

*Book Review*

Humanism with and without Inverted Commas

*Humanism in Language Teaching by Earl Stevick. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990.*

Reviewed by Enrica Flamini

In the forward, Alan Manley says that this book "is the first of a new series intended to stimulate thought, reflection and debate." Indeed the book stands out among the language teaching literature for its perspective and its concern to stress the humanistic aspect of language teaching, which sometimes is taken for granted or confused with a genuine commitment of language teachers in understanding their students' needs and interests.

The major objective of the book is to look critically at "humanism", starting from the word itself in its past and present connotations and exploring its implications in language teaching.

The most original and innovative part of the book lies in the author's desire to start a critical examination of the "humanistic" approaches using as model the way of thinking of Karl Popper. The philosopher provides Stevick with the necessary science to study the issue seriously, in order to clear the path from the critics of methodologists such as Alan Manley and Christopher Brumfit, who have argued that "humanism" has become a kind of religion for language teachers, who are blindly accepting a method as a dogma, giving up thinking for themselves. Moving from K. Popper's philosophical theories, he uses his terminology

(World 1, World 2 and World 3), to label the words used by language teachers in their work and shows how they refer either to the rational world and to the world of intuition, where things cannot or need not be tested.

This world of untested assumptions (World 3), which he calls "the faiths", becomes then his field of investigation as they may motivate support or critics to the humanistic approach.

Stevick then explores the literature of "humanism" trying to clarify some aspects of the theory and practice of the two most famous "humanistic" methods i.e. Curran's Counselling Learning and Gattegno's Science of Education, and tries to find aspects of humanism (without inverted commas) in many other well known methods.

He makes his point explicit especially when he deals with the two "humanistic" methods above mentioned, as they have something in common: both emphasize uniquely human attributes of the learner; both affirm and promote human freedom; both respect and contribute to the human dignity of the learner.

Also in other approaches he mentions, (precisely in six: Grammar Translation; Audio-Lingualism; de Saussure's Direct Method; Total Physical Response; the Natural Approach; Suggestopedia and the Communicative Approach) he finds humanistic elements which fully justify their use. For example, he says that "Grammar Translation emphasizes the ability of the human mind to reason and to decipher, and the ability of the human spirit to persevere." Moreover, as far as human dignity is concerned, he states that "Suggestopedia treats the learner as successful, prestigious characters in its practice of assigning them fictitious identities."

We might argue that, following this path of research, we can

find humanism in every learning act, as it goes without saying that it is the human mind which provides tools to formulate rules and follow them, to adjust to different situations, to monitor one's own uttering, etc.

But E. Stevick wants to suggest that in every pedagogical action the teacher must ask him/herself questions about the choice of the method, since a scientific attitude is always needed, and also reason about the extent of humanism, with or without inverted commas, which he/she is operating in, because "we function best when faith, experience and intellect are in harmony" as Alan Manley sums up in the book-foreword.

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