Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and Krashan's Monitor Model: Main Ideas and A Critique of the Two Theories

Ihssan A. J. Al-Muslimawi
University of Kufa/College of Arts
ihssan.fazaa@uokufa.edu.iq

Abstract

This paper sheds some light on the main ideas involved in two theories of second language acquisition: the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Krashen’s Monitor Model (KMM). In each, the researcher critically reviews the arguments for and against and their implications for the teaching of languages.

Key words: Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), Krashen's Monitor Model (KMM), Second language, First language, Second language acquisition.

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

1-1: The Main Ideas and Development

CAH was linked to behaviorist perspectives of language learning approaches, which treated learning as a kind of habit information through stimulus – response – reinforcement operations. That is, learners of a language react to the stimulus ‘linguistic input’, and reinforcement strengthens the response; therefore, they repeat and imitate the items they hear and when learners are reinforced for the response, learning happens, “the implication is that practice makes perfect” (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 35). There is a plethora of publications (such as: Ellis, 2008, pp. 359-360; Block, 2003, p. 14) that mentioned that CAH was widely accepted in the 1950s and 1960s and its main purpose was purely pedagogical. It was thought by many to be an advantageous predicator of where students would probably encounter problems in learning second language.

Linguistics across Cultures (1957) was the publication of Lado that is regarded as the greatest contribution in the domain of contrastive studies. In his book, Lado claims that second language learning being greatly influenced by the first language forms; the second language forms that coincide with first language will be easy to learn and represent ‘positive transfer’. In contrast, different forms will be a source for difficulty and they
create ‘negative transfer’. Consequently, pointing to the similarities of the two languages compared will ease for the learner the process of second language acquisition. Block (2003: 14) indicates that Lado’s publication draws the attention together structuralist and behaviorist psychology, the dominants in the study of language learning at that time, to develop CAH as a rigorous method to what to teach, when and how to teach it. As a result, the effort was creating a theory relating the findings from linguistics and psychology and promoting main models such as ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ transfers. It successfully added a great value to the development of second language learning with the following main premises:
- Language is a habit and learning a second language is acquiring new habits.
- The basic source of errors in second language learning is interference from the first language.
- Errors of a second language learner can be predicted and analyzed by studying the differences between both languages.
- The learner has to concentrate on the difficulties between the native and foreign languages because similarities will transfer automatically.
- Repetition and practice of linguistic items will lead to learning of those items.

Ellis (2008: 359) indicates that CAH is involved into a set of component procedures: description, selection, comparison and finally making a prediction of difficulty through contrast. Some researchers have classified CHA into three versions: strong, weak, and moderate. The attempt to Wardhaugh (1970) clarifies that the strong version claims that second language errors can be predicted through knowing the similar and difficult structures between the first language and the second language; it suggests that the main reason for difficulty and error is the interference in the learner’s first language. However, this strong version was popular before showing that many of learner’s errors could not be traced back to the first language. While the weak version plays the diagnostic role in which teachers can account for observed difficulties in second language learning and highlight which errors will make this interference. Finally, we have the moderate version that concentrates on the nature of human learning; the basis of language learning is to categorize abstract and concrete patterns according to their perceived similarities and differences.

1-2: A Critique of the Theory

The hypothesis areas, at their first glance, seem to make sense; however, the CAH was disputed in many aspects in the start of the 1970s, and its pedagogic attention was no longer significant as it was before. Lightbown and Spada (2006: 34) indicate that “researchers have found that learners do not make all the errors predicted by the CAH”. In reality a small proportion of errors made by second language can be traced back to first language interference. CAH also fails to adequately explain second language performance. In French, for example, also Spanish, object pronouns comes before the verb (e.g. Je les vois ‘I them see’), while in English object pronouns come after the verb (I see them). The CAH will predict this different word order in both languages, as the French learner would produce a sentence like: I them see, but the French speakers found this kind of error was not made, because they apply English word order very early to English sentence, but not French structure. Furthermore, from my experience in teaching, English second language students would generate sentences like: He teached her or She buyed a new coat. This application of the regular past tense formula to irregular English
verbs is not the application of first language rules. Thus, CAH fails to explain adequately this kind of errors; consequently, this led to ‘Error Analysis’ hypothesis later on (Lightbown & Spada, 2006: 78-79).

Moreover, children do not acquire language through imitation; they constitute their linguistic knowledge through hypothesis formation and testing. Children, as Chomsky claims, and adults generate an infinite number of sentences, even those that they have never heard before; therefore, they cannot be acquiring language through imitation (Lightbown & Spada, 2006: 35). Finally, Whitman (1970: 191-3) claims that all procedures of the CAH are subjective because they do not express any psychological and linguistic theory based on a scientific description. Hence, the CAH and behaviorism fell into disfavor and became untenable theoretically and practically.

