

The Monitor Model: A Critique of Its Concepts and Impact

Thomas Entwistle

The British Council, Japan

When considering what makes for a good second language learning theory, Mitchell et al. (2013) wrote that valuable theories are “collaboratively produced, and evolve through a process of systematic enquiry, in which claims of the theory are assessed against some kind of evidence and data” (2013, p. 3). Assessment of second language learning and second language acquisition theories can be carried out in a multitude of ways, ranging from formal experimentation to ecological procedures, in which data can be collected for analysis as it happens in a more natural setting (Mitchell et al., 2013). This essay aims to precisely describe the main ideas and concepts of, and then go on to critically evaluate, Stephen Krashen’s (1981) Monitor Model. Finally, this paper discusses the implications that the Monitor Model brings to TESOL practice.

Keywords: affective filter, comprehensible input, monitor, natural approach, second language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

Second language learning (SLL) and second language acquisition (SLA) have been around for hundreds of years with early practices evolving around monastery and marketplace interactions (Howatt, 2008). However, more modern, systematic, and thoughtful exploration into SLA theory and methodology originates in the last century. An early SLA theory was Behaviorism, which posited that language learning is an unconscious and automatic process (Skinner, 1957). This theory was very much in vogue in the 1940s and 1950s with teaching methods like the Direct Method and the Audiolingual Method supporting a Behaviorist point of learning. However, Chomsky’s (1959) withering critique of

Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* (1957) dealt Behaviorism a blow from which it never truly recovered (although it is still practiced today; e.g., the Callan Method). Chomsky's comprehensive critique of Behaviorism led to a vacuum in SLA theory until the 1970s and 1980s, when there was more of a shift towards more natural, humanistic approaches to SLA.

THE MONITOR MODEL

It was the shift in direction from the idea that language is a learned behavior to language being more innate that led to the rise of SLA theories like Krashen's (1982) Monitor Model (also known as the Input Hypothesis), Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG), and Long's Interaction Hypothesis (IH). Krashen's Monitor Model is the following set of five SLA hypotheses, which emerged out of much research into SLA.

The Acquisition–Learning Hypothesis

According to Krashen's Acquisition–Learning Hypothesis, acquisition is a rough-tuned, unconscious action. This is the opposite of learning, which is absolutely fine-tuned, is a conscious act, and refers to a learner's knowledge of particular grammatical rules and their ability to use them (Gregg, 1984). Because of this, the learning of a language usually takes place in controlled environments through formal teaching. Krashen states that acquisition and learning are in fact different systems, and that they should stay in contrast with one another (Krashen, 1981).

The Natural Order Hypothesis

The Natural Order Hypothesis puts forward the idea that there is a certain order to the acquisition of L2 structures, regardless of a learners' L1, ability, age, and the condition in which learners are exposed to a language. Evidence of a natural order had been previously reported by other researchers (Bailey et al., 1974; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Gleason, 1958).

The Monitor Hypothesis

The Monitor Hypothesis states that when learners desire greater

accuracy in their spoken or written discourse, they will utilize their internal “monitor.” This monitor could be described as a sort of mental accuracy-checking device that checks learners’ output and makes sure it is as error free as possible. The monitor is employed less when learners wish to communicate more freely, meaning accuracy is sacrificed. Krashen (1981) posits that there are three types of monitor users. Learners who regularly utilize the monitor are named “over-users,” learners who either do not have an ability to or choose not to use conscious knowledge are named “under-users,” and learners who make appropriate use of the monitor (i.e., when use does not impede one’s communication) are named “optimal-users.” The monitor works optimally when three certain circumstances are met: There is enough time for usage, the communication is focused on form rather than meaning, and the learner knows the structure (Krashen, 1981; Schulz, 1991).

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

The Affective Filter Hypothesis claims that the learner is well placed in the language acquisition process when the affective filter is low, that is, if the learner is motivated, self-confident, and has low anxiety levels. In instances where a learner may be feeling stressed, tired, or having difficulties with the language, the affective filter will be high, meaning very little input will be processed (Krashen, 1982). Krashen states that the affective filter “explains why it is possible for an acquirer to obtain a great deal of comprehensible input and yet stop short (and sometimes well short) of the native-speaker level (or ‘fossilize’; Selinker, 1972). When this occurs, it is due to the affective filter” (p. 32).

