

**The Reconciliation of Communicative Competence
and Structuralist Approaches to
Second Language Acquisition:
An Account of My Teaching Approach Experimentation**

By

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INTRODUCTION

L. Balhzen, author of *The Teaching of Modern Languages* (1905),

describes the method he used in studying French as:

A barren waste of insipid sentence translation. Our main occupation consisted in committing words to memory, translating sentences, drilling irregular verbs, memorizing, repeating, and applying grammatical rules with their exceptions.

The process of second language acquisition (L2), or in Balhzen's case, second language learning, is described by many students as having these same negative characteristics. It seems that linguists, methodologists, teachers and textbook writers have failed to be responsive to the linguistic, cultural and affective needs of the learners. In her book, *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice* (1983), Sandra J. Savignon warns us that we need to have a basic understanding of all the variables involved in second language acquisition if we want to be truly responsive to learners' needs and expectations. She provides a framework for these variables which are grouped under four categories: WHO, WHAT, WHERE, and HOW.

VARIABLES IN L2 ACQUISITION AS CATEGORIZED BY SAVIGNON

WHO	WHAT
Learner Variables	Communicative Competence
Age, Sex	Grammatical Competence
Formal Education	Sociolinguistic Competence
Other language code(s)	Discourse Competence
Intelligence	Strategic Competence
Needs	
Attitudes	
Personality	

WHERE	HOW
Setting(s) or Situation	Strategies and Processes
Formal/Informal	Interaction with L2
Amount of time	Learning Style
Role models	Cognitive processes
Access to L2	Structuring/practice/activities

In this thesis, I will analyze these four variables within the context of my teaching experience during the summer of 1989 at the Renaissance Language Instruction, a private language school in Chicago. The first part will deal with the "WHERE" of acquisition, the setting in which language is learned. The second part will focus on the "WHO", the attributes of the learners, their needs, attitudes, and motivations. In the third part, I will describe "HOW" the second language was learned and maintained and "WHAT" approaches made acquisition possible.

1 RENAISSANCE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION: A PRIVATE LANGUAGE SCHOOL

Where does the language acquisition process begin?

1.1 STUDENTS AS CONSUMERS

Renaissance Language Instruction (RLI) is a private language school situated in the downtown area of Chicago. Susan Pezzino, the President and owner of the school, explains to all her new instructors, "Students are consumers. You must give them what they want." Client satisfaction is the primary goal and this is accomplished by providing the student with a sound reason to remain in business with the school.

The idea of "giving them what they want" is precisely what advocates of communicative competence, humanistic, and natural approach have in mind. Ms. Pezzino's statement that clients will eventually leave if they are not satisfied is another way of explaining Professor Savignon's idea that although learners may be initially attracted to

L2 study because they consider it to be challenging, elitist, or even exotic, if they do not subsequently experience success in terms of their own interest, they probably will not pursue their study for long (Savignon, 1983).

The school is targeted towards middle class individuals who cannot afford to attend a full time program at a major university because of financial constraints or lack of time. RLI provides these learners with the opportunity to attend classes year round with flexible scheduling and at reasonable rates, while benefiting from cultural and linguistic exposure to native instructors.

1.2 NEARLY NATIVE FLUENCY AS MAIN OBJECTIVE

The principal goal of RLI, as stated by Ms. Pezzino, is, "...to help students attain nearly native fluency over a period of about three years of continuous attendance in the second language class."

Secondary objectives within the main goal are:

- to prepare people whose career needs require a foreign language**
- to prepare individuals for travelling abroad**
- to entertain people who take up a language as a hobby or a way to socialize**
- to help those individuals who choose to study the ethnic language of their ancestors find their linguistic and cultural roots.**

Depending on whether learners find what they are looking for in the language class, they will exhibit the following behaviors:

-people who take the language class only as a way to socialize,

will usually drop out when the excitement is over (this may depend on whether or not they have found a "partner")

-people interested in learning the language for travelling/vacation purposes will usually remain the six months necessary to learn the basic vocabulary and expressions that are associated with travel and that can help vacationers through a trip in a foreign country

-people who learn the language as a hobby will remain in the class until they feel they have had enough language

-finally, individuals who learn the language for work/career purposes, and people who study the language to gain a deeper knowledge of their ethnic origins are the two groups that will remain with the school for periods of up to three or four years.

