The Acquisition of Language According to Krashen

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Some years ago, I tape-recorded one of my English language teacher colleagues in operation in the classroom. As a normative speaker, she wanted to review the tape with me in order to gain some insight into how she could possibly improve her classroom language.

On self-monitoring the tape, she was totally surprised and somewhat alarmed at the frequency and consistency with which she omitted the final 's' from simple present tense verbs agreeing with third person singular subjects. After all, this was one of the teaching 'items' continually appearing in her own lesson plans. She knew the rule. She could explain it. She could teach it. She could even use it - but, normally, as she discovered, she didn't.

There are, in addition, a number of other puzzling phenomena which characterize the typical second language classroom or learner. Why can fifth-grader Lai write so accurately, yet be barely capable of participating in a conversation in the playground? Why can't (don't?) my students use plural endings appropriately in their speech after so many years of drills, practice and 'getting it right' on all their tests? Why was Mr. Stafford, a teacher of Indonesian, not able to effectively use his knowledge of the language when he went on his first visit to Jakarta (he had to use English)? Why, on checking and rechecking their written work, are learners able to identify, and usually correct so many of the recurring errors?

Krashen (1982, 1985; Dulay et al., 1982) provides the answers - or so many of us believed. On second thoughts, is it all too good, too simple, to be true?

This paper attempts to briefly examine Krashen's major hypotheses and to reflect some of the major current concerns with these suppositions and their implications.

Gregg (1984), among others, in a particularly scathing attack, takes Krashen to task over the incoherence of the hypotheses, the ambiguous or ill-defined terms employed, and the lack of evidence to support many of the claims made.

The four hypotheses to be examined are:

1. The Acquisition I Learning Hypothesis
2. The Monitor Hypothesis
3. The Input Hypothesis

4. The Affective Filter Hypothesis

(1) The Acquisition / Learning Hypothesis

Krashen proposes that "adults have two distinct and independent ways of developing competence in a second language (1982 :65)." He distinguishes between 'acquisition' and 'learning'.

'Acquisition' refers to the subconscious process of 'picking up' a language through a focus on meaning rather than form. Learners are consciously unaware, both of this process in action, and the resulting acquired rules. This is a similar, if not identical, process to the way children learn their first language.

The second way to develop second language competence is through conscious 'learning' (I will employ Krashen's distinction and forthwith use the term 'learning' to refer to the gaining of conscious knowledge of a language. 'Learner' will refer to the child or adult who is acquiring or learning a language). Conscious learning consists of gaining knowledge, normally in a classroom situation, of the grammar or the rules of a language.

Krashen (1985 :8) goes on to point out that it is acquisition and not learning that plays the central role in second language performance. Furthermore, error correction affects only learning and not acquisition; it may lead the learner to rethink or adjust conscious rules.

The acquisition / learning hypothesis claims therefore that both children and adults can acquire language - that is, the ability to acquire does not cease at puberty. Of course, it is noted (Krashen, 1982: 65), this is not to say that adults will necessarily be able to achieve near-native or nativelike fluency in a language. As we shall see, other factors are influential.

Krashen's neat distinction between acquisition and learning is not of course a new one (Nunan, 1985: 2). What is new, and controversial, is his claim that the two are totally separate - that learning can never become acquisition.

This fact is used as evidence to support the observation that learners of a first language are inevitably successful, while second language learners develop varying degrees of competence, with few ever reaching near-native fluency and accuracy (Nunan 1985: 1).

This assertion is certainly extreme and has attracted much criticism (eg. Nunan,1985: 2; Gregg, 1985: 80). Krashen boldly turns his back on the cognitivists who suggest that conscious learning, in a meaningful context, can indeed be internalized and subconscious.

