

Krashen's Five Proposals on Language Learning: Are They Valid in Libyan EFL Classes

Ibrahim Abukhattala¹

¹The Libyan Academy, Misurata, Libya

Correspondence: Ibrahim Abukhattala, The Libyan Academy, Misurata, Libya, PO.Box 177. Tel: 218-91-322-4987. E-mail: Ibrahim.abukhattala@mail.mcgill.ca

Received: October 18, 2012 Accepted: November 7, 2012 Online Published: December 12, 2012

doi:10.5539/elt.v6n1p128 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n1p128>

Abstract

The most remarkable theory which aims to offer an overall explanation for SLA is Krashen's Monitor Theory. As documented by the professional literature, although it has received a great deal of criticism, this theory has had a great influence on all aspect of second language research and teaching since the 1980s. Krashen's theory seems to be attractive to many language teachers all over the world. Based on my experience as an EFL teacher and researcher, I attempt to provide a critical analysis of the theory's five main hypotheses and the applicability of these proposals in foreign language contexts.

Keywords: language acquisition, language learning, Monitor theory, Stephen Krashen, EFL classes, EFL methodology

1. Introduction

Unlike some earlier theories about language learning, Krashen's theory on second language acquisition (SLA) has been stated in simple language- in words the majority of teachers can understand, and uses examples from classroom practice. However, this theory must be adapted according to the different situations in which students experience language acquisition. Before analyzing what I believe is a useful adaptation of Krashen's theory, I will briefly review his hypothesis.

2. Krashen's Five Proposals

2.1 Learning/Acquisition Distinction Hypothesis

According to Krashen and other SLA specialists (Krashen and Terrell 1983; Littlewood, 1984; Ellis, 1985), students have two different ways of developing skills in a second language: learning and acquisition. Learning is a conscious process that focuses the students' attention on the form of the language (structure). Acquisition, unlike learning, is a process similar to that by which we acquired our mother tongue, and which represents the subconscious activity by which we internalize the new language, putting emphasis on the message (meaning) rather than on the form. Acquisition is, thus, the untutored or naturalistic way.

In most classrooms learning is emphasized more than acquisition. In traditional classrooms one of the first things teachers say "pay attention", and they have students analyze, and take notes on, the new structure item in the lesson. Later, students are given practice in providing correct answers either structurally or functionally, but always remaining conscious of what they want to say. In more conservative classes they are evaluated on their grammatical and lexical knowledge; consequently, they are forced to "study" for the exams.

However, in real life, when we interact with speakers of our own language, we rarely focus our attention on the form of the language the speaker use. We are concerned, rather, with what the speaker means or with the paralinguistic features of his speech (i.e., gestures, signs, etc.), which determine the quality of the message.

We have, for the most part, been teaching grammar rules or rules of usage instead of facilitating acquisition of English in the classrooms; consequently, it is necessary to change the type of activities we perform in class in order to help students develop an accurate, automatic, and long-lasting second language. Communicative language teaching has improved the kinds of techniques teachers use in class. However, we must be aware of pseudo-communicative materials-texts that teach language functions by using audio-lingual techniques. For example:

Talking about occupations:

S1: what do you do

S2: I am a doctor

(picture of a dentist) S2: What do you do?

S3: I am a dentist

(Picture of a lawyer) S3: what do you do?

S4: I am a lawyer

Acquisition techniques are, at least at present, more difficult to devise than learning techniques, but in the long run they are more effective.

Table 1. Learning/Acquisition Differences

Learning	Acquisition
Conscious process	Subconscious process
Knowing the rules	Picking up the learning
Results in accuracy	Results in accuracy and fluency
Formal, traditional teaching helps	Formal, traditional teaching does not help
Available for correction	Available for Automatic production

2.2 The Natural Order Hypothesis

According to the Natural Order Hypothesis, learners of a second language acquire structural items in a predictable order regardless of the order of presentation. This means that some structures are more easily acquired than others, and the order of difficulty does not necessarily correspond with what we believe in an easy or difficult structure. For instance, one of the structural items that we teach first in most language programs is the third-person singular of the simple present tense. Surprisingly, this is one of the structures acquired last. This is why we often complain of having intermediate, or even advanced, students who make mistakes with such a simple pattern.

