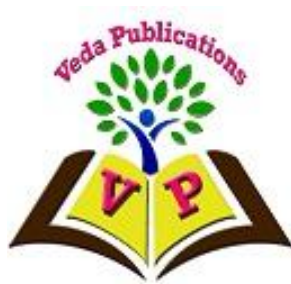# MENTAL GRAMMAR AS A SOLUTION TO MONITOR OVERUSE IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

In the context of India which enjoys the privilege of being a multilingual country, English is taught as a Second Language. Krashen's theories of Second language Acquisition may be well adapted to the Indian context of English Language teaching. Even after the graduation or post graduation many Second Language Learners find it hard to communicate effectively in the target language. This paper deals with Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis which offers a solid reason behind this lack of competence.

Keywords: *English, Second Language, Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis.*

When Stephen Krashen developed the Monitor Hypothesis in the 1970's, it turned out to be a prominent paradigm in the theory of Second Language Acquisition. His attempt to draw a distinction between the conscious and intentional process of learning and the subconscious and incidental process of acquisition revolutionised the English Language Teaching pedagogy all over the world. The age old methods of ELT were challenged by the notion that the conscious learning of formal rules does not contribute much to the actual language performance. In the new paradigm, the learned system was degraded into a mere monitor or editor while the acquired system was accelerated to the position of an initiator of utterances.

How the editing system adversely affects the communicative competence of an ESL learner is perfectly substantiated by Krashen by focussing on the 'time' element in the monitor overuse.

One necessary condition for successful monitor use is time. It takes real processing time to remember and apply conscious rules. We should expect most students to successfully apply conscious rules to their output during oral conversation- there is, obviously little time. People who do attempt to think about and utilize conscious rules

during conversation run two risks. First, they tend to take too much time when it is their turn to speak, and have a hesitant style that is often difficult to listen to (Krashen,1982, p.89)

Other over-users of the monitor, in trying to avoid this, plan their next utterance while their conversational partner is talking. Their output may be accurate, but they all too often do not pay enough attention to what the other person is saying (Krashen, 1982).

As he points out, the learner's attempt to apply the conscious rules to their output during oral conversation can literally affect the flow of speech. One of the major factors that heighten the monitor overuse can be identified as the excessive input of linguistic rules and this fact can be verified with a close examination of the textbooks prescribed for the formal teaching of English in primary and secondary classes whose medium of instruction is the vernacular language.

Krashen identifies the 'wrong' ways of learning grammar as the major reason behind the incompetent monitor use that hampers the internalisation of linguistic skills. He never ignores the chances of rules getting misinterpreted and turning out to be deterrent to communicative competence. He observes:

> In effect, both teachers and students are deceiving themselves. They believe that it is the subject matter itself, the study of grammar, that is responsible for the students' progress in second language acquisition, but in reality their progress is coming from the medium and not the message. Any subject matter that held their interest would do just as well, so far as second language acquisition is concerned, so long as it required extensive use of the target language. (Krashen, 1982, p.120).

The practice of teaching grammatical rules can be traced back to the very beginning of Second Language teaching programme. To ensure accuracy in each utterance, Second Language curriculum is usually tightly packed with grammatical rules that are most often communicatively unessential. Krashen himself sees it unfair to thrust upon complex linguistic formulas to learners who are unable to understand even simpler messages in the Second Language (Krashen, 1982).

Too much attention on teaching grammatical rules under the impression that the meta-linguistic knowledge can contribute to the linguistic competence and thereby nourishing the communicative performance has every chance to turn out to be a hindrance in the acquisition of the target language.

The fact that the feel for correctness in the Second Language is not found evolved even after years of formal education calls for the need for research in this area. How far the conventional methods of teaching grammar contribute to the monitor overuse that keeps the Affective Filter high, subsequently hampering communicative competence in an ESL context is also to be explored at this juncture.

Krashen prefers to call the "feel for correctness" a by-product of acquisition. He attempts to explicate the evolution of the 'feel for correctness' by juxtaposing the inductive and deductive strategies of learning.

> When the goal is inductive learning, the focus is on form and the learner attempts to analyse formal aspects of the data presented. When the goal is acquisition, the acquirer attempts to understand the message contained in the input. Also, the "rule" developed by the two processes is different. An inductively- learned rule is a conscious mental representation of a linguistic generalisation – an acquired rule is not conscious, but is manifested by a "feel" for correctness. (Krashen, 1982, p.114).

While discussing the feel for correctness the Error Correction strategy also demands attention. The Second Language Acquisition Theory maintains that error correction is not of use for acquisition. Acquisition occurs, according to the Input Hypothesis, when acquirers understand input for its meaning, not when they produce output and focus on form (Krashen, 1982).

Graham Hall's perspective on the use of Affective Filter puts forward a new dimension to the monitor overuse by Second Language Learners.

The learners who are demotivated, bored, anxious or low on self confidence may tend to filter out input while motivated, confident and relaxed learners will have a low Affective filter and be ready to acquire comprehensible input (G. Hall, 2012, p.107) Researches on the techniques for lowering the Affective Filter and Monitor Overuse have found alternatives in bilingual methods deeply rooted in the Mentalist theory of Noam Chomsky. He views language as a by-product of evolution. He hypothesized that language may have evolved simply because of the evolution of the physical structure of the brain and the cognitive structures that were used for things like tool-making or rule-learning were also good for complex communication.

