

Krashen's claims through a usage-based lens

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Keywords

input, Krashen, natural order, second language acquisition, usage-based linguistics

In the following, I will briefly outline how Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Acquisition/Learning distinction, and the Natural Order Hypothesis hold up when seen through the lens of usage-based approaches. A number of frameworks fall under the umbrella label of usage-based approaches, including cognitive-functional linguistics (Evans et al., 2007), usage-based construction grammar (Goldberg, 2006, 2019), and dynamic systems theory (de Bot et al., 2007). As diverse as these frameworks are in terms of the questions they focus on and the methods they employ, they are united in their commitment to two fundamental assumptions about language and language acquisition: First, that the primary impetus of language acquisition is the learner's exposure to usage events, that is, their communicative experience using their second language; and second, that the cognitive mechanisms that learners employ are not exclusive to language learning, but the same ones at work in any kind of learning (Ellis & Wulff, 2020).

1 | THE INPUT HYPOTHESIS

As Bill VanPatten and Karen Lichtman have laid out in the introductory chapter of this special issue for us, Krashen's Input Hypothesis comprised four parts, with the most hotly debated one being the claim (and its implications) that language is acquired through comprehensible input, or $i + 1$. That input plays a major role in the acquisition process certainly constitutes one of the fundamental assumptions of usage-based approaches (though it is not an assumption exclusive to usage-based theories; see Rothman & Slabakova, 2018). The devil is in the details, however. No contemporary usage-based approach would agree with Krashen that comprehensible input and a sufficiently low/weak affective filter are the two necessary conditions that cause language acquisition (Krashen, 1982, p. 33). It's important to point this out here as this is often wrongly

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assumed to be the position of usage-based approaches. On the contrary, usage-based approaches have always emphasized that usage is a notion that captures considerably more than input alone. Earlier work by Kemmer and Barlow (1999) already explained that usage is not only input, but crucially output as well when they defined a “usage event” as “instances of a speaker’s producing and understanding language” (Kemmer & Barlow, 1999, p. viii). More recent definitions of language learning as “situated and attentionally and socially gated” (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 27) further explicate the highly complex processes that jointly determine how much of the input surrounding a learner in fact becomes intake (Corder, 1967), from the learner’s cognitive machinery and state to the discourse situation and social context. Once all of these factors are acknowledged to have their role in how and to what extent input is processed, language acquisition can only be seen as a highly individualized process in which no two learners share the same developmental paths or ultimate outcomes—in fact, in a usage-based approach, there is no outcome: The linguistic system continues to develop over the course of an individual’s life. This fits empirical data from (especially sequential) bilinguals, and at the same time, is not accounted for by Krashen’s Input Hypothesis. So, in summary, Krashen’s idea that input plays a crucial role in the acquisition process is widely accepted. That said, the current understanding of usage goes far beyond “input + affective filter” (both linguistic and otherwise), as we have been gaining more insight not only into what makes input comprehensible, but also into the conditions under which comprehensible input is in fact gainfully processed to further language acquisition.

2 | THE ACQUISITION/LEARNING DISTINCTION

According to Krashen, there are two processes at work in developing second language proficiency: (i) Acquisition, which is the unconscious process of figuring out how a language works through what Krashen refers to as “natural communication—in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding” (Krashen, 1982, p. 105-106), the process at work in children acquisition their first language; and (ii) learning, which is a conscious process that, unlike acquisition, is aided by drawing learners’ attention to the underlying rules of the language and by correcting learners’ mistakes (Krashen & Seliger, 1975). In many ways, acquisition reflects what we nowadays refer to as implicit learning, while learning in Krashen’s definition is what we refer to as explicit learning.

Although Krashen himself attributed the learning component a minor role (Krashen, 1982, p. 33), it appears that he attributes it exclusively to second language acquisition, which invites an interpretation that implies a fundamental qualitative difference between first and second language acquisition. Correspondingly, the (on average) more variable outcomes of second language acquisition compared to the nearly always optimally realized acquisition of a first language is often referenced as evidence in favor of this claim. Usage-based approaches not only call into question the assumption of perfect homogeneity in the ultimate attainment of first language acquisition, but also account for a more nuanced version of this empirical fact in a different way: Rather than claiming that the processes underlying first and second language acquisition only partially overlap, usage-based approaches argue that the same processes are at work, but the conditions of their deployment are more variable in (especially sequential) second language learners compared to first language learners.

First, sequential bilinguals start learning their second language(s) later, so they have less time to gather experience with the second language overall. Consequently, compared to age-matched monolingual speakers, sequential second language learners will always by definition have had considerably less exposure to the second language. Non-immersion learners receive even less exposure than immersion learners. Furthermore, just as differences in input quantity result in correspondingly variable attainment outcomes, so do differences in input quality and input setting; see, for example, Dąbrowska (2012) on effects of education even for first language attainment; Kupisch and Rothman (2018) on how differences in access to formal schooling in the standard variety of a heritage language contribute to variability in heritage language attainment; and Rothman and Guijarro-Fuentes (2010) on the impact of the often sizeable share of nonnative input, say via peer-to-peer interactions in the classroom, on the inter-language development of sequential second language learners.

