

Does the Monitor Theory Provide An Adequate Model For The Second Language Classroom?

(5)

—The Monitor Theory in Japan—

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Monitor Theory is receiving greater attention in Japan, especially since the 1984 Japan Association of Language Teachers conference, at which Stephen Krashen delivered the keynote address. Language teaching in Japan often means English teaching, and since English seems to be the “second language” around which the Monitor Theory tacitly revolves, a feasibility study of applications of the Monitor Theory in Japan is in order.

Japan has a chequered history in dealing with the West, and a look at the cross-section of Japanese society would probably reveal a *millefleure* pattern of pro- and con- attitudes toward the study of English. The subject of the following discussion will be the degree to which these attitudes harmonize with the Monitor Theory, and whether Krashen’s ideas prove valid in the specific context of foreign language study in Japan.

2. MILESTONES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN JAPAN

Foreign languages have been taught in Japan throughout its history. Beginning with the Taika Reformation, written Chinese was taught by the memorization of the Confucius *Analects*. The primary method employed was the Reading-Translation method. Indeed, Chinese characters were used in writing the Japanese language until the 9th Century, when the *kana* syllabary was invented to render spoken Japanese in written form. After the Europeans arrived in the 16th Century, a second *kana* syllabary was invented to render foreign words and names in writing.¹⁾

When Japan went into seclusion after 1639, education, including the study of classics, was strengthened, although certain European scientific and medical publications retained their influence. During this period the military class operated feudal schools to educate their children in cultural, moral, and military subjects. In addition, temple schools were operated to teach farm children how to read, write, and operate the abacus.²⁾

When Japan was reopened during the Meiji Restoration, the new government established a system of universal education. Shortly thereafter, English became a subject for entrance examinations which would qualify students to enter high school or university. In 1921, Harold Palmer was invited to Japan as a linguistic advisor to the Ministry of Education, to assist in the development of foreign language teaching. However, nationalistic sentiment caused a temporary decline in interest in the study of English, prompting Palmer to abandon his work. After WWII, interest in foreign language study waxed strong again, aided by Charles Fries, who established the English Language Education Council in Tokyo.

Japanese education today is compulsory through the ninth grade. Elementary school students learn basic subjects which prepare them to live

in Japanese society. During junior high school, "a student's natural capabilities are nurtured in order to help him select the path for the future which best suits his individual personality. Students are taught English for the first time upon entering junior high school...students enter high school [on a voluntary basis] by passing entrance examinations... upon graduation from senior high school, students enter university by passing competitive entrance examinations." ³⁾

There are over 440 universities and over 500 junior colleges in present-day Japan. These include 93 public and 319 private universities.⁴⁾ In addition, numerous vocational and business schools offer career advancement opportunities at the post-secondary level. Private language schools cater to the large demand for foreign language instruction, mainly in English. Furthermore, many secondary school students attend afternoon and evening preparatory schools in hopes of attaining better marks on entrance examinations.

Japan has obviously invested an enormous amount of time and energy in education. What is the result of this industriousness in terms of foreign language instruction, and does the end justify the countless hours spent in public and private foreign language study? More importantly, does the Monitor Theory offer any concrete solutions to the problems encountered in foreign language instruction in Japan? These questions may be approached from two directions: internal aspects of Japan, its society and citizens; and outside influences upon Japan and its educational system.

3. INTERNAL ASPECTS OF JAPANESE SOCIETY RELEVANT TO THE MONITOR THEORY

One of the most vivid contrasts between Japanese society and western societies can be found in the tendency of Japanese to rely on their community for support and direction, whereas the westerner seems to strive for self-reliance. Known as the Dependency Syndrome, this unique trait has its roots in the supportive, uncritical mother-son relationship which every Japanese child enjoys. In professional life, Japanese men try to find a mentor to help them cope with life's emotional, social and economic challenges. This mentor will often facilitate advancement of his protégé, who places himself in a position of dependence, relying on his mentor in much the same way that he relied on his mother when he was a child. In western societies men sometimes seek a mentor, but it is the struggle with the father, rather than dependence on the mother, that inspires the protégé. Also, the western relationship is likely to end when the protégé decides that his time for self-dependence has come.⁵⁾

In his celebrated work on the subject of dependence, Takeo Doi compares the Japanese views of the world and their apprehension of reality with those of the West. He says that the basic difference lies in the psychological process which precedes words, or in terms of the Monitor Theory the "utterance initiator".⁶⁾ Since there is nothing in western society which corresponds to the Dependency Syndrome, can the utterance initiator described in the Monitor Theory function in the same way for Japanese as it is said to do for westerners? If it does not function similarly, can the Japanese adult be expected to use the acquired system as an utterance initiator when learning a foreign language? Some answers can be found by considering pertinent aspects of the Dependency Syndrome in Japan and

comparing them with Krashen's ideas about L1 and L2 acquisition.

