# HUMANISM IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

By

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**ABSTRACT**

Humanistic principles emphasize the importance of the individual and specific human needs. Humanism in education has been in concern during the last few decades. However, there are controversies as whether to use its principles in foreign language classrooms or not. The present paper provides an overview of the major assumptions underlying humanism as well as different emphases of it. In general, most literature on humanism is concerned with its relation to education, this paper use the implications of the contributions of humanism to education in explaining the way humanism can contribute to foreign language teaching. In addition, areas of difficulty that are faced when trying to put humanistic values into practice in the classroom, are described. Next, an important point is given regarding criticisms against humanism in language teaching. Finally, the paper discusses whether it is better to use or not to use humanism in foreign language teaching.

Keywords: Humanism, Humanistic Psychology, Humanistic Education, Humanistic Language Teaching, Emphases of Humanism.

## INTRODUCTION

Humanism in education has attracted a lot of attention since the 1970s. Humanism is a general term in psychology which is highly concerned with the 'self.' It gives high importance to the inner world of humans and considers the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of individuals as the foreground of other human achievements (Wang, 2005). In simple terms, it gives priority to affective factors of language learners. As Underhill (1989) maintains, the components of humanistic psychology are not new; Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers are two people who are specifically associated with evolution and development of humanistic psychology.

## Definition

Humanism is generally linked with beliefs about freedom and autonomy and notions that, "human beings are capable of making significant personal choices within the constraints imposed by heredity, personal history, and environment" (Elias and Merriam, 1980, p. 118; Heimstra and Brockett, 2008). Humanistic education is a way of relating that emphasizes self-discovery, introspection, self-esteem, and getting in touch with the strengths and positive qualities of others and ourselves (Moskowitz, 1994; and Mishra, 2000).

Humanistic principles emphasize the importance of the individual and specific human needs. The major assumptions underlying humanism are: (a) human nature is inherently good; (b) individuals are free and autonomous and therefore, they can make major personal choices; (c) human beings have unlimited potential for growth and development; (d) self-concept has a significant role in growth and development; (e) individuals are urged to move toward self-actualization; (f) each person defines reality by himself/herself; and (g) individuals have responsibility to both themselves and to others (Elias and Merriam, 1980, in Heimstra and Brockett, 2008).

## Emphases of Humanism

Stevick (1990) states that the word 'humanism' has been used in different meanings in the field of foreign language learning. The different meanings have five overlapping emphases. Those emphases are as follows:

1.  Feelings: Humanism rejects whatever causes people to feel bad or whatever destroys enjoying esthetics.

2.  Social Relations: Humanism encourages friendship and cooperation, and rejects whatever may reduce them.

3.  Responsibility: Humanism accepts the need for public

scrutiny, criticism, and correction, and disapproves whoever or whatever denies the importance of such issues.

4. Intellect: Humanism rejects whatever interferes with the free use of mind, and is doubtful about whatever cannot be tested intellectually.

5. Self-actualization: Humanism believes that the search for realizing one's uniqueness leads to liberation.

These emphases include both the development of certain qualities and contribution for achieving human potential in language learning (Kemp, 1994).

Humanistic principles, in general, and its emphases, in particular, make highly valuable contributions to foreign language teaching and learning.

### Contributions of humanism to foreign language teaching

Humanistic approaches to language teaching are those which prioritize development of human values; development of self-awareness and understanding others; human feelings and emotions; and active engagement of learners in the learning process (Richard, Platt, and Weber, 1989). Language teaching methods such as Silent Way, Suggestopedia, and Community Language Learning are based on the principles of humanism. Humanism has certain implications for language teaching. These implications are discussed here.

*Teaching is subordinated to learning.*

Mishra (2000) stresses that the focus of humanism is away from teaching and towards learning; that the goal of education is facilitating learning, and facilitation occurs only through interpersonal relationship with the learner which requires the teacher to, get rid of feelings of superiority and omniscience. A number of language teaching methods which are based on humanism have emphasized the role of appropriate relationships between the teacher and language learners as a determining factor in language learning. Moreover, the move from learning to teaching is something nowadays highly emphasized in language teaching.

*Learners need an atmosphere in which they can express their 'selves'*

The teacher needs to truly trust and accept the students as

valuable individuals (Mishra, 2000). In the field of language teaching, the teachers too are required to have trust in their learners so that they can transfer an acceptable degree of responsibility for learning to the learners. They are also expected to value the individuals and individualization of the language classroom.

The teacher is expected to understand that the learner needs an understanding of himself and the freedom to communicate this 'self' to others and that his responsibility is to provide the appropriate context for learning, not to give knowledge (Mishra, 2000). Bozkurt and Ozden (2010) carried out a study regarding the relationship between empathetic classroom environment and the students' success. The results indicated that it was the empathetic behavior of the teachers, rather than their academic competencies, which had influenced self-report students' success.

Humanism requires that the language teacher think of himself as a facilitator responsible for facilitating learning through creating a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in which the learners are supposed to use language for real functions such as expressing their feelings. As Romig and Cleland (1972) state, the teacher is expected to facilitate the learner's interaction with the curriculum and with other learners by trying to help the learners interpret their own thoughts and feelings, or as in Bala's (2007) words to be a facilitator of "empowered learning" (p. 1). As Underhill (1989) states, "the facilitator has a lot to do with setting the mood or atmosphere which supports self-directed learning" (p.256).