As could be expected, clear evidence in support of one view or the other does not as yet exist and we are compelled to fall back on what Gregg believes is 'intuitively obvious' (: 81). He relates his own experience in learning Japanese and strikes some familiar chords. I too, on the basis of my language learning experiences, agree with him that "it certainly does seem intuitively obvious that at least some rules can be acquired through learning (:81)." While intuition does not clearly prove anything, Gregg deftly challenges Krashen to disprove the more widely held proposition that learning can become acquisition.

Krashen comes under attack on another front when Gregg (: 82) admonishes him for his ill-defined terminology. Krashen's failure to adequately define the terms 'conscious' and 'subconscious' would

seem to indicate either an embarrassing oversight or a serious and academically unforgivable lack of attention to key and determining concepts. What is meant by 'subconscious'? Are we to understand that what enters the subconscious is not accessible to the conscious mind? And conversely, and more importantly in our present discussion, is conscious knowledge incapable of entry into the subconscious?

Gregg concludes:

> "If some unconscious knowledge is capable of being brought into consciousness, and if conscious knowledge is capable of becoming unconscious - and this seems to be a reasonable assumption - then there is no reason what-so-ever to accept Krashen's claim, in the absence of evidence."
>
> (:82)

The acquisition / learning hypothesis has also received attention from Klein (1986) who sees Krashen's crucial distinction in a different light.

He misguidedly, it seems, interprets Krashen's 'acquisition' and 'learning' in terms of his own distinction between 'spontaneous' and 'guided' language acquisition:

> In both cases [Krashen's 'acquisition' and 'learning']... the crucial element is 'acquisition' in the sense 'of a subconscious process governed by certain rules. The 'learning' (and indirectly, teaching) in which the learner is involved exerts, to a certain extent, a controlling influence upon the 'acquisition' of language.
>
> (Klein, 1986: 28)

Klein views learning as the 'domestication' of the natural process of acquisition, and believes that:

> The same idea is contained in Krashen's model with the specification that the effective control operates within the learner...
>
> (p. 28)

Surely this is not what Krashen means at all. Domestication implies an alteration of the condition of subconscious knowledge. While this view is less extreme and more appealing than Krashen's, as it acknowledges some kind of interaction between - the conscious and the subconscious - learning and acquisition, Klein further confuses matters when he concedes that:

> We do not ... intend to follow Krashen's distinction since there is no clear evidence that the processes are basically different.
>
> (p. 20)

Until Krashen clearly defines his terms and their parameters, and introduces some substantial evidence into his arguments, we are left to ponder the possible reconciliation of classroom experiences and what is felt to be 'intuitively obvious' about the learning / acquisition distinction.

(2) The Monitor Hypothesis

The next piece in Krashen's jig-saw is the Monitor Hypothesis, which states that our conscious knowledge of a language performs only one purpose - that of a monitor or editor. This hypothesis

specifies how the two separate processes of acquisition and learning are used in second language performance (Krashen, 1982: 69).

The monitor has three major functions - the conscious learning of the rules of a language (eg. from a grammar book or in a classroom), the conscious formulation of utterances, and the editing of utterances during production or after they have been produced by the acquired system. In this third role, the Monitor is engaged to check or scan acquired output (either oral or written) and make any necessary corrections based on the conscious rules learned (Dulay et al, 1982: 59)

Krashen goes on to posit that three conditions are necessary, but not sufficient, for the utilization of the Monitor as an editor or composer. Firstly, the learner requires sufficient time to think about and apply conscious rules. Secondly, he needs to focus on the 'forms' of a text. Finally, the performer must know the grammatical rules concerned.

These are quite formidable preconditions, as Krashen himself acknowledges:

> .... research evidence strongly suggests that Monitor use is very limited, that all fluency and nearly all accuracy in second language performance, even among highly "analytic" adult performers, is a result of what we have acquired, not what we have learned .... for most people, even university students, it takes a real discrete point grammar test to meet all three conditions for monitor use...
>
> (Krashen, 1982: 71)

Furthermore, the Monitor cannot be utilized until adolescence - until Piaget's 'formal operations' stage of cognition (Dulay et al., 1992:60).

