needless to say, despite facing multiple critical challenges, the theory still has a number of significant implications for teachers' roles, learners' roles and teaching method as well. The present study seeks to critically explore the properties of the theory and then bring out in detail the implications the former entails.

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Introduction

Krashen's Monitor Model Theory consists of five hypotheses that deal with the acquisition-learning distinction, the natural order of acquisition, how learning monitors acquisition, how we acquire language, and how affective factors affect the acquisition. It is called the "natural approach" to language learning where the emphasis is on exposure, or comprehensible input. But the theory is flawed in a number of respects. "Krashen's tendency to make broad and sweeping claims for his theory" (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 58) makes it controversial to scholars of language acquisition. As we will see later, most of his claims emanating from his hypotheses are barely substantiated. They considerably lack empirical scrutiny-led justification. Thus what actually accounts for language acquisition remains in a dubious position in Krashen's theory.

However, the theory bears significant implications for teaching and learning in the language class. The teacher's task is to provide adequate language input in the class to maximize learners' exposure to language for the sake of effective learning. Teaching methodology, therefore, has to proceed in a manner that provides comprehensible input in low anxiety situations, incorporating messages that are interesting to learners. In order for learners to achieve mastery over language, their work should centre on meaningful communication, not the form or structure of language. Classroom should be managed in such a way as to optimize emotional preparedness for learning and to ensure a relaxed classroom environment.

The five hypotheses

The five central hypotheses of the Monitor Model (Krashen, 1982) are critically discussed below.

I) The acquisition-learning hypothesis

The acquisition-learning hypothesis makes a distinction between acquisition and learning. Acquisition is a subconscious process. In this process language acquirers are not aware of the fact that they are acquiring a language. They are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication. Acquisition is thus an informal learning in a natural way. On the other hand, learning is a conscious process. It involves both conscious knowledge of the rules of grammar of a second language and practical use of the knowledge. It is, therefore, a formal learning in an explicit way.

But Krashen's use of the terms 'conscious' and 'subconscious' are questionable, since he does not clearly define them. The vagueness of these terms impedes the reliability of the hypothesis. Then the way Krashen draws a hard and fast boundary between acquisition and learning is also disputable. Although he draws a distinction between them, he does not think of the possibility that both of them can form a synergic relationship rather than become mutually exclusive (Ellis, 1985).

II) The natural order hypothesis

This hypothesis states that grammatical structures are acquired in a predictable order. Certain structures tend to be acquired earlier than others. For example, the following chart shows the order in which people learning English as a second language acquire grammatical morphemes.

- a) ing (progressive)
- b) plural
- c) auxiliary (to be)
- d) auxiliary (progressive)
- e) article (a, the)
- f) irregular past
- g) regular past
- h) third person singular (s)
- i) possessive ('s)

(Krashen, 1982)

However, it is not clear how to decide whether a morpheme has been acquired or not - the fact that a learner uses a specific grammatical feature does not necessarily mean that he uses it in an appropriate fashion, or that he understands how it works. As Krashen himself recognizes, a learner may use the feature in one context and not in another. The way he presents the morphemes in a specific order raises question- can they be predicted exactly in the naturally predictable order as he has predicted? Indeed, he does not recognize that a different order is also possible in a different context (McLaughlin, 1987).

III) The monitor hypothesis

The acquired linguistic system initiates utterances when we communicate in a second language. The monitor hypothesis maintains that conscious learning can function only as a monitor or editor that checks and repairs the output of the acquired system. This means that we may call upon learned knowledge to correct ourselves when we communicate.

Three conditions limit the successful use of the monitor:

- a) **Time:** There must be sufficient time for a learner to choose and apply a learned rule.
- b) **Focus on form:** The language user must be focused on correctness or on the form of the output.
- c) **Knowledge of rules:** The performer must know the rules. (Krashen, 1982)

A major criticism of the monitor hypothesis is that Krashen relegates language monitoring to a peripheral position in language acquisition. It is seen as simply being a post-learning process, a tool for use of language in certain restrained conditions. However, researchers have pointed to monitoring as a basic learning strategy (Rubin & Naiman). They have been particularly interested in studying whether people who have been identified as 'good learners' have any specific characteristics.

