

# LEARNERS TYPOLOGY: LANGUAGE ACQUIRERS VS LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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## ABSTRACT

Krashen's Monitor Model has been arousing considerable debates for many years and learning-acquisition distinction described by the author has become the subject of criticism from both researchers and teachers. But the controversy which is revealed in the Monitor Model and in the follow up literature is not resolved yet. Moreover, scholars and language teachers provide ample justification to foster this hot discussion. We have carried out literature study, introspective and retrospective analysis to examine our own experience as a teacher and as a language learner, and have studied cases described by many other language teachers in a number of teachers' forums from 15 professional network groups. It is shown that individual learner differences are the key factor which should be taken into consideration when describing the process of second or foreign language mastering. Language learning and language acquisition should not be opposed to each other as they present different means of developing language skills used by different learners. As a result, some learners demonstrate process of language learning characterised by careful grammar rule studying and benefit from error correction, while others develop language skill through subconscious acquisition. Thus, we state that learners fall into two types: language learners and language acquirers whose individual differences predetermine the way learners study the language. The type of a learner defines the peculiarity of language skill development.

**KEYWORDS:** Krashen's Monitor Model, language learning, language acquisition, individual learner differences, second language acquisition, referential children, expressive children

## INTRODUCTION

Krashen's famous Monitor Model has been fuelling extensive debates and controversy with subsequent revisions among researchers in the field of Second language acquisition (SLA) since its first publication in 1977. One of Krashen's most referred work is "Principles and practice in second language acquisition" published in 1982 where he describes his Monitor Model. It comprises five hypotheses, which are input, acquisition-learning, monitor, natural order and affective filter hypotheses (Krashen, 1981, 1982). On the one hand, Krashen's Model encouraged the transition in language teaching from grammar-translation and audiolingual methods to communicative teaching, which is now considered to be the most widely used and approved method (Lighrbow, Spada, 2006: 38). On the other hand, his speculations have provoked considerable criticism of the Model itself as well as of each hypothesis separately.

According to Krashen there is a rigid distinction between *language acquisition*, which is a subconscious process similar to the acquisition of the first language by a child, and *language learning*, which is a conscious process through learning rules, contributing from error correction. The author states that progress in mastering a language depends on acquisition but not on learning. This distinction is also referred to when describing Monitor hypothesis: "Monitor hypothesis posits that ... acquisition "initiates" our utterances ... and is responsible for our fluency. Learning has only one function, and that is as a Monitor, or Editor. Learning comes into play only to make changes in the form of our utterance, after it has been "produced" by the acquired system" (Krashen, 1982: 15). But a great number of researchers criticise Krashen for his overgeneralisation of the statements in the description of his Model and for the overclaims that he has made (Liu, 2015; Moreen and Soneni, 2015; White, 1987; Zafar, 2009). Gregg pays attention to the inconsistency in the use of terms and contradictions and states that "each of five hypotheses is marked by serious flaws: undefined or ill-defined terms, unmotivated constructs, lack of empirical content and thus of falsifiability, lack of explanatory power (Gregg, 1984, p.94). Lack of evidence is one more source for Krashen's model critique (Gregg, 1984; McLaughlin, 1987). McLaughlin writes "...Krashen does not provide 'evidence' in any real sense of the term, but simply argue that certain phenomena can be viewed from the perspective of his theory". Brown supposes that Krashen's theory of SLA is oversimplified, his claims are overstated and disagrees with his objection to explicit grammar instruction (Brown, 2000).

Liu points out that Krashen's input hypothesis has been over-emphasised and his claim that "... all other factors thought to encourage or cause second-language acquisition work only when they contribute to comprehensible input and/or a low affective filter" (Krashen, 1985, p.5) is considered to be exceedingly strong (Liu, 2015). Liu's literature study shows that there are internal learner's factors as well as external ones which contribute to acquisition.

Within SLA research internal learner's factors are described as individual learner differences, and there is enormous literature on this issue. Individual differences (ID), which are personality, aptitude, motivation, learning styles and learning strategies, are considered to be predictors of success in SLA (Dörnyei and Skehan, 2003; Sawyer and Ranta, 2001, Dörnyei 2006). Predictive power of ID factors can be a helpful source of ideas for teachers' interventions, that is why the detection of those learner's traits which influence learning process may become a useful tool in teaching practice.