Comments

In the area of written production, I feel sure that many language teachers would readily agree with Krashen on the evidence of the ability of second language students to edit their own compositions by thinking about and using rules to identify and correct many of the systematic grammatical errors which surface, presumably as the result of the learners' preoccupation with content rather than form, especially in the production of first drafts.

While it is accepted that in the process of writing, we generally have more time to rely on conscious knowledge of rules, the second of Krashen's three conditions for Monitor utilization, a focus on form, is considered by Gregg to be a 'false distinction' - in oral production at least (:83). He maintains that, with a few exceptions (such as plural markers and the third person, singular, present -s ending), a focus on form, how we say something, is in fact a focus on content, what we say. The choice of one determines the other.

Again in terms of oral language, Rivers (1883, in Nunan, 1985: 2) seems to agree in asserting that despite being fluent in French, she finds herself rapidly monitoring her own normal speech; yet French friends consider her to be totally focused on the message, not on the form, of her utterances. (My own less than fluent experience with Malay would confirm such rapid monitoring, and my friends would almost certainly say that they felt I was concerned with content, not form. I wonder nevertheless, just how 'normal' my speech is - after all, native speakers, it is assumed, seldom consciously monitor their speech at all.)

The point is of course, that a learner's grammatical system and its 'rules' is not normally congruent with that of the target system of the native speaker - the consciously learned rules always (hopefully!) are however. My grammatical forms may express what I want to say, but at the same time may not be those of the native speaker. I can, and do, therefore take time out to focus on forms vis-a-vis the learned forms of the target system.

This objection to the formulation of one of the conditions for Monitor use by Gregg may be trivial, and does not constitute an objection to the existence of the Monitor itself -but what are the implications for an acceptance of Krashen's monitor and it's cognitive nature?

With reference to the three conditions for efficient monitor use, Krashen clearly admits that in a normal communicative situation, the monitor cannot be used (1982: 71); he therefore implies, as Gregg (1985: 84) notes, that conscious knowledge of language rules is of no use for acquisition and, except under extraordinary circumstances, no use for production.

This, according to Gregg (: 84), leads us to a fundamental contradiction - if conscious knowledge or rules is of no use for acquisition, then it cannot be said that there are two, independent means for acquiring ability in a second language, and therefore the acquisition / learning hypothesis is false.

Krashen's assertion that children, in acquiring a first language, do not consciously process the language (i.e. utilize the Monitor) is challenged by Nunan (1985: 3). In Krashen's words:

> The capacity for grasping the conscious representation of abstract linguistic rules appears to emerge at about puberty and may well be the result of the adolescent's new ability to think abstractly in general.
>
> (Dulay et al., 1982: 60)

Nunan suggests that children do in fact pay conscious attention to language and gives some evidence of a child's linguistic negotiation with an 'expert user' to support this view (:3).

(3) The Input Hypothesis

So far we have seen how Krashen characterizes learning through the use of the Monitor - and briefly described this process. We now need to consider the acquisition process, as the major determinant of language performance.

Krashen (Dulay et al., 1982: 9) claims that the question of acquisition is best answered by a hypothesis which fits the data most accurately - and this is that we acquire in one way only, by understanding utterances. New rules are acquired then, by understanding input which contains these new rules. Extralinguistic context ('the here and now' feature (Krashen, 1986:75)), knowledge of the world and previous linguistic competence are the factors which make input, containing yet to be acquired rules, comprehensible.

We acquire language (new structures) through understanding input which goes a little beyond (i+1) our present linguistic competence (i). Furthermore, this input need not only contain (i+1). If the learner understands the input, and it is of sufficient quantity, (i+1) will automatically be provided. Krashen proposes that the best input does not necessarily aim at (i+1) - this is unnecessary, and in fact may be harmful (Krashen, 1982 - 74).

Finally, the input hypothesis states that oral fluency cannot be taught, but instead 'emerges' automatically over time.

