

DOES THE MONITOR THEORY PROVIDE AN ADEQUATE MODEL FOR THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ?

(1)

The Learning - Acquisition Distinction

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the Twentieth Century, the pace of research in science and technology has been greatly accelerated, and developments in one field often lead to advances in another. This has been the case in the branch of Applied Linguistics which has its practical application in the second language classroom. For centuries, language was taught according to the Grammar-Translation Method. As Americans began to attend European universities, language instruction in the United States shifted toward the more speech-oriented Direct Method. After World War II, behavioral psychology gave rise to the Audio-Lingual Method, which emphasized listening, speaking, reading and writing. One reaction to the behaviorist approach was the development of Transformational-Generative Grammar, which resulted in the Cognitive Code Model. However, in recent years many linguists have focused their attention on the Monitor Theory, which brings to bear aspects

of both cognitive and behaviorist thinking, in attempting to provide a model for adult second language performance.

The Monitor Theory hypothesizes that adults use two interrelated, independent systems for achieving second language proficiency. These are conscious language learning, and subconscious language acquisition. Learning requires explicit rules and error correction; acquisition, which is similar to the way in which a child learns a first language, requires the speaker to focus upon the meaning which is communicated, not upon the form of the statements. The Monitor Theory claims that statements are initiated by acquired skills, and that conscious learning affects the student's final performance through the use of the Monitor. If insufficient skills have been acquired in the second language, the performer will fall back upon his acquired native language skills in order to initiate an utterance. A final claim of the Monitor Theory is that acquisition is far more important than learning.

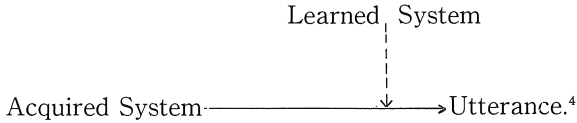
The second language classroom contains a complex mixture of physical, intellectual and psychological elements, capable of producing a variety of results. These results can range from mediocre to dynamic, largely depending upon the skill of the classroom teacher. A model for adult second language performance should include a description of the role of the teacher as well as of the student, and the Monitor Theory does provide such a description. However, the Monitor Theory makes some assumptions which could lead to a less-than-ideal second language experience for both teacher and students. In the papers which follow, an attempt will be made to examine the three basic claims of the Monitor Theory in light of other viable research, in order to reconstruct the Monitor Model as a practical tool for the second language classroom teacher.

2. THE MONITOR

Stephen Krashen defines the Monitor as the only channel by which conscious learning is available to the performer, that is, the performer pays attention to what he is learning.¹ Krashen identifies the source of the Monitor as Piaget's formal operations stage, which occurs during adolescence, and which enables the individual to "use abstract *rules* to solve a whole class of problems at one time."² It is essential to remember, in discussing the Monitor Theory, that Krashen regards the Monitor as a deterrent to language performance if used excessively. He says that "formal operations may give us the Monitor. But it also has negative effects on language acquisition, a poor exchange that may be the cause of child-adult differences."³ These differences are manifested in the use of the Monitor, or edited adult second language output, resulting in improved accuracy levels, but also resulting in variable performance. This variable performance is caused by differences in the personality types of different Monitor users, as well as by fluctuating conditions of Monitor use.

In order to use the Monitor, the performer must have time, which is not normally available in everyday conversation, but which can be available in the classroom. He must also focus on form, or grammatical correctness, which in turn requires that he know the rule. Krashen states that there are three types of performers. The Monitor overuser is characterized as having a cognitive aptitude for learning. His rational capacities operate inductively, that is, working from the individual parts toward a unified whole. He tends to be calm, conservative, self-conscious and sincere. At the other extreme is the Monitor underuser, who is outgoing and seems to have a natural ability to communicate in the second language. His speech is fast and spontaneous, revealing an affective rather than cognitive orientation. He is a deductive thinker, that is, he begins with the unified whole rather

than with the individual parts. Between the two extremes is the optimal Monitor user, who makes use of both the acquired system and the learned system, which are said to interact in this manner :



