

# The Application of Second Language Acquisition Theories in Current English Teaching

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**Abstract.** Nowadays, in the context of the globalization of English, whether it is for traveling abroad, studying, doing business or other circumstances, people can use English. Today as a universal language, the importance of English is self-evident. Many countries, especially those whose mother tongue is not English, are attaching greater importance to the teaching of English as a second language. This paper first presents and introduces the theories related to second language acquisition. Then it explores the phenomena existing in English teaching at the present stage including the inactivity of students in class, the irrationality of language input, the shortage of language acquisition environment and the emotional problems of students. Finally, it utilizes these theories to enlighten contemporary English teaching by putting forward some suggestions such as the development of a sense of purpose, the provision of effective input, the transition of teaching mode, the recruitment of foreign talents as well as the decrease of affective filtering, aiming at providing a reference for today's English teaching.

**Keywords:** Second Language Acquisition; Existing Phenomena; English Teaching; Application.

## 1. Introduction

A second language is a language learned after acquiring a first language. As an independent discipline, the research of second language acquisition (SLA) was formed in the late 1960s and early 1970s [1]. Having been developing up to now, the research on SLA has attracted the interest and attention of many scholars at home and abroad. It focuses on the process of learning a second language and how to improve the level of it. Learning a second language is an extremely widespread phenomenon in this era. According to the statistics, there are about 55 countries in the world where English is the second official language including India, Singapore and South Africa [1].

Speaking of SLA, many scholars will mention Stephen D. Krashen who is an eminent American language educator and devotes himself to the study of SLA. Since the late 1970s, he has put forward a series of theories on second language acquisition [1]. A comprehensive and accurate understanding of Krashen's second language acquisition theories is of positive significance for better perceiving the nature of foreign language learning and promoting foreign language teaching.

Since English is one of the most widely used and important languages in the world, it is imperative to research the field of English teaching by combining the second language acquisition theories which are of guiding significance. With the application of second language acquisition theories in English teaching, the improvement of English teaching quality and the increase of people who are proficient in English will be facilitated, which is helpful for cross-cultural communication and broadening people's horizons.

## 2. Krashen's SLA Theories

### 2.1. The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis

This hypothesis is the basis of Krashen's theories. He thought that there are two ways to develop language ability, namely acquisition and learning [2]. The process of language acquisition is similar



to the development of children's native language ability. It is a process of unconsciously and naturally learning language. Through listening to others, communicating with others and reading etc., children's abilities of listening, speaking, reading and writing are gradually formed. In other words, acquisition means that the learner unconsciously absorbs the language through contact with the outside world and uses the language fluently and correctly without realizing it [2]. However, learning is a formal process of acquiring knowledge deliberately and consciously. Students learning the language in school belong to this process. When students are learning a second language in school, teachers will explain the language phenomena and grammar rules to them, supplemented by conscious exercises, memorization and other training, so as to achieve the purpose of enabling students to master the pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar of the language [2].

Krashen regarded acquisition as more important than learning because a person who has mastered a language through "acquisition" is able to communicate easily and fluently in that language [3]. Only language acquisition which is the production mechanism of people's use of language, can directly promote the development of second language ability.

## **2.2. The Natural Order Hypothesis**

This hypothesis shows that the acquisition of grammatical structures follows a predictable "natural order". That is, some language structures are learned first and some are learned later [2]. Although different groups differ greatly in language acquisition, there are some things in common.

With regard to the natural order hypothesis, English is perhaps the most studied language, and among the various structures in English, morphology is the most studied. Roger William Brown, a pioneer in psycholinguistics, showed experimentally in 1973 that children tended to acquire their mother tongue by acquiring some grammatically functional morphemes earlier than others [3]. For example, when children learned English which was their mother tongue, the progressive tense sign "-ing" (e.g. He is playing baseball) and the plural sign "-s" (e.g. two dogs) were the first to be learned. The third person singular sign "-s" (e.g. He lives in New York) and the possessive sign "'s" (e.g. John's hat) were acquired later. Then, based on Brown's research results, Duret and Burt conducted a study on second language acquisition of children with different native languages. They found that no matter what the children's first language was, they all showed this natural sequence of morpheme learning when they learned a second language [3]. After that, Berry, Marton, and Krashen also found the natural sequence of SLA in adults which is very similar to that in children, and these adults' first languages were also different [3].

Therefore, it can be seen from these findings that people learn a second language in a fixed order which is not influenced by learners' ages and first languages.

## **2.3. The Monitor Hypothesis**

This hypothesis is closely related to the forementioned "acquisition-learning hypothesis". Krashen thought that there are two separate language systems in the human brain, one is the language acquisition system and the other is the language learning system. The language acquisition system contains subconscious language knowledge and the language learning system contains conscious language knowledge [3].