IV) The input hypothesis

According to the input hypothesis, humans acquire language by understanding messages or by receiving comprehensible input. They move from i , their current level, to $i+1$, the next level along the natural order, by understanding language containing $i+1$. Here the structure is $i+1$ where i represents, as stated above, the current level of competence and 1 represents the new input that is to be added with i . The following figure is a representation of the process.

$$i + 1 \rightarrow \text{current level of competence} + \text{new input.}$$

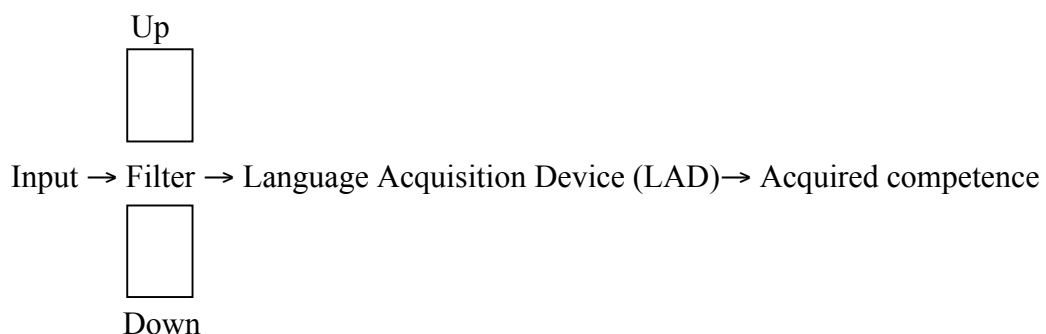
Therefore, humans acquire language by going a step beyond their current level of competence.

However, Krashen's position is hotly contested. He talks about comprehensible input. But it is not clear what he exactly means by this. He appears sometimes to mean that the input should be written or spoken in such a way that the language itself is comprehensible to the student - hence he refers to Motherese, caretaker language and foreigner talk. This kind of speech, he says, is 'roughly tuned' to the learner's language level, and tends to get more complex as the learner progresses. In this case, it is the language input itself that is modified. Then, what actually makes up comprehensible input remains seldom explained.

Krashen has done language teaching a favour in drawing teachers' attention to the fact that previously courses were overly based on grammar, and did not provide the amount or the variety of input that was needed (Krashen, 1982). But it oversimplifies considerably the processes of acquisition, begs the question of how input aids acquisition, and plays down the role of production.

V) The affective filter hypothesis

The affective filter hypothesis states how affective factors relate to second-language acquisition process. The affective filter is a part of the internal processing system. It subconsciously screens incoming language based on affective factors such as, the acquirer's motives, attitudes, and emotional states. The operation of the affective filter (based on Krashen, 1982) can be seen in the following figure.



Only when the filter shown in the figure is down or low, the input can reach the LAD and result in acquired competence. According to Krashen, it is necessary for the acquirers to be open to the input. When the affective filter is up, the acquirer is able to understand what is seen and read, but the input does not reach the LAD. This occurs on account of the acquirer's lack of motivation, confidence, and his concern with

failure. The filter is down when the acquirer does not feel worried and finds interest in becoming a member of the target language group. The acquisition then gets easy and comes to fruition.

Krashen further holds that the affective filter acts as the main source of individual differences in second-language acquisition. His hypothesis determines the relationship between affective variables and second language acquisition process. It shows that the strength or level of affective filter varies from acquirer to acquirer. If the attitudes of the acquirers are not in favour of second language acquisition, they will get a minimal input and then the affective filter will be high or strong. Even if they understand the message they will not be able to take the input into the definite part of the brain responsible for language acquisition. But if their attitudes are in favour of second language acquisition, they will successfully seek and obtain more input and then the filter will get weaker to prevent the acquisition. Therefore, only a strong or high affective filter can obstruct the input from reaching the LAD, and in this case second language acquisition is not likely to occur.