Chomsky's generative grammar stored in the brain that allows a speaker to produce human language that other speakers can understand places itself as an alternative to metalinguistic elements in the pedagogy of ESL. Chomsky is of the view that all humans are born with the capacity of constructing a Mental Grammar, given linguistic experience; this capacity for language is called Language faculty (Chomsky N., 1965). The basic postulate of his universal grammar is that a certain set of structural rules are innate to humans, independent of sensory experience. With more linguistic stimuli received in the course of psychological development, children then adopt specific syntactic rules that conform to Universal Grammar. This mental grammar stands contrasted with other grammars, e.g. prescriptive, descriptive and pedagogical. The Mental Grammar of a language which a child acquires from the environment without any conscious teaching makes him/her proficient in secondary order skills as reading and writing later.

Chomsky himself wrote that 'we should probably try to create a rich linguistic environment for the intuitive heuristics that the normal human being automatically possesses' (Chomsky N., 1968). While contrasting the natural informal situation where an immigrant is using the language for his everyday purpose with an artificial formal situation such as a classroom, he identifies the former with the native speakers whose language is modified through perennial communication characterised by trial and error method.

Place of grammar in the instruction of ESL is also clearly defined by Chomsky by pointing out that it must be recognised that one does not learn the grammatical structure of a second language through "explanation and instruction" beyond the most rudimentary elements, for the simple reason that no one has enough explicit knowledge about this structure to provide explanation and instruction (Chomsky N., 1969).

By rejecting the view that the first language interferes with SLA, Krashen sees the use of the first language as a performance strategy. The learner falls back on his first language when he lacks a rule in the L2. He initiates an utterance using his first language (instead of acquired L2 Knowledge) and then substitutes L2 lexical items, also making small repairs to the resulting string by means of the Monitor. (Ellis, 1994). Chomsky also asserts that there is a genetically determined "window of opportunity" for language acquisition. If the child does not learn its first language during this period, then it will never attain full native-like mastery of any language. It has also been observed that the L2 learner possesses a grammar of a first language incorporating the principles of Universal Grammar and specifying a particular set of values for its parameters. It is the notion of the parameter fixing that formulates the relationship between first and second language learning in a more precise way. L1 is viewed as a mediator by Chomsky and advocates for a bilingual formula by stating that once some language is available, acquisition of others is relatively easy (Chomsky N., 1969).

Keith Nelson has described an approach for accelerating first language acquisition based on 'rare event' learning (Nelson, 1982); first he assesses whether a child is 'ready' to learn a particular structure, then he provides examples of it over a short period; triggering experience when the time is ripe teaches the child the structure. Similarly the prototype theory of categorization suggests that there are 'best' examples of categories; a robin is a 'better' example of a bird than an ostrich (Rosch, E., 1977).

Chomsky's theory of Second Language Teaching and Learning puts forward an alternate to the system of ELT that keeps the Affective Filter high. By offering ample pattern practice, the learner's inhibition can be lowered to such an extent that he or she will be able to communicate his/her thoughts without much mental obstacles. The innate capability of human brain to adopt linguistic patterns and adapt them for the making of utterances in any language helps the learner to construct necessary linguistic structures of Second Language when he aims at fluency in the target language.

The learning acquisition distinction by Krashen gets dissolved in the Chomskian perspective where the consciously-learned patterns move to the acquisition domain and act as an utterance initiator. Internalisation of the linguistic structures is possible only when they are frequent in the linguistic environment created around the learner whether it is formal or natural. The mental grammar innate in all humans develops a "feel for correctness" for a particular language when the learner is immersed in that particular linguistic environment. Chomsky offers a key to attain communicative proficiency by creating a rich linguistic environment for the intuitive heuristics (Chomsky N., 1968). The excess time consumed by the Monitor Overuse is being saved while the utterance is initiated by the acquired system empowered by constant drills and practice. The 'wrong' pattern of teaching grammar mentioned by Krashen can also be remedied by consciously avoiding the practice of teaching descriptive rules of grammar transacted with a pedantic terminology which has nothing to do with the actual purpose of learning English. Why should a learner be able to distinguish between a demonstrative pronoun and an interrogative pronoun if he does not want to get a Masters in Linguistics?

Mugging up grammatical rules just as formulae are being learnt by heart in a mathematics classroom will definitely place the Affective Filter high. Hence anxiety regarding the grammatical rules as well as their appropriate use in the production of actual utterance is to be ruled out in order to ensure communicative competency.

Based on the postulates of Monitor Hypothesis and the Mental Grammar, it can be concluded that the problem of monitor overuse in the ESL context can be ruled out by implementing the techniques based on the Mental Grammar which relies on the brain's capacity to generate grammar of its own. Such techniques can bring the Affective Filter low so that the flow of linguistic output becomes smooth and effective which in turn leads to a better communicative competence.

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