

The Acquisition – Learning Distinction: A Critique of Krashen’s Monitor Model

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Abstract

A lot of research has brought to light observations that children acquire their first language easily, yet they meet with great difficulty in learning the second language. This has stimulated the debate on whether second language learning can result in language acquisition. Children fail to learn what they are taught, but paradoxically, are often successful with items that they are not explicitly taught. Language is an indispensable vehicle for all human knowledge as well as a product of all human society; therefore it is important to understand the distinction between acquiring and learning it. The scope of this paper therefore critiques Krashen’s Monitor Model and attempts to find out whether formal learning can ever result in language acquisition. The study is important as it brings to light the link between acquisition and learning, as in some instances people are unable to use their second language even after learning it in the classroom.

Keywords: acquisition, learning, first language, second language, monitor model

INTRODUCTION

Krashen’s monitor model is perhaps the most ambitious theory of second language learning process. It evolved in the late 1970s in a series of articles and was elaborated in a number of books. Though the theory has received popularity among second language teachers, it has also been subject to varying criticism. However, to Krashen, the theory is supported by a large number of scientific studies in a wide variety of language acquisition and learning contexts. The scope of this paper is to find out whether humans can acquire a second language without instruction.

ACQUISITION

Cook (1996) notes that research since the 1960s has confirmed that children who know a second language are better at separating semantic form from phonetic aspects of words, at tasks involving classification and at tests of creativity, hence they have a sharper awareness of language. Growing up with two languages thus indeed is a great asset to children’s intellectual development. According to Krashen (1985) human beings have two independent means of gaining ability in second language viz –a- viz acquisition and learning. Acquisition is a subconscious process identical to the process used in first language acquisition, where the acquirer is not aware that he is gaining a language. Radford, Atkinson, Britain, Clahsen and Spencer (1999) state that acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances but in the communicative act. Acquisition produces what Chomsky (1965) calls “tacit competence” or a feel of the language.

Chomsky claims that linguistic competence is the product of a species-specific innate language faculty, and it is further maintained that this faculty is independent of other cognitive capacities.

LEARNING

Learning involves conscious knowledge, knowing about the language. Krashen (1985) asserts that when we talk about grammar or rules, we are referring to learning not acquisition. Radford et al (1999) argues that the learned system is the product of formal instruction and it comprises a conscious process which results in conscious knowledge about the language, for example, knowledge of grammar rules. “When our errors are corrected, we rethink and adjust our conscious rules” (Krashen, 1985:09). Thus, to Krashen, acquisition plays a far more important role than leaning in second language performance. The ability to use a second language comes, mostly from what we have acquired, not from what we have learned. Our conscious rules perform a monitoring function. Thus learning is less important to acquisition.

The monitor theory constitutes five basic hypothesis:

1. The Acquisition Learning Distinction

This is the most fundamental of all hypothesis in Krashen’s theory. McLaughlin (1987) provides a critique to Krashen’s theory with regards to setting. For Krashen in the natural setting an adult can obtain formal instruction by asking informants about grammar and by receiving feedback from friends. In the classroom, language can be acquired when the focus is on communication, for example through dialogues and role playing. In Krashen’s sense,

setting is not important. McLaughlin (1987, 56) argues that, "Krashen's theory fails at every juncture...Krashen has not defined his terms with enough precision, the empirical basis of the theory is weak, and the theory is not clear in its predictions" Thus McLaughlin argues that there should be a clear distinction of what Krashen means by conscious and subconscious, though he identifies conscious learning with judgements of grammaticality based on rule and subconscious acquisition with judgements based on feel. The question becomes "were the subjects operating on the basis of rule or feel?". It becomes difficult then to determine whether students were acquiring or learning the language.

In his theory, Krashen argues that learning does not turn into acquisition. What is consciously learned, through presentation of rules and explanations of grammar, does not become the basis of acquisition of the target language. The arguments that conscious learning does not become unconscious acquisition is based on three claims; (Krashen 1982, 83-7). Firstly, that sometimes there is acquisition without learning, that is, some people have considerable competence in a second language but do not know very many rules consciously. Secondly, there are cases where learning never becomes acquisition, that is, a person can know the rule and continue breaking it. Lastly, that no one knows anywhere near all the rules.

