On Victims, Innocents, and the Need for Some Degree of Verifiability: A Response to Wheeler's "Krashen, a Victim of History"

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(From the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)
victim noun [C] someone or something which has been hurt, damaged or killed or has suffered, either because of the actions of someone or something else, or because of illness or chance:

to provide financial aid to hurricane/flood, etc. victims

victims of crime.

The children are the innocent/helpless victims of the fighting.

The new drug might help save the lives of cancer victims.

We appear to have been the victims of a cruel practical joke.

Our local hospital has become the latest victim of the cuts in government spending.

Krashen is a victim of history?

Introduction

The word *victim* is a powerful one. As suggested by the above examples, it implies one's state of innocence and more important, suggests the existence of external forces or agents that have negatively affected a person for reasons that are beyond his or her control, the existence of which explains and possibly justifies his or her present position. It is common to use the word when highlighting the case of someone whose suffering has been overlooked and/or when the agents responsible for that suffering have not been sufficiently punished.

I was, therefore, both surprised and intrigued to see it used to describe Stephen Krashen in the spring issue of 2003 of the *TESL Canada Journal*. In this issue, Garon Wheeler uses this word to describe Krashen as a victim of history who has been misunderstood and harshly attacked by language educators as a result of their historical bias for "scientific" and verifiable theories in opposition to more "natural" and intuitive theories based on common sense and experience.

Krashen (1981, 1982, 1985; Krashen & Terrell, 1983), whose work in the 1980s theorized an innatist approach to language learning, influenced second-language teaching practice, particularly in promoting variations of the communicative language teaching approach (Lightbown & Spada, 2002). Through five famous hypotheses, Krashen constructed a model of language education that contrasted "acquisition": the unconscious, intuitive way one naturally constructs a language by simply being exposed to it (much as children learn their first languages) with "learning": the conscious, deliberate cognitive act of constructing a language through an understanding of its rules and components (echoing the type of formal cognitive learning that occurs in adult language classes). In Krashen's view, acquisition was superior to learning in producing a high degree of competence in the target language (TL). Krashen drew a distinct line between the learning and acquiring, arguing that what was learned could never be transferred and converted to acquisition.

Acquisition required only two conditions: (a) exposure to rich input in the target language, which was comprehensible, yet also slightly challenging of the learners' degree of competence in the target language; and (b) an environment where learners felt relaxed and secure to help lower their "affective filters," allowing input to be properly processed. Over time, learners would acquire the TL in a predictable and natural order.

Unlike acquisition, learning involved the use of a "monitor," a symbol of the conscious intellectual act required when using the TL. The monitor served a watchdog function and was used to choose, evaluate, and adapt one's language production. Although Krashen recognized that this monitor could be of some use in certain situations, he stressed that its use was impractical and often resulted in labored, unnatural, and nonfluent speech production.

Krashen's model received wide acceptance from teachers due to its simplicity, concreteness, and intuitive appeal. His theories also gained popularity in the way they echoed a call to see language learning as something that went beyond learning grammar rules and doing exercises. Language educators welcomed its focus on meaningful input and the importance of a learning environment that encouraged risk-taking and playing with the language.

However, despite these influences and their continued popularity, Krashen's theories have been seriously criticized and even disregarded by fellow researchers, who cite oversimplification and lack of empirical strength (De Beaugrande, 1997; de Bot, 1996; Gregg, 1984; McLaughlin, 1978, 1990a; Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

Harsh Criticism?

Wheeler reacts strongly to this criticism of Krashen. It seemsthat the criticism offered by these researchers about the weaknesses of his theories is not sufficient to explain his fall from one of the "best-known figures in the field of language teaching" (p. 92) to that of a researcher whose theories have "effectively been dismissed by the big names in the field" (p. 93). For him this criticism is "unusual," even for a "conspicuous" theory (p. 93). In defense of Krashen's intellect, Wheeler suggests that "something deeper than the traditional challenges to the leader" is at the heart of Krashen's fate. His fall from grace is attributed to historical forces that have victimized Krashen. Wheeler states, "I think that Krashen's fate was foretold from the beginning. His rise was not surprising, and the nastiness of his fall was inevitable. I believe that he was a victim of history" (p. 93).