Researchers note several problems with the affective filter hypothesis. Krashen seems to indicate that the affective filter manifests itself at around the age of puberty. However, he does not make any serious attempts to explain how and why this filter develops only with the onset of puberty. Further, he does not explain how this filter would selectively choose certain “parts of a language” to reject. Laser-Freeman and Long (1991) state that “to provide...empirical content, Krashen would need to specify which affect variables, singly or in what combinations, and at what levels, serve to ‘raise the filter’” (p. 247). Clearly no explanation exists as to how this filter works. For example, is it sufficient for one aspect of a learner’s affective state, such as motivation, to be positive, or do all aspects have to be positive in order to lower the filter, and if so, to what degree? People who are unmotivated, stressed, or worried will not learn as well. In fact, this idea is not just applicable to language learning, but for any kind of learning. However, unlike Krashen, this idea applies to prepubescent children as well.

Implications of the five hypotheses for language classroom

Despite the criticisms, Krashen’s Monitor Model Theory entails important implications on different aspects of language classroom. Implications of the five central hypotheses of Krashen's theory are as follows:

Implications of the acquisition-learning hypothesis

The acquisition-learning hypothesis implies that conscious learning plays a comparatively minor role in second language learning. Acquiring a language is more successful and longer lasting than learning. It is, therefore, more important to focus on meaningful communication. Focus on language forms is less important. Meaningful learning, such as communicative and interactive exchanges, is required. Different meaningful activities are of use in the process of acquisition.

Implications of the natural order hypothesis

The natural order hypothesis provides an order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes. It suggests that we should follow the order when we go on with our learning. It further suggests that error correction has a limited effect on reducing mistakes. Teachers should not focus on errors during class. The errors that learners make are a natural part of the learning process. It is no good trying to get the learners to correct errors which are as yet beyond their competence.

Implications of the monitor hypothesis

According to the monitor hypothesis, if we are exposed to incorrect language and pick up wrong expressions, our learned knowledge will monitor the acquired knowledge. This monitor operates only when there is sufficient time, the focus is on form, and the language user knows the rule being applied (Krashen, 1982). Therefore, in order to ensure successful use of the monitor the three conditions must be met. However, overuse or underuse of the monitor is not desirable, which may lead to hesitant and inconsistent utterance. Monitoring should be optimal in which performers use the monitor when it is appropriate and when it does not interfere with communication.

Implications of the input hypothesis

The input hypothesis suggests that if communication is successful, and there is enough of it, $i + 1$ is provided automatically. Therefore, input need not be deliberately planned to contain appropriate structure ($i + 1$). The input hypothesis further suggests that fluent speaking cannot be taught but rather emerges naturally over time (Krashen, 1982). The best way to teach speaking according to this view is simply to provide comprehensible input. The requirements for optimal input are that it be (a) comprehensible, (b) interesting and relevant, (c) provided in sufficient quantity to supply $i + 1$ and (d) delivered in an environment where students are "off the defensive". (McLaughlin, 1987).

Implications of the affective filter hypothesis

According to the affective filter hypothesis, comprehensible input can have its effect on acquisition only when affective conditions are optimal (McLaughlin, 1987). It suggests that learners learn best when they are relaxed. Therefore, we have to make sure that learners are emotionally secure in the classroom. This means that the classroom has to be made learner- friendly so that the learners don't feel bored, angry, frustrated, or nervous. The affective filter must be lowered.

Implications for teachers' roles, learners' roles, teaching method and classroom environment

The Monitor Model Theory has significant implications for teachers' roles, learners' roles, teaching method, and classroom environment as well. The following is an attempt to point out the implications.

