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# **An overview and evaluation of Stephen Krashen's Monitor Theory**

**Anne Tokunaga and Masahiko Tokunaga**

## **Introduction**

In 1976, Stephen Krashen first postulated an idea which would become part of a model of second language performance (Krashen 1976) known as the 'Monitor Theory' which was modified and developed in the 1980s into one of the first general or 'macro' theories to explain how language is attained, the characteristics of learner language and the factors involved in language learning. Much early research into language development in contrast, had offered only 'micro' theories of second language learning, dealing with specific phenomenon and having only a narrow focus such as the acquisition of a specific language feature (McLaughlin, 1987: 9). Significantly, Krashen's use of the term 'language acquisition' which he distinguished from formal conscious learning, has become commonly used and indeed is the term that identifies the academic field of study into second language development, which is referred to as, 'Second Language Acquisition' or 'SLA.'

Over the preceding thirty years Monitor Theory has been vigorously criticized by linguists, nevertheless, it is still one of the best-known theories of SLA, having helped to inspire and direct research in the field of SLA. It is also important for having had considerable influence on classroom practice, which has been partly due to Krashen's willingness to expound the applications of his theory in considerable detail to language teaching and learning and to provide guidelines to second language classroom practice (Krashen 1981, 1982, 1985, Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991: 244) making him one of the first applied linguists to make theoretical ideas accessible to teachers.

## **Krashen's five 'hypotheses'**

Krashen's Monitor Theory is a naturalistic view of language learning, which contrasts with the view that languages are learned through interaction with the environment (the nurture perspective). Naturalistic perspectives stress the importance of innate or genetic factors and hold that language acquisition is biologically determined, as humans are born with a device that allows us to acquire language naturally.

The theory of second language acquisition that Krashen formulated makes five claims which are mostly unsupported by any evidence. Krashen uses the term, 'hypotheses' to refer to these claims concerning child and adult, naturalistic and instructed second language acquisition (Krashen 1982, 1985,

Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991: 241). The first three claims, the Acquisition-Learning, Natural Order, and Monitor hypotheses relate to issues focused on in the original formulation, the so-called, 'Monitor Model'.

The *Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis* asserts that two separate knowledge systems underlay second language performance with each being completely distinct to the extent that Krashen claimed there was no 'interface' between them. The first was termed 'acquisition' and this referred to the subconscious process by which linguistic competence is developed as a result of using language for real communication, which according to Krashen, usually occurs in informal environments. The second, 'learning', referred to the conscious process by which meta-lingual knowledge of a language, in other words, "knowing about the language" (Krashen 1982: 10), is developed through formal instruction. Krashen believed that it was only through acquisition that one gained mastery of a language; learning, on the other hand resulted in knowledge of only 'easy' grammatical rules, and that knowledge could only be used when certain conditions were met. Here, Krashen asserted the presence of a 'monitor' function, (the '*Monitor Hypothesis*') which served to highlight the differences and the relationship between the acquired and learnt systems. The learned system of knowledge functions only as a planner or editor with which to inspect, or monitor the output of the acquired system, which is responsible for the fluent production of sentences and which speakers used when they were attending to meaning and engaged in real-time communication. Krashen believed that the monitor was only accessible 1) when there was time, 2) when the learner was focused on form and 3) when the learner knew the rule (Lighbrown and Spada 1993: 27). Crucially, according to Krashen's theory, the Monitor, in parallel with conscious knowledge of language, plays a limited role in the attainment of language.

The '*Natural Order Hypothesis*' draws on studies on the acquisition of L1 by children which show that children appear to go through a series of stages, acquiring the different grammatical morphemes in regular and predictable sequences. Basing his ideas on research done by Dulay and Burt (1974), Krashen theorized that second language rules were acquired in a predictable order that is the same for adults and children and for learners with different L1s. This natural order is evident when the focus is on communication, however, it is disturbed as a result of intrusion of the learned system on performance, "causing ('big M') Monitoring" (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991: 241).

Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 241) note that the fourth and fifth claims, referred to as the 'Input Hypothesis' and 'Affective Filter Hypothesis' are the central claims of what has become known as the 'Extended Standard' Monitor Theory. The *Input Hypothesis* (Krashen 1985) attempts to explain how 'acquisition' takes place. Krashen theorizes that the only way a second language is acquired is through reading or hearing language that is slightly above the learner's capability, and that can be still understood. Krashen uses the term 'comprehensible input' (or 'CI') to describe this language. He argues that progress

along the natural order occurs when the learner is exposed to comprehensible input that is one step ('input + 1') beyond their current level.

