**On Analyzing the Function of Monitor Theory in Second Language Syntax Acquisition**

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Krashen proposed, as part of his Monitor Theory that all language follows a natural hierarchy in acquisition. The research has shown that it is entirely positive that this hierarchy extends beyond both English acquisition and the morphological acquisition of language. This analysis seeks to review some of the literature associated with the acquisition of syntactic constructs in a particular order, and build a visual diagram very roughly depicting the order in which the specific constructs are attained.

Specific attention is given to the role of the speaker’s native language, and not how it will cause the words to differ, but rather, how despite the differences, the type of vocabulary acquired remains relatively constant. The objective is to acquire a unity between the literature referenced, and to seek a commonality between their findings.

A model has been created, but seeks only to serve as a rough outline, closer to a starting point by which more research could be done, or as a quick reference for attempting to evaluate a student’s positioning in the L2 learning process, especially for instructors of ELL students who may or may not be able to determine their level of initial language sequencing.

**Introduction**

When one elects to study a new language, it stands to reason that they are affected by the aspects of their original language, and this informs the development of their second language. For example, logically a Spanish speaker may have difficulty with blended consonant sounds of English that aren’t typically present in their native language, or a Chinese speaker may struggle with the concept of gendered pronouns, which are, again, not present. However, despite this rationale, quite a bit of research seems to point to the contrary in which the second language is always learned in roughly the same way.

In 1982 Krashen said, as part of his Monitor Theory of second language acquisition that, after doing some analysis of the studies completed by Dulay and Burt, that morphemes are acquired in relatively predictable order regardless of the method taught or the individual. When applying what we know about the acquisition hierarchy, combined with Krashen’s theory, we can postulate that language is acquired in roughly the same order, *regardless* of original language. As shown in figure one, a table from his 1977 study, across a variety of language backgrounds, the tendency to acquire certain parts of words, (most commonly in this chart being the morphological endings) are global, and persist between their differing language bases. (Krashen 1982)

However, in relation to this, from a few different studies, we can find specific patterns in which certain syntactic structures Just the same as Krashen proposes occurs with the morphology, so too could the concept apply to other facets of language acquisition, specifically, that of the syntax parts that make up a language: the objective of this review.

Applying this to syntax, however, is an extension of this belief on which the research of the Natural Order Hypothesis is unfounded, but it is supported by other facets of Monitor Theory. Throughout his Monitor hypothesis, Krashen continuously refers to the *i* and the *i +* 1 of language learning, where the *i* represents the state that the learner is currently at, and the + 1 is the zone in which the learner will grow to develop. Should *i* be a consistently shifting variable, and the + 1 being a directly shifting constant, they should both be logical steps in each other’s development of second language.

**Grammar Studies**

During the Byrne & Davidson 1985 study, it was found that children would almost invariably learn subjects over objects. In their article, “On Putting the Horse Before the Cart,” they created a miniature artificial language (referred to as a MAL) to communicate with very young children whilst playing with a small toy horse and cart. In almost every single case, the children would learn the subjects prior to the objects, almost always favoring learning the horse over the cart. What’s especially interesting and important about this, is that this was a double-test, done with both Fijian children who spoke an OVS language, and Australian children that spoke an SVO language.

Furthermore, discounting any notion that this might be a favoring of the horse itself, the test was repeated with a boulder and a grader, and the majority of the time, the grader was learned prior to the boulder, further encouraging that the subject is learned prior to the object. Additionally, regardless of the order the subject and object were referred to in the MAL (OVS or SVO), they always learned the subject prior to the verb.

From this study, there’s a few different things that the model can draw from. The base is that object-subject ordering is completely unnecessary to understanding, and that the subject is generally understood before the object, due to the agent-patient-like relationship between the two of them.

**Complexity of Words and Acquisition Hierarchy**

An additional conclusion that can be drawn is the tendency of learners to simply acquire and use the most common parts of language. George Kingsly Zipf postulated that the most common words in English are always the articles, with “the” being the most common, followed by “a” and “an,” and these words will occur exponentially more often than any other words (Zipf 1937). Being the most common words, it stands to reason that they’re the most commonly used—and therefore heard—words. This will, of course, tap into the input portion of monitor theory that explains that the more input that an individual receives, the more likely they are to acquire it.

