

BEST QUOTES FROM THE PAPER
(Compiled by Eric Hermann)

Savignon, 1976. *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice*.
<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED135245.pdf>

A Revolutionary Paradigm Shift:

- Savignon quotes Postman and Weingartner who are talking about **the inquiry method of learning and teaching**, but Savignon says it applies to teaching for communicative competence:
- **'It is NOT a refinement or extension of modification of older school environments. It is a different message altogether**, and like the locomotive, light bulb and radio, its impact will be unique and revolutionary . . . **the inquiry method is not designed to do better what older environments try to do**. . . Thus, it will cause teachers, and their tests, and their grading systems and their curriculums to change" (p. 2).
- "It is not a question of patching up existing programs with 'communicate practice drills,' 'pseudo-communication,' but of **redefining our goals and rethinking our methods**" (p. 4).
- "More important, **accuracy in the use of all of these discrete linguistic elements is not essential to communicative competence**" (p. 5).

Testing:

- "In our concern for 'respectability' and, subsequently, for norms and standardization of achievement criteria, we have remained prisoners of academia and **failed to offer our students the kinds of language learning experiences they need most.**" (p. 14)
- ". . . **as long as we look to traditional discrete-point tests of second language proficiency for placement and evaluation**, we are victims of the rearview mirror syndrome. We are pasting new slogans on old wagons. **We have not understood the message of communicative competence**" (p. 8).
- "**If we teach for communicative competence, we have to test for communicative competence**, so that we and our students know how well we are doing what we purport to be doing" (p. 6).
- "**We can talk all we want about language for communication, real-language activities, spontaneous transactions, but if verb forms and dialog recitation are what show up on the test, the students quickly get the message that we don't mean what we say**" (p. 6).

Curriculum:

- “Above all, remember that for it to be real, communication must be a personalized, spontaneous event. It cannot be programmed – but YOU can make it happen.” (p. 20).
- “In the United States it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that modern languages were offered in public schools . . . So it was that when modern languages were first introduced into the schools, they were taught, as befitted an ‘academic’ subject, on the models of Latin and Greek” (p. 14).
- “There is nothing at all sacred about the syllabus which begins with definite and indefinite articles, move next to noun gender, followed, perhaps by present tense of Type I verbs . . . leaving the past tense for some time in the eighth or ninth unit. . . If linguistic competence is but a part, and not always an essential part at that, of communicative competence, much more emphasis needs to be given to non-linguistic aspects of communication” (p. 9-10).
- Savignon quotes Postman and Weingartner: “. . . the fact is that many teachers of English are fearful of life and, incidentally, of children. They are pompous and precious, and are lovers of symmetry, categories and proper labels. For them, the language of real human activity is too sloppy, emotional, uncertain, dangerous, and thus altogether too unsettling to study in the classroom. . . Grammarians offer such teachers a respectable out. They give them a game to play, with rules and charts, and with boxes and arrows to draw. Grammar is not, of course, without its controversies, but they are of such a sterile and generally pointless nature that only one who is widely removed from relevant human concerns can derive much stimulation from them” (p. 11).

Errors:

- “This implies acceptance of ‘error’ as a natural and desirable feature of language learning. It is helpful to think of the notion of error in its entomological sense. It comes from the Latin *errare* meaning to wander. The modern French verb is error. This understanding of error as exploration is crucial, if we are to begin sincerely to make progress toward the development of programs which teach and test communicative competence” (p. 10).
- “And it would seem to be their own feelings of inadequacy [those of non-native speaking fluent teachers] which, rather than increase their tolerance, make them particularly eager to point out and correct the errors of others” (p. 13).

Teachers:

- “It is understandable if the kinds of language teachers and teachers of future language teachers to whom I referred in my earlier anecdotes see, in what they perceive to be a current disregard for grammar, a threat to their own professional identities. Those who have learned the surface structure of a language but are not

communicatively competent (more precisely, have not found occasions for acquiring communicative competence) are not likely to be the first to herald teaching strategies which place value on creativity and spontaneity. The apprehensions and insecurities of others in training feed their egos – allow them to ‘show their stuff’ one more time to an admiring crowd . . . a crowd of future teachers who will, in turn, conceal their own communicative INcompetence behind the structure drills, dialogues, and grammar analyses they will offer to their students. We have produced exactly what the system made it inevitable for us to produce. There has been little or no opportunity for producing anything else. And to quote again Postman and Weingartner, ‘It is close to futile to talk of any new curriculum unless you are talking about the possibility of getting a new kind of teacher . . .’ (p. 15).

- “There is ample research to show that second language learning does not proceed in a lock-step, error-free, stimulus-response fashion. Before any meaningful attempts can be made to implement teaching and testing procedures which reflect what we know about second language learning strategies, however, we have to deal convincingly with the feelings of the classroom teacher. Failure to do so will result in yet another wave of ‘reform’ consisting of a new set of labels – communicative competence, affective learning activities, language for special purposes, notional syllabus – with nothing really changed.” (p. 10)

Not Intelligence:

- “. . . about the potential of children who are characterized as incapable of studying ‘the difficult subjects.’ . . . Spanish teacher started explaining, in so many words, why this kid wasn’t smart enough to learn Spanish. The father just looked at the teacher a bit perplexed and said, ‘Why can’t you teach my son the Spanish that the dumb kids in Spain speak?’” (p. 15)
- “. . . why would foreign languages still have the reputation for being among the ‘toughest’ subjects in the school curriculum? Why would the attitude still prevail that second language teachers are privileged to have the ‘best’ students in their classes. And yet, as we have seen, second language learning success is not primarily a function of general intelligence or even language aptitude.” (p. 14).

Practice:

- “You can help enormously by 1) not criticizing their efforts and 2) relating to them in as friendly, authentic a manner as possible. This is not the time to correct grammar or to ask for complete sentences. Try, just for the moment, to forget you are a language teacher and to listen instead as an interested participant. . . Be helpful, be honest, but never hurtful” (p. 16-17).
- “Encourage them to ask you for the words they need. The best time to learn a new word is when you really want to know it. You are not expected to know every word either, of course” (p. 18).

- “Don’t be afraid to admit it when you don’t know a word or a pronunciation. Your frank admission of what you do and don’t know will make you that much more credible in the eyes of your students. It will ultimately serve to give your students confidence that they, too, can learn the language” (p. 20).
- “Use the first five minutes or so of every class period to talk with your students in the second language about things of interest to them. The things they talk about spontaneously among themselves before the bell rings are a good clue as to what really interests them” (p. 20).
- “Finally, do everything you can to get to know your students as individuals, with lives and concerns that extend far beyond the four walls of the language classroom.”