Two issues remain to be considered. What is the nature of the internal processing system responsible for operating on comprehensible input to incorporate it into the developing language system? What is the evidence, or data, with which Krashen believes his hypothesis is consistent? On the actual nature of the 'Organizer' as he calls it, Krashen is less than helpful:

> While it seems that some mental processor... is responsible for the learner's development of the new language system, we cannot yet fully specify its operational principles.
>
> (Dulay et al., 1982b: 56)

As for the data said to be consistent with the hypothesis, Krashen (1982: 74) draws our attention to studies of: a. first language acquisition in children, b. second language acquisition, c. the silent period in second language acquisition, and d. first language interference.

(a) First language acquisition in children

It is observed that the hypothesis is consistent with the 'caretaker speech' ('motherese'), or the simplified speech that parents and others use when speaking to young children. Such speech is modified, says Krashen, in order to facilitate comprehension. It is significant that caretaker speech is roughly tuned', not 'finely tuned', to the child s level of linguistic competence at any given time.

(b) Second language acquisition

Second language learners are also exposed to a similar type of modified input in the forms of 'foreigner talk', 'teacher talk' and 'interlanguage talk' (i.e. the speech of other second language learners).

(c) The silent period

Krashen refers here to that period in the initial stage of natural language acquisition when little (apart from some memorized segments) production may be evident. He explains this period in terms of the input hypothesis as follows:

> ... the child is building up competence in the second language via listening, by understanding the language around him. In accordance with the input hypothesis, speaking ability emerges on its own after enough competence has been developed by listening and understanding.
>
> (Krashen, 1982: 78)

(d) First language interference.

First language interference is explained as follows: the substitution of L1 rules for (i+1) (first language interference) results if the learner needs (i+i) to express himself but has yet to acquire it.

Comments

Two of Krashen's claims in particular, and the evidence offered, demand serious attention.

Firstly, the idea that comprehensible input is sufficient for second language acquisition ignores the role of the learner as an active participant in the process - studies of childparent oral interactions suggest that the learner takes significant responsibility for the acquisition of language, formulating and testing hypotheses in the joint negotiation of meaning with the 'expert language user' (normally the mother) (Painter, 1986; Bruner, 1981). Similarly, Gregg (:87) calls on Krashen to back up his assertion in the face of the widely-held belief that practice is necessary for language acquisition.

Krashen also claims that extra-linguistic knowledge is employed to enable us to understand language containing structures not yet acquired. Gregg identifies a serious problem with his interpretation of this claim, which he calls 'astonishing':

> I find it difficult to imagine extra-linguistic information that would enable one to 'acquire' the third person singular -s, or yes/no questions, or direct object placement, or passivization (p. 88)

Certainly, such a strong interpretation of the proposition must be rejected.

The evidence of 'caretaker speech' is also carefully examined by Gregg (1984: 89) who concludes that Krashen's own source of data (Newport, Gleitman and Gleitman (1977)) notes that caretaker speech is not structurally less complex than adult-adult speech. While it is acknowledged that caretaker speech is simpler in terms of propositional content, the evidence in fact suggests that there is no significant correlation between caretaker speech complexity and the propositional complexity of a child's utterances (Gregg: 89). Krashen himself weakens his claim when he admits:

> While there is no direct evidence showing that caretaker speech is indeed more effective than unmodified input, the input hypothesis predicts that caretaker speech will be very useful to the child.
>
> (Krashen, 1982: 75)

While caretaker speech, teacher talk or foreigner talk will assist a learner in understanding input, we still have no indication of how understanding is related to the acquisition of (i+ 1) (Gregg, 1984: 90).

The silent period, as Gregg (1984: 90) points out, while being consistent with the input hypothesis, is certainly not evidence for its existence. It has not been shown that the emergence of prbduction ability necessarily requires a period of non-production in either adults or children.