*There must be a balance between learners' freedom and constraints on them*

Humanism requires the facilitator to have the skill for "finding the appropriate balance for each individual between self-directed autonomous power and other-directed authoritative power" (Underhill, 1989, p. 254). Although individualization in language learning is stressed to a large extent, it does not mean that they must be left to do whatever they want. Thus, the teacher should be aware of the degree to which language learners should be free and the degree to which they have to accept the different constraints on them.

*Learning is based on learners' needs, not other's expectations*

The learners "are weaned away from the trap of working to please the teacher, which may be quite deeply ingrained" (p.256) and towards working to please themselves (Underhill, 1989) because as Cormon (1986) maintains teachers should remember that learners are people and therefore, have different personalities, feelings, and interests. Humanism requires, that the assessment of language learners be in accordance with their needs to and expectations of language learning; the result of such a way of assessment is that the learners need not learn what they are expected to learn.

*Reflective teaching and learning is emphasized*

Arnold (1998) maintains that humanistic language teaching brings a new view of the language teacher which includes recognition of the importance of his or her personal development. However, this does not mean that language teachers no longer need, for example, a firm command of the language being taught or proper training in language teaching methodology. It means that these skills will be much more effective if teachers are also concerned with their own emotional IQ.

In humanistic terms, Underhill (1989) states that reflection paves the way for negotiation and choice in matters of control and responsibility in the classroom. Through reflective discussion of their experience of an activity, teacher and learners co-operatively evaluate the processes they are opting for, bringing to light their different learning preferences, and adjust the kinds of choices they are making.

*Assessment must highlight the learners' strengths*

Language teachers are expected to view and apply assessment of learners' performance in a positive way, by emphasizing their strength in using English by means of interaction (De Matos, 2005). Obviously, language learners, *as learners*, have almost always have weaknesses in the foreign language. On the other hand, lot of studies have emphasized the negative demotivating effects of stressing these weaknesses for learners. Therefore, language teachers should motivate language learners by pinpointing the strong points in their language learning. Moskowitz (1994), in this regard, states that most of us have probably heard much more criticisms than been praised; consequently, we may not feel as good about ourselves as otherwise we could.

*Errors are considered as indicative of learners' progress*

In a classroom run according to humanistic values, errors are valued positively. Underhill (1989) maintains that mistakes are outcomes of learners' attempts and can help the teacher to guide these attempts. The teacher asks questions not to elicit a right answer, but to get feedback about the learners' process and to help them learn about their own process.

### Problems in Practice

Underhill (1989) mentions two areas of difficulty that we may face when trying to put humanistic values into practice in the classroom.

The first area the author mentions, concerns the difficulty of managing change in ourselves, especially at the level of our values and attitudes, and how we manifest them in our behavior in class. When we try to change, we may find that we are locked into patterns of teaching, and these patterns may be rooted quite deeply in our own training and in our experience of our own teachers and authority figures from the past (Underhill, 1989). Perhaps we have tended to evaluate the versions of humanistic education that have applied to English language teaching through the filter of our existing attitudes and values.

A second area of difficulty, the author believes, arises from the various external pressures operating against our wishes to try different things. Learners may find it disturbing when asked to take more responsibility for their learning, and teachers may lack knowledge, experience, confidence, and skill in facilitating this change. Teachers may also lack the support and understanding of parents, colleagues, directors, inspectors, trainers, and of the cultural and political environment. Materials, syllabuses, training schemes, and school organization can also mitigate against this change.

### Criticisms

Gadd (1998) refers to some problems in humanism. Arnold (1998) tries to show that his criticisms are not right and replies each of the criticisms individually and believes that

the problems Gadd refers to, are part of Stevick's list of seven hazards inherent in trying to incorporate a humanistic approach; however, neglecting to mention an eighth hazard, by implication of Stevick who feels to be the greatest of all: 'being so impressed with the first seven hazards that one becomes afraid to try!" (Stevick 1980, p.33, and Arnold, 1998).

## Conclusion

Humanism in language teaching has been emphasized in recent decades. In practice, however, some are unsatisfied with language classrooms because they are not humanized enough. For example, De Matos (2005) maintains that although notable advances have been made in the study of the kinds of professional knowledge expected of English teachers, the fact is that the humanizing dimension tends to be left out. The teachers are also not taught or wanted to learn about ways of humanizing their classes.

On the other hand, there is a danger in teachers' fully accepting and practicing the humanistic principles in language classrooms. Inspite of many good ideas and sound principles contained in the works of authors who have written about humanism, there are considerable dangers involved in wholeheartedly accepting and implementing in the classroom, a 'humanistic approach' (Atkinson, 1989). Therefore affective factors ought not to be regarded as ends in themselves, and a humanistic approach should not be treated, even implicitly, as some sort of greater good over and above the more 'pedestrian' business of learning and teaching a foreign language. Thus, teachers should know that although they are expected to humanize their classrooms, they must bear the fact that they should make choices about what principles of humanism are applicable to their teaching context, and how they should make such choices wisely.

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