The fifth claim is the '*Affective Filter Hypothesis*' which concerns attitudinal variables that affect language attainment. Krashen asserts that learners with optimal filters have a low affective filter which allows them to be more receptive and therefore to allow more input in. In other words, comprehensible input cannot be fully utilized by learners if, for example, learners have negative feelings about themselves, the language, the language method or the teacher. Krashen argues that factors such as anxiety, stress, negativity or lack of motivation act as a barrier to acquisition.

Suffice it to say, as Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 244) point out, Krashen's idea about SLA attainment is based on just one causal statement involving two variables which makes one of the strongest claims concerning SLA: that "CI, plus a 'low affective filter', is necessary and sufficient for SLA."

### **Implications for Teaching**

Krashen's theory of SLA has been associated with a paradigm shift (cf. Reynolds 1971, in Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991: 226) in L2 pedagogy, which had been dominated by Audiolingualism in the United States. Audiolingualism had emerged in the United States during World War II and retained some influence right up until the 1980s. It drew on Behaviorism which saw all behavior, including language, as being learnt through repetition and positive or negative reinforcement; consequently, drilling and repetition of collections of discrete sentences and grammatical rules were central elements of instruction along with a focus on accuracy. Krashen's theories about language acquisition, together with approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching, assisted in the reassessment of the teaching learning relationship and second language learning itself. This was in spite of the fact that Krashen saw little value in explicit teaching of a language, arguing that "If acquisition is more central, and learning of less use to second language performance, and if comprehensible input and the filter are the essential causative variables for second language acquisition, the classroom should help only to the extent it supplies comprehensible input in an environment conducive to a low filter" (Krashen 1982: 33).

#### *The Language Syllabus*

The assertions that language is acquired as part of a natural process and explicit learning did not lead to language acquisition led to changes in language courses, which traditionally tended to be defined in terms of the language being taught. In planning language syllabuses, teachers had been engaged in the selection and organization of linguistic content to be taught and language learning had been seen as involving mastering a fixed content of grammar. Krashen's theories freed teachers from pre-selecting

language items and also from focusing solely on language *per se* – as an object.

### *Language Content*

Claims made about acquisition and the importance of comprehensible input had implications for lesson content, which had previously been overly based on grammar and explicit teaching of rules. Under Krashen's guidelines, teachers could now focus on providing in varied and interesting input, which had the additional benefit of being relevant to the interests of students.

### *Focus on input, not output*

Krashen's idea of the primary importance of comprehensible input in language acquisition is in opposition to a lot of traditional pedagogical practices with their "emphasis on language use as a performance skill mastered only through intensive overt practice" (Littlewood 1994: 202). The implication that comprehension plays a greater role than production in language attainment means that teachers are free to "exploit fully the advantages of receptive activities" (Littlewood 1994: 203) which Littlewood notes are easier to arrange for learners of varying abilities and "go some way towards solving the dilemma of a situation in which there is only one competent speaker of the foreign language for a group of thirty learners" (1994: 203).

### *Error Correction*

In responding to Krashen's claim that acquisition only occurs as a result of the learner processing comprehensible input, teachers were freed from having to correct every single error a learner made, as error correction had no role in Krashen's idea of acquisition, and ideas such as those purported in Audiolingualism—that errors which remained uncorrected could become habitualized in a learner's interlanguage—were dismissed.

### *Instructional scaffolding*

The idea that language has to be comprehensible, meaningful and just beyond the learners' current understanding and competence in order for acquisition to take place has led to a form of 'scaffolded' instruction. Input could be 'scaffolded' or made comprehensible by firstly pre-modifying the input before it is offered to the learner, and secondly, by negotiating the input through interaction. Examples of pre-modified input are graded readers, in which the grammar and vocabulary have been modified, and where teachers modify input during interaction by using gestures, repetition, reformulations, visuals, simpler sentence structure and comprehension checks, among other techniques.

