

The Language Learner in Acquisitionland, or Through the Black Box

A rough guide to the krashenic miracles

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The Language Acquisition Device (LAD), or simply the Black Box

This is in the brain. We put in *comprehensible input* on one end and *acquisition* comes out on the other. Unlike the black box in aeroplanes, we don't really know what happens in there. But then again, we don't need to, because it's all automatic! There's a catch, though; the input has to be *comprehensible*, so make sure you use *i+1* only!

Acquisition vs. Learning

It's crucial to be able to tell them apart, but very easy, too. *Acquisition* is automatic, subconscious, fast and effortless - because it's natural. *Learning* is manual, conscious, cumbersome and slow - because it's artificial, and because of *monitor* interference. How can we help learners acquire rather than learn? In a nutshell, by not teaching. No grammar, for starters. Or explanations. Or any explicit information. We just regulate the amount of *comprehensible input* and keep the *affective filter* deactivated. The *LAD* will do the rest. Given the time it takes to acquire our mother tongue, it may be quite some time till students acquire a second language in an EFL school setting. But we're not in a hurry.

Affective Filter

The *affective filter* is attached to the *LAD*. We would expect the *filter* to help the *LAD* function normally by blocking out the undesirable elements, but we would be wrong. The *affective filter* blocks the goodness of *comprehensible input*. This means that the *filter* has to be inactive for *acquisition* to take place. The ideal situation is when the ducts are wide open to allow *comprehensible input* to flow freely into the *LAD*.

Monitor

The *monitor* uses conscious knowledge, which is the result of *learning*, to check and edit language use. This is undesirable, because it slows down production. Of course, the *monitor* also picks out mistakes, but who wants to be reminded of these?

Grammar

Just say no. Explicit grammar knowledge switches on the *monitor* and then *acquisition* is reduced to *learning*. What's worse, it may activate the dreaded *affective filter*. Of course grammar diluted in *comprehensible input* is fine, but only as long as learners don't know it's there. Also, the more explicit information about language we give learners, the more powerful their *monitor* becomes. With an active and well-functioning *monitor* the learners will be able to correct themselves and even keep *learning* consciously on their own. Now, are we sure we want that to happen?

Comprehensible Input (or *i+1*)

Remember that excessive or inappropriate *input* will activate the *affective filter*. So how can we tell when the *input* is *comprehensible*? Piece of cake. Check how much the learners already know (the *i*) and then give them **one** more. This is important. Half will be too little and one-and-a-half will be too much - not to mention messy, as the excessive half may stick to the *filter*. And by no means attempt to give learners any analytical information about language. They may start *learning*, and then where will we be?