The Official Accusations

Wheeler admits that a formal evaluation of Krashen's theory using Stern's (1983) criteria for the evaluation theory strength reveals its lack of explicitness, coherence, and consistency, as well as an absence of explanatory power and verifiability, making it indeed a doubtful and questionably "scientific" explanation of what language learning is and how it can best be done. This, incidentally, echoes many of Krashen's critics' arguments. Although Wheeler does not go into any details about these in his article, I believe it is worth reviewing them more specifically for this discussion.

In essence, criticism of Krashen's five hypotheses might be summed up by saying that Krashen's model of language acquisition paints a much too simplified picture of what goes on when one learns a language (Brown, 2000). For example, Krashen's focus on input as the sole motor of language acquisition has been criticized for excluding other vital aspects of language learning such as the important role played by output in second-language acquisition (de Bot, 1996; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Others point out that Krashen's focus on input excludes critical external factors such as culture, social background, motivation, awareness, and social relationships (de Beaugrande, 1997; Dunn & Lantolf, 1998). Still others have denounced the lack of clear definitions in Krashen's model (Gregg, 1984; McLaughlin, 1978, 1990b). How, for example, is a teacher to draw the line between noncomprehensible input and comprehensible input that "contains structures 'a bit beyond' [a student's] current level of competence" (Krashen, 1981, p. 100)? How can teachers reconcile acquisition versus learning with conscious and unconscious learning? Can it truly be impossible for language that has been learned consciously ever to become fluent, unconscious, and automatic? Are there no times when conscious rule-learning or form-focused instruction can be useful for learners? Indeed there is empirical research that shows that in some cases it does help (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1997; Swain, 1998).

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Despite Krashen's lack of scientific backbone, and the consequent difficulty one has in judging (a) whether his model reflects well what language learning is, and (b) whether it is useful for language learners and teachers, he remains in the words of Wheeler a victim, a word the definition of which implies that Krashen does not deserve how harshly his theories were rejected.

In Defense of the Victim

To explain this view, Wheeler positions Krashen as a representative of a historical movement that sees language education as *art*. This movement offers an alternative to a stronger, more dominant historical movement in the field of language education that has made the study of language as scientific as possible.

Wheeler characterizes this "language education as art" movement as believing that "Learning how to speak a language ... is not a rational process which can be organized in a step-by-step manner following graded syllabuses ... it is an intuitive process for which human beings have a natural capacity that can be awakened provided only that the proper conditions exist" (Howatt, 1984, cited by Wheeler, 2003, p. 95). All that is truly needed for someone to learn a language is "someone to talk to, something to talk about, and a desire to understand and make yourself understood" (Howatt, 1984, cited by Wheeler, 2003, p. 95). To make this link Wheeler points to the similarities he sees in these beliefs and Krashen's references to a "natural" and relatively control-free way languages are "acquired."

Wheeler suggests that Krashen has been disregarded by the field because his ideas are "understandably upsetting to researchers" (p. 96) who are biased toward language education as a science where theories are verifiable. Krashen's fall from grace is hence explained as his refusal to play by the rules of a scientific game where the players will not tolerate a nonscientific theory.

Wheeler proposes that historically there have always been disagreements between those who view language education as an art and those who support the discourse of the scientific. Krashen's failure to use science in his theory-building is symbolic of this conflict and of whether it "poses a problem or not" (p. 98). Wheeler implies that the conflict is not a problem and that consequently, "a more developed sense of history would allow us to see the futility of such an argument as the one we have with pro- and anti-Krashen" because it would as "foolhardy" as "attempting to decide whether art or science is superior in the teaching of languages" (p. 98).