### *Roles of Teachers*

The perspective held by Krashen that language learning is the development of a natural process, had implications for the roles of teachers and learners. The focus on the teacher's role as central in a

traditional classroom in dictating the lexis and grammar to be taught was questioned, and instead the classroom became learner-centred, where the focus is on the learner to direct their own progression through interaction with the environment. In such a classroom, the role of the teacher was altered to one of manager of learning activities, and the relationship between teachers and learners became more collaborative.

### *Classroom Environment*

According to Krashen, input alone is not sufficient; it must be experienced in combination with an environment that lowers stress and anxiety, while increasing motivation and positive self-esteem. Creating a more natural and 'human' environment for learning in which learners were motivated, and less likely to feel anxious was crucial to ensure a situation where the affective filter was lowered so that comprehensible input could 'get in'.

## **Explanations for the lack of success of second language learners**

In applying his ideas to language pedagogy, Krashen not only provides guidelines for teachers but also offers an explanation for why SLA is not successful in the classroom.

### *Conscious learning inhibits acquisition*

Krashen contends that this is a result of goals and activities being shaped by rule explication, oral practice and error correction, all of which stimulate conscious learning, and as a result, get in the way of the acquisition process (Pica 1994: 175). However, this dismissal by Krashen of the role of conscious learning and formal instruction in the development of a learner's L2 is not adequately supported by findings from research and represents a weakness in the pedagogical aspects of Krashen's writings.

### *Grammatical competence cannot be taught*

On the basis of early work in L2 acquisition, which provided evidence of a 'natural route' of development (Ellis 1994: 652), Krashen proposed that language learners needed to be able to construct their interlanguages naturally, arguing that grammatical competence for the most part, could not be taught, but had to be acquired. Although Krashen accepted that some formal instruction could contribute to the learning of linguistic structures that were simple in structure and transparent in function (Krashen 1982), he argued that such explicit knowledge was of limited value because it could only be used in monitoring, when the learner was focused on form and had sufficient time (Ellis 1994: 652).

### *Learned knowledge cannot be used to communicate meaning*

Moreover, Krashen argued that explicit knowledge of the language cannot be converted into implicit knowledge; in other words, learning does not become part of the acquired knowledge system, which is

used in natural communication when the language user is focused on meaning and not form. That is to say, there was no interface between what Krashen saw as two separate knowledge systems, which led to his rejection of formal instruction because, he argued, it does not contribute to the kind of implicit knowledge needed for normal communication. Littlewood (1994: 202) questions this idea stating that, “Experience makes one believe that there is more interflow ... that items that have been first learned consciously have eventually become available for spontaneous use.” Ellis (1994a: 653) also questions whether the relationship that Krashen proposes between acquisition and learning is really as separate as is suggested by Krashen, pointing to a number of studies (Harley 1989 and White et al. 1991 in Ellis 1994a: 653) which reveal that formal instruction helps grammatical accuracy, even in unplanned use, and the gains that learners make can be durable. Ellis (1994a: 653) concludes by stating that “there is substantial evidence that formal instruction works, not because it happens to supply comprehensible input for acquisition but because on at least some occasions learners actually learn what they have been taught.”

Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 304) support this position, stating that “SLA research to date has barely begun to probe the effects of instruction on interlanguage development, but studies conducted thus far have already revealed some potentially positive contributions instruction can make.” Although they argue that while comprehensible input may be necessary and sufficient for SLA, they refute Krashen’s non-interface position and dismissal of the role of instruction by concluding that it “may simplify the learning task, alter the processes and sequences of acquisition, speed up the rate of acquisition and improve the quality and level of second language ultimate attainment” (Long and Freeman 1991: 304).

### **Weaknesses of Krashen’s Theory**

The Monitor Theory has received strong criticism and is no longer considered valid within the field of SLA research. Linguists have offered the following reasons, mostly focusing on the fact that Krashen’s ideas are not supported by empirical studies, are vague, and can’t be falsified.

#### *Lack of preciseness*

The principal weakness in Krashen’s Monitor Theory as a theory is its vagueness. This lack of preciseness is partly due to the fact that many concepts used by Krashen are not coherently defined. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 291) provide an example of the problem that Krashen has with defining concepts, noting that he consistently means something else when he uses the term ‘hypothesis’. Most of the claims or ‘hypotheses,’ as Krashen prefers to call them, involve constructs such as ‘acquisition’, ‘learning’, ‘input’, and ‘input + 1’ that are not operationalized, which means that they cannot be measured. However, for something to be called a ‘hypothesis’, a condition is that it must be empirically testable. This differs in the case of statements in causal-process theories. As Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 224) note, “whereas every hypothesis must be testable, this is not true of every

statement in a theory.” They go on to point out that, “A theory remains falsifiable as long as parts of it are testable and all untestable parts are related to testable ones”.