1.2 NATIVE TEACHERS TO MEET CONSUMERS' NEEDS

It is a requirement at RLI that all instructors be natives. One of the questions most often asked by prospective clients when contemplating the possibility of joining a language class is, "Is the instructor a native?" Ms. Pezzino explains this concern on the part of the learners:

Learners want a "guarantee of quality". They want to communicate with a native speaker. They don't care if an American instructor with the same qualifications can teach them everything about Italian language and culture. They want "the real thing". They are interested in exchanging messages with natives in real life situations. They are interested in *what* to say to a native, rather than *how* to say it. They feel that they will only learn how to say things if they have an American instructor (July 1989).

The president of RLI insists on the importance of satisfying the learners' demands. If students feel more comfortable with a native instructor, if they feel they are learning more, if this will help them pursuing their interest in the second language and culture, then it is the responsibility of the school to provide such an environment (Pezzino, July 1989).

1.4 AN ENVIRONMENT OF TRUST

Crucial to the success of second language acquisition is the setting where negotiation of meaning is taking place. New instructors at RLI are carefully screened in an attempt to evaluate their ability in creating a warm, confident, non-threatening environment in the classroom setting. As Gertrude Moskowitz points out in her book, *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class* (1978), individuals who are learning a second language often develop feelings of insecurity, uncertainty, and fear. It is therefore essential to establish from the beginning a supportive, acceptive climate where learners feel they can be themselves. Ms. Pezzino fully agrees with Moskowitz in that expressing warmth is a powerful way to communicate in any language.

The ideal instructor at RLI must promote an environment that is free from tension where students are encouraged to communicate whatever it is they want to say, and where the instructor is *genuinely engaged* in communication with the learners. This approach is described by psychologist Charles Curran as a *counseling-learning* approach to teaching where the emphasis is on the teacher as an interested person rather than on the teacher as a knower (Savignon, 1983).

The size of the group is important in determining the success of the learning

process. Classes at RLI welcome a minimum of six and a maximum of twelve students. Interaction among students is greatly enhanced and results in terms of cohesiveness and spontaneity of expression are remarkable.

The setting is a cozy, well-lit room that resembles a nineteenth-century den or a small study in an old university's library. The blackboard has been placed in a corner to eliminate anxiety that might develop when associating the idea of the blackboard to the idea of teacher-oriented, formal instruction. Learners usually sit in a circle or wherever they feel comfortable. Refreshments are always available to create a conversational, informal, cafe-like atmosphere.

1.5 THE CURRICULUM

Eleven languages are offered at Renaissance Language Instruction: English, Italian, French, Spanish, German, Russian, Polish, Rumanian, Czech, Latin, and Greek. The curriculum for each language is tailored to suit the different needs and interests of the target group. Individuals interested in learning Greek exhibit physical, psychological, and intellectual characteristics that are different from individuals who want to learn Spanish. For instance, learners of Spanish are usually more extrovert and talkative than learners of Greek. Whereas the first group would prefer to attend a Brazilian carnival dance, the latter would rather watch a documentary on Greek mythology. As Savignon states, language is culture in motion; it is people interacting with people (Savignon, 1983). In shaping curricula for the language programs, it is essential to be aware of needs and interests that extend far beyond those of the language classroom.

Given the great variety of the student population at RLI and given the fact that some languages require different teaching approaches, a mixture of teaching materials and resources were chosen to attempt to maximize language acquisition. The following is a list of options that were provided by Ms. Pezzino:

- textbooks (mainly used as guidelines)
- visual aids (maps, photographs, posters, magazines, articles of clothing and objects of various nature imported from other countries)
- tapes and videos
- attendance to performances in the target language (with or without instructor)
- going to an ethnic restaurant where the target language is spoken and order a meal in the L2 (usually with instructor)

A variety of supplemental material and activities outside the classroom is an essential component in planning an effective curriculum. Furthermore, in developing a framework for L2 acquisition, teachers must never lose sight of the target groups. Sauli Takala, a specialist in curriculum construction, writes in her article, *Contextual Considerations in Communicative Language Teaching*:

For whom is the curriculum intended? There are several possible target groups: political decision makers, general public... There are also many different kinds of students with different needs and expectations. For different target groups we need different versions with varying degrees of specificity. We cannot expect to be able to communicate properly with such diverse groups unless we tailor our message to suit each group (Savignon-Berns, 1984)

1.6 A WHOLISTIC APPROACH TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

In discussing the advantages of communicative competence with Ms. Pezzino, she explains that although the communicative approach can be successfully used in certain languages, negotiation of meaning will not happen when dealing with other particular languages. She claims that when the function and the structure of the L2 is similar to the function and structure of the native language (L1), then it is easy to teach communicatively. In other words, when there is a low level of developmental morphology (function and structure very similar in L2 and L1), meaning can be guessed or inferred.

Examples of languages with low developmental morphology are: Italian/Spanish, French/Spanish, English/Italian, or any combination of these.