Wheeler points to Krashen's enduring popularity, due perhaps because his ideas do not "make you feel inferior, inadequate" (p. 97). After all, Wheeler concludes, "teachers are not scientists" (p. 97), and as long as ideas, including Krashen's, are good for you and/or perceived as useful, why worry about whether they are verifiable?

Taking a Closer Look at the Victim

Admittedly there have long been tensions surrounding the philosophy of science and its place in the field of language education, and consequent controversy surrounding what counts as acceptable foci, findings, and eventually theories. Indeed one need not look too far back for evidence of a continuation of these debates (Beretta, 1991; Block, 1996; Firth & Wagner, 1997, 1998; Gass, 1998; Gregg, Long, Jordan, & Beretta, 1997; Hall, 1997; Kasper, 1997; Lantolf, 1996; Liddicoat, 1997; Long, 1990, 1997; Poulisse, 1997; Rampton, 1997; Thorne, 1998; Van Lier, 1994). A historical perspective of these issues is important, and questions about theory-building, appraising, and selection are certainly of great importance for our field.

However, Wheeler's use of a simplified version of this debate fails to justify two statements that he makes, both of which are problematic: (a) Wheeler's depiction of Krashen's work as "artistic"; (b) Wheeler's suggestion that language education need not always try to be verifiable.

First, a closer examination of Krashen's theories reveals that he did not refuse to play the game of science, opting instead for art. Rather, he played it to the hilt, taking advantage of scientific rhetoric and discourse to help build and support his theories. De Beaugrande (1997) criticizes Krashen for using "the language of science" (p. 279) to create a theory that is inapplicable for practice. Careful reading shows that Krashen bases his work on "scientific" traditions. Not only does Krashen make tremendous use of the language of science—using words such as *hypothesis, input, filter,* and *monitor,* for example—to make his arguments, but his theories are described as: "based on an empirically grounded theory of second language acquisition, which has been supported by a large number of scientific studies in a wide variety of language acquisition and learning context" (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p. 1).

De Beaugrande (1997) also notes that Krashen's theoretical roots are instrinsically linked to the work of Chomskyian linguistics. At the root of Krashen's hypotheses are assumptions that cognitive processes are operating in fundamentally the same way for everyone, which predetermine "natural order" of a developmental process. This approach is scientific in how it separates language from its use.

Dunn and Lantolf (1998) echo this point by contrasting the monistic view of language as unified and inseparable from its use and users in the work of researchers such as Vygotsky (1986) with Krashen's exclusive focus on one object of study: the individual and the cognitive processes behind that individual's language development. All other factors (such as personality, sex, social status, output, etc.) are either excluded or subordinated to one primary factor: input.

Finally, unlike some researchers who openly discuss, especially in qualitative research, the limitations of their work and their inability to predict or make generalizations, Krashen makes strong use of the discourse

of science to construct rhetorically the theoretical strength of his ideas as true and generalizable predictors of behavior (hence the term *hypotheses*). Moreover, he uses this rhetoric to give direction to empirical research and practice in the classroom (one must not forget that his hypotheses were accompanied by a method that teachers were invited to follow). It is, therefore, not so surprising or as harsh as implied by Wheeler that so many looked closely at what was being presented as scientific and pointed out the weaknesses of these arguments based on scientific criteria.

Ironically, Krashen's theories can indeed be seen as an extension of the historical scientific movement identified by Wheeler. If Krashen is a victim of history, he is so in a different sense than that intended by Wheeler. Krashen is a victim of having fully engaged in the discourse of his time: the discourse of language education as a science, but without the "science" to back him up.

On the Need to Mix Science and Art

I agree with Wheeler that the verifiability of a theory should not simply be equated to the degree to which its elements can be measured. Verifiability, however, can be defined in other ways than measurability. It is possible to establish some degree of verifiability even when working with nonnumerical data. Many examples of outstanding qualitative research in our field succeed quite well in establishing the verifiability of their ideas without using quantitative data (Casanave, 1998; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Verifiability in this sense refers to the ability to justify the conclusions of one's research, explaining where they came from and the process through which they were obtained. It refers to the ability to be honest about the limitations of one's work, the level of complexity involved, the level of detail and precision offered in the descriptions of the concepts involved, as well as the level of detail and precision missing and the ability to find real-life examples to support these ideas.