The Input Hypothesis

The Input Hypotheses claims that not all input needs to be fully comprehended by the learner, but the learner, however, should be exposed to large amounts of both listening and reading input (Krashen, 1981). Language is thought to be most useful and acquirable if it is at a level that is “a little beyond” (p. 66) that of the learner’s current proficiency level (i.e., $i + 1$; where i represents *interlanguage*). This acquisition is said to happen through the help of context and further linguistic information (Gitsaki, 1998). Krashen (1981) claims that the

Input Hypothesis is evidenced by how effective certain types of graded speech are. For instance, caretaker speech from a parent to their offspring, teacher talk from an educator to their second language learner, and foreigner talk from an understanding native speaker to the language acquirer. Also, Krashen (1982) believes that the so-called “silent period” (p. 26) in early childhood development, before children start to formulate words, is proof of them acquiring growing amounts of comprehensible input.

A CRITIQUE OF THE MONITOR MODEL

In a recent interview (Matt vs. Japan, 2020), Krashen still asserts that we acquire language in only one way, when we understand language through exposure to comprehensible input. He goes on to say that we do not acquire language through correction, that we do not acquire language when we speak, and that we do not acquire language when we study it. This seeming lack of evolution and enquiry into his own theory would possibly not make for what Mitchell et al. (2013) call a good second language theory. It has been left to others to evolve and add to the Monitor Model. Swain (1985) criticized the simplicity of comprehensible input leading to acquisition and stated that this was not enough. Her investigation into Canadian immersion programs showed that even though learners were exposed to vast quantities of comprehensible input, seemingly the perfect environment according to the Monitor Model, the rate of acquisition was still relatively stunted. It is possibly fair to say that Krashen’s Monitor Hypothesis is an attempt to further explain Chomsky’s Language Acquisition Device (1959), however Swain’s research seems to indicate that there is still much more to acquisition than Krashen’s theory.

At its core, the simplest way to understand the Input Hypothesis is that if one is exposed to comprehensible input, this leads to language acquisition, which in turn, allows for the emergence of output. This could be said for L1 acquisition in an infant’s mother tongue as it can be said that we all have an innate “abstract knowledge of language” (Ellis, 2015, p. 175) and an access to UG. Krashen takes this further and posits that the principles of UG also allow us to acquire second languages as well as our L1, if input is comprehensible. However, there are some problems regarding this, such as how input can be made

comprehensible. Long (1996) agreed with Krashen that comprehensible input is needed for the acquisition of L2 but instead believed that interaction and negotiation of meaning between interlocutors is key for input modification and acquisition. For me, this idea seems more intuitive than Krashen's assertion that all one needs for acquisition is vast amounts of listening and reading, and Krashen does not seem to account for the role of interaction and output.

A significant issue, if not the most significant problem, that one may see in Krashen's work is that there is a methodological issue with it: The Monitor Model cannot be scientifically proven or disproven through testing, thus making it unfalsifiable. This has led to some questioning this theory because of its lack of academic rigor (Ellis, 1990; Gitsaki, 1998; Gregg, 1984; Sampson, 2005). For example, Ellis (1990) states how Krashen "provides no evidence to show that the methods he believes are facilitative of acquisition" (p. 127). More recently, Sampson (2005) explained how he is highly dubious about the innatist perspective and seems to regard UG as a kind of pseudoscience. If this is true, it would call into question much of Krashen's theory. However, the concept of a UG, particularly in L1, seems logical to many, but there does seem to be a lack of both descriptive and explanatory validity for how it works in L2. The key question is possibly do we have continual access to an innate UG during SLA (Ellis, 2005). This is yet to be fully answered.

It has been said by some researchers that the Affective Filter Hypothesis also falls victim to a lack of clarity when it comes to explaining how and when it affects second language learners. It has been almost thirty-seven years since the seminal book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983) was published. In this book, Gardner challenged the idea of a single form of intelligence and posited that there are seven different intelligences: naturalist, musical, mathematical, linguistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences. The Monitor Model (1981) does not seem to take any of these differences into account and does not seem to indicate how an affective filter would manifest in different learners with different intelligences. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) state that for Krashen to support the Affective Filter Hypothesis with empirical evidence, he would have to clearly identify what the variables are for different learners at different levels and what type of learner they are. Currently, there seems to be no clear evidence to support the Affective Filter

Hypothesis. Though, it does seem more than plausible that learners find acquisition easier if, for example, they are not stressed and in a comfortable, anxiety-reduced setting.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The influence of Krashen's work on English teaching classroom practices is undoubtedly widespread. Many subsequent teaching methodologies and practical classroom ideas have much of their rationale based on parts of Krashen's Monitor Modal theory.

