

Monitoring the 'Monitor': A Critique of Krashen's Five Hypotheses

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Abstract

This article discusses Krashen's Monitor Model and the attendant five hypotheses. Since its 1977 publication, Krashen, through a series of revisions, have tried to explain the way learners acquire a second language. This article closely looks at his basic premises and the criticism they have generated to better understand both the Monitor Model and its various lacunae and biases.

Key words: Affective Filter, Krashen, Language Acquisition Device (LAD), Monitor Model, Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

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1. Krashen's five hypotheses: "clearly false or trivially true"?
Things fall apart, according to many critics, as they approach Krashen's 'Monitor' model. Since its first publication in 1977 and subsequent revisions, Krashen's premises have generated substantial

debate and controversy. Some critics, for instance, have questioned his use of generalizations in describing the model. For others, the Krashen hypotheses appear testable according to the somewhat stringent criteria he has set for them, but beyond that the model is often not as convincing as he has claimed. In this article, these issues will be discussed to arrive possibly at a rethinking of Krashen's 'Monitor' model.

2. The Acquisition Learning hypothesis:

The hypothesis states that adults have two independent ways of developing L2 proficiency: acquisition and learning. In case of acquisition, instead of being "aware" of the rules of language/s, we gradually develop a "feel" for correctness in a "subconscious" way "identical" to "child first language acquisition", credit due to our in-built Language Acquisition Device (LAD) (Krashen and Terrel, 1988: 26-27)ⁱⁱ. Language learning, on the other hand, is described as a "conscious" and "explicit" process of "knowing about language" as opposed to its "implicit" acquisition. Krashen observes that learning cannot become acquisition (26-27).

Krashen's claims are meant to arouse controversy. Both McLaughlin (1978, 1987) and Gregg (1984) find it difficult to accept the idea of a fully operational LAD in adults, since adults, with regard to language acquisition, are well past the age of puberty. Krashen's attempt to stretch the scope of LAD beyond its originally meant-for capacity is not therefore well received. It is equally not easy to repudiate his claims by asserting the total opposite. Since Chomsky (1975) himself, in a later development, acknowledges limited accessibility to LAD on part of adults (but in no way "identical" to that of children) provided with age the ability to use LAD declines. To successfully intervene in this debate, a modified view of Krashen's version of LAD might be adopted to explain, for example, why some Language 2 (L2) learners achieve native-like proficiency. As for myself, the remarkable example of Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) — the Polish-born writer, who started learning English at the age of twenty-two only to be included in the English canon in the following decades, might help demystify the stance taken by some anti-Krashenites.

However, the vagueness of the terminology used by Krashen has not escaped criticism. Strictly speaking, what he exactly means by terms such as acquisition/learning, subconscious/conscious, implicit/explicit is hard to ascertain. It is not surprising that a need for definitional accuracy is widely felt, but Krashen remains less perturbed by that (McLaughlin, 1978, 1987). It is also difficult to perceive how acquisition and learning, 'housed' in two separate linguistics systems, could be put into use by L2 learners (Gass and Selinker, 1994). That learning cannot turn into acquisition is another contentious issue. In my view, acquisition could be better understood when described as a process enriched by the learned system. Instead of drawing a borderline separating acquisition and learning into two discrete disciplines, the cross-currents of both the systems constantly at work in second language acquisition (SLA) are to be acknowledged and explained.

3. The Monitor Hypothesis:

In the Monitor Hypothesis, the learned system is undermined in favour of the acquired one (Krashen, 1981, 1982; Krashen and Terrell, 1988). The acquired system is responsible for speech initiation and the learned system only for its editing/monitoring. To activate the learned/Monitor system, three conditions (i.e. time, focus on form, knowledge of rule) need to be met which makes it all the more difficult either to implement or to test the hypothesis in real-life situation.

As Krashen (1988) states, the Monitor could be applied in case of "simple" rules only (e.g. determining third-person singular number). but as "difficult rules" dealing with complex semantic properties are to be considered, the Monitor is of little or no use (Krashen and Terrell, 1988: 31-32). One can rightly ask the justification of proposing a hypothesis which is a problematic one, theoretically.

The acquired system versus the learned system issue invites legitimate criticism. Especially Gregg (1984) and McLaughlin (1987) are not in favour of highlighting the role of acquisition in generating utterance and comprehension at the cost of learning which is assigned "an extremely limited function" by Krashen (Krashen et al.

Terrel, 1988, p.30). With interesting anecdotes, Gregg (1984) demonstrates how learning, besides acquisition, is used in comprehension. McLaughlin (1987) points out that speech is a rule-governed, learned system-activated procedure. Had speech been solely generated by the acquired system, L2 learners would have ended up throwing words together in random, without making much sense. Therefore, in communication, the frequency of the learned system-activated utterances cannot be denied. McLaughlin (1987) challenges Krashen's claim that children, due to their lack of the Monitor, are superior to adults in terms of L2 acquisition. In support, he draws from research results that demonstrate adult learners performing, at times, exceptionally well in learning and ultimately attaining L2. After all, adults already have in their control the knowledge of the linguistics properties of Language 1 (L1) (see Bley-Vroman, 1989). The Monitor is also criticised for being poorly supported by empirical evidence. Such criticism denies the Monitor the kind of representational role Krashen has envisaged for it.