Krashen asserts that second language acquisition resembles first language acquisition. The process of acquiring Japanese as a native language should therefore be an indicator of the L2 learning strategies employed by Japanese adults. We have seen that in elementary school, students are taught how to live in their society. What this means in terms of language is that they must observe a complex pattern of vertical comparisons in all personal relationships.⁷⁾ When a Japanese mother corrects a child's speech, she is not correcting grammatical errors, as is her western counterpart, but rather, she is correcting his intonation, attitude, and manners of courtesy.⁸⁾ Thus "caretaker speech" as described by Krashen enters a new dimension.⁹⁾ If L1 is a language of courtesy, and L2 is a language of grammar, the problems of incorporating caretaker speech in a foreign language program become self-evident.

The courtesy-grammar distinction is only the tip of what could be termed a very large psycho-linguistic iceberg. If L2 were learned in the same manner as L1, Japan would possibly be at the forefront of practical applications of the Monitor Theory. As it stands, however, Japanese students do not approach a foreign language in the same manner as they do their native language. The native speaker of Japanese is a kind of "super Monitor underuser", making almost exclusive use of the "acquired system" in speech. In his constant effort to not offend another person, he avoids explicit statements in favor of implicit statements which are not meant to communicate ideas, but to determine the listener's moods and attitudes.¹⁰⁾ Meaningful communication therefore also enters a dimension unexplored by Krashen. When L1 is oblique and L2 direct, it is very difficult for the foreign language student to master a basic direct response, such as in English, "no". The solution for the Japanese student is to

distance himself from the foreign language by treating it as a discipline in the same league as mathematics and history.

This distancing of the self from the danger of exposure to directness in foreign language study results in the Japanese student becoming a kind of “super Monitor overuser.” Since English is taught for the first time in junior high school, the student’s “natural capabilities” are beginning to include formal operations, and the Language Acquisition Device is beginning to close. The student is already aware of the impending series of examinations he must pass, so there is little motivation for a concerned student to “use his acquired system to initiate utterances.” What this student wants is to use his learned system to pass examinations. Moreover, the Translation Method, used in most secondary schools, is rarely if ever a spontaneous experience. Rather, it involves a slow, laborious process of converting the foreign language into terms which are familiar to Japanese students. Related to the Translation Method is the use of *kana* to render foreign words in Japanese. This results in an unnatural tailoring of all foreign sounds to fit the 46 characters plus their variations which comprise the Japanese phonetic syllabaries.

If the Monitor Theory is to be successfully applied in Japan, the above-mentioned problems will have to be solved. Of course, teaching the foreign language at an earlier age would be an excellent solution. This would give the students an opportunity to utilize their Language Acquisition Devices, provided that a sufficient cultural backdrop were provided to discourage the students from translating every meaning back into Japanese. Another tremendous advantage would be gained by removing the training wheels of the *kana* syllabary, and allowing students direct access to the foreign language in its own writing system during the early stages of instruction. For the Monitor Theory to succeed in Japan, it will have to find a way to

translate the language of grammar into the language of courtesy; to render the direct statement by oblique communication systems; and to interpret the independent spirit of the West in terms of the Dependency Syndrome of Japan.

4 . EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON JAPANESE EDUCATION

After the Ministry of Education institutionalized the study of foreign languages and English became one of the subjects for examinations, linguistic advisors were recruited to assist in the development of a program of foreign language teaching and its accompanying materials. One such linguistic advisor was Harold Palmer, who advocated the Direct Method in teaching English. The Direct Method contained no translation, and a minimum of grammar and reading. Significantly, Palmer insisted that English be learned in the same way that a child learns its native language.¹¹⁾ Palmer's contributions are outlined below, with an account of how they compare and contrast with Krashen's Monitor Theory.