### *Criticism of the Input Hypothesis*

In the case of the ‘Input Hypothesis’ which contains the constructs ‘input’ and ‘input+1’ it is hard to see how such a concept could be properly tested given the lack of preciseness of the idea of input containing structures and vocabulary just beyond those of the learner’s current grammar. Moreover, as Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 225) point out the Affective Filter Hypothesis is not related, (except by assertion) to the Input Hypothesis, and in addition “it not only contains a construct but is itself a construct,” which would therefore need to be operationalized. In other words, according to Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 247), Krashen would need to specify “which affect variable, singly or in what combinations and at what levels serve to ‘raise the filter’.” As a consequence of Krashen not doing this, Monitor Theory in its post-1980 formulation is untestable and so unfalsifiable – criteria that researchers such as Long (1993) and McLaughlin (1987; 1990, both in Ellis 1994a: 683) argue are important in evaluating the worth of a theory.

White (1987) also expresses her difficulties with Krashen’s “lack of precision” in relation to comprehensible input. She notes that the term ‘comprehensible input’ as constructed by Krashen, is interpreted as simplified input and points out the problems with defining comprehensible input in this way as it “is in danger of providing less than adequate input to the acquirer” (1987: 108). This would undermine Krashen’s assertion concerning his ‘Input Hypothesis,’ that one needs only to provide comprehensible input for successful L2 acquisition to take place, and in cases where successful L2 acquisition does not happen it is due to affective barriers alone. White contends that it is possible to come up with “specific and testable proposals as to what aspects of input might motivate grammar change in the learner and what kinds of change to expect” if one is prepared to take “some kind of theoretical stance on the nature and form of learners’ grammars” (1987: 100). Krashen on the other hand, “never has any specific proposals as to what i and i + 1 consist of” and White goes on to state that his implication that “we cannot know is too strong” (1987: 100).

### *The acquisition-learning distinction*

Finally, Krashen makes a claim that there are two knowledge systems: an acquired one and a learnt one without explaining what the process of acquisition is and why learned knowledge is not accessible in the same way as acquired knowledge. Additionally, the claim is based on the assumptions that firstly, language acquisition is facilitated by a specific pre-programmed ‘Language Acquisition Device’ (‘LAD’) and secondly, the LAD is still available for the acquisition of a second language – both of which are not supported by any evidence. Furthermore, Krashen’s distinction between learned and acquired knowledge, which is similar to the distinction between declarative knowledge or ‘knowing that’ and procedural



knowledge or 'knowing how,' is more likely a distinction between two stages of the learning *process*. In such a learning process, knowledge transfer takes place, but we have no awareness of how we have shifted knowledge from one domain to another.

## Conclusion

Krashen's Monitor Theory has declined in influence in the field of SLA research. Nevertheless, it has served researchers well by enabling an early attempt to make sense of a range of research findings, and moreover, by helping to stimulate fresh data-based research prioritizing input and affective factors. However, with the increased recognition of the complexity of L2 knowledge and of the learning process, researchers have acknowledged that SLA does not lend itself to a single explanation. Instead, researchers look for theories and explanations that suit their varying purposes and that more truly represent the reality of SLA. In the area of language education, Krashen's theories have provided insights into how best to present a foreign language, and in addition, offered a guide for teaching practice, particularly in helping to create a more stimulating environment for classroom learning.

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# **An overview and evaluation of Stephen Krashen's Monitor Theory**

**Anne Tokunaga and Masahiko Tokunaga**

## **Abstract**

Just over 30 years ago, Stephen Krashen published a paper on an idea that would develop into one of the most well-known and influential theories on second language acquisition. This paper presents an overview and evaluates Krashen's general theory of second language acquisition, or what is often referred to as the 'Monitor Theory,' Krashen 1976, 1982, 1983). The first part focuses on Krashen's five claims or what he calls 'hypotheses,' part two explores the implications of Monitor Theory on language education, and looks at the how it has informed language teaching practice, while the third part examines Krashen's explanations for why second language learning is unsuccessful. Finally, the paper provides a critical assessment of Krashen's theory.