The fact that Krashen's model has been attracting attention of researchers for almost 40 years means that in spite of controversy his approach is a fruitful source of debates and discussions which causes new insights and explanations of language acquisition and fosters invention of new teaching approaches. Different scholars provide various ideas and supply grounds and evidences to support their own points of view using Krashen's claims in spite of the existing controversy. But it is not clear what fuels such hot debates among teachers and scholars and how the diversity of justification can be explained. We put forward a working hypothesis to account for existing controversy in criticism of Krashen's Model and long-lasting interest to his ideas which states that the starting point in the description of SLA processes must be a learner whose individual differences define the characteristics of these processes.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main source of data in this research was published literature describing the studies on learner differences which are considered to be affecting the process of mastering a foreign language. Careful analysis and comparison of the works provided data which allowed us to make a preliminary assumption about relationship between learners' individual differences and the way they master the language, namely, through language learning or language acquisition. Aiming to evaluate this assumption I used an introspective method (Minn, 1986). The subject of the introspection was my own experience of both as a teacher and as a language learner. As a result, I developed a hypothesis to be proved or rejected in the subsequent research. In order to get further support for the assumed hypothesis or its denial I studied cases presented by teachers in 15 foreign language teachers' professional groups in the social network ВКонтакте. The absolute majority of participants in these groups is Russian-speaking teachers of English. Consequently, they share their experiences not only as teachers but also as language learners. Approximately 300 posts and comments describing language teachers' beliefs and cases concerning language mastering were critically reviewed.

## RESULTS

Literature study has revealed the fact that individuals significantly differ in the way they act while acquiring second language (Kounin and Krashen, 1978; Krashen, 1978; Krashen, 1982; Stafford and Covitt, 1978; Leaver et al 2005). In the description of his Monitor model Krashen accounts for this variation by suggestion that there may be three types of performers depending on the degree of Monitor use: Monitor Over-users, Monitor Under-users, the optimal Monitor user. According to Krashen *Monitor Over-users* are performers "... who are constantly checking their output with their conscious knowledge of the second language... they are so concerned with correctness that they cannot speak with real fluency" (Krashen, 1982: 20). Further he writes that the reason for over-use is either being a victim of grammar-only type of instruction or a learner's personality. If the reason for Monitor Over-use is learner's personality, learners "simply do not trust acquired competence and only feel secure when they refer to their Monitor "just to be sure" (Krashen, 1982: 20). *Monitor under-users* are performers "... who have not learned, or if they have learned, prefer not to use their conscious knowledge, even when conditions allow it. Underusers are typically uninfluenced by error correction, they can self-correct only by using a "feel" for correctness (e.g. "it sounds

right"), and rely completely on the acquired system" (Krashen, 1982: 20). *Optimal Monitor users* can use their learned competence as a supplement to their acquired competence.

In SLA theory there is one more direction of studies which favours for the existence of different types of language learners. That is the study of so-called "good language learners" which was initiated by Rubin (1975). According to Rubin and other scholars who continued research in this direction (Griffiths et al., 2008) effective learners have a certain group of strategies which they flexibly and productively use to master the language. The main basis for differentiation in these research is learner's effectiveness.

Many researchers in the field of SLA draw parallels between second (foreign) language acquisition and first language (L1) acquisition. In some works on L1 acquisition it is stated that a great deal of variation exists in children's early speech production (Lieven, Pine, Barnes, 1992; Lieven, Pine, 1990; Nelson 1973; Nelson 1981; Dobrova, Piven', 2014). The existence of stylistic variation between children in the early stages of language acquisition has been most frequently studied using Nelson's (1973) referential-expressive distinction. As this distinction states, referential children use language mainly to label objects and expressive children use language mainly to talk about their own feelings and needs and those of other people and use language as a means to interact with other people, producing more social formulas and pronouns. Further studies revealed other characteristics in the speed of L1 development, some peculiarities of phonetics and a number of tendencies which each of the group demonstrate to represent this distinction.