The subconscious language knowledge builds up and represents a person's true language ability. Everyone relies on acquisition to speak a language fluently. In daily communication, the words people output are caused or driven by the subconscious acquisition system. The language learning system, or conscious language knowledge, only monitors the use of the second language. The language knowledge acquired through learning does not make the learners express things fluently. It just plays a role in monitoring the language output in people's minds. In other words, conscious language knowledge has only one function in speech act, that is, it can only act as a supervisor or an editor to check and control the output of discourse [3]. In the process of language learning, speakers

consciously use grammatical rules to correct, modify or consummate their speech. This monitoring function may occur before, during, or even after the speaker speaks.

Additionally, it should be paid attention that there are some preconditions that are needed in order to realize this monitoring function. Firstly, the speaker should have enough time to monitor their speech. Second, the speaker should focus on the grammatical form and syntactic structure rather than discourse content. Third, the speaker also has to know about the grammatical rules, which means that learners should know how to adjust grammar to the standard one [4].

## **2.4. The Input Hypothesis**

More specifically, this hypothesis is called the “comprehensible input hypothesis” and it is also the core of Krashen's language acquisition theory. This hypothesis says that language acquisition is based on comprehension. Learners acquire language knowledge by absorbing “understandable input” which refers to the understandable language material that the learner hears or reads [4]. Although the difficulty of the material should not be too easy, it should also not be greatly beyond the knowledge the learner has mastered but should be slightly higher than the learner's current level. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that "understandable input" emphasizes the understandability of the content meaning, not the understandability of the form.

This hypothesis can be summed up in the formula “ $i+1$ ”. In this formula, “ $i$ ” represents the learner's current level, “ $1$ ” represents the gap between the current level of the learner and the level of knowledge to be learned in the next stage and this gap should not be too large, then “ $i+1$ ” denotes the new knowledge the teacher should teach.

Aside from understandability, ideal language input also needs to have two other characteristics. One is that the input should be sufficient. The amount of language input is the material basis for language acquisition, and only a large number of language inputs can contribute to language acquisition. A large amount of input means listening a lot or reading a lot, or both. The other is that the input should be interesting and relevant. If the new content can spark learners' interest, they can absorb knowledge more easily [4].

## **2.5. The Affective Filter Hypothesis**

This hypothesis points out that the process of second language acquisition may also be affected by many emotional factors. It is impossible for all the new knowledge to be absorbed by learners because they may filter out a lot of content due to their own factors.

Krashen thought that there are three affective factors that affect language acquisition. The first is motivation. Whether the students' learning purpose is clear directly affects the learning effect. Purposeful students will engage in learning with a positive attitude and make rapid progress. Otherwise, they may produce little effect [4]. The second is personality. Learners who are confident, outgoing and willing to be in an unfamiliar language environment make faster progress in their learning. The third is the emotional state. In second language learning, negative emotions like anxiety will hinder the understanding and absorption of language knowledge while a relaxed mood will not [3].

## **3. The Phenomena Existing in English Teaching at Present Stage**

### **3.1. Many Students Are Not Active Enough**

It can be observed that many students are not very active in English learning. This phenomenon results from some reasons which are excessive monitoring, introversion and lack of motivation. Some students overuse monitoring, which means that they spend a lot of time repeatedly checking their words, afraid of making grammatical mistakes that will prevent them from expressing their meanings accurately [5]. So it can be seen that they are not apt to not only answer questions in class, but also

communicate with others verbally in English. The same is true of some students who are introverted. Although they have a good grasp of English and they know the probability that they will make grammatical errors is very small, they still won't share their answers in class and go on oral interaction with others [6]. The situation that students are not active in English learning due to inadequate motivation is common, especially in universities. From primary school period to high school period, students are supervised by teachers in English learning on a daily basis, and they learn English with a clear goal, that is, to prepare for entrance examinations. However, when students go to college, they find that their study relies largely on their self-discipline and there is no frequent supervision and guidance from teachers [7]. Therefore, although English is a compulsory course in colleges, many college students do not know the purposes of learning English, which means that they do not have definite goals, thus they are not so energetic when learning English.

### **3.2. The Input Is Unreasonable**

The irrationality of input is mainly manifested in two situations. One is that the English knowledge taught by teachers is inadequate. In secondary schools, a large number of teachers pay more attention to vocabulary teaching than grammar teaching [8]. They seldom explain and emphasize advanced grammar, and mostly use simple sentence patterns in class. Therefore, students' grammatical input is too little, which makes them have a weak foundation and get accustomed to utilizing simple grammar in writing. The other situation is that the difficulty of the knowledge taught largely exceeds students' current level. This makes students unable to understand the knowledge. Most college English teachers think that students have learned and mastered all grammar and sentence patterns before attending universities, so they do not set up grammar courses and teach freshmen texts in books by using advanced grammar at the beginning [9]. However, since these students did not receive enough grammatical knowledge during the secondary school period, what their teachers teach is incomprehensible for them.

