

# A Critical Evaluation of Krashen's Monitor Model

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**Abstract**—This paper provides a critical evaluation of Krashen's Monitor Model, the influential theory in second language acquisition. On the basis of providing a detailed explanation of all the five hypotheses in the model and the Krashen's evidence to support them, the paper evaluates the contributions of the theory, and discusses the criticisms to the theory based on relevant empirical studies.

**Index Terms**—Krashen, monitor model, critical evaluation

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the past three decades many scholars have conducted studies in the area of second language acquisition and different theories have been proposed. Among these various theories, the Monitor Model proposed by S. Krashen in the 1980s has enjoyed widespread popularity and influence in the field of second language acquisition teaching as well as research, and this theory has been enriched and refined over years in a series of his works (Krashen, 1981; 1982; 1985; Krashen & Terrell, 1988). The core parts of Krashen's Monitor Model are composed of five interrelated hypotheses: the acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis and the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which we will look at in detail. Despite its popularity and influence, it also encounters many controversies as well as criticisms. In this paper we will carry out a critical evaluation of Krashen's Monitor Model, and discuss both its contribution and limitation to second language acquisition. We will describe Krashen's Monitor Model first, and then carry out a critical evaluation of several crucial and controversial claims in this theory.

## II. KRASHEN'S MONITOR MODEL

In this part we will introduce each hypothesis in Krashen's Monitor Model. We will also have a look at some evidences that Krashen used to support his statements as well.

### A. The Acquisition-learning Hypothesis

In this hypothesis Krashen maintains that there are "two distinct and independent ways of developing competence in a second language" (Krashen, 1982, p.10) for the adults. The former one, acquisition, is a sub-conscious and implicit process to develop a feeling towards the language use by focusing on the "real communication" of meanings, which is similar to the acquisition of mother tongue for the children. He believes that adults, as children, still can get access to the "language acquisition device".

Ellis (1994) has stated that Krashen's Monitor Model is influenced by Chomsky's Universal Grammar. We can see that the premise of Krashen's five hypotheses is that second language acquisition is similar to first language acquisition. He opposes others' opinions especially the critical period hypothesis that children acquire language while adults learn language, and holds that adults can still "pick up" languages even after the critical period of adolescence for language acquisition, while this claim has encountered many criticisms later on, and we will touch upon these criticisms in the next part of evaluation.

The latter one, learning, which is opposite to acquisition, is a "conscious and explicit" process (Krashen and Terrell, 1988, p. 26-27), and refers to the "knowing about language", "rules" or "grammar" (Krashen & Terrell 1988) with conscious practice and memory. Krashen maintains that acquisition and learning are totally separate systems, and learning cannot become acquisition, and there is "no interface".

### B. The Monitor Hypothesis

The Monitor Hypothesis is closely related to the "Acquisition- Learning" hypothesis, and tries to reveal how learning and acquisition are used, and embodies the innate relationship between the two. Monitoring will "give awareness of what has been created, making it possible to check, either before or after articulation, for the frequent slips of the tongue, grammatical errors, social infelicities and other deviations from the intention that characterize normal speech" (Morrison & Low, 1983, p. 228, cited in Ellis, 1994).

According to the Monitor Hypothesis, the acquisition system and learning system have different roles. Krashen points out that only “acquisition system” can directly promote the development of second language competence and can be used as the production mechanism for language use, while “learning system”, as the result of conscious knowing of the language structure, can only be used as monitor roles in language use but not as part of language competence. There are three necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for the activation of the monitor roles:

- 1) Sufficient time: that is, language users have to have sufficient time to effectively select and use grammar rules;
- 2) Focus on form: that is, language users have to focus on the form of the languages by considering the appropriateness of the language;
- 3) Know the rules: that is, language users have to possess the grammar concepts and language rules of the language learned.

According to Krashen, the monitor system may be overused or underused, while the users of optimal monitor adopt the Monitor system “when it is appropriate and when it does not interference with communication” (Krashen, 1982, p. 20).

### C. *The Natural Order Hypothesis*

This hypothesis believes that the acquisition of language structures is conducted in “a certain predictable order” (Krashen & Terrell, 1983); that is, certain structures will be learned earlier than others. For instance, it has been proved that in learning English as a second language, some children or adults would learn the present tense earlier than past tense, learn nouns earlier than the possessives of nouns, etc.

Krashen has also used evidences of other researchers’ findings to illustrate this natural order hypothesis in second language acquisition. He mentions that Brown has investigated the first language acquisition of children and found that they acquired a series of morphemes in a predictable order. Krashen also cites the study of Dulay & Burt that as children acquire their first language in a specific order in picking up certain grammatical morphemes before others, this also holds true for the second language learning. This hypothesis is not free from criticisms later on, and we will discuss it in the next part.