Again Krashen fails to clearly establish a coherent hypothesis, and while data is produced which is consistent with the hypothesis, much could hardly be considered 'evidence' for its existence.

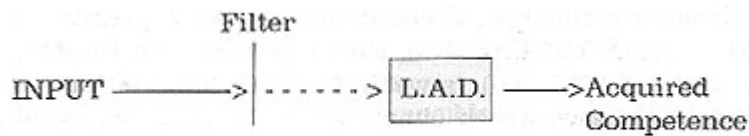**(4) The Affective-filter Hypothesis**

This hypothesis claims that while comprehensible input is necessary for second language acquisition, it is not sufficient. Whether or not, or to what degree, input reaches the 'Organizer' (discussed above) depends on the condition of the Affective Filter (Dulay et al., 1982: 46-54). As the name suggests, this barrier screens input based on 'affect', or the learners' motives, needs, attitudes, and emotional states.

A high Filter, which is capable of preventing input reaching the Organizer, results from low motivation, high anxiety and low self-esteem. A low Filter is therefore conducive to efficient second

language acquisition. Krashen also proposes that while the Filter is part of the internal (subconscious) processing system, it is outside the Organizer. Thus the Filter relates directly to acquisition and not to learning.

The Filter is said to determine (1) which target language models will be selected by the learner; (2) which parts of language will be attended to first; (3) when language acquisition efforts should cease; and (4) how fast a language can be acquired (Dulay et al., 1982- 46).

Attitudinal factors which vary among individuals arid within individuals, determine the success or otherwise of the language learner in acquiring a language. The differences in attainment between children and adults results not from the Organizer but from the operation of the filter, together with the monitor.

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                    Filter
INPUT ----------->|- - - - -> | L.A.D. | ----->Acquired
                  |                             Competence
                        (Krashen, 1982: 82)
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[The 'affective filter' was originally posited by Dulay and Burt (1977). Note: Krashen's use of the 'Chomskian' term 'Language Acquisition Devise' (L.A.D.) in the diagram is not explained; it is assumed to correspond to the Organizer)]

Comments

While few would argue against the importance of affective variables in second language acquisition, Krashen's Filter seems to operate only in adults. Why this should be so is difficult to understand. Krashen attempts to relate the development of the Filter to concurrent cognitive development - that is the Filter becomes operational only after the learner has reached Piaget's formal operations stage, which occurs at about puberty (Krashen, 1981: 35, discussed in Gregg) and is accompanied by increased self-consciousness, feelings of vulnerability and lowered self-image.

However, Gregg questions Krashen's assumption that "children do not have affect, that they never suffer from feelings of insecurity, anxiety, lack of confidence, inferiority, etc." (: 92).

He further claims that, if we agree with Krashen, then surely adults should be better acquirers than adolescents as the negative conditions associated with puberty are eventually overcome. No evidence exists to support this conclusion.

Gregg (1984: 93) also questions the exact nature of the Filter in terms of the roles attributed to it by Krashen. He concludes that while accepting that affect no doubt influences adult acquisition of a second language, "this by no means justifies a theory postulating an Affective Filter the growth of which and the function of which are not explained, and for the existence of which there is no evidence (:94)".

The hypothesis is again, on the surface, an attractive one; yet Krashen's theoretical construct, for an cognitive device separate from, but linked to, the Organizer and the Monitor (Dulay et al., 1985: 46),

is weak. Careful examination reveals the types of flaws which characterize the other suppositions examined - poorly defined terms, lack of precise explanations and analysis, and lack of evidence.

Krashen's ideas, while many are hardly new, are attracting much attention, and, especially among classroom practitioners, many followers. They do indeed seem to provide many of the insights that have eluded us for so long. But this is far from suggesting that they represent a coherent theory of second language acquisition. Apart from lacking any basis in linguistic theory, there are inconsistencies, explanative gaps, ill-defined terms, and empirical voids which require serious attention if we are to even consider according the hypotheses this kind of status.

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