

Acquisition and Learning

The desire of knowledge, like the thirst of riches, increases ever with the acquisition of it.

Laurence Sterne

The main part of the intellectual education is not the acquisition of facts but learning how to make facts live.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

We have two different ways to develop competence in a second or foreign language. They are acquisition and learning.

Acquisition is a subconscious process. It is similar to the process by which children acquire their mother tongue. Thanks to acquisition also certain grammatical features of the language are acquired. Just we have to be exposed to comprehensible input. Input is not usually deliberately structured or planned. It happens automatically. For successful acquisition the acquirer must be motivated, have a good self-image, and be free from anxiety. When acquiring the second language, individuals “pick up” the rules of the language subconsciously as they participate in communication situations. Normally we associate this process with children learning their mother tongue or with second language learners in out-of-class situations. Anyway Stephen Krashen in his hypothesis claims that even adults can acquire a second language in school and that the acquired system can serve to initiate all language utterances.

What does this mean for the classroom education?

Classroom environment is useful for foreign language students who do not have input sources outside of the class. It is also suitable for those whose competence in the foreign language is so low that they are not able to understand the language of the world outside. They are mostly beginners.

Optimal input in the classroom should be:

- a) interesting and relevant
- b) comprehensible
- c) provided in sufficient quantity
- d) delivered in friendly atmosphere.

Error correction should be minimized. When the goal is learning, it is of some limited use.

When the goal is acquisition, it is of no use. Error correction e.g. must not be used in free conversation.

Students should not be asked to speak fluently in the second language under pressure.

Speaking fluency cannot be taught. It emerges naturally in time after enough comprehensible input.

Learning is conscious. Most teachers and learners focus their attention on language learning rather than on acquisition. It means they are focused on the conscious learning of the rules. They study them. Students listen to their teachers explain the grammar rules, practice them in exercises and drills, and listen to teachers’ corrections of their errors. As a result the students cannot communicate because communicative skills can only be acquired, they cannot be learned.

Let us have a better look at Stephen Krashen’s hypotheses:

His first hypothesis, which is the **acquisition/learning hypothesis**, says that individuals may acquire or learn the second language. The hypothesis has already been described.

The second hypothesis is called the **natural order hypothesis**. It says that both first-language learners and second-language learners acquire grammatical structures in a predictable order.

This does not mean that they all acquire the structures in the same speed. It means that similarities exist among learners. They learn some structures early and some later.

The third Krashen's hypothesis is the **monitor hypothesis**. It deals with the function of conscious grammatical knowledge. He claims that conscious knowledge of rules has a limited use in normal speaking. In his hypothesis the rule cannot serve as a system to generate utterances. Thanks to the rules we only can predict what the speaker plans to say or to edit after what s/he said. Krashen divides rule-users into three categories: Over-users stick to the rules and only produce the speech, which is grammatically correct. Optimal users need the rules only when they can without interfering with communication. Under-users do not use the rules enough to progress toward correct language use.

The fourth Krashen's hypothesis is called the **input hypothesis**. It reflects the fact that individuals acquire the language by understanding language that is slightly above their current level of competence. They receive the language through listening and reading (receptive skills). The productive skills appear afterwards. New vocabulary and structures come to the learner through listening and reading. Teachers cannot teach speaking and writing directly.

The last hypothesis is the **affective filter hypothesis**. Krashen claims that in unfavourable circumstances learners may develop negative attitudes. They may result in an affective filter, or mental block. The block prevents them from internalising the language and using it afterwards. Therefore the learners should be highly motivated. The classroom atmosphere should lower their anxiety.

Summary:

Second or foreign language learning should be more like the child's acquisition of its mother tongue. Children hear and experience the language in different situations where they are involved in communication. Thus their ability to use language is the result of many subconscious processes. Much foreign language teaching seems to focus on using the exact opposite of this process.

Parents tend to simplify the language they use to communicate with their children. There are similarities in the way people talk to foreigners. The input they receive is slightly above their level and they will acquire the language without making a conscious effort to do so. Krashen suggests that students can acquire language thanks to being given comprehensible input adjusted to their level. Consciously learned language should only be available in highly restricted circumstances according to Krashen. Learning does not directly help acquisition but it can support it.

The text is based on:

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