The Natural Order Hypothesis also accounts for students' mistakes and errors: Students make mistakes (or developmental errors) when the structure used has not been completely acquired. However, students can use their learned competence to modify their production, thus correcting mistakes as they appear in their statements. We can assume, then, that mistakes will always be present during the acquisition process, especially when dealing with the late structure. Consequently, the best way to correct students' mistakes is to provide more *input* containing the structure in question.

We must, then, take into consideration that we do not need to change the order of presentation of language items. In fact, Krashen suggests that we present the language without any conscious effort to organize it; on the contrary, he recommends a syllabus based on topics, functions, and situations. What I feel should be done with most published material is to include more recycling of the material so that late structures can be properly received by students.

2.3 The Monitor Hypothesis

Krashen's SLA theory was originally known as the Monitor Theory, perhaps because the central part of it was the Monitor hypothesis. As I mentioned earlier in the section on the learning/acquisition distinction hypothesis, there are two ways of developing skills in a second language; one of them, acquisition, is automatic and subconscious. According to Krashen, acquisition is in charge of generating statements. These statements will eventually be corrected by the monitor, the section where learning is stored.

This hypothesis takes into consideration three kinds of monitor users: (1) over-monitor users, i.e., students who seldom trust their acquired competence, thus verifying every sentence they produce by using their learned competence. Such speakers are sure to speak hesitantly and with no fluency. (2) Under-monitor users, the other extreme, i.e., speakers who do not really care about correctness, only meaning. These speakers are usually very talkative even in their own mother tongue, and, although they make more mistakes than over-monitor users, they will also convey more meaning. (3) Optimal monitor users, or acquirers who manage to use the Monitor only when it is appropriate- e.g., when writing a speech or a letter. Optimal monitor users usually give the impression that they possess more competence than under-monitor users of the same level of acquisition, because they can

use their learned competence together with their acquired competence, and in many cases can use their L1 grammar adapted, with logical changes, to English by means of the monitor: this Krashen calls the *L1 + monitor* mode. One of the advantages of this mode of production is that the speaker receives more input because the communication process is established.

2.4 The Input Hypothesis

To Krashen, the Input hypothesis is the most important of his five hypotheses. He states that people acquire languages by understanding messages—that is, by receiving what he calls *comprehensible input*. We could describe it like this: in order to help someone learn how to drive, we must first show him or her how to do it (input) and then, little by little, when the driver is prepared, he or she can start trying (production). Learning how the carburetor or the gear box works will not help him or her become a good driver.

Krashen states that from *input* to *production* there is a period when students do not produce any original statements. This he calls the *silent period*. Students seem to need the silent period to internalize the information properly. When this period is broken, students are likely to develop a negative attitude towards learning the new language.

One of the problems most language-teaching institutions face is the fact that the length of the silent period varies from speaker to speaker. Some have very short periods and start producing right after something has been presented in class. Others seem to take forever and never volunteer to speak freely in class. At present, it is difficult to cope with this characteristic of speakers, especially in schools where terms are short and final evaluation is required. In the future, the evaluation systems should be modified to give long-silent-period acquirers the opportunity to codify all the new input presented in each class.

Krashen believes the productive skills (speaking and writing) evolve from the receptive skills (listening and reading) and, consequently, they should be given much more emphasis.

A roughly tuned input, as opposed to a finely tuned input, is recommended. In everyday conversation we normally use all kinds of structures, organizing our speech according to our communicative needs. We may start with the simple present, then answer question using a continuous tense, later carry on the conversation with a narrative in the simple past, including comments and advice using the conditional, etc. However, in the language classroom, teachers select the language they use, not only simplifying their speech, which is natural, but in most cases using only the structure being analyzed at the moment. This is called “finely tuned input”, or input directed only at the students’ level of acquisition. Roughly tuned input, on the other hand, “casts a net” of structures over the students’ level of acquisition. Some of those structures will be slightly beyond the students’ level of acquisition; however, that does not mean they cannot understand them.

The advantages of using roughly tuned input are obvious: your language will sound more natural, students will be exposed to a better kind of input, and structures will be previewed, then practiced, and finally reviewed.