Extensive reading (ER) is one such way of language learning that is thought to facilitate language acquisition through the reading of large amounts of foreign language material. The main idea for ER is that the material learners read is, first and foremost, comprehensible – it should be slightly below to barely above their current language level. Many have supported the efficacy of ER in expanding learners' lexical range (Cobb, 2007; McQuillan & Krashen, 2008); however, there are contrasting perspectives as to what extent ER can be solely responsible for lexical acquisition. ER is a well-researched area of SLA, and much has been written about it being a fun, motivational, and engaging teaching practice. Furthermore, with the advent of technology like QR codes, digital libraries, and podcasts, we are seeing the proliferation of extensive listening more and more. When coupled together, ER and EL (extensive listening) can provide learners with double the amount of comprehensible input (Stephens, 2011). I believe that it is the role of the educator to provide as much comprehensible input as possible to language learners. This is of greater importance in language-poor environments like non-English-speaking environments and monolingual contexts, as well as in times of crisis such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, where students are being asked to learn remotely. The provision of comprehensible listening and reading can go some way toward making up for the lack of live exposure to comprehensible input and is something I have tried to make more available to my students during the pandemic.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of learners being affected by a high or low affective filter does seem logical. It could be said that at any stage of education, it is imperative that learners can benefit from a safe, relaxing, and welcoming atmosphere in the class. If this can be achieved,

it can lower the affective filter, thus making acquisition an easier process for the learner. This can be done in a multitude of ways: through humor, using students' names, making eye contact, giving positive feedback, interacting with learners outside of the classroom, etc. Some older classic teaching methodologies such as Lozanov's Suggestopedia (1978), which incorporated Baroque music into the classroom for its calming effect, and Curran's Community Language Learning from the 1950s, where the consideration of the students' feelings and fears was put at the front of a teacher's mind (Entwistle, 2020) may have faded away, but a shift toward more humanistic teaching is very much a key part of the modern classroom experience. Students need to feel at ease in the classroom and feel safe to make errors and mistakes. This is arguably more important in certain contexts where students are not used to having to speak up in class, as in some East Asian contexts like Japan (Marwood, 2019).

With regards to the Monitor Hypothesis, in a second language classroom promoting both fluency and accuracy in our learners can be a particularly tricky balancing act for the teacher. It is often quite difficult to have learners produce both fluent and accurate utterances at the same time. Task-Based Learning (TBL) is one such teaching practice where the focus is less on form and more on meaning. As learners work on a main "task," it is the teacher's job to input extra, often upgraded, language that the students may be struggling to produce. In this way, it could be said that the teacher acts as an input provider, or the $i + 1$ provider, of the language "a little beyond" (Krashen, 1981, p. 66) the students' reach. Another job of the teacher is to be cognizant of their students' learning variables (e.g., age, motivation, language level) and to help them to be an optimal user of their monitor. The goal of an ESL course is to provide the students with the language that they need to effectively communicate, and the goal of the teacher, as an $i + 1$ provider, is to create the opportunity for greater language acquisition.

The Natural Order Hypothesis has implications, as the name suggests, on the order in which certain grammatical forms and structures should be included in the class as to make them most conducive to acquisition. As a general rule of thumb, easier language concepts should be introduced first and then built upon through scaffolding to introduce more complex and difficult structures and concepts. While this seems totally intuitive, rigid syllabi often move on to the next "grammar point" without learners fully comprehending the previous one. A widely used teaching approach, though not lacking in its own detractors, is

Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP). PPP is a simple, a widely used teaching approach that supports the notion of direct instruction and is at odds with Krashen.

Another implication of the Monitor Model is the lack of drilling, explicit teaching of grammar rules, and error correction. This is more in line with how we acquire our L1 and the result is that learners naturally acquire the language in a low-stress, anxiety-free way. This was outlined in Krashen and Terrell's 1983 book, *The Natural Approach*. This way of teaching is still widely popular as it is simple to understand, easy to implement as educators are given freedom to try the method along with their current practices, and it has been clearly demonstrated by Krashen (Markee, 1997). This approach is a clear reflection of the Affective Filter and the Natural Order Hypotheses. I agree with Krashen that constant error correction is demotivating to many students. Focusing on meaning over form can be beneficial in many contexts, particularly ones where the wants and needs of the learners are that of effective communication rather than absolute accuracy. However, Terrell (1983) does believe that some degree of the conscious learning of grammar rules has a place in the classroom. This is something I also tend to agree with, particularly at lower levels to provide learners with the fundamental metalanguage around grammar.

