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ABSTRACT

Within the framework of viewing communicative competence as a prerequisite to linguistic competence, rather than vice versa, this paper considers the following: (1) the nature of communicative competence; (2) the implications of communicative competence for second language teaching; and (3) ways in which the teacher can begin to make a foreign language program more meaningful. Communicative competence is defined as what native speakers know which enables them to interact effectively with each other. Implications for the language teacher include: (1) the need for tests which measure the ability to use language; (2) the irrelevancy of sequencing surface features; (3) the need for emphasis on non-linguistic aspects of communication; and (4) the need to re-examine attitudes toward students and language teaching. Practical suggestions for implementing communicative competence in the classroom include the use of spontaneous role-playing, discussions, games, radio, and the telephone. (AM)

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: THEORY AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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In talking about the impact of new media, McLuhan has evoked what he calls "the rearview mirror syndrome." He contends that most of us are incapable of understanding the impact of new media because we are like drivers whose gaze is fixed not on where we are going but on where we came from. It is not even a matter of seeing through the windshield but darkly. We are seeing clearly enough, but we are looking at the rearview mirror. Thus the locomotive was first perceived as an "iron horse," the electric light as a powerful candle, and the radio as a thundering megaphone. A mistake, says McLuhan. These media were totally new experiences and did to us totally new things.

In their book, Teaching As A Subversive Activity (1969), Postman and Weingartner have used McLuhan's metaphor in examining the implications of the inquiry method of learning and teaching. The metaphor applies equally well to the implications for foreign langauge teaching of the concept of communicative competence.

> It is not a refinement or extension or 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. Yet the rearview mirror syndrome is already at work.

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> Most educators who have taken the trouble to think about the . . . method are largely interested to know if it will accomplish the goals that older learning media have tried to achieve: Will students pass the Regents? Will they pass the College Boards? How will they do on "objective" tests?
>
> But . . . the inquiry method is not designed to do better what older environments try to do. It works you over in entirely different ways. It activates different senses, attitudes and perceptions, it generates a different, bolder and more potent kind of intelligence. Thus, it will cause teachers, and their tests, and their grading systems and their curriculums to change. [1]

The parallel that I would like to draw with McLuhan's metaphor and the implications for foreign language teaching of the concept of communicative competence is summarized in a recent statement by Albert Valdman who writes in the November Modern Language Journal on the relationship between two of the latest bandwagons--performance objectives and individualized instruction--and what looks like it is fast becoming a third: language for communication.

> The introduction in foreign language instruction of the notion of performance objectives was motivated by the desire to verify the acquisition of proficiency at various points in the course of study and to justify pedagogical procedures and practices. . . . Not only did this result in the neglect of "higher goals of language learning," more recalcitrant to statement in terms of

> performance objectives, but it led to the perpetuation of the fallacious belief that the ability to use a language for communicative needs is acquired by attainment of stated performance levels in the manipulation of a finite set of discrete linguistic elements: sounds (or phonemes), grammatical forms, sentence patterns, lexical items. . . . However, there is ample evidence that suggests that success in communication tasks is not guaranteed by control of stated inventories of linguistic features demonstrated by conventional discrete-item tests.[2] . . . It is clear that traditional performance objectives define neither communicative competence nor minimal communicative competence. They deal with linguistic elements, not speech acts, and they are concerned with manipulative activities, not meaningful intentions.[3]

Thus it is NOT a question of "from linguistic competence to communicative competence" but rather of from communicative competence to linguistic competence, if that is where you want to go. It is not a question of patching up existing programs with "communication practice drills," "pseudo-communication," but of redefining our goals and rethinking our methods.

It is in the framework of the foregoing observations, then, that I would like to look at the following three questions:

1. What is communicative competence?
2. What are the implications of the concept of communicative competence for second language teachers and teaching?
3. How can the classroom teacher begin now to make his/her program more meaningful?

First of all, communicative competence is not a method. It is a way of describing what it is a native speaker knows which enables him to interact effectively with other native speakers. This kind of interaction is, by definition, spontaneous, i.e. unrehearsed. It requires much more than a knowledge of the linguistic code. The native speaker knows not only how to say something but what to say and when to say it. The linguistic features of an exchange are embedded in a cultural context which includes the role of the speaker in a particular context, the roles of the other participants and a host of non-verbal communication cues such as distance, posture, gestures, facial expressions.