1-3: The Theory Implications for Teaching of Languages

Although there are many criticisms directed to CAH, a deep look in the theory raises that language teachers have good benefit of being familiar with the students’ problems. Many researchers (such as: Klein, 1986: 26; Mitchell & Myles, 2004: 31-32) advocate this view in that teachers can be aware of their learners’ main problems and can help them understand what is to be learned. Thus, the learners can better explore which of their first language can be transferred to the second language; hence, CAH can give a basic clue to understand and create a means for correcting learners’ errors such as pronouncing the correct form of the verb think as Arab students are probably to pronounce it as sink, and bitter instead of better.

As an English second language teacher, the following recommendations and suggestions can avoid the notion of ‘negative transfer’:

1- Teachers should avoid using terms that have negative connotations, and those which are merely assumptions which are not based on experimental evidence.
2- Teachers should avoid those terms of CAH which are considered old-fashioned.
3- Teachers should exclude those terms that may suggest that second language is a kind of a threat to the foreign language.

1- Krashen’s Monitor Model

KMM is probably the most broadly cited theory of second language acquisition and has often dominated education debate in the field. It has a great impact on second language research and teaching since its appearance in the 1980s. However, it was subject to numerous critiques from the time of its inception (Block, 2003: 20). Krashen’s Model comprises five interrelated hypotheses:

2-1: The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis:

Krashen (1982, p. 10) suggests that Knowledge of a second language is developed in “two distinct and independent ways”. One way is through ‘acquisition’ which is a subconscious process that facilitates fluency and similar to the way of a child learning or an adult ‘picking up’ a second language by living in a foreign country, i.e., in a natural, implicit and informal context whereby error correction has little or no impact. The other way is through ‘learning’ which is conversely a conscious process of developing a second language that enables the learners to know about language, attend to form and figure out rules, paying attention to errors correction explicitly and formally (Brown 2002: 278). Krashen also claims that acquisition is essential to gain full proficiency while learning is less important and peripheral; therefore, they should remain disparate.
2-2: The Monitor Hypothesis

Krashen (1982:15) indicates that this hypothesis shows how learning and acquisition used in speech production. He states that while learning can only act as a “Monitor or editor” making changes or corrections to speech production, acquisition ‘initiates’ utterances to be responsible for second language and fluency. According to Gregg (1984: 82), three conditions, but not sufficient, are necessary to this monitor: sufficient time to employ acquired knowledge, focus on form, and knowing the rules. For example, learners should know the correct tense to use, rules of plurality, articles (a, the), etc. (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, pp. 31-2).

Different individuals use the monitor in various methods, with different levels of success. Some are ‘over-users’ who attempt to always use their editor without making mistakes; consequently, their speech is hesitant and non-fluent. Others are ‘under-users’ who have not consciously learned or who do not care of their mistakes; hence, they are fluent. Finally, there are ‘optimal-users’ who use their monitor appropriately (Mitchell & Myles, 2004: 46).

2-3: The Natural Order Hypothesis

Wilson (2000) mentions that this approach explains that language is acquired in a particular order which is predictable. This order, however, does not imply that each learner can acquire grammatical forms of a language in a similar way; some of those structures are acquired early while others tend to be late (Krashen & Terrell, 1983: 28). For instance, children firstly tend to leave some grammatical morphemes such as ‘the’, ‘is’, ‘of’, etc., generating lexical morphemes only to produce sentences like (‘here bed’, and ‘not mama’) , then when they acquire them, children appear to do so in a certain order.

2-4: The Input Hypothesis:

This hypothesis is Krashen's chief claim of his theory. It shows how the student acquires a second language or how second language acquisition takes place. Its approach explains that learners progress in a ‘natural order’ when they receive second language input which is only one step beyond their present level of linguistic competence (Krashen, 1982, p.21). Krashen uses, for instance, the formula “i+1” to describe the aim of language learning, ‘i’ refers to the learner current stage of knowledge while ‘1’ refers to the learner’s next stage. Therefore, to move from ‘i’ to ‘1’, the learner should receive ‘comprehensible input’.

2-5: The Affective Filter Hypothesis:

This approach indicates that it is not enough for acquirers to simply receive comprehensible input; they also have to let in to process. Lightbown and Spada (2006:37) state that Krashen’s filter comprises variables such as feelings, motives, needs, attitudes, and emotional states, which play a facilitative role in second language acquisition. Thus, weakening of the affective filter (e.g. deceasing anxiety, strengthening self-belief) will be vital for second language acquisition, i-e., learners will take much or all input. Conversely, when the filter is ‘up’ (e.g. tense, self-conscious, unmotivated), second language acquisition may be impeded or blocked (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p.38).