CONCLUSIONS

From the critique and implications outlined in this essay, it is clear that Krashen's Monitor Model has been somewhat controversial in the field of SLA. However, I think it can also be said that this SLA theory has been of great influence on many other SLA theories and second language teaching practices. Although, it may be somewhat harsh to describe the theory as a bucket full of holes (Ellis, 1990), there are some major problems limiting both its descriptive and explanatory validity. The question posed in the introduction of this essay was whether the Monitor Model makes for sound second language acquisition theory. I think Ellis may have put this best when he said that the Monitor Model explains that "successful classroom acquisition learners require access to message-oriented communication that they can understand. It also provides a rough explanation of why this might be so. The main problem with Krashen's hypothesis is that it is nothing like as 'fundamental' as

he claims” (Ellis, 1990, p. 107). Despite the problems and criticisms levelled at Krashen and the Monitor Model, it is undeniable that it has had a substantial impact of the field of SLA and English language teaching.

THE AUTHOR

Thomas Entwistle is a British Council English language specialist and member of the English Team at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, Japan. He received his BA in creative practices from Leeds Beckett University. Afterwards, he gained his CertTESOL through Trinity College London and became DELTA qualified through International House London. Email: thomas.entwistle@britishcouncil.or.jp

REFERENCES

- Bailey, N., Madden, C., & Krashen, S. D. (1974). Is there a “natural sequence” in adult second language learning? *Language Learning*, 21, 235–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1974.tb00505.x>
- Chomsky, N. (1959). Reviews: *Verbal Behavior* by B. F. Skinner. *Language*, 35(1), 26–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/411334>
- Cobb, T. (2007). Computing the vocabulary demands of L2 reading. *Language Learning and Technology*, 11, 38–63.
- Dulay, H., & Burt, M. (1974). Natural sequences in child second language acquisition. *Language Learning*, 24, 37–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1974.tb00234.x>
- Ellis, R. (1990). *Instructed second language acquisition*. Blackwell.
- Ellis, R. (2015). *Understanding second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Entwistle, T. (2020). Community language learning: What can we take from this classic teaching method? *Nagoya JALT Journal*, 1(1), 78–86.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. Basic Books.
- Gitsaki, C. (1998). Second language acquisition theories: Overview and evaluation. *Journal of Communication and International Studies*, 4(2), 89–98.
- Gleason, J. (1958). The child’s learning of English morphology. *Word*, 14, 150–177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00437956.1958.11659661>
- Gregg, K. R. (1984). Krashen’s Monitor and Occam’s razor. *Applied Linguistics*, 5, 79–100. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/applin/5.2.79>
- Howatt, A. (2004). *A history of English language teaching*. Oxford University

- Press.
- Krashen, S. D. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Pergamon.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., & Long, M. (1991). *An introduction to second language acquisition research*. Longman.
- Lozanov, G. (1978). *Suggestology and outlines of Suggestopedya*. Gordon & Breach.
- Long, M. H. (1996). Native speaker/non-native speaker conversation and the negotiation of comprehensible input. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 126–41. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/4.2.126>
- Marwood, D. (2019). Ensuring East Asian speakers find their voice in the classroom. *International House Journal*, 47, 14–17.
- Matt vs. Japan. (2020, November 9). *Talking with Stephen Krashen: How do we acquire language?* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VYfpL6lcjE
- Markee, N. (1997). *Managing curricular innovation*. Cambridge University Press.
- McQuillan, J., & Krashen, S. D. (2008). Commentary: Can free reading take you all the way? A response to Cobb (2007). *About Language Learning and Technology*, 6, 104–109.
- Sampson, G. (2005). *The language instinct debate*. Continuum.
- Schulz, R. (1991). Second language acquisition theories and teaching practice: How do they fit? *Modern Language Journal*, 75, 17–26. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/329831>
- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 10, 209–231. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1972.10.1-4.209>
- Skinner, B. F. (1957). *Verbal behavior*. Appleton-Century-Crofts. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11256-000>
- Stephens, M. (2011). The primacy of extensive listening. *ELT Journal*, 65(3), 311–313. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccq042>