Implications for teachers' roles

Teachers' roles include organizing class activities, facilitating acquisition processes and the explanation of language input. Depending on learners' language proficiency,

teaching content and atmosphere of class, teachers have to modify their language to meet the need of classroom teaching. Teachers can use simple vocabulary and less complex syntactic structures, slower speech rate and provide comprehensible input for learners. Teachers can modify their language by using frequent vocabulary and grammatically well formed sentences to facilitate the learners' comprehension. Frequent stimulations to student's can help them remember the knowledge they learnt and give them opportunities to comprehend. Moreover, appropriate introduction of background knowledge is crucial in language class. To make students acquire more input, teachers should teach the language from the perspective of culture. They can provide learners background instruction that draws on their experiences. They can organize warm-up activities introducing background information to activate learners' prior knowledge to facilitate comprehension in the class.

Implications for learners' roles

Learners are largely responsible for their learning. They have to put emphasis on the primacy of meaning rather than on form. Since communication is the primary function of language, they have to be frequently engaged in meaningful communication to grasp language. Understanding the messages of the language is important. In this regard, Krashen and Terrell hold, acquisition can take place only when people understand messages in the target language (Krashen and Terrell, 1983). Thus the learners need to properly understand the messages of the language for acquisition to take place.

Implications for teaching method

The traditional teacher-centered teaching method does not contribute to effective learning. It is known that language learning is a process of active construction. Learners need to actively notice and choose the outside information according to the proceeding cognitive structure and construct the meaning. Therefore, learners should be made to actively take part in class activities on the basis of learner-centered teaching method. Lessons have to be planned in such a way as to ensure full use of the limited time in class to provide more opportunities for language practice. Learner-centered teaching method gives learners more chances to gain enough comprehensible input which is essential for their learning.

Implications for classroom environment

Classroom environment is required to be optimal. It must be conducive to low affective filter (i.e. high motivation, low anxiety etc). It needs to create a supportive atmosphere so that learners can feel relaxed. Teaching-learning aids in the class also deserve emphasis. To provide sufficient input, multimedia technology can be used in the class. With the help of multimedia technology it is possible to bring the whole world into a classroom and create a highly facilitated learning environment. Besides providing learners with much information, it can help them focus more on meanings and messages than forms, which is put forward in the Monitor Model Theory.

Conclusion

Krashen's Monitor Model Theory, also called the "natural approach" to language learning, sees communication as the primary function of language. With its communicative approach to language it explores the language acquisition process itself and a number of factors that come into play in the acquisition process. In sum, "Krashen proposes that: (a) the core ingredient of additional language learning is meaningful, comprehensible input; (b) the processes of additional language acquisition are implicit and subconscious and any explicit and conscious processes that may be summoned in the classroom can only help carefully monitored performance but will have little effects on true language knowledge or on spontaneous performance; and (c) the main obstacles to additional language learning for adults stem from affective inhibitions. Despite its popularity, the Monitor Model is evaluated as being too metaphorical to lend itself to proper empirical investigation. The strongest critiques are leveled by SLA scholars who are well versed in skills acquisition theory from the field of psychology (e.g. McLaughlin 1987), and also by scholars who apply Universal Grammar theory from the field of linguistics to the disciplinary SLA project (e.g. Gregg 1984). In both cases, the criticisms also serve to carve intellectual spaces for a better understanding of Krashen's theory and bringing the theory to a new altitude.

However, the implications for language learning the theory already entails cannot be overlooked. As it was noted earlier, the teacher is mainly responsible for providing as much comprehensible input as possible in the classroom. Whatever helps comprehension is important. Learners need to be exposed to a wide range of language practice. They have to be actively engaged in communication that contains meanings and messages. Accordingly, the teaching method needs to focus on much participation of learners in the learning process. Krashen's theory suggests that a well conducted learner centered teaching method has the potential to bring success in language classroom. The classroom environment needs to be positive, supportive and relaxing so that learners can work with ease and interest in a friendly atmosphere. Indeed, a critique of Krashen can come to a fruitful end when the critique is tempered with judicious appreciation rather than just staunch criticism.

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