Second Language Acquisition
—— A New Look at the Implications of Krashen's Hypotheses ——

Tyler BURDEN*

Abstract

This paper critically reviewed Krashen's second language acquisition theory and identified some of its key weaknesses and strengths in the light of more recent research findings.　The theory was then assessed in terms of its implications for the EFL classroom.　It argues that the most important implications concern the issue of teaching in the target language and the approach taken to teaching grammar.

Introduction

Since its inception over 20 years ago Stephen Krashen's theory of second language acquisition has enjoyed massive exposure and has been widely cited throughout the EFL literature as well as on numerous training courses for aspiring English language teachers.　In fact, the theory has been so influential that it is even routinely quoted in other countries such as Japan for aspiring teachers of the Japanese language.　So what is the theory, and to what extent does it merit its lofty status in the language teaching profession?

The following sections attempt to answer these questions and place the theory in context so that its implications for the language classroom may be properly evaluated.　The theory will also be discussed in terms of its implications for language education in Japan.

The theory centres around five basic hypotheses.　These are described in the following :

*Lecturer, Faculty of Regional Development Studies, Toyo University, Japan

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis

This states that there are two independent types of knowledge about a second language that are internalized in two different ways. With 'acquired' knowledge, "We are generally not consciously aware of the rules of the languages we have acquired.   Instead we have a "feel" for correctness".   Whereas, 'learned' knowledge can be referred to as, "conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them", (1982).

In Krashen's view, the two types of knowledge are used differently.   The acquired system is used to produce utterances whereas the learned system checks the correctness of these utterances.

The Natural Order Hypothesis

This states that elements of a language are acquired in a predictable order which cannot be altered by instruction.

The Monitor Hypothesis

The learned system (mentioned above) acts as a Monitor and serves to alter the output of the acquired system.   In order that the Monitor may work, three principal conditions must be met.   They are, the monitor needs time, a focus on form and an appropriate knowledge of the rule.

The Monitor acts as a link between the acquired and learned systems.

The Input Hypothesis

In order to move from one point in the 'natural order' of acquisition to the next, learners must receive "comprehensible input", Krashen (1985).   This "comprehensible input" must be at a level slightly ahead of that possessed by the learner.   If it is at the same level it is not useful in aiding acquisition.   Krashen called this input "i＋1", stating, "We move from i our current level to i＋1 the next level along the natural order, by understanding input containing i＋1", (1985).

Krashen assumed the existence of an innate mental structure called a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which handles both first and second language acquisition.   Comprehensible input activates this device.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

According to Krashen, there is a mechanism he terms 'the Affective Filter'

which determines how much comprehensible input can reach the LAD.　When the filter is high, comprehensible input is obstructed.　A high Affective Filter is caused by such things as anxiety, low self-confidence or low motivation, (1982).

　　This then, helps to account for learners' varying success rates in second language acquisition.

Analysis

　　Despite its apparently far-reaching appeal, Krashen's theory has been widely criticized on many of its central tenets.　One major perceived failing of the theory is the claim that there are only two causal variables in second language acquisition ; namely, comprehensible input in the presence of a low Affective Filter.　The research so far performed in this area, suggests that it is not just input, but output too, that has a role to play in learners' acquisition, (See for example the work of Larsen-Freeman (1991) and Pica (1994) amongst others).　There is, as Krashen himself acknowledges, a significant degree of overlap between the way in which a first language is acquired and that of a second one.　The way children learn their first language strongly suggests output is important as, despite an initial silent period, the major thrust in language development comes when they start using and playing with words in their early years.　The absence of a role for output in Krashen's theory also seems to fly in the face of what both language learners themselves report and what language instructors have observed about the role of output in learner development.

　　The quality of the evidence assembled in support of the theory has similarly been criticized, e. g.　Gregg (1984).　On this point, as recently as 2004 at the JALT (The Japan Association for Language Teaching) conference in Nara, Japan, this author observed a debate involving Krashen in which he attempted to promote his theory using the example of a single learner as evidence of its claims.　The learner in question was an Eastern European polyglot who, due to the politically-imposed restrictions of the former Soviet Union had apparently never been outside her home country and had never had any significant contact with speakers of the languages she had seemingly mastered.　The technique she had used to acquire these languages was extensive reading and Krashen argued that her case strongly substantiated his ideas.　Her achievements make for a very interesting case study and indeed seem to support Krashen's theory.　However, it should be remembered that this is only one

language learner, to what extent she can be representative of language learners in general is highly questionable.   After all, hers is a very special case, that of someone who has been able to learn many languages fluently.   There are countless examples of learners who have attempted to learn language in a similar fashion, using extensive reading, but who have not been able to master even one language, let alone master numerous languages.

A further criticism of the theory arises from the way parts of it were stated in such a way that they could not be disproved, Gass and Selinker (1994).   In fact, the pseudo-scientific way (i.e. "i + 1") in which the theory is stated weakens its message. There is no mathematics involved in arriving at this theory, so why is it stated using algebra in imitation of a mathematically precise formula.   This appears to be a cosmetic exercise aimed at giving the theory a more impressive veneer.

Criticisms aside, however, certain researchers believe the theory deserves a sympathetic treatment.   Zobl, for example, on reviewing some studies related to code-focused instruction, was impressed by the way, "the theory possesses the ability to predict outcomes", (1995).   He points out that the information from these studies was not available to Krashen at the time he formulated his theory.   Although Zobl did not attempt a defence of all aspects of Krashen's theory, he concluded that there was much new empirical information to support Krashen's 'learning-acquisition' claim, (1995).