Example: Scusi Signore, dov'è la spiaggia? (Italian)

Excuse-me Sir, where is the beach? (English)

Excusez-moi Monsieur, où est la plage? (French)

¿Perdon Señor, donde está la playa? (Spanish)

The linguistic concept in the four languages is the same; the closer the notional syllabus (asking, requesting, demanding), in both L2 and L1, the easier to guess meaning. Communicative competence, Ms. Pezzino suggests, can have remarkable results only when the L2 and L1 are closely related morphologically and culturally. The farther the target language from the learner's native tongue, the harder it is to negotiate meaning.

Furthermore, you can convey comprehensible ideas in one of the above mentioned languages even if articles are omitted or endings are incorrect in number and gender.

Example: Donne moi livre/Donne me la livre/Donner moi livre

(French for "Give me the book"), will be as communicatively effective as the correct form, "Donne-moi le livre."

In Russian and Polish, Ms. Pezzino insists that where the level of developmental morphology is high, it is impossible to adopt a communicative approach before learners have mastered at least two years of linguistic structure. In this case, the teaching of structure must precede the teaching of function; it would be an almost impossible task for an American to attempt to learn Russian in any other way (Pezzino, March 1990).

Krashen's natural approach is much more effective with languages which have a low or non-existent level of developmental morphology (English, for example). Drawing from her teaching experience with ethnic students in Chicago (mainly from Germanic and Slavic origins), Ms. Pezzino illustrates how natural acquisition does not always occur for these students, even when the conditions are close to being optimal:

A great deal of students who have grown up in families of Germanic and Slavic origins where the target language was spoken at all times, arrive at Renaissance Language Instruction not knowing how to engage in a basic exchange of information. Sometimes they don't even understand a simple question like "How old are you?" They come in and they want to know *how it works*, they want to know the *rules*, they ask for *structure*. For them the natural approach did not work (Pezzino, March 1990).

A quote from Professor Savignon's *Communicative Competence* seems at this point appropriate:

Communicative competence depends on the negotiation of meaning between two or more persons who *share to some degree the same symbolic system*. (My emphasis)(Savignon, 1983).

2 A SPECIFIC CASE: LEARNERS OF ITALIAN

Who are the target groups?

2.1 AGE, SEX, OCCUPATION, AND SOCIAL STATUS

Age Range: 20 - 60

Mean Age: 25

2 Beginners Classes of 10 and 8 students each.

1 Intermediate Class of 10 students.

1 Advanced Class of 6 students.

Total of 34 students; 24 female and 10 male.

Each Class is 2 hours/week and held in the evening after work or after regular classes at small colleges.

Social status of the learners:

Learners are middle class professionals and students coming from the following occupational fields:

- Airlines industry (flight attendants)**
- Travel industry (travel agents, tour-guides, travellers)**
- Fashion industry (fashion designers)**
- Marketing/banking/trading industries and law firms**
- The Arts (students and artists)**

A great number of the learners have at least a Bachelor degree or are in the process of pursuing one.

2.2 MOTIVATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

What motivates students to learn Italian?

- to become fluent in the ethnic language of their ancestors**

- to be able to communicate with native Italians (on vacation)
- for work purposes (business with Italians)
- for study purposes (e.g. students of art intending to study at Italian universities)
- to be able to read Italian newspapers, discuss current issues, understand the news, gain deeper understanding of culture
- to meet new people (according to Ms. Pezzino, young professionals and students alike have grown tired of bars, movie theatres and discos; they are now looking at the "learning of a new language" as a new form of entertainment where they can relax, enjoy themselves and learn something interesting and useful in the process.)

The expectations of the learners:

Learners enter the language class with a variety of expectations. Yet they all seem to agree on one point: they want to learn how to communicate in the target language. "Communicating in the target language" may mean understanding spoken language, it may mean reading and comprehension of written material, it may mean being able to learn about the culture, or it may mean being able to speak the target language at a higher degree; more often it is a combination of all these elements.

When I asked a thirty year old travel agent why he wanted to learn Italian, he smiled and said to me, "I want to be able to sing 'Happy Birthday' in Italian to my grandmother." The travel agent eventually learned his song and decided to remain in the class to improve his singing skills in Italian!

The point is that by discovering learners' expectations early in the interaction process, communication between the acquirer and the teacher is enhanced. Foreign

language instructors must learn to regard everyone's expectations as important and help each individual learner to maximize his or her potential in the language acquisition process.

2.3 ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE NEW LINGUISTIC ENVIRONMENT

How did learners feel in the Italian classes?