My own experience as a language teacher, as a language learner and as a researcher shows that the same teaching techniques applied to different learners do not guarantee the same results. Our study of language acquisition by identical tweens has displayed the difference in the performance as well as in language strategy used by siblings in spite of the fact that they were exposed to the same language and teaching environment (Igolkina, 2008; Igolkina, 2014). The research with the use of eye-tracking methods has proved that learners' differences affect the way they process information during language learning (Igolkina, Belykh, 2016).

Our study and the analysis of teachers' posts and comments in professional network groups have demonstrated the fact that almost all discussions on such issues as error correction/treatment, teaching grammar and teaching reading rules are marked by considerable controversy on various aspects of language teaching. The majority of viewpoints fall into two extremes (see Table). The beliefs and attitudes in group 1 correspond to Krashen's language acquisition, which is defined as subconscious process similar to the acquisition of the first language by a child without studying rules and profound grammar correction. Beliefs and attitudes in group 2 refer to Krashen's language learning, which is described as conscious process including learning rules and contributing from error correction.

**Table.** Teachers' beliefs and attitudes to error correction/treatment, teaching grammar and teaching reading rules

	Group 1 (language acquisition)	Group 2 (language learning)
Error correction/treatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– teachers should be highly tolerant to errors and mistakes;</li> <li>– only meaningful errors should be corrected;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– almost all errors and mistakes should be corrected otherwise they can get fossilised;</li> <li>– being exposed to errors and mistakes may cause them in learner's speech production</li> </ul>
Teaching Grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– grammar rules shouldn't be explained explicitly, as they can be acquired implicitly;</li> <li>– drilling activities should be avoided;</li> <li>– L1 should be avoided.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– grammar rules should be explained to learners explicitly;</li> <li>– drilling activities are helpful;</li> <li>– translation and L1 can be used in teaching and learning.</li> </ul>
Teaching Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– there is no need to teach phonetic symbols as learners can</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Teaching phonetic symbols and reading rules helps learners with reading;</li> </ul>

	listen to the pronunciation; – whole-word reading approach is preferred to teaching reading rules.	
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Any described case may provoke debates on the most appropriate and productive teaching interventions and in majority of situations it is evident that teachers perceive the case differently and consequently support different points of views. The proofs and arguments provided by teachers demonstrate that some of them are inclined to consider the process of mastering the language as learning in Krashen's term whereas others describe it as acquisition. The former usually advocate for systematic grammar and vocabulary drilling and deductive approaches to teaching, complain on learners' mistakes and search for remedies to cope with them in speech production. The latter insist on more spontaneous speaking practice and are much more tolerant to mistakes, apply inductive approaches in teaching. They argue their ideas describing different cases from their teaching practice or exemplifying their own experience as language learners.

## DISCUSSION

Our study has revealed a considerable controversy and contradiction in the attitude to the learning-acquisition distinction in Krashen's Monitor Model among both researchers and language teachers. Both sides argue their position and provide a substantial number of cases which prove the validity of their points of view. We argue that these cases and positions are not contradictory but supplement each other if we admit the fact that learners have individual differences which make them study and master a language completely differently. These combinations of learner's differences comprise a learner's type which triggers certain combinations of language learning strategies to perform a task and, consequently, causes learners to learn or to acquire a language.

Thus, we can state that learners fall into two types, namely, *language learners* who preferably learn a language, and *language acquirers*, who rather acquire a language. Moreover, in developing various language skills the same learner can demonstrate different types. As our study of cases in literature and teachers' discussions shows learners can perform as acquirers studying pronunciation but studying grammar work as a learner. In this case, the learners favour a lot from their flexibility to gain better results.

## CONCLUSION

The distinction between *language learning* and *language acquisition* presented by Krashen in his Monitor Model has provoked a lot of discussion among researchers and caused considerable shift in teaching methods. The controversy in Krashen's works and follow up critique can be resolved if a learner with all possessed differences is considered to be a starting point of speculations. It is a learner's type which defines the way a learner masters a language – through learning or acquisition. Further research can show which characteristics exactly predetermine learner's approach to studying the language and in what way language learning and language acquisition are interrelated.

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