In addition, increasingly robust evidence is emerging which would appear to support the 'natural order hypothesis'.   That is, that the language items learners are successfully able to acquire is influenced by their stage of development, Ellis (1994).

Implications

Krashen isolates two important implications of his input hypothesis thus :

1) *Speaking is a result of acquisition and not its cause.   Speaking cannot be taught directly.*

2) *If input is understood and there is enough of it, the necessary grammar is automatically provided.   The language teacher need not attempt deliberately to teach the next structure along the natural order* (1985).

This then, challenges much established practice in the second language classroom.   On the basis of the above, one might question the value of speaking practice

activities such as an information exchange where output, and not input, is the focus. There may, of course, be some comprehensible input to be gained from these activities, but if it comes from fellow students, it is unlikely to be reliable. Such activities, together with drills, represent a deliberate attempt to teach speaking and thus, in Krashen's view, are not useful to the process of acquisition, (they may have, though, other benefits such as raising confidence and thus lowering the Affective Filter).

Other established practices, those of sequencing grammar according to linguistic complexity and focusing on one particular structure in a lesson, are also roundly dismissed. He argues that we don't know the natural order of acquisition and thus could quite easily not be providing any "i＋1" input, (1982). Furthermore, the demands of the Monitor are such that it is only possible to teach non-complex, "learnable" rules, (1982). In many classrooms, grammatical instruction is attempted for even the most complex of systems, such as, for example, articles.

The theory also casts doubt over the role of the tape recorder in language lessons. It is likely that the only person capable of judging student level and thus, how best to alter their speech in order to provide comprehensible input, is the teacher. A recorded message, after all, cannot react to a class. This accords with observations made by Ur (1998) who advocates teaching activities whereby the teacher provides listening input that is moderated as the class progresses.

For the Communicative approach, Krashen's theory has a serious implication. In this approach, the teacher is primarily a facilitator and should seek to minimize teacher talking time, Littlewood (1995). In fact many EFL instructors have been trained to do just this and have been criticized for spending too long talking in front of the class. On a CTEFLA course (Certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Adults) undertaken by this author, teachers were actively discouraged from talking to the class other than to give the most basic task instructions. One experienced teacher skilled in the art of communication through mime and gesture was actually presented as the ideal to be aspired to. In Krashen's view, and in this author's view as well, such a teacher would be squandering an enormous opportunity as teacher talking time is a prime source of comprehensible input. Teachers should not only be less worried about spending lengthy periods of time talking to the class but be actively seeking to do so.

Language education in Japan

In Japan, language education has been criticized in two areas relevant to this discussion. The first of which is the lack of instruction in the target language. A large number of instructors in Japan particularly in early years education do not have a high enough level of proficiency to instruct their students in the foreign language and, in fact, even if they are sufficiently proficient choose not to do so, LoCastro (1996). This not only denies students a source of comprehensible input, but also denies students the opportunity to get used to operating in the target language and gain confidence from that (i.e. lowering the 'Affective Filter' in Krashen's framework). Although this is changing with the gradual increase in native-speaker instructors it is still significant.

The second problem is the way in which emphasis is placed on the need for grammatical accuracy in the education system, LoCastro (1996). It was noted in the above that there is an order of acquisition. Thus, it may not be possible for learners to acquire the rule, for say third person '-s', at the stage when teachers try to teach it. In fact, as Ellis (1994) points out, such grammatical features may be acquired and then briefly 'dislodged' as new language is acquired. That is to say, learners' ability to produce grammatically accurate language is seemingly determined by their stage of development. This has tremendous implications for the efficiency of language instruction as it may result in time wasted focusing on grammatical features that students are not ready to learn. It also has implications for the design of tests. Typically, a feature of language courses is the end of term (achievement) test. If such tests focus primarily on grammatical accuracy and this grammar is in a state of flux, to what extent can the information gathered be considered reliable? In fact, it is possible that such tests could penalize higher-level students who are further along the learning curve (and thus at the point in development where the target grammar has been temporarily dislodged).

Conclusion

We saw in the above that Krashen's theory of second language acquisition has a range of implications for classroom practice. These implications need to be viewed, however, in light of some of the principled criticisms outlined in the above. Although the theory is by no means perfect it does contain ideas that are still

relevant.　Perhaps the most important of which is the concept of a natural order of acquisition.　This, as we saw, impacts not just on instruction but on testing as well. The design of a valid and reliable achievement testing instrument which accounts for this phenomenon is an area worthy of further research.

Bibliography :

Coleman, Hywel, ed. (1996),　*Society and the Language Classroom.*　Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, R. (1994),　*The Study of Second Language Acquisition,* Oxford : Oxford University Press

Gass, S. and Selinker, L. (1994),　*Second Language Acquisition : An Introductory Course,* London : Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Gregg, K. (1984),　Krashen's monitor and Occam's razor, *Applied Linguistics,* 11/4 : 364-383

Krashen, S. (1982),　*Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition,* Oxford : Pergamon

Krashen, S. (1985),　*The Input Hypothesis : Issues and Implications,* New York : Longman

Larsen-Freeman, D. (1991),　Second Language Acquisition Research : Staking Out the Territory, *TESOL Quarterly,* 25/2 : 315-350

Littlewood, W. (1995),　*Communicative Language Teaching,* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press

LoCastro, Virginia (1996),　'English language education in Japan' in Coleman, 40-58.

Pica, T. (1994),　Questions From the Language Classroom : Research Perspectives, *TESOL Quarterly,* 28/1 : 49-79

Ur, P. (1998),　*Teaching Listening Comprehension,* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press

Zobl, H. (1995),　Converging Evidence for the 'Acquisition-Learning' Distinction, *Applied Linguistics,* 16/1 : 35-56