4. The Natural Order Hypothesis:

Krashen's hypothesis (Krashen, 1982; Krashen and Terrell, 1988) assumes a predictable natural order in L2 learner's acquisition of grammatical structure. However, not all L2 learners adopt the same route to attain Target Language (TL) proficiency. In fact, the opposite is quite often proven true (McLaughlin, 1987). Krashen is certainly provoking criticism by including in one acquired system various approaches that L2 learners adopt to attain TL. Note that his claim for a natural order is based mainly on English morpheme order studies which has already been demonstrated unsatisfactory (Gass and Selinker, 1994; McLaughlin, 1987).

Krashen has also overlooked the considerable influence of L1 on L2 and the role of positive and negative transferences. As researchers show, with a specific L1 some learners might find the learning of L2 more difficult in comparison to other learners (see Wode 1977, Zobl, 1980, 1982). Instead of confronting and acknowledging the complexities involved in SLA research, Krashen seems to have

simplified his premises and hardly left any room for addressing individual variations in L2 learning.

5. The Input hypothesis:

For Krashen, the Input Hypothesis holds a special place (it "may be the simple most important concept in SLA today") because the hypothesis attempts to answer "the crucial question of how we acquire language" (Krashen, 1980: 168). A mechanism is devised to explain how L2 learners gradually acquire language beyond their current level of competence ($i+1$) through contextual and extra-linguistic information. The Input hypothesis, like that of the Acquisition-Learning and the Natural Order, emphasises acquisition instead of learning. Krashen maintains that the L2 learner's production ability has little to do with the learned system.

Interestingly, Krashen (Krashen, 1982; Krashen and Terrell, 1988) demonstrates the basic tenets of his hypothesis not by providing much 'evidence' in the real sense of the term, but by arguing in favour of certain phenomena that could be viewed from the perspective set by his theory. Also, according to Gregg (1988), the argument that acquisition occurs through extra-linguistic information is probably false. In the absence of such information, L2 learners would have to depend on guesswork to understand certain grammatical rules beyond their present level of acquisition ($i+1$), but that does not mean that such guesswork would gradually be transformed into acquisition.

As Krashen (1985) further states, since L2 learners acquire language in a predictable natural order, it would be relatively easy if L2 teachers could detect the level of competence of learners and devise teaching materials accordingly (i.e. of $i+1$ quality). The "necessary grammar" would "automatically" be provided as L2 teachers ensure that students receive "comprehensible input" in "sufficient amount" and "right quantities" (Krashen, 1985: 2). Claims like this are indeed difficult to test empirically since nowhere does Krashen define "comprehensible input", or tell exactly how to measure the "level of

competence" in "sufficient amount" or "right quantities". The vagueness of the terms employed makes his theory all the more non-testable.

6. The Affective Filter Hypothesis:

Taking a cue from the term "affective delimiters" originally proposed by Dulay and Burt (1977), Krashen (1982, 1988) builds up this particular hypothesis through various revisions. The hypothesis recognises three personal variables (motivation, self-confidence and anxiety) impacting on L2 learner's success/failure. The idea of an affective filter is established, which is "that part of the internal processing system that subconsciously screens incoming language based on" the three variables mentioned (Krashen, 1982: 30). The introduction of the affective filter, in effect, takes the proposition of the Input hypothesis a step forward because now acquisition is seen as a naturalised process put in track by comprehensible input ($i+1$) and the screening by high/low affective filter. In case of weak L2 learners, the filter shields LAD from getting the input necessary to activate the acquired system, in case of successful learners, the vice versa.

The application of the affective filter to explain the acquisition scenario produces disturbing results which can be dealt one by one. For instance, in case of children, Krashen claims a total absence of the filter and forgets that even children can be affected by personal variables such as feelings of insecurity, anxiety and a lack of self-confidence, factors which are known to stand in the way to some adult learner's route to acquisition. Despite this, children successfully master L1 — how and why? Again, if the absence of the filter can make children such effective learners, how to explain the achievement of some adults who attain native-like proficiency — what happens in their case is left unexplained. In this regard, Gregg (1988) quotes the case of a Chinese woman who has achieved almost native-like proficiency with the exception of the correct use of the third-person singular number. How then does, Gregg inquires, the filter let out all the information but withhold only the third-person singular number? How does the filter determine which parts of

language are to be screened in/out? How can the process of fossilisation and inter-language development be determined by the filter? As usual, Krashen is too reticent to provide an adequate reply. It is, thereby, problematic on his part to promote a filter without specifying its nature and the tools required for assessing its particular strengths and weaknesses.

7. Conclusion:

Many critics feel that Krashen has postulated a model without properly explaining its many variations and functions, thus rendering it unsatisfactory when empirically tested. In the face of increasing criticism, Krashen is forced to acknowledge that "further research may change them or even force us to reject one or more of them" (Krashen, 1988: 2). But such constant changes, modifications and revisions can frustrate both the researchers and teachers interested in using this model. Had Krashen taken that into account, he might have been able to propose a more testable, viable and useable Monitor.

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ⁱ This quotation is from Gregg, K. (1984).

ⁱⁱ Language Acquisition Device (LAD): "A language faculty that constraints and guides the acquisition process" (Gass and Selinker, 1994: 333).