Gregg (1984) criticises these claims saying though the arguments are true, they do not constitute evidence in support of the claim that learning does not become acquisition. For Gregg, many second language learners believe that some rules can be acquired through learning and Krashen's claims run counter to these beliefs. Greg (1984:21) gave the example of a student having forms of Japanese verbs by memorising the conjugation chart in his textbook. In a few days, his use of these forms became error free, with no input but a bit of drill. The point here is that he learned the rules and acquired them for he could produce the verbs error free without meaningful interaction with native speakers.

The Monitor Hypothesis

Krashen also alludes to the monitor hypothesis which explains the relationship between acquisition and learning and defines the influence of learning on acquisition. The acquisition system is the utterance initiator, while the learning system performs the role of the monitor or editor. Functions of the monitor are to plan, edit and correct where three specific conditions are met, that is, the second language learner has sufficient time at his disposal, he focuses on forms or thinks about correctness and he knows the rule. Krashen noted that the role of the monitor should be minor, used only to correct deviations from normal speech and to give speech a more polished appearance. Thus to Krashen, the role of conscious

learning is somewhat limited in second language performance.

Natural Order Hypothesis

Krashen alludes to the fact that acquisition of grammatical structures follows a natural order which is predictable. For a given language some grammatical structures tend to be acquired early while others late. The implication of a natural order hypothesis is not that a language program should be based on the order found in the studies. Krashen thus rejects grammatical sequencing when the goal is language acquisition.

Input Hypothesis

This is concerned with acquisition not learning and explains how second language acquisition takes place. The learner improves and progresses along the natural order when he receives second language input that is one step beyond his current stage of linguistic competence. The learner at stage (i) who receives comprehensible input gets to stage (i) + 1. Not all learners can be at the same level of linguistic competence at the same time, therefore natural communicative input is the key to designing a syllabus, ensuring that each learner will receive some (i) + 1 input that is appropriate for his current stage of linguistic competence.

The Affective Filter

This is a barrier that can prevent input from reaching the LAD. The hypothesis claims that comprehensive input, although necessary is not sufficient for second language acquisition as input might be understood by the acquirer but might not reach the LAD. Successful language acquisition requires that at least two conditions be met; acquires must assume that they will be successful and must consider themselves to be potential members of the 'club' users of that language. Stevick (1976) notes that many language students are on the defensive in language classes as they consider the class to be a place where their weakness will be revealed, not a place where they will grow in competence. Theoretically then this causes a high affective filter. A high filter is one that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition device and it is caused by low motivation, high student anxiety and low self esteem.

Critics of Krashen argue that there is no pronouncement by Krashen of what acquisition and learning is. According to McLaughlin (1987:22), Krashen gave an example of an individual who had learned in class a rule of 3rd person singular morpheme for regular verbs in English and was able to apply it at one point but it was only later at another point that the rule was acquired (that is, after meaningful input from native speakers at this point. To Krashen, at the first point, the learner was faking it until his acquisition caught up until the second

time, the learner could apply the rule but had not acquired it.

While Krashen contends that rule application occurs only when certain conditions are met, Gregg has a different opinion; that learners apply the rule rapidly and without making mistakes regardless of context. Gregg (1984) contends that Krashen gives the language acquisition device a scope of operation much wider than is normally the case in linguistic theory. Where Krashen equated the LAD with unconscious acquisition. Chomsky (1965) saw it as modular, with the LAD as but one of various mental organs that interact with each other and with the input to produce linguistic competence. So, where Krashen alludes to the fact that adults have access to the same LAD that students use, Chomsky asserts that the ability to use the LAD declines with age and adults second language learners must rely on other mental faculties. It is not clear how the concept of the LAD can be applied to an adult as the adult is no longer in the initial state with respect to language and is also endowed with more fully developed cognitive structures. Where Krashen only refers to what is subconscious, Chomsky says one can cognise both what is accessible to consciousness and what is not.

CONCLUSION

Krashen is not clear on the acquisition – learning distinction but contends that it is an abstraction that predicts many observable and concrete phenomena. As Gee (2014) asserts, humans are creatures of language. They are born ready and able to acquire some variety of a human language. For children, language acquisition is entirely unconscious, it does not require teaching or correction but eventually they catch up and say the correct forms of language. Chomsky argued that there is a biological capacity for language that sets a basic design for all human languages and sets as well, parameters of how different languages can vary from this basic design. Therefore, oral language is that which children speak, the fundamental form of language that our biology prepares and helps us to learn by structures in our brains.

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