### **3.3. The Lack of Language Acquisition Environment**

Language environment is absolutely crucial for second language learners. In daily life, many second language learners have few opportunities to immerse themselves in a second language environment. Actually the same is true in class. Taking college English classes in China as an example, it can be found that most English classes are taught in Chinese. Also, in English classes, teachers are in the dominant position while students are subordinate, which shows a unidirectional and rigid subject-object relationship [10]. So it can be seen that teachers have little oral English communication and interaction with students in class. Besides, Chinese universities have a low degree of internationalization and few foreign teachers are recruited. On top of that, many English classes do not integrate real situations.

### **3.4. Many Learners Have Negative Emotions**

Many students have psychological barriers which can lead to poor language learning effect. Some students realize that their English level is not as high as others and are not confident during the process of English learning. Therefore, they have a low self-evaluation and often feel anxious. For example, they fear that if they do not perform well in the exam, they will be punished by the teacher and laughed at by their classmates. Students with low self-evaluation tend to be afraid of being judged negatively by others and worry about what others will think of them [11]. In addition, some students are resistant to English learning. This is because they are underestimated and do not get much encouragement. Then they gradually regard English learning as meaningless.

## **4. The Enlightenment of Second Language Acquisition Theories on English Teaching**

### **4.1. Students Should Cultivate Their Sense of Purpose**

When students attend college, they need to start thinking about their future plans [7]. For example, they can choose to go abroad for further study after graduation and choose some English-speaking countries such as Britain, the United States and Singapore and so on. In order to adapt to the English environment, they will practice their English and make their language scores up to the standard before going abroad. In addition, students majoring in English can choose to work as English teachers or translators. Then in order to be qualified for their jobs, they will devote themselves to English and continuously improve their level. When students set clear goals, they will regard these goals as the motivation to learn English, and they will actively consult the teacher to promote the improvement of their English ability, so as to make continuous progress towards their goals [7].

### **4.2. Teachers Should Provide Rational Language Input**

For secondary school teachers, it is not enough to focus only on the accumulation of English vocabulary. They should also pay attention to teaching different English grammar. Especially in high school period, teachers should explain advanced grammar in detail like attributive clauses, compound sentences, appositive clauses, absolute construction and so on so as to satisfy the required amount of input. Moreover, since there are still many students whose English foundation remains weak and have not mastered many grammar when they start to attend college, it is not advisable that first-year students be exposed to difficult English courses in the beginning [9]. College teachers should offer special grammar courses to freshmen. They should lead students to consolidate grammar knowledge step by step, which means that they should appropriately increase the difficulty of knowledge on the basis that students can understand what they have learned. Besides, in the process of grammar teaching, teachers should also focus on the grammatical meaning, not just the grammatical form [12]. Only after comprehensive grammar learning can students be able to learn difficult English courses.

### **4.3. The Change of Teaching Methods**

The traditional English teaching method that students only listen to the teacher in class has little effect on second language acquisition. Teachers should combine acquisition with learning. In college English classes, in order to create a language acquisition environment, teachers especially those who teach English major students, can try to teach in English and have more oral interaction with students in class [13]. In this way, not only can students practice their oral English, but also they can increase their English application ability. Through frequent interaction, students can use all grammar more fluently and skillfully. And then they will also reduce the use of monitoring because they do not have to worry about making mistakes. Teachers should also use situational teaching methods to create a language acquisition environment [14]. For example, when they are teaching slang, they can play some English movie plots in class so as to deepen their impression of the meanings of slang.

### **4.4. The Introduction of Foreign Teachers**

Increasing the proportion of foreign teachers in universities is also a good way to promote the improvement of English teaching quality. Contacting foreign teachers is a direct way to acquire English. As a person who can speak idiomatic English, a foreign teacher can impart more English knowledge than other teachers. Besides, when communicating with foreign teachers, students can also enhance their speaking level and practice their listening [12]. At present, it is difficult for Chinese universities to greatly increase the amount of foreign teachers within a short time and it is necessary to create some favorable conditions to attract foreign teachers.

### **4.5. Teachers Should Reduce Affective Filtering**

As bad emotions are a barrier to English learning, teachers should help students adjust their emotions. In order to reduce students' anxiety in English learning, teachers should pay as much attention as

possible to students who are bad at English [11]. Teachers should know about students' needs and levels and give corresponding guidance to make up for their deficiencies in English knowledge. Also, in order to enhance students' confidence in English learning, teachers should encourage and have faith in them rather than looking down on them. They need to give credit to students as they see their progress [11]. On top of that, teachers should also avoid comparisons between students.

## 5. Conclusion

Today it is of great significance to learn English which is a widely spoken language in the world. It is undoubted that there exist some problems when learners learn English as a second language. Krashen's second language acquisition theories are of great help to English teaching as they contain various content including the comparisons between acquisition and learning, the similarity of different groups in second language acquisition, monitoring, language input and affective factors. By combining these theories with English teaching, it is strongly believed that the teaching effect will be satisfactory and that learners can see a noticeable enhancement in their English level.

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