Krashen's Model for Adult Second Language Performance

3. ACQUISITION AND LEARNING

The distinction between acquisition and learning forms the cornerstone of the Monitor Theory. Without this distinction there would be no opportunity to “monitor” since the term signifies a conscious application of explicitly learned rules, as contrasted with unconscious, spontaneous, “monitor-free” performance. Krashen states that “there is no evidence to support the claim that conscious learning needs to precede acquisition.”⁵ Yet there is evidence, both in Krashen’s work and in the works of others, that contradicts this statement. The two systems, acquisition and learning, are interrelated, but may not be as independent as the Monitor Theory claims them to be.

Language is a trait which is universally achieved among human beings, but the onset of adolescence represents the final opportunity for an individual to develop natural language ability.⁶ The Monitor Theory attempts to break down child-adult differences, which stem from the brain’s process of maturation, by associating acquisition with the affective domain, disputing the primacy of the cognitive domain and intellectual aspects of learning. Earl Stevick, in his study of memory and emotion, claims that “information is rarely, if ever, stored in the human nervous system without affective coding.”⁷ If learning takes place at all, and the fact that different people speak different languages indicates that it does, Stevick’s statement hints that learning and acquisition enjoy a symbiotic relationship. In other words,

affective coding rarely, if ever, takes place without some kind of learning experience. In children, it would appear that learning and acquisition have no clear dividing line: that which is learned is acquired, and that which is acquired has been learned. But the persistent difference between children and adults casts a shadow of doubt upon the Monitor Theory's claim of acquisition dominance in adults. Even if it were physiologically possible for an adult to maintain a childlike equation of acquisition and learning, the Monitor Theory still overlooks one element of learning which is fundamental to language achievement. The effects of memory are very important to the concepts of "acquisition" and "learning" as proposed by the Monitor Theory, and should be considered in detail as they relate both to the child's first language and to the adult's second language.

The first consideration to be made is the adult's memory of his first language development. The Language Acquisition Device opens at the age of about twelve months, at which time the child begins to speak. But early childhood experiences, many of which were crucial to the learning of language, often go unremembered during adult life. Krashen lists active involvement as one necessary criterion for language acquisition.⁸ But active involvement requires the learner to pay attention, and thus we have the "learned system" of the Monitor Theory. If the process of early childhood conscious learning is forgotten by the adult, he appears to demonstrate an "unconscious" ability to perform his native language. But in fact he is utilizing skills which were consciously mastered, then stored in a system which is accessible with minimal conscious application. In terms of the Monitor Theory, this is the "acquired system".

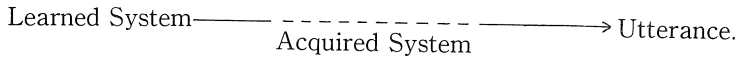
The study of surgically induced memory loss in adults provides an illustration for this phenomenon. In his study on the biological bases for memory, Stevick found that although such patients could learn new skills,

they had no recollection of having learned them.⁹ The process of learning required unbroken concentration and constant repetition, in other words, conscious learning. The result, however, was the ability to perform the skills without consciously thinking about them. In terms of the Monitor Theory, the distinction between acquisition and learning becomes less clear, since these individuals' performance seemed to be initiated by the unconscious "acquired system", yet in fact they were mastered through the conscious "learned system". Acquisition appears to be an inverse function of memory rather than a true antithesis to learning. When the analogy is drawn between patients with surgical lesions of the hippocampus and adults whose pre-adolescent experiences cannot be recalled, the phenomenon of "acquisition" proves to be dependent upon learning and repetition over a period of time.

The adult language learner is bound by the restrictions imposed upon him by the formal operations stage. Formal operations effectively closes the Language Acquisition Device, thus severely restricting an individual's ability to "acquire" language. This applies not only to a second language, but also to a person's native language. Those aspects of his native language which an individual achieves after adolescence (vocabulary, syntax etc.) are learned, not acquired, in the same manner in which the individual learns a second language. This is the converse of the claim of the Monitor Theory, which says that a process similar to a child's acquisition of his native language is available to adults. If the Language Acquisition Device is open to any degree, it is accessible to the adult only by means of the Monitor, the product of the formal operations stage.