In many ways these notions of verifiability refer to the criteria identified by Wheeler: simplicity and clarity, comprehensiveness, explicitness, coherence inconsistency, explanatory power, all qualities of good research identified by Stern (1983). Verifiability is a concept that can apply to all research, whether it aligns itself more with a classic scientific definition of language or an artistic one. In Krashen's work, a lack of coherence and clarity/preciseness, combined with a lack of inclusiveness and flexibility, all nonnumerically related qualities, are his theories' biggest weaknesses. Their strength is their commonsense appeal.

Yet "popular" assumptions about language education are not always the best informants for decisions about language policy. I list, for example, the following commonsense and sadly "popular" assumptions, all contradicted by research: (a) that a student's home language is a handicap and that immigrant language minority parents should speak English to their children

in order to help speed up their acquisition of the majority language (for negative evidence, see Guardado, 2002; Kouritzin, 1999; Schecter & Bayley, 1997; Wong Fillmore, 1991); (b) that when studying full time, it takes only a few years for someone to learn a language (for contradictions, see Collier, 1989; Thomas & Collier, 1997); (c) the notion that only children can ever learn a language well (for a better explication, see Marinova-Todd, Bradford Snow, & Catherine, 2000; Piller, 2002); and (d) all it takes for language learners to learn a language is be submerged and exposed to it much as our grandparents once were (for negative evidence, see Crawford, 1992; Samway & McKeon, 1999).

Contrary to Wheeler, who believes that "science and language teaching do not always mix" (p. 98), I suggest that they have to come together. The effect of the language educators' decisions is simply too great not to require those decisions to be justifiable and based on valid information. There is certainly a place for intuition and experience, but language educators must remember that the purpose of theory is to guide and inform practice in the field, whether it be at the level of classroom instruction or at the level of policymaking. These decisions have a tremendous effect on the lives of our students, and in the long term on the type of society we are about to live in.

I side with Giroux (1992) in seeing teachers and educators in general as much more than simple guides or information transmitters, or even as intuitive explorers of what feels right in their classes. All educators, especially language educators, must recognize their roles as "cultural workers" and accept responsibility for their influence on society. This implies taking an interest in the reasons and forces that influence what they do, facing up to our social responsibility to approach theories critically and to ensure that theories achieve a minimum degree of verifiability.

Krashen may be right in stressing the role of input, but his theories silence the struggle some learners may face in obtaining this input. Our schools are full of language learners. Many administrators already believe that simply putting them into the system, and hence exposing them to English input, will be enough. The statistics about language minority students' low academic achievement show, however, that this is not true (Gunderson, 2000; Watt, 2001). Krashen's theory can be seen to support oversimplification, with the danger that many of the key issues related to second-language acquisition (such as identity, politics, access, and distribution of resources or input, symbolic and material), and permission to participate (output) in the target language's community are ignored. This idea is echoed by De Beaugrande (1997), who states,

> No one seems to notice here, and Krashen would be crazy to say so, that, by the same logic, his theory also predicts that we could fire teachers and replace them with automatic input-providing devices like radios and televisions, or with naïve native speakers brought in off the streets

of foreign cities, who would work for low wages and would require no expensive training in pedagogical method he has declared are all wrong anyway. (p. 300)

In short, I do not believe that Krashen is a victim, nor would I deny the value his work. The debates Krashen has inspired are a good example of how research needs to be questioned, discussed, and criticized. I side with Wheeler in demanding that we continue to have these discussions in an environment that promotes academic freedom. Only through sometimes difficult, honest, dialogues can we succeed in our shared mission to learn more about what it means to learn a (second) language, and possibly what it takes for that learning to happen.

Acknowledgments

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