### D. *The Input Hypothesis*

The Input Hypothesis occupies a particular place in Krashen’s Monitor Model, for it tries to solve the problem of how language is acquired”. Krashen has pointed that “humans acquire language in only one way---by understanding messages or by receiving ‘comprehensible input’”, that is, by receiving input slightly higher than the current language skills of the learner, and meanwhile the learner can focus on the comprehension of the meaning or information instead of the forms, can the learner achieve acquisition. This is his famous formula of “ $i+1$ ”, where “ $i$ ” stands for the current level of the learner and “ $1$ ” refers to the language materials that are slightly higher than the current level of the learners. The part of “ $1$ ” will be understood by taking context and knowledge of the world as well as the current competence into consideration. In addition, this kind of “ $i+1$ ” input do not need to be consciously provided; if the learners can understand the input and if he has got the sufficient amount, this kind of input has been automatically provided (Krashen, 1985, p. 2). Therefore, “comprehensible input” is the core of the hypothesis.

Krashen has mentioned that the ideal input is composed of the following characteristics:

- 1) comprehensibility

The comprehensible input of language materials is the necessary condition for language acquisition, while incompressible input is only a kind of noise to the learners.

- 2) interesting and relevant

The input materials shall be more interesting and more relevant. In order to facilitate language acquisition and then language learners can acquire language in an unconscious way.

- 3) not grammatically sequenced

The key point of language acquisition is comprehensible input. If the goal is “acquisition” not “learning”, the teaching arranged in accordance with grammar procedures is not necessary.

- 4) sufficient input

In order to acquire language structure, a few exercises or passages are far from enough; the acquisition needs constant reading interesting articles and large amount of conversation and communication.

Krashen (1982) has supported his idea of “comprehensible input” in second language acquisition by drawing upon the following evidences:

- 1) the caretaker speech. People are usually likely to talk in simple words to children, which are roughly at the level of the children and are familiar to the children, in order to get understood by the children. These speeches also focus on the current place and time, which makes the caretaker speech more like comprehensible input in helping children successfully acquire first language.
- 2) Simple talk. He draws on foreign talk and teacher talk in which modified utterances (such as lower speed, shorter sentences, simple syntactic structure, etc.) are used for facilitating comprehension in communication, and these modified simple speech is close to the current level of the learners, which also forms comprehensible input for the learners in the process of their acquisition of second language.

- 3) The silent period. Usually children who go to a new country and acquire a totally new language may go through an initial period of not talking, and Krashen (1982, p. 27) believes that “the children are building up competence in the second language via listening, by understanding the language around him”.
- 4) The limited contribution of the first language. Before learning the correct second language rule, the learners may resort to their first language rules, and this may result in error if their first language and second language rules differ.
- 5) Method comparison research. He finds that methods concerning emphasis on input and immersion and sheltered language teaching are more successful because that they have provided with a lot of comprehensible input.

#### *E. The Affective Filter Hypothesis*

The Affective Hypothesis holds that the sufficient comprehensible input is not the sufficient condition for learning a target language, while in the process of second language acquisition various affective factors shall influence the result of learning. These affective factors play the role of filters as “a mental block” (Krashen, 1985, p. 100) in determining the amount of input that the learners receive. According to this hypothesis, the language input may be converted into intake only after affective filter. Krashen believes that the affective factors which may influence language acquisition include the following:

- 1) motivation: whether the learners have clear goals shall directly determine the learning outcomes;
- 2) characters: the more self-confident, outgoing learners shall make greater progress in learning;
- 3) emotion: which mainly refers to the degree of anxiety, etc. Strong anxiety will block input and block language acquisition.

In sum, the five hypotheses described above can be generalized as follows:

“Acquisition is more important than learning. People acquire second languages only if they obtain comprehensible input ( $i + 1$ ) and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input ‘in’ (Wilson, 2000).

### III. EVALUATION OF KRASHEN’S MONITOR MODEL

The above-mentioned five hypotheses of Krashen’s Monitor Model have great impact on and made great contribution to the second language acquisition and function as a “catalyst to the current SLA research” (De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2005). It is one of the first comprehensive theories for the explanation of second language acquisition, and the popularity of this theory has also encountered controversies, which has in turn promoted the development of related research in second language acquisition. Despite its popularity and influence, there are also criticisms towards this theory, and actually these criticisms in turn make great contribution to the development of the field of second language acquisition.