The adult's memory of the process of learning a second language is much more accessible than is his memory of learning his first language. The mature learner depends upon his memory to a greater extent than did the

child, because formal operations gives him the ability to learn new concepts verbally rather than through direct experiences. The mastery of these concepts proceeds by degrees over a period of time, to the point that the individual can perform with a seemingly unconscious fluency. This can be illustrated in terms of Krashen's original diagram as follows:



Proposed Model for Adult Second Language Performance

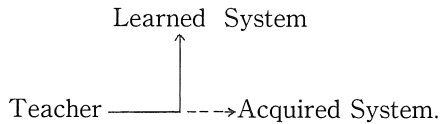
4. THE FORMAL CLASSROOM AND THE MONITOR THEORY

The ultimate measure of any theory's success is its practical application in the classroom, and the results which its use can produce. The classroom needs to incorporate a theory in every aspect of the learning experience -- textbooks, materials, teaching methods, and student activities -- in order for a valid judgment to be made concerning the theory's worth.

Several considerations must be made prior to determining the practicality of incorporating the Monitor Theory in formal classroom instruction. Intake and output comprise the basic Monitor Theory second language experience. Yet it is important to note that intake can result in either acquisition or learning; output consists of either the acquired system, or the learned system which utilizes the Monitor. The students' activities outside the classroom must also be accounted for, and care must be taken not to confuse the effects of community involvement with the success of the theory, regardless of the effect of that involvement upon the student's education. Although the Monitor Theory's argument in favor of a learning-acquisition distinction is not conclusive, it makes qualitative assertions which a discerning teacher can use to augment formal instruction in the traditional sense.

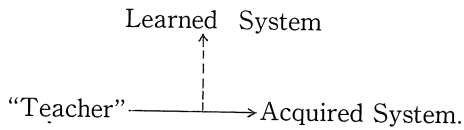
The traditional classroom follows a fairly predictable format. The class

meets on a regular basis in the same room; there is one teacher and many students; the class uses a textbook and other materials to study linguistic rules which are presented one at a time; there is opportunity for feedback and error correction from the teacher, but this is limited to the time allotted and the number of students; often there is an examination at the end of the term; an evaluation is made of the students' performance, and reflected in the form of a final grade. Krashen's model for adult second language performance, from the point of view of the traditional classroom teacher, and allowing for both acquisition and learning, can be illustrated like this:



Learning and Acquisition in the Context of a Traditional Classroom

The Monitor Theory does not criticize the traditional classroom format. But the goals of the traditional classroom are to increase linguistic knowledge through graduated presentation of grammar and error correction. In contrast to this, the major functions of the Monitor Theory classroom are to provide intake for acquisition, and to improve fluency through increased output.¹⁰ If both intake and output are directed toward the acquired system, and if the focus of classroom activities is upon "Monitor-free" situations, then the implications for the classroom teacher are profound: the Monitor Theory suggests an activity other than teaching as the basic role of the teacher. Stated as an acquisition-oriented model, the above illustration can be re-written:



Learning and Acquisition in the Context of a Monitor Theory Classroom

The formal classroom provides input, focused either upon the traditional linguistic model or upon the Monitor Theory's acquisition model. Krashen states that the type of intake which is best for acquisition is that which is directed toward the individual, whether in a formal or informal environment. He refers to this as an "intake-type" environment.¹¹ He further defines intake as being comprehensible, relevant to the student's immediate environment, and a true form of communication.¹² According to Krashen, output is initiated by the acquired system. If there is insufficient acquisition, the performer may fall back on his first language surface structure, or upon routines and patterns, which are fundamentally different from both acquisition and learning.¹³ With sufficient acquisition, the Monitor affects accuracy by supplementing acquired output.