There are degrees of communicative competence just as there are degrees of linguistic competence. The acquisition of the linguistic code is, to be sure, a part of the acquisition of communicative competence as a whole. But the focus on surface features of a language--verb forms, use of prepositions, noun endings, word order, pronunciation and the like--all those things with which we as language teachers have traditionally been concerned--does not begin to account for thewhat and when of language use in interpersonal transactions. More important, accuracy in the use of all of these discrete linguistic elements is not essential to communicative competence.

Communicative competence can be measured. But our traditional tests of second language proficiency are not a good measure of communicative competence. They are, rather, discrete-point or separate measures of proficiency in terms of the elements of language: pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. The assumption underlying the

discrete-point approach to testing language proficiency has been that by breaking down a skill into the elements of language and testing these elements separately, we have a more "objective" evaluation than is possible in an admittedly subjective evaluation of performance in an integrated skill. Laudable as these efforts have been, however, they have failed to take sufficiently into account the complexity of the communicative setting. In their emphasis on linguistic accuracy, they have served, moreover, to discourage the development of the strategies which are necessary for the development of communicative competence.

The first implication of the concept of communicative competence, then, is the need for tests which measure not knowledge about language but an ability to use language effectively in an exchange with a native speaker. I put the development of new kinds of tests at the top of the list because of the importance of tests in shaping all that we do and think in the classroom.

1. First of all, tests serve to measure student progress. 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.

2. Second, tests serve as a powerful motivating factor. They let students know what is really important. 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. The discrepancy between linguistic

competence and communicative competence shows up nowhere more clearly than in the reactions of students in an audio-lingual program to a testing situation which required them for the first time to use what language they had learned in a variety of real-life encounters with native speakers.

> If this is an easy test, I just found that I couldn't talk my way out of the airport if I flew to France.
>
> I though it was fun, but very challenging. It doesn't seem as though we've had enough practice speaking off the top of our head. Until this evening I was never forced to say anything except answers to questions or substitute phrases . . . there was no need to search for words . . . they were supplied. I wish we were forced to do this more often. This is what a language should be.
>
> It seems very difficult but it is the first time I have had the chance to actually express myself in French. . . . I feel I have an "A" in beginning French writing, reading and grammar but an "F" in actually having a practical knowledge of the language.
>
> I felt that the whole test was difficult because I was told all semester not to think about what I was saying but rather to see patterns. [4]

3. Third, tests of communicative competence serve to tell us what students can really do with the language they are learning. From these examples we as teachers and researchers can learn more about second language learning strategies. Second language learning research, while still in its infancy, has cast serious doubts on many commonly

held assumptions of how a second language is learned or acquired. To the extent that the second language classroom is tightly controlled in shaping or preventing second language use, the situation is too artificial to provide any meaningful data on second language learning strategies. Once we allow students to use language for their own purposes, however, we will begin to see how they use what it is they have seen and heard, what meaningful organization they give to the data presented. These insights will provide a basis from which to evaluate the instructional process and goals.

4. Fourth, tests of communicative competence are a much better measure of functional skills for real-world work. Could you get simple directions from a francophone taxi driver in Montréal? Could you coach a basketball team as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala? Could you serve as a receptionist in a German-American firm? Could you help Chicano children to learn mathematics?

To return to McLuhan's metaphor, 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.

The second major implication for the classroom of the concept of communicative competence is one of sequence of materials. 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 sometime in the eighth or ninth unit. The concept of communicative

competence means looking not at surface features--the concern of structural linguistics--to give shape and form to our programs. It means, rather, looking at the totality of a communicative situation--with whom, to whom, relationship, context, intent. This concern with speech acts has led some methodologists to propose a syllabus based on how-to's, or a description of language functions as opposed to language form.