Students always seemed to be happy in class. They expected to find a warm, accepting environment and they contribute a great deal to the creation of a cohesive, relaxed atmosphere. No matter what their levels of acquisition were, they *wanted* to communicate and, as a consequence, their strategic competence (an essential component of communication) was very well developed. They exhibited some degree of frustration whenever they could not produce language. It is interesting to remark that the greater the linguistic abilities, the higher the level of frustration when incapable of expressing a complex idea.

Learners reacted favorably to homework and participated willingly in group activities (they seemed to appreciate the value of communication through group interaction). Students were extremely interested in cultural aspects and they were eager to assimilate new vocabulary and new expressions to use in real-life situations (at the restaurant, at the airport, in a store, etc.).

Students easily became bored with lengthy grammatical explanations and they often pointed out that part of the problem stemmed from their ignorance of basic grammatical structures in English.

At all levels, learners wanted to be able to express their thoughts and feel free to

discuss topics that were of interest to them, thus bringing into the class a variety of experiences from their environments. They all wished they could progress faster in the acquisition of the target language and that they could spend more time in the L2 environment.

The ultimate success in learning to use a second language depends on these affective variables of the learners, or their attitudes. Feelings and emotions enter the language class as much as cognition. Carl Rogers comments in *Bringing Together Ideas and Feelings in Learning* (Moskowitz, 1978):

As a consequence of the overstress on the cognitive, and of the avoidance of any feeling connected with it, most of the excitement has gone out of education.

This is especially true in the language class where the importance of a learner's attitude towards the new linguistic environment is central. Edith Harding, in her book, *The Bilingual Family*, explains how children with a positive attitude towards the community will try to make friends. This, in turn, will make demands on their learning abilities and will increase their motivation to learn. If the child is rejected or ignored, Harding continues, they will not attempt to interact with the new community (Harding, 1986). Similarly, adults in the Italian class will not attempt to interact with other members of the class if their thoughts and feelings are ignored or rejected. It is important that students share themselves, their feelings, their experiences, and interests. It is by sharing ourselves that others get to know us better. While discussing the importance of learners' attitudes, Moskowitz writes:

When we don't know what others are like, rather than feeling acceptance

towards them, we are more likely to feel neutral, indifferent, mistrustful or disinterested (Moskowitz, 1978).

In order to maximize a positive attitude towards the new linguistic environment, it is essential that teachers blend what learners think, feel and know with what they are learning in the target language.

3 TRYING THE MATCH: MY CONTRIBUTION TO THE CLASSROOM

How was I responsive to learners' needs and interests?

3.1 THE "STRUCTURALIST TRAP"

Eager to apply the most progressive, innovative theories I had learned in my teaching methodology classes at the University of Illinois, I arrived at RLI with the primary objective of applying "communicative competence" in my classes. On my first day of teaching I informed the beginner class of my intention to only speak Italian, to play games, to organize group activities and to get to know one another. I also lectured them for ten minutes on the principal tenets of communicative competence. They looked puzzled and they expressed their concern about not learning any grammar and not using a textbook. I had made my first mistake: you should never explain your teaching strategy; you should just adopt it and analyze the results.

By the end of the first week, two students had already dropped out. They felt that the class lacked "structure", that they weren't learning anything, and that they felt uncomfortable not being able to "understand." Slightly doubtful of my teaching method,

I decided to utilize a degree of structure in my lesson plans. I began to explain grammar points in English, to apply grammar rules to exercises in the textbook, to drill on pronunciation, to give dictations and check for spelling errors, and to correct improper use of words, verbs, prepositions. By the end of the second week two other students had dropped out. They claimed the course was too demanding and somewhat abstract; they also felt uneasy making so many mistakes when trying to speak.

I had made a second mistake: I had fallen in the "structuralist trap". Structuralists rely heavily on evaluations of the elements of language - pronunciation, syntax, lexicon. Their assumption is that allowing learners to say something before they are first taught how to say it will result in ungrammatical speech which is later difficult to correct. I had made my communicative competence approach into a structuralist syllabus in which the grammatical focus had distorted classroom attempts at communication. I clearly lacked a plan for both acquisition opportunities and for learning possibilities. Stephen D. Krashen defines acquisition as the unconscious process through which learners develop the ability in the L2 by using it in natural, communicative situations; learning, instead, means having a conscious knowledge about grammar, "knowing the rules" (Krashen, 1983). I needed a balance between acquisition and learning.

What was wrong with my approaches? How could I make students understand a language that contained structures that they had not yet acquired? The first important consideration I made was that the learner had to be "open" to the input in order to fully utilize it for acquisition. For communicative competence to function, it was first necessary to create a climate of mutual trust, free of anxiety. A humanistic approach was going to

be the basis on which to build negotiation of meaning.

