



Comparative essay

**“Comparing Chomsky and Krashen’s
Language Acquisition Theories”**

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Learning and Acquisition of English
as a Foreign Language

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Since the 1950's, acquisition of the first language, same as the second language learning or acquisition processes, has been deeply studied by many researchers (Ellis, 1994; Clark, 2009; Klein, 1986), and several different hypotheses have been established from their discoveries in order to try to understand and determine how learning occurs in the human being's mind. There are two authors who proposed different perspectives on how human being acquires or learns a language, Chomsky and Krashen, focusing on the cognitive field of the learning process. The present essay aims to establish some similarities and differences between Chomsky's Universal Grammar Hypothesis, which is cited by Cook (2001), and Krashen's Monitor Model Hypothesis, cited by Cook (n.d.), considering the moment of life when they think human being acquires the language, the theorists' approach, relevance of input, the social factor and Krashen's Affective Filter and Comprehensive Hypotheses.

Firstly, the linguist Noam Chomsky proposed the Universal Grammar Hypothesis (UGH) in the 1980's, focusing on the way language acquisition happens in the human mind. Nevertheless, Chomsky never referred to how the second language might be acquired or learned. Despite this, several linguists still agreed with the author's theory, even though some may say UGH is a limited theory (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Thus, this might be considered as the main difference between both linguists, since Krashen did focus in the first and second language acquisition. In addition, Krashen proposed five hypotheses, and one of them states a difference by defining learning as "*knowing about*" language' (Cook, ¶. 2) and acquisition as acquiring by *using language for real communication* (Cook, ¶. 2).

Secondly, Chomsky's UG model, cited by Cook (2001), is defined as *the system of principles, conditions, and rules that are elements or properties of all human language... the essence of human language* (p. 181). Hence, according to Chomsky, cited by Lightbown and Spada (2006), language acquisition occurs owing to an innate knowledge of these Universal Grammar principles, a process that happens at a certain age, which is called the Critical Period. Therefore, this aspect of Chomsky's hypothesis could be considered as a similarity due to

Krashen mentioned that after the age of puberty, any language learning process will occur more slowly and it will be more difficult than if it happened in a normal first language learning process; moreover, Krashen found a negative effect of age when he analyzed studies of age differences in the acquisition of a second language -considering the pronunciation aspect- (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). Notwithstanding, taking into account the case of an isolated thirteen-year-old girl, Krashen, cited by Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978), also states that despite the slow process and the difficulties that the human being might face at that age, there are high chances that language skills keep on improving many years after the Critical Period by following alternative routes. Hence, according to Krashen's theory and his hypotheses, a human being is capable of acquiring a language either in his/her childhood or in the adult stage.

In the third place, another likeness between both linguists' postulates is that the two of them are centered on the cognitive field, since they state that the acquisition process happens in the mind. First, Chomsky, cited by Diamond (n.d.), put forth what is called Language Acquisition Device, also known as LAD. This concept is defined by the author as a hypothetical tool which holds the main principles of language; in other words, the theory developed by Chomsky proposed that every person was born with the capability of understanding the universal principles and rules of language, only needing to acquire the necessary vocabulary, and this vocabulary and information acquired from the outside would be what is known as the "Input" -mother tongue language-, which is the lexicon received by the child and that will be acquired and lately transformed into the output. Indeed, according to Diamond (n.d.), Chomsky *discovered that when children are learning to speak, they don't make the errors you would expect. For instance, children seem to understand that all sentences should have the structure 'subject-verb-object', even before they are able to speak in full sentences* (¶. 8). It is compulsory to keep in mind that the LAD is just a theoretical concept, inasmuch as there is not any section in the brain called "Language Acquisition Device", nor could it be turned on and off for acquiring or learning a new language every time the person needs it. Since the linguist developed the Language Acquisition Device concept in the

1950s, this idea has become into a deeper theory called Universal Grammar. Second, according to Cook (2001), Krashen based his theory in five different hypotheses, calling one of them “The Input Hypothesis”. This one states that humans acquire language by “comprehensible input”, meaning that the learner must understand in her/his mind the message delivered. Thus, as both of them postulate that the input is processed in the learner’s brain, being this a mental process, they are both centered on the cognitive field. Nevertheless, the main factor that Krashen’s theory has is the social factor because besides from acquiring vocabulary, the learner gives a meaning and mental images for the new words she/he is being exposed to when the child interacts with the people who are around. So, his postulate, apart from being a cognitive theory, is a socio cognitive theory, involving the cognitive aspect in a social context (Cook, 2001).

Fourthly, taking into consideration the previous difference, it is clear that although input is important in both theories, this importance differs from one theory to the other one. In Chomsky’s UGH, input is the main constituent since it is the only factor which affects language acquisition. For Chomsky, experience is not an important factor that may affect the acquisition of language; on the contrary, he considered language acquisition as an innate process which occurs in every human being’s mind. Consequently, it can be deduced that the influence of external factors on the development of language in children is very little for the linguist. On the other hand, for the theory established by Krashen, input is an essential part of the environment surrounding the learner, splitting his theory into five hypotheses. In fact, he refers to a mental process which also involves environmental and psychological aspects, affecting the way language is acquired (Cook, 2010). Therefore, the main difference between both authors in this aspect is that for Krashen the LAD is part of the system for understanding and acquiring the input, which complements external and psychological factors, whereas for Chomsky the LAD is the “nucleus” of the UGH.

In the fifth place, along with this hypothesis, Krashen proposes the Affective Filter Hypothesis which is *a mental block, caused by affective factors ... that prevents*

input from reaching the language acquisition device (Cook, n.d., ¶.5). Accordingly, those acquirers who are in a not optimal affective state will have problems acquiring the knowledge or input that is being delivered (Krashen, 1981). In addition, Krashen mentions three variables which are related to properly acquire a second language:

- 1. Anxiety: Low anxiety relates to second language acquisition. The more the students are "off the defensive", the better the acquisition.*
- 2. Motivation: Higher motivation predicts more second language acquisition. Certain kinds of motivation are more effective in certain situations, moreover. In situations where acquisition of the second language is a practical necessity, "instrumental" motivation relates second language acquisition; in many other situations, such as those where acquisition of the second language is more of a luxury, "integrative" motivation predicts success in second language acquisition.*
- 3. Self-confidence: The acquirer with more self-esteem and self-confidence tends to do better in second language acquisition. (1981, pp. 73-74).*

On the contrast, emotions and feelings are not explicitly mentioned by Chomsky on the papers and references used for this essay.

In the sixth place, in the Comprehensible Hypothesis from Krashen's Monitor Model, it is stated that the acquisition of the language takes place as the result of a process where the learner is able to understand input which should be a little beyond her/his level: $i + 1$ Level (Cook, n.d.). As in Chomsky's theory the previous statement is not mentioned, this is considered a difference between both authors.

To conclude, Noam Chomsky needs to be recognized as the inventor of the Universal Grammar Hypothesis, even though he mainly focused on what happens inside the learners' mind when they are in the process of acquiring their first language. Moreover, he should be considered as one of the most important pioneers who have developed cognitive theories for language teaching. Then, it is necessary to highlight from Stephen Krashen's theory, how he develops

psychological aspects in language acquisition. Most of the hypotheses and theories reviewed in this essay hugely expands the topic of first and second language acquisition and teaching/learning, by not only considering what happens on the acquirer's mind, but also it takes into consideration the environment and everything that surrounds the learner, including the feelings and the atmosphere where the acquisition occurs, since both are factors which can shape and change the way a person learns.

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