An example of this kind of situational or notional syllabus, as it has come to be called, is one which has been developed by the Council of Europe to serve as a guide for the development of language teaching materials. Taking as a starting point the work by Wilkins on notional categories and categories of communicative function, they have described a threshold level or T-level of language learning which specifies the following components:

1. the situations in which the foreign language will be used, including the topics which will be dealt with;
2. the language activities in which the learner will engage;
3. the language functions which the learner will fulfil;
4. what the learner will be able to do with respect to each topic;
5. the general notions which the learner will be able to handle;
6. the specific (topic-related) notions which the learner will be able to handle;
7. the language forms which the learner will be able to use;
8. the degree of skill with which the learner will be able to perform.[5]

The third major implication of the concept of communicative competence is one of process. 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. Gestures, facial expressions and other kinesics can be learned early. They help you to act like a Frenchman long before you have mastered the French /y/ if indeed you ever master the French /y/ !

An understanding of the process of second language learning means not only a tolerance but encouragement of risk-taking in saying what you mean. 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 errer. 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.

This brings me, then to the fourth major implication of communicative competence for classroom teachers and teaching, the need for a profound re-examination of the attitudes we hold toward students, language and language teaching.[6]

My concern with teacher attitudes has grown from experiences I have had with language teachers, first as a student, now as a colleague. As I talk with teachers suffering from what Jakobovits has called the Battered Language Teacher (or BALT) Syndrome, teachers beleaguered with new approaches, new data from socio- and psycholinguistics,

it has become apparent to me that while we have devised questionnaires and other strategies to discover learner goals and interests, we have not given sufficient attention to the values held by language teachers themselves. There is ample research to show that second language learning does not proceed in a lock-step, error-free, stimulus-response fashion.[7] 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.

There are days when, following a particularly discouraging professional encounter, I am tempted to agree with Postman and Weingartner who persistently single out teachers of English and their preoccupation with grammar for the "relentless trivialization of the study of language in the schools." They get even nastier in their characterization:

> . . . 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.[8]

Why is it that with the role of language teacher there seems to come the assignment of language defender, defender of form, defender of tradition against the perceived assaults of diversification and change? What is true of the first-language teacher would appear to be true to an even greater extent of the second language teacher. The teacher/defender of a second language shows a particular resistance to language change, often insisting on maintenance of forms which have ceased to be current among native speakers.[9] Equally conservative is the preoccupation of second language teachers with formal style, the language of reporting and describing, to the exclusion of colloquial expression, the language of doing. Students learn how to write a book report or describe a news event in French, but they don't learn how to make a friend in French.

This concern for form, for "rules and charts" and "boxes and arrows" is not, as might be assumed, the special preoccupation of the older teacher, steeped in the grammar/translation tradition. Many of my teacher trainees express fears about not knowing enough "grammar." And almost all of them confess, openly or in private, that they are afraid to get up in front of their peers to conduct practice dialogues and drills because their "accents" are not as good as they should be.

Now many of these students have just returned from a year of study abroad and are fluent by any standards. Their knowledge of structure is more than adequate to cope with the kinds of situations

they will face in a first or second year high school class. Their accents are perhaps not "native" but are certainly acceptable. Yet the fears of these young teachers are real, and they will not go away with increased training and experience--at least not of the kind they are often now receiving. We all know of non-native teachers with advanced degrees who are so concerned with errors that they are all but speechless in informal encounters with native speakers. And it would seem to be their own feelings of inadequacy which, rather than increase their tolerance, make them particularly eager to point out and correct the errors of others.

And yet there are other models. Charles Curran, following in the footsteps of Carl Rogers, has described an approach to teaching which he calls counseling-learning. Crucial to his model of what should go on between teacher and learner is the concept of community, a living dynamic where members relate with one another in a common learning task and no one member has any special power. Community Language Learning involves the teacher as a person, a resource person who helps class members say whatever it is they want to say.[10]

Students in Community Language Learning cite a freedom from tension, a freedom to communicate similar to that which has emerged in research which I have conducted on teaching for communicative competence. Crucial to these feelings, in both instances, is the absence of the teacher as judge and the replacement of an emphasis on grammatical accuracy with a concern for helping students to express their own thoughts.

The problems in getting teachers to accept the role of teacher-counselor rather than that of teacher-defender rest in part, as I [redacted] with the langauge background [redacted] perceived self-[redacted] of the non-native speaker. [redacted] this there is the long tradition of language teaching in the schools. It is only of recent date in the history of public education that modern languages have been accepted as worthy of inclusion in the curriculum. In the United States it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that modern languages were offered in public schools. Up until that time, French was considered a suitable diversion for genteel young ladies, along with dancing and embroidery, while their brothers went to school to study Latin and Greek.[11] 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.