Although intake and output may be directed toward the theoretical acquired system, there is no reason why the same activities cannot equally serve the learned system. Comprehensible input is of course necessary for learning to take place. Relevancy to the students' immediate environment must be extended from the classroom to daily activities which the student is likely to experience, because the classroom is a relatively confined system, in which learning takes place from verbal rather than from concrete experiences.

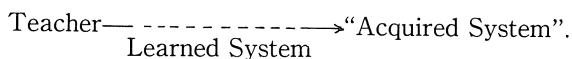
It is unlikely that significant amounts of true communication will take place in the classroom, especially in quantities large enough to produce "acquisition", because of large student-teacher ratios and limited amounts

of time. Output must also be present in a traditional classroom before any error correction can take place. Rather than sufficient and insufficient acquisition dictating the use of the Monitor, it is more probable that the amount of time spent in formal instruction will produce the effect of “acquisition”, which represents a greater command of learned skills.¹⁴

The geographical location of the formal classroom undoubtedly affects the learning experience, not only in terms of the activities “relevant to the environment” which take place inside the classroom, but in terms of the students’ activities outside the classroom. Krashen says that “foreign language learners have less access to language acquisition and rely more on learning” than ESL students.¹⁵ This would indicate that “acquisition” does not take place in the classroom, but in the community. Inasmuch as acquisition is a product of learning, and since students who are studying in a country where the target language is not spoken do not “acquire” as much as they learn, it can be concluded that the formal environment produces acquisition proportional to the amount of time spent in study; and the informal environment can also be a vital element in the language learning experience: where the target language is spoken outside the classroom, learning (and acquisition) will proceed at a much faster rate.

The formal classroom is subject most of all to the students’ expectations. In an ESL class, the students expect to be provided with “rhyme and reason” for all the input which they have been given in the community. However, EFL students depend upon the formal classroom and its outside assignments for the majority of their intake. Both sets of expectations tend to favor the classroom which has as its goals the development of conscious linguistic knowledge of the target language. Of course, the ESL teacher in an intensive program of 20 hours per week will have much more opportunity to experiment than will the EFL teacher who is limited to 90 minutes per

week. In any event, the teacher who is trying to “teach” an acquired system will be faced with the ponderous task of eliciting an unconscious response from students in the formal classroom, which is by and large the territory of conscious learning. In order to implement the Monitor Theory fully, the classroom itself, with all of its structures, would require a transformation which is not practical in the system of formal education. Rather than restructure the entire system, it would be better to incorporate the practical aspects of the Monitor Theory into the existing system. The role of the teacher could then be defined as “facilitating proficiency (achievement, fluency, ‘acquisition’) through learning,” and could be illustrated:



Proposed Model for Adult Second Language Teaching

5. CONCLUSION

Despite the weakness of the Monitor Theory in its attempt to establish a distinction between acquisition and learning, it provides valuable insights into the second language learning process. The notion of the Monitor and its source in the formal operations stage opens a window of understanding into the world of child-adult differences. A teacher who can effectively manipulate the conditions of Monitor use, i.e., time, knowledge of rules and focus on form, can condition the adult performer for “optimal” Monitor use. But the Monitor Theory attempts to re-open that which nature has closed, by its claim that the adult has similar access to language learning as does the child. This tends to direct teachers toward “acquisition-oriented” activities, at the expense of activities which take advantage of the adult’s wide range of experience and greater capacity for deductive reasoning. The adult’s memory must also be exploited in order for conscious learning, and hence, the phenomenon of “acquisition”, to take place. With this in mind,

the Monitor Theory must be substantially modified in order to provide an adequate model for the second language classroom. But the analytical processes used in substantiating the theory's claims can lead to modifications which the teacher can use to efficiently instruct students.

NOTES

1 Stephen D. Krashen, *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981), p. 2.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 2-5.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

6 Ronald W. Langacker, *Language And Its Structure*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), p. 13.

7 Earl W. Stevick, *Memory, Meaning and Method* (Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, 1976), p. 10.

8 Krashen, p. 46.

9 Stevick, p. 7.

10 Krashen, pp. 101, 111.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 47-50.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 111.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 55.