However, while learning those occurs rather early in the SLA experience, mastery of them occurs much later, which better clarifies the acquisition order. While the concept of articles is learned rather early, and the idea of what they stand for is regularly employed in all English speech and writing, choosing the correct article, especially for those who natively speak a language other than English occurs much later in development, further implying that the order may exist, but on a usage spectrum.

Related to that is the idea of the complexity of words, as well as their use being directly tied to their order of acquisition. Basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) take between 2-3 years to acquire, and consist primarily of greetings, basic conversation elements such as weather and time, and general items for survival in an L2 scenario. By contrast, we know that cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) skills and vocabulary develop much, much later than BICS, usually taking between 6-7 years to acquire in the second language, and are almost invariably tied to the specific field of work or field in which the language use is acquired. (VanPatten, 2014)

**Ties to L1 Learning**

Another important aspect is the consideration of the hierarchy of the words learned in one’s first language. In one study, it was found that more than 95% of the first 300 words that someone learned could be classified as “people, food, body parts, clothing, animals, vehicles, toys, household objects, routines, and activities or states.” From those surveyed from that study, it was found that those tended to be the very first words they learned in their second language as well. (Luniewska, 2016) Given the way that synapses tend to form in the brain, with the oldest being the most insulated and therefore the strongest, it’s safe to assume that the brain hangs onto these early vocabulary words, and most easily builds connections between them due to their age and strength. As for the model, we can place these basic nouns towards the early part of the acquisition hierarchy, and use it as an umbrella to sit above the subject and object relationship discussed earlier.

During Deb Roy’s “The Birth of a Word” TED Talk, he describes the types of things that his child learns, in what order, and moves into the conjecture of why. He gives the specific example of water, and how it almost invariably ties to the kitchen or bathroom, where the comprehensible, context-based input is most likely to occur. Similarly, one can find the concept of goodbye around all doors. Roy describes these centers as “hotspots” where words are learned due to context. (Roy, 2011). While this mostly refers to first language acquisition, given the above study, it’s fairly obviously applicable to second language instruction as well.

**Implications**

Krashen himself says that the Natural Order is not necessarily to be employed for pedagogical research. Rather, it is more akin to a metric for organizing where someone may be on the language learning spectrum. It is a *natural* order because the order forms naturally, without specific support to the ideally acquired facets. Rather, Krashen advises *against* using the hypothesis as the grounds for a syllabus or something similar.

 The use for this may be primarily to determine an ELL’s skill band, so that a new teacher can better understand where to place them in a specific setting that equals Krashen’s *i+1* in the hopes of creating the most comprehensible input possible.

**Additional Considerations and Forming the Model**

Now, as for a standard order, as language is fluid and the language learning process varies from person to person, the natural order is to be seen more as general spectrum rather than a hard and fast series of steps.

From these parts, we can form a general picture of just a few tendencies that might occur during ELA. These are compiled in a rough chart (Figure 2) affixed to this document. As stated earlier, language is fluid, and these may emerge not necessarily in a step-by-step order, but rather, these develop in less of a sequential manner, and more akin to that of a map that one passes over irregularly, with several of the steps occurring all at once.

Another thing to note is that Krashen did not allow for individual differences in his Natural Order Hypothesis. While modern thinking encourages the acceptance of individual difference, Krashen, by contrast, believed that the tendencies analyzed in them monitor hypothesis were global, and would create an overarching tendency hierarchy regardless of the individual. This line of thinking is intriguing, but lacks a solid foundation, and ultimately, does not truly present its model, outside of simply say that it’s so and citing the Dulay and Burt studies. A specific criticism comes from Lowie, who believes that the natural order is different for each individual, and tendencies towards acquiring certain mechanics vary wildly from person to person. (Lowie, 2015). The state of deciding the importance of individual differences will likely determine the longevity of Monitor Theory and its ability to continue to demystify the process of SLA.

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Appendix:

Figure 1



From Krashen, 1982.

Figure 2: 