Second, sequential second language learners by definition already know another language (or more than one in the case of sequential multilingualism), and so face the challenge of figuring out in what ways their first and sequential languages are similar or different, as well as the continuous cognitive challenge of not having the two or more languages interfere with one another during language comprehension and production.

The later age of onset and consequently lower amount of exposure to the second language, the lower quality of input due to less-than-ideal input settings, nor previous knowledge of a first language (or languages) are all realities that make child first language and adult second language learning contextually distinct. They do not imply, however, that the cognitive processes at work in acquiring a second language must differ from those involved in acquiring a first language. In fact, usage-based approaches go a step further and postulate that all kinds of learning, of language and anything else, employ domain-general cognitive mechanisms such as joint attention, conceptualization, automatization, analogy, and priming, to name but a few (see Diessel, 2017, for a detailed explanation of these terms and Ellis, 2019, to trace the roots of arguing in favor of simple, domain-general cognitive mechanisms to emergentism and dynamic systems theory). What makes one learning situation different from another one is not what kinds of cognitive mechanisms are employed; rather, the relative importance of each of the cognitive processes will vary in response to what it is that is being learned. Correspondingly, we see a number of cognitive processes heavily at work in bilinguals that are less employed in monolinguals deploying language, such as executive control, inhibition, and selective attention. That's because "[t]he mental juggling that appears to be necessary to negotiate the use of two languages is a natural circumstance of bilingualism" (Kroll, 2008); again, we expect control, inhibition, and selective attention to be recruited whenever two tasks compete, not just in bilingualism.

In summary, though usage-based approaches assume that the cognitive blueprint and mechanisms first and second language learners have at their disposal are the same, learners recruit them to different extents as a reflection of the different circumstances in which language learning unfolds.

3 | THE NATURAL ORDER HYPOTHESIS

Finally, let us briefly consider what, as Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001, p. 4) put it, "has become somewhat of a Holy Grail of SLA research", namely, accounting for Krashen's hypothesis that the acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order. Ellis

and Laporte (1997, p. 64) state that invariant developmental sequences are “as consistent with empiricist as with linguistic nativist theories of language.” Krashen (1982, p. 15) seems to lean towards a nativist account when he writes that the “uniformity is thought to reflect the operation of the natural language acquisition process that is part of all of us”, but advocates of a usage-based approach have argued that likely, multiple factors conspire in creating robust acquisition orders. A meta-analysis by Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001) that pooled data from 12 previously published studies in fact suggests that a large part of the variance in the accuracy scores for grammatical functors can be accounted for in terms of their perceptual salience, semantic complexity, morphophonological regularity, syntactic category, and frequency; the authors thus conclude that “no appeal to any innate blueprints or specific syntactic models is required to explain order of acquisition” (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001, p. 36).

Some researchers adopting a usage-based lens go even further and submit that natural orders are a product of placing the research focus on accuracy and consequently looking at data in a particular way. When we move from one-time assessments of groups of learners in terms of mean accuracy scores to longitudinal analyses of individual learners that track overall development, that is, not only accurate use in obligatory contexts, but also nontarget-like morphosyntactic assemblies learners produce, natural orders disappear. As Lowie and Verspoor (2015, p. 63) comment: “This paradox shows we can only make the observations that our method allows us.”

In summary, usage-based approaches can account for robust developmental sequences by recourse to salience (measured in differently nuanced ways) as a driving factor in the acquisition process—yet many usage-based researchers are less interested in ultimate attainment at the level of groups of learners and instead more interested in the dynamic process of development itself at the level of the individual learner.

4 | CONCLUSION

When we look back on Krashen’s claims as articulated in the early 1980s from the luxurious position of 2021, backed by the knowledge, data, and methods we have available to us today, I think that Krashen’s impact on second language research, and especially usage-based theory, is undeniable. By giving input a central role in accounting for L2 acquisition, he boosted a core tenet of usage-based theory; by bringing attention to the difference between implicit and explicit learning, he motivated usage-based researchers to examine their differential and/or combinatory role in second language acquisition, to delve more deeply into the empirical, cognitive underpinnings of second language acquisition, and how these shape individual learners differently depending on their learning context(s); and by postulating natural orders, he helped clear the path to an understanding that differences between two theories often lie not in which theory is objectively right and which one is demonstrably wrong—rather, different theories ask different questions from the start. Where contemporary usage-based theory disagrees with Krashen is ultimately in the details rather than the general thrust of his claims. How much the details matter, we will see over the next 40 years.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Stefan Th. Gries, Karen Lichtmann, Jason Rothman, and Bill VanPatten for their invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this commentary.

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How to cite this article: Wulff, S. (2021). Krashen's claims through a usage-based lens. *Foreign Language Annals*, 54, 306–310. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12555>