This remains largely true today. In spite of all the apparent concern with teaching for speaking, heralded by the direct and, later, the audiolingual methods, we as a profession have remained largely imbued of our classical past, reflecting old academic constraints and concern for respectability as a discipline. If this were not true, 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.

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. The following excerpt from an article in a midwestern American newspaper sums up the situation we face:

> Long before Joseph Bechard came to Urbana to be assistant superintendent for new program development (and before he was dismissed from that job), he was principal of a high school in Michigan. Something happened one day in Michigan that expanded Bechard's insight about the potential of children who are characterized as incapable of studying "the difficult subjects." And in a sense, that insight is at the heart of his educational philosophy. "We had a student who was doing very poorly in Spanish," Bechard recalled. "He brought in his father for a conference with the boy's teacher and me. My 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?'" [12]

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 teachers in training feed their egos--allow them to "show their stuff" give 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. . . ."[13]

There are days when, following a particularly encouraging professional encounter, I would assert that we do have that kind of new teacher. There are many teachers as well as community and government groups striving to make language teaching and testing more reflective of real langauge needs. This very conference, with the title Freedom to Communicate, is evidence of the concern and commitment of the leaders of our profession for effecting changes which will benefit all of us. To be successful, these efforts must begin with an exploration of the attitudes and motivations of the teachers themselves, teachers in relation to other teachers, teachers in relation to their students, and teachers in relation to the language and culture they teach.

It is in this optimistic spirit, then, that I would like to conclude with some practical suggestions for implementing the concept of communicative competence on Monday morning in your own classroom.[14]

There are a variety of classroom activities which not only encourage but imply spontaneous language use in the classroom. Role playing, discussion topics and games all represent strategies for providing the emotional involvement necessary for authentic interaction in the classroom. Not all activities are suited to all students at all times. Some students, the natural actors, will particularly enjoy the role playing. Encourage them to create their own scenarios. (These should be unrehearsed, commedia dell'arte type of sketches, not memorized dialog.) Others will prefer small group discussion where there is no pressure on a particular person to speak at any one time. Try to respect individual differences as much as you can. Let each student find a sense of achievement in whatever kinds of language activities he enjoys most.

As they begin the role playing, games and other activities, many of your students will be naturally shy. Many of them are ill at ease performing extemporaneously in English, let alone in a second language. 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. If you don't understand a statement addressed to you, let the other person know. Ask him to repeat or to explain, if he can. Or you

can restate what you thought you understood for his confirmation. Be helpful, be honest, but never hurtful.

Students will want to say things for which they have not yet learned the words. 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. If someone wants to talk about threshing machines, and you have never spent any time on a mechanized farm in a country where the language is spoken, chances are you will have to look it up. If there's no time for that at the moment, call it "threshing machine," and try to describe it so a foreign speaker could understand.

There are lots of words and expressions that you can give your students to help them save face on those numerous occasions when they can't think of a word or need time to collect their thoughts. There may be second language equivalents of "thing," "watchamacallit," etc., which can fill in for just about any concrete noun. How do you say . . ., Will you please repeat . . ., I'm sorry, I didn't understand . . . are necessary phrases to have in your repertoire if you are to let a fast-speaking native know just how much he is getting across. Equivalents for let's see . . ., I mean . . ., um . . . and other such expressions serve to keep the conversation going while you pause to get your bearings.

A single gesture sometimes says more than a thousand words. Show your students the typical gestures you know and use them yourself. Handshaking, shoulder shrugging, fist waving, and lip pursing all have their place and are fun to learn.

Exploit the resources of your community to create the occasion for authentic communications. Perhaps there is a visiting exchange student living nearby. There may be professional people who would enjoy coming to the school to talk with students. You need not be concerned that their accent is unfamiliar or their language too advanced. Let your students handle the situation as best they can. The more authentic the better.

Explore the possibility of small group activities that bring together students from different levels of language study. Many games and discussions are more fun a second and third time with different participants. The more advanced students can serve as resource persons when you are not there; and the satisfaction they will gain from explaining something to someone else is important to their own motivation for continued study.