The optimal input must be comprehensible, interesting and/or relevant, not grammatically sequenced, sufficient in quantity, and a little bit beyond the students’ level of comprehension: $i + 1$

2.5 The Affective Filter Hypothesis

Understanding a message is not enough to assure language acquisition; one must be open to the message so that it reaches the language acquisition device (LAD) (Intake). Not all the input reaches the LAD; somewhere along the way it is filtered, and only part of it is acquired. This filtering process takes place in the affective filter, which acts like a gate controlling the amount of input. The affective filter “opens” or “closes” according to our mood. That is, if we are relaxed and in a pleasant learning environment, more input will reach the LAD, while if we feel tense or are in a negative environment, our efforts to provide input will be fruitless. That is why it is important to provide an appropriate acquisition environment in the classroom, eliminating anxiety and encouraging students so they feel they can really acquire the language. One way to doing this is to allow the silent period to take place. Another is by using suggestopedia techniques in the classroom. For example, using the imagination to daydream situations that will lead into discussion using the target language. Of course, proper motivation is the best way to open the filter.

3. Proposed Adaptation of Krashen’s Monitor Model

Krashen does not believe that learned competence can become acquired. However, I have noticed in my own situation that being conscious of what I was going to say has eventually helped me acquire a few structural items. In countries like mine, where English is not necessary for everyday communication, interaction between speakers of English is unusual. Nevertheless, there are people who develop very good fluency (and accuracy) without having traveled to the USA or the UK. I also feel acquired competence can become learned competence.

Many times I have discovered rules that nobody taught me, and, if we consider that acquisition includes sounds, intonation, vocabulary, and body language as well, then many times I have become aware of certain pronunciation patterns and gestures that I later included in my monitor.

Krashen says the statements are generated in the LAD, but I believe they can also be generated in the monitor, as when we think of what we are going to say. Self-correction can then be available either from the monitor or from the LAD (correction by feel).

In the affective aspect of this theory, I believe there are two affective filters, one to control the amount of input and another for the output. This could explain why some students vary their performance depending on the situation they are in.

As you can see, the input affective filter not only controls the amount of language that goes in, but also selects where this intake should go: to the LAD or to the monitor.

One easy way to encourage acquisition in the classroom is by having the students pay attention to the gestures used in a normal communication act; that is, if the student is giving directions, he or she should use his/her hands as he does this. Teachers should encourage the use of body language in class. Thus, the students will not concentrate too much on the form, but on the meaning as well, and how this meaning goes together with nonlinguistic information.

4. Conclusion

For many of us, Krashen's SLA theory changed our concept of language teaching and has suggested new ideas for communicative language teaching. Nevertheless, the implications of this theory should be adapted according to the teacher's individual situation in order to obtain the best results. The years to come will give more shape to this theory, so that, together with other teaching theories and approaches, it will improve our methodology and our results.

References

- Ellis, R. (1985). *Understanding second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis*. Harlow: Longman.
- Krashen, S. (1997). The Comprehension Hypothesis: Recent Evidence. *English Teachers' Journal*, 51, 17-29. Retrieved from http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Units/Mazkirut_Pedagogit/English/Publications/ETJFocusonProjects/
- Krashen, S. (1998). Has Whole Language Failed? *ESL Magazine*, 1(6), 8-10. Retrieved from http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/text/Krashen_WholeLang.PDF
- Krashen, S. (1999). Seeking a Role for Grammar: A Review of Some Recent Studies. *Foreign Language Annals*, 32(2), 245-57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1999.tb02395.x>
- Krashen, S. (2000). What Does It Take To Acquire Language? *ESL Magazine*, 3(3) 22-23. Retrieved from http://www.sdkrashen.com/articles/what_does_it_take/index.html
- Krashen, S. (2008). Language Education: Past, Present and Future. *RELC Journal*, 39(2), 178-187. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0033688208092183>
- Krashen, S., & Terrell, T. (1983). *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Littlewood, W. (1984). *Foreign and second language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mason, B., & Krashen, S. (2004). Is Form-Focused Vocabulary Instruction Worthwhile? *RELC Journal*, 35(2), 179-185. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/003368820403500206>
- Nikolov, M., & Krashen, S. (1997). Need We Sacrifice Accuracy for Fluency? *System*, 25(2), 197-201. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X\(97\)00008-0](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X(97)00008-0)
- Rodrigo, V., Krashen, S., & Gribbons, B. (2004). The Effectiveness of Two Comprehensible-Input Approaches to Foreign Language Instruction at the Intermediate Level. *System*, 32(1), 53-60. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2003.08.003>