Although Palmer recognized the widely differing attitudes toward L1 and L2 in Japan, and advocated an L1-style approach to L2 learning, he realized that the "age of intelligence" (formal operations) made the difference in terms of the learner paying attention, concentrating, analyzing, and translating...in other words, monitoring. He said that "the use of the eyes inhibits the use of the ears; the utilization of his [the student's] conscious and focused attention militates against the proper functioning of the natural capacities of assimilation."¹²⁾ This statement about the "learned and acquired systems" was made 50 years before Krashen's time.

Palmer also advocated a "silent period", similar to that proposed by Krashen, in which a student may be permitted to delay speech for the first

3-6 months. Palmer stated that the adult is too often forced to produce L2 without having adequately heard the language. Krashen says that early production is undesirable because of insufficient acquisition. If comprehension (whether acquisition or adequate listening) precedes production, a silent period may indeed be desirable. However in Japan the above statement might read "perfection precedes production". The Japanese student is highly self-conscious and will delay production until he has assembled the statement perfectly in his mind. (Indeed for certain students the silent period may be 3-6 years.) Yet Krashen sees this as perfectly acceptable, positing that production may not be necessary at all.¹³⁾

Students who have a high degree of knowledge *about* a foreign language but little ability to *use* the language in a functional manner might be called "false beginners." Palmer noted the remedial nature of adult language courses in Japan, stating that unsound acquisitions cannot be repaired by spontaneous methods: "What has been done consciously must be undone consciously."¹⁴⁾ Krashen does not account for this kind of false beginning, especially when he says that "the 'good language learner' is an *acquirer*, who ...may or may not be a conscious learner."¹⁵⁾

Rather than suggest the acquisition-learning distinction which forms the basis of the Monitor Theory, Palmer implied the existence of the Learning-Acquisition continuum mentioned earlier.¹⁶⁾ Speaking of the Japanese attitude toward English as an examination subject, he said that "this preliminary work will be of the studious order, but will be succeeded at the right moment by the more normal and more spontaneous methods."¹⁷⁾ The process of learning a foreign language seems therefore to function as a series of tension and release activities. In Palmer's terms, this involves moving from the known to the unknown by converting what has been studied into that which is "acquired". In Krashen's thinking, the "i+1"

attempts to move the student from what has been acquired to what is unknown. In the Monitor Theory, the vital element of conscious learning is not included as an essential part of the foreign language experience.

After the global conflict which interrupted Palmer's work, another attempt was made to influence foreign language study in Japan, this time by Charles Fries of the University of Michigan. His general goal was to improve accuracy in the early stages of language instruction, utilizing the Oral Approach. In the Oral Approach, some explanation in the first language was permitted, but the focus was upon learning structural signals which would give the student a key to predicting possible responses.¹⁸⁾

Fries maintained that the foreign language program should be kept simple to avoid confusing the student with too much new material. However, discarding the idea of a silent period, he stressed that production of a basic repertoire of English structures would enable a student to adapt this repertoire, at a later date, to almost any special purpose. According to Fries, production was more than just memorized routines and patterns. In his view, production required an increasing number of choices on the part of the student. Furthermore, he said, "to be most effective, these highly selected basic materials must *all be thoroughly learned in the sequence here set forth, for each new step depends upon what precedes.*"¹⁹⁾

The learning sequence set forth by Fries provides an interesting point of comparison with the Monitor Theory. First, any artificially contrived sequence will serve to detract from the "natural" approach advocated by Krashen, who says that intake "must be understood, be at the appropriate level, and be 'natural'."²⁰⁾ Anyone who has ever visited a foreign country will immediately point out that "natural" speech is anything but understandable, and is rarely at the appropriate level. Moreover in Japan, the great difference between intellectual achievement and aural comprehension

drives a wedge into the remaining portion of Krashen's theory. Ironically, the Monitor Theory is basically a structural theory, in spite of attempts to "naturalize" it by cloaking it in spontaneity. Evidence for this can be found in Krashen's fascination with the "natural order".