2-6: A Critical Analysis of the Theory

Nevertheless Krashen’s Model has been very influential in second language acquisition; it has been criticized by many linguists, psycholinguists, and educators for its
lack of scientific rigor and for ignoring the importance of output and grammatical rules in second language acquisition. Early responses (such as: Gregg, 1984; McLaughlin, 1987) based their criticism that Krashen’s two concepts, ‘Acquisition / Learning distinction’, are not verifiable empirically and therefore, not falsifiable. For instance, McLaughlin (1987: 317) observes that Krashen does not sufficiently define the terms ‘acquisition, learning, subconscious or conscious’; therefore, it is difficult for us to identify between acquiring or learning language. Moreover, Krashen’s claim that “learning cannot become acquisition” is quickly refuted by everyone experience (Gregg, 1984, p.81-2). In our personal experience, we have noticed learners, who spent years in UK without formal study, communicate in a wide range of vocabulary and received sufficient input in a natural context, but in an ungrammatical fashion. Krashen’s pretention that learning is less important than acquisition is also highly criticized, because second language acquisition is a process where various degrees of acquisition and learning can be both useful, which depends greatly on the acquirer’s strategies and styles (Brown, 2002, p.281).

The Monitor Hypothesis has been also criticized for being untestable and for a lack of real evidence. For instance, Gregg (1984: 84) points out that Krashen has limited the use of the Monitor to ‘learned’ grammar which only occurs in production; therefore, he contradicts himself with the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis in that the role of comprehension is completely ignored. Additionally, it is difficult to tell whether a learner is monitoring the acquired system or the learned system (Mitchell & Myles, 2004:47). Lack of evidence and support by morpheme studies put the Natural Order Hypothesis in a critical place as Krashen does not separate grammatical morphemes from, for example, syntax, or phonology. The hypothesis also ignores individual differences whether they are, for instance, Chinese, or Spanish speakers, etc. (Block, 2003, p.21).

Krashen has put himself under criticism once again by his imprecise claim that ‘the input one understands must contains ‘i+1’, i-e., the comprehensive input. In this case, we are unable to define the level ‘i’ and ‘1’. Moreover, he contends that speech ‘emerges’ when the acquirer has built up sufficient comprehensible input; however, comprehensible output is also necessary for learner competence to emerge and there is no information about learners whose speech does not ‘emerge’ (Brown, 2002, p.281).

Finally, the affective filter concept has been also criticized for not delineating either the scope of the variables or the process how input is filtered out by an unmotivated learner, how it develops and works (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p.403). We conclude with Gregg’s quotation that summarizes all our critiques of Krashen’s theory: “each of Krashen’s hypotheses is marked by serious flaws: indefinable or ill-defined terms, unmotivated constructs, lack of empirical content and thus of falsifiability, lack of explanatory power” (1984: 94).

2-7: Implications of Krashen’s Model for Teaching of Languages

Krashen’s theory has been popular and spread internationally. This is due to its comprehensive nature and its movement from theory to practical classroom teaching. It has also fed teaching practice, classroom strategies and teacher training. Block (2003: 22) indicates that its usefulness lies in its reflection of the complex nature of second language acquisition; it has attracted teachers and educational systems, because it considers the linguistic, social psychology, psychological learning, and discourse analysis theories through its different hypotheses.
We clearly see that the monitor theory clarifies that learners can get benefit when classroom teaching provides them with a comprehensible input that allows them to reach a certain level and enables them to make better use of a language by using particular communication methods (Schütz, 2007).

In our experience as a university teacher, I consider language input is the most basic aspect for acquiring a language and important to language teaching, because the input helps students to build up their confidence; consequently, they will enhance their opportunities in critical thinking which plays a significant factor in consolidating their ability to utilize language in a well-rounded style. What more important is that teachers should encourage language learners to produce the target language from the beginning without giving an ‘initial silent period’ so that they can build up their competence before beginning to produce it as the input hypothesis suggests. Moreover, the input hypothesis should work hand in hand with the affective filter hypothesis because students’ anxiety will be reduced when getting comprehensible input. That is, the effective teachers should create suitable environments that encourage low filter after making input comprehensible (Wilson, 2000); therefore, language teachers should seek to make difference in learners’ anxiety and motives through listening to them, solving their problems, etc.

**Conclusion**

Two main theories are significant in the development of second language acquisition. One is greatly rooted in the behaviorist approaches. Its main mainstream is that the basic barrier in second language learning is the interference of first language similarities and differences with the second language system; it is the CAH. Its prediction has been criticized with many shortcomings as in many cases it was not based upon scientific evidence and could not predict for all the problems or situations. The second theory is KMM, which is regarded as a remarkable model attempting to deal with the most factors involved in second language acquisition and teaching. Despite of its fame, it has been also criticized by many researchers basically on its lack to provide empirical evidence and definitional adequacy.

**References**