Don't overlook the contributions technology can make to communication. Local radio and television programs in the second language exist in many communities. If not in yours, have you thought about using a short-wave radio? More and more schools are successfully incorporating broadcasts from other countries into their programs. They offer up-to-date commentary on a variety of topics in language that is fresh and real. Some teachers with a ham radio operator's license let their students transmit in the language to points around the United States and Canada.[15]

The telephone is a readily accessible means for providing additional occasions for conversation. You might want to set up a system of "phone pals" whereby students exchange messages with each

other or with native speakers in the community. You could conduct a telephone clinic one hour a week in which you answer any questions put to you in the second language including, as an incentive, questions on the content of the next day's quiz.

Learn to relax about your own "errors." Unless you are a native speaker, chances are you make them. Don't let that keep you from talking spontaneously with your students. You will get better with practice, and, more important, you will be allowing them the practice they need to improve. 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.

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. If you, too, chat with them in English before the bell, try to continue the same conversation in the second language This has the advantage of giving you a topic to discuss on which you've already had some warm-up. Ideas have been expressed, differing points of view noted or perhaps an amusing or dramatic anecdote begun.

Use the second language to talk to your students about the things that concern you all in the day to day classroom routine. Discussions of assignments, corrections, class activities and so forth constitute the most natural opportunity available for authentic communication. Make the most of it.

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. You might ask them to fill out a 3-by-5 card at the beginning of the term indicating their special interests, any jobs they may hold, musical instruments they play and other talents. This information will give you a headstart in helping to make class activities more meaningful to all of you.

Once you and your students begin to use real-language activities and to understand their value, you will no doubt find contexts which have particular meaning for you, your class and your community. 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.

Footnotes

1. Neil Postman and Weingartner, Teaching as a Subversive Activity (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 26-27.

2. Albert Valdman, "On the Specification of Performance Objectives in Individualized Foreign Language Instruction," Modern Language Journal, 49, No. 7 (November, 1965), 353-54.

3. Valdman, p. 355.

4. For a full account of this study, see Sandra J. Savignon, Communicative Competence: An Experiment in Foreign Language Teaching (Montreal: Marcel Didier, Ltée., 1972).

5. J. A. vanEk, Systems Development in Adult Language Learning: The Threshold Level (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1975), p. 5.

6. For further elaboration of the importance of teacher attitude, see Sandra J. Savignon, "On the Other Side of the Desk: A Look at Teacher Attitudes and Motivations in Second-Language Learning," in Anthony Mollica, ed., Attitude and Motivation in Second-Language Learning, Special Issue of The Canadian Modern Language Review, February, 1976.

7. See, for example, Ervin-Tripp, "Is Second Language Learning Like the First?" TESOL Quarterly, 8 (June 1974), 111-127; Dulay and Burt, "A New Perspective on the Creative Construction Process in Child Second Language Acquisition," Language Learning, 24 (December 1974), 253-78; Selinker, Swain and Dumas, "The Interlanguage Hypothesis Extended to Children," Language Learning 25 (June 1975), 139-52.

8. Postman and Weingartner, p. 55.

9. So it is that teachers of French continue to insist on the use of se rendre compte long after réaliser has become common in both written and spoken French.

10. For an introduction to the concept of Community Language Learning, see Charles A. Curran, Counseling-Learning (New York: Grune & Stratton, Inc., 1972), pp. 30-31.

11. See George B. Watts, "The Teaching of French in the United States," French Review, 37 (October, Part II, 1963), 11-65.

12. Champaign-Urbana Courier (Champaign, Illinois), February 23, 1974.

13. Postman and Weingartner, p. 56.

14. For additional suggestions, see S. J. Savignon, "Teaching for Communication," in Robert McConnell and Anthony Papalia, eds., Fourth International Conference of the Ontario Modern Language Teachers' Association and New York State Association of Foreign Language Teachers Papers, 1975, pp. 10-16.

15. For an introduction to the use of radio in the modern language classroom, see Robert J. Nelson and Richard E. Wood, "ERIC/CAL Series in Applied Linguistics," Arlington, Va.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975.