The idea of a natural order of acquisition of grammatical structures contains a number of interesting problems. Fries proposed a strict adherence to a sequence of structures, each of which depended for mastery upon mastery of the previous structure. Many foreign language textbooks progress according to this type of grammatical sequence. The question is rhetorical: does the grammatical sequencing of textbooks lead to a so-called natural order in foreign language acquisition? Undoubtedly a student who has been exposed repeatedly to the *ing* form will "acquire" that morpheme before he does another morpheme to which he has not been so heavily exposed. However, Krashen does not even begin to develop a comprehensive natural order of acquisition. What, for example, is the order for tag questions, which are usually presented toward the end of textbooks? In spite of the fact that this type of question occurs in 90% of "natural speech", it is in general poorly acquired in Japan.²¹⁾ The notion that entire sentences, not just morphemes, can be acquired by a "natural order" leads to another observation, which deals with the phonemic quantity, rather than the morphologic quality of items to be acquired.

The child L1 acquirer first assembles a variety of sounds which are then cultivated and grown into words. However, the cultivation does not stop with words, but continues to grow into phrases which have open ends. The "natural order" of L1 is by no means limited to grammatical morphemes, but includes entire phrases, composed of words which are themselves bound forms. Fries emphasizes the teaching of words in their environments, rather than simply memorizing lists of lexical equivalents. Moreover, he

dismissed as pedantic the study of individual grammatical items, preferring the goal of identifying and describing contrasting patterns which regularly elicit predictable responses.²²⁾ If this seems overtly behaviorist, it would be of interest to compare Krashen's natural order of grammatical morphemes with Fries' provision of the socio-cultural context as a setting for concealing the prediction patterns from both the student and the teacher. Fries said that the signals must not themselves become the object of attention (consciously applied rules) that would restrict dialogue. Moreover "the structures to be mastered must always be *signals of some real meaning of which the pupil must be vividly conscious... not learning about the English language, but learning to use the English language in real communication* is the fundamental aim of the work set forth here."²³⁾

5 . CONCLUSION

If L2 acquisition is similar to the process children use in acquiring their native language, the Monitor Theory should meet with tremendous success in Japan, where interest in foreign language study is high, and where L1 is performed in an acquisition-rich environment. However Krashen fails to provide convincing explanations for the exceptions to his theory which are found in Japan. The oblique, implicit and courteous aspects of the Japanese language should create an atmosphere which is ripe for acquisition, yet what is more often found is an overwhelming atmosphere of test-oriented instrumental motivation.

The three methods of teaching which have been prevalent in Japan are the Translation Method, the Direct Method, and the Oral Approach. As there is no evidence to date that a "Monitor Method" is in the making, it would be safe to assume that foreign language teaching in Japan will

follow a rather conservative path. Notwithstanding, the constant effort to improve teaching techniques has caused a number of foreign language professionals in Japan to consider the Monitor Theory. The psychological, social and linguistic situation in Japan will prevent the Monitor Theory from achieving success in the manner that Krashen predicts. If it is to succeed, the Monitor Theory must adapt to the local situation; it must develop a following among influential persons in the educational community; and it must find an appropriate medium by which it may be presented to students. Until that time the Monitor Theory will continue to present an impracticable model for the second language classroom in Japan.

NOTES

1. Sumako Kimizuka, *Teaching English to Japanese* (Moab, Utah: Neptune Books, 1977), pp.10-11.
2. Yasuo Aoto, Takashi Momose and Megumi Tateyama, *Nippon: the Land and its People* (Tokyo: Gakuseisha, 1982), p.47.
3. *Ibid.*, p.145.
4. *Ibid.*, p.155.
5. Robert C. Christopher, *The Japanese Mind* (London: Pan Books, 1984), p.62.
6. Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1971), pp.67-69.
7. Christopher, pp.35-36.
8. Isaiah Ben-Dasan, *The Japanese and The Jews* (New York: Weatherhill, 1972), p.185.
9. Stephen D. Krashen, *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981), p.102.
10. Christopher, pp.38-39.
11. Kimizuka, p.18.
12. Harold Palmer, *The Principles of Language Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), p.8.
13. Krashen, p.108.
14. Palmer, p.19.
15. Krashen, p.37.

16. Jackson Stewart, "Does The Monitor Theory Provide An Adequate Model For The Second Language Classroom?" Fukuoka: *The Economic Review of Daiichi Keizai Daigaku*, Vol. 15., No. 4 (March, 1986), p.24.
17. Palmer, p.20.
18. Kimizuka, p.20.
19. Charles C. Fries and Agnes C. Fries, *Foundations for English Teaching* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, Ltd., 1961), p.3.
20. Krashen, p.104.
21. Fries, p.15.
22. *Ibid.*, pp.7-8.
23. *Ibid.*, p.251.