The criticisms of theory mainly orient around the content and the methodological issues as well as the testability of this theory. Some scholars (e.g. Gregg, 1984) criticize this model by claiming that it is not coherent or lacks credible evidence to support it. McLaughlin (1978) has pointed out that though Krashen tries to develop a detailed and compressive second language acquisition theory, some of the core assumptions and various hypotheses have not been defined clearly, which leads to the problem that they are not easily testable. We will evaluate this model from aspects such as the distinction between acquisition and learning, monitoring role of learning system, natural order in second language acquisition, input in second language acquisition and the affective factors in second language acquisition.

#### *A. The Distinction between Acquisition and Learning*

The greatest contribution of this hypothesis is that “it posits a distinction between acquisition and learning” (Horner, 1987, p. 339), and is central to Krashen’s theory, which is considered as a “cornerstone” by himself (Krashen, 1989). However, Cook (1993, p. 63) has pointed out that there is little evidence to support this distinction; so in a sense, the distinction between acquisition-learning sounds like an assumption instead of a hypothesis.

Ellis (1994) has also stated that the distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge is supported by most scholars, while the distinction between acquisition and learning system has encountered controversies, especially the non-convertibility from the learned knowledge into the acquired knowledge has been criticized a lot.

Zafar (2009, p. 141) has also criticised “the vagueness of the terminology” by pointing out that there is no accurate definitions for the terms including “acquisition/ learning, subconscious / conscious, implicit/implicit”, which makes practical implementation in second language acquisition difficult.

Another controversial issue is that Krashen believes that acquisition and learning are two independent systems and learning cannot be turned into acquisition. Actually, we think that the distinction between the two is not that clear-cut in second language acquisition; this has also been discussed by Zafar (2009), who believes that “acquisition could be better understood when described as a process enriched by the learned system”. Furthermore, as to the LAD in Krashen’s theory, Gregg (1984, p. 80-81) have stated that this term is used much wider than that in Chomsky’s theory.

#### *B. Monitoring Role of Learning System*

Krashen holds that the learning system can only be used as monitoring role. Zafar (2009) has stated that the three necessary but not sufficient conditions for monitoring system (i.e. sufficient time, focus on form, knowing the rules) proposed by Krashen “makes it all the more difficult either to implement or to test the hypothesis in real-life situations”,

and this lack of empirical evidence is one of the criticisms, as indicated by McLaughlin (1987, p. 30): “People have rules for language use in their heads, but these rules are not those of the grammarian. People operate on the basis of informal rules of limited scope and validity. These rules are sometimes conscious and sometimes not, but in any given utterance it is impossible to determine what the knowledge source is”. The role of the three conditions is also questioned by some scholars (e.g. Gregg, 1984).

In addition, the acquisition system and learning system have also aroused criticisms (Gregg, 1984; McLaughlin, 1987). Gregg (1984) has pointed out that the role of learning system in the comprehension shall not be ignored, and this has also been confirmed by McLaughlin (1987), who has argued that if only the acquired system is responsible for the language production, it would be impossible for the second language learners to generate language appropriately.

### *C. The Natural Order in Acquisition*

The claim of natural order in second language acquisition is mainly based on the study of English grammatical morphemes in the 1970s. However, the claim that some things are learnt before other things lacks an explanation of why this is the case, and whether it applies to all situations for all people, so the natural order in acquisition might be an overgeneralization for all the second language learners. It is apparent that not all of the second language learners shall use the same route to achieve language proficiency due to individual variations. The evidence Krashen uses to support his claim is also questionable. It is hard to tell how to decide the statement that whether a morpheme has been acquired successfully or not, for the use of a certain morpheme by learners does not necessarily mean that the learners have acquired the rules of the use. This is also confirmed in his own study: the learners may not use the morpheme all the time but in some context instead of another.

What is most important is that this hypothesis has “overlooked the considerable influence of L1 on L2 and the role of positive and negative transfers” (Zafar, 2009, p. 142). For instance, a second language learner of English whose mother tongue is Chinese and one with French as mother tongue might not adopt the same route in the acquisition of the English language structures. Therefore, it seems that this hypothesis ignores various factors in individual differences of second language learners by simplifying the process.

### *D. The Input in Second Language Acquisition*

The input hypothesis has great significance for second language acquisition. Especially the comprehensible input is the pre-condition for language acquisition. If the materials for language teaching are far beyond the comprehensibility of the learners, or the materials are not interesting or irrelevant, there would be little value in the input for the acquisition. Therefore, in classroom teaching, it would be better for the teachers to provide comprehensible input to the learners, and ensure that the input to the students is comprehensible according to the feedback from students. In addition, it would be better if the teachers can provide interesting and relevant topics to the students, and guide the students to comprehend the new knowledge on the basis of the current level of knowledge, which may facilitate the acquisition of the target language. Besides classroom learning, learners shall take initiatives by themselves to expose to as much compressible input as possible as well as the materials interesting and relevant to themselves.