3.2 GOING BACK ON TRACK: A HUMANISTIC APPROACH AS THE BASIS FOR COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

The first step towards real communication was creating an atmosphere of mutual confidence where students felt comfortable with themselves and the others in the class. Expression and negotiation of meaning was simply not going to happen in a tense climate. It was necessary to build rapport, cohesiveness and caring among the learners. On the first day of the third week I arrived in class with a big map of Italy, photographs of the area in which I grew up, and a family album. We sat in a circle and I started to tell students about myself, my family, my friends, the place in which I grew up and my feelings about being away from them. I spoke in Italian the whole time, very slowly, smiling to students, pointing at my visual aids, occasionally resorting to English. I wanted to share moments of my life with the class and show the students that I was willing to disclose feelings, thoughts, emotions about myself and that they could do the same. At the end of the activity I encouraged them to bring to class their family album, some photographs of the place in which they grew up and anything else they wished to share with the class.

It was a complete success. By the end of the third week the class became a small family in and of itself where students had learned a great deal about each other. On that week-end we went out together to have a cappuccino at a local Italian cafe. I had finally succeeded in combining the subject matter to be learned with the feelings, emotions, experiences, and lives of the students. I recognized the importance of personalizing the

content being learned by asking students related questions about themselves; I was able to provide content that was truly interesting and meaningful. Commenting on personalizing contact, Moskowitz writes:

When students talk about what they want to and are interested and attentive, teachers often feel they are off the subject and must get back to the content. Yet when students do talk about what relates to them, there is increased attention.

Introducing humanistic concepts into the class does not mean total abandonment of the teaching of structure. Advocates of communicative competence do want and expect that students will acquire grammar. Krashen writes in his book, *The Natural Approach*, that embracing a "communication" philosophy, does not mean to reject the idea that students need to acquire grammar. In setting the goals for his "natural approach" to foreign language teaching, Krashen states that the objectives are based on an assessment of students needs. It is first necessary to determine the situations in which learners will use the target language and the kind of topics they will have to communicate information about. Learners are then expected to be able to deal with a particular set of topics in a given situation. Acquisition of a certain group of structures and form is not the aim of a classroom activity. Activities are not organized with a grammatical syllabus in mind. (Krashen, 1983).

Vocabulary is a more essential tool of communication and this is proven by the results of the humanistic activity in my beginner class. Although students ignored the grammatical rules governing the Italian language, by the end of the third week they were able to describe their family, friends and place of birth in the target language with simple

nouns, adjectives and verbs.

Once an environment of trust was established, it was important that I helped learners develop strategic competence, the strategies that one uses to compensate for imperfect knowledge of rules. The way in which this was accomplished will be the object of the next section.

3.3 ERRORS AS AN INDICATION OF LANGUAGE GROWTH

Every time learners attempt to speak a second language they are taking a risk. It is a risk that what they say won't be accurate, that they will be corrected, or that the class may subject them to ridicule. During the first three weeks of teaching, I realized that correcting inaccurate forms of speech was counterproductive with respect to the encouragement of genuine and spontaneous communication. It was very important that students had an opportunity to express themselves in whatever way they could. When I stopped correcting ungrammatical utterances, beginners as well as intermediate and advanced students started to make use of a great deal of paraphrasing, repetition and guessing. It was crucial that students felt free to experiment with different strategies to cope with the target language.

The idea that moments of hesitation and silence should be avoided in the class proved wrong. Learners showed a need for periods in which they could recollect their thoughts and strategies and allowing them to do so gave them reassurance and confidence when reproducing speech. Refinement of language will only occur when the student is ready. Linguists and educators tend to agree today that errors are an indication that

students are learning the target language by making use of strategies.

Instead of concentrating on how the language is produced, teachers should concentrate on providing learners with semantic richness at very early stages. As Professor Savignon claims,

We should expect grammatical errors as the natural consequence of learning and exploring; we should provide for lots of listening experiences; we must do it in meaningful context that involves the feelings and concerns of our students (Savignon, 1983).

The creation of a relaxed, informal setting where students could share themselves, in an error-free environment greatly enhanced communication and encouraged learners to pursue their interests in the target language.

CONCLUSION

It is only after careful consideration of all the variables involved in second language acquisition that we, as teachers, can be responsive to learners' needs. During my twelve weeks at Renaissance Language Instruction I discovered that dogmatism towards any single teaching approach can be counterproductive. Approaches must be combined with relative weightings, or emphasis, shifted to meet the particular needs of the class and its student make-up.

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