However, the input hypothesis has also encountered criticisms from different scholars. The term of “comprehensible input” is not specifically defined, and it is difficult to define the current level “i” of the learners. The formula of “i+1” may mean differently to different learners because of the individual differences, which makes it difficult to apply this hypothesis in classroom teaching, and Krashen does not provide any reasonable and appropriate solutions for this tricky problem.

McLaughlin (1987, p. 36) has criticised Krashen’s evidences for the Input Hypothesis by pointing out that “What Krashen does is not provide ‘evidence’ in any real sense of the term, but simply argue that certain phenomenon can be viewed from the perspective of his theory”, so there might be alternative explanations for the cases.

In addition, it seems that Krashen focuses more on the comprehensible input while not touching upon the output, which is also an important part for the second language acquisition of language learners. Krashen believes that speaking (output) can only help language acquisition in an indirect way, and the fluency in speaking is mainly acquired through comprehensible language input such as reading and listening rather than practice in speaking by claiming that the fluency in speaking and writing for second language learners “will come on its own with time” (Krashen & Terrell, 1988, p. 32). This claim has further been criticized in the “Output Hypothesis” proposed by Swain (1995) on the basis of her study of immersion programme, who points out that language output (including speaking and writing) can help learners to notice their problems and the gap between their language knowledge and target language, and this kind of awareness can facilitate the learning process in helping learners learn new knowledge or strengthen what they have already learned. Additionally, by observing the language output of the students, the teachers can also know the weakness of students, which is helpful for appropriate guidance.

The evidence of the comprehensible input resulting acquisition has also been challenged by Ellis (1994), who maintains that the relationship of acquisition and caretaker talk is a co-occurrence. He has also put forward that the process of comprehension is far from detailed or specific enough.

### *E. The Affective Filters in Second Language Acquisition*

The affective filters hypothesis “captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition” (Krashen, 1982, p. 31) and thus it plays a significant role in the second language acquisition, and the affective factors such as self-confidence, motivation as well as anxiety, which are crucial in second language acquisition process, may accelerate or block the learners’ progress in second language acquisition. According to Krashen, the Affective Filter Hypothesis also provides theoretical justification in explaining why some learners of second language may not achieve language competence even they have received much comprehensible input. Therefore, in order to facilitate the learners’ acquisition, teachers and learners shall work together to reach a high a high level of motivation, high self-esteem and low level of anxiety for second language learners.

Though most scholars believe that affective factors do play a significant role in second language acquisition, some poses questions on this hypothesis as well. McLaughlin (1987, p. 52-53) has argued that whether it is necessary to devise affective filters to explain the findings are problematic. It is not clearly stated by Krashen that whether and how single factor or combined factors are functioned as filters for second language acquisition. Gregg (1984, p. 92) has also argued that if it is the case that affective filters do influence the second language acquisition, it would become necessary to explain why these affective filters do not work for children in their acquisition of first language, for Krashen claims that the LAD in the adults and children are similar. Therefore there remain a lot of unanswered questions concerning this problem.

In sum, Krashen’s Monitor Model has limitations in the application or testability in second language acquisition due to unclear definitions of assumptions as well as hypotheses. Just as Gregg (1984, p. 94) has pointed out that “each of Krashen’s five hypotheses is marked by serious flaws: undefined or ill-defined terms, unmotivated constructs, lack of empirical content and thus of falsifiability, lack of explanatory power”. However, just these criticisms of Krashen’s theory have driven more researchers in second language acquisition discover the mystery of second language acquisition.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In all, based on what we have discussed above of the contributions as well as criticisms of Krashen’s Monitor Model in the field of second language acquisition, we can conclude that Krashen’s Monitor Model is a very systematic and comprehensive theory on the basis of his years of observation, research and teaching. As one of the most popular theory in second language acquisition, he almost encompasses every aspect of second language acquisition in this Monitor Model. It seems that he attempts to explain too much in this single model, which also one of the sources of the flaws in the theory, for we know that it is really difficult to take all kinds of variables into account in second language acquisition at a time. Though the lack of empirical evidence or unclear definition of terms makes some hypotheses in his theory unable to be tested in some sense, these flaws have challenged other researchers in the field of second language acquisition come up with better solutions to the problems found, which is also a drive for the acceleration of theories in second language acquisition. Anyway, we could not ignore the value of his theory just because of these imperfections.

Additionally, this theory has played a crucial role in facilitating the teaching of second language all over the world, and some effective teaching methods have been based on his main claims in the theory for facilitating the learners to better acquire the second language. Despite various criticisms from all perspectives, Krashen’s Monitor Model has played a significant role in the field of second language acquisition and second language teaching.

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