

Professional Practice Issues

The Importance of Humanistic Teaching In the Foreign Language Classroom¹

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The year 2000 has arrived and education has made significant changes over the past fifty years. Curriculums have varied and molded to the times. Currently many educational researchers are in pursuit of a curriculum that can “compete” and “win over” others and make them “big money”. Or they are out to satisfy the interest of a country, state or an organization instead of looking towards developing moral, affective and humanizing curriculums for the students of this new century.

In many ways our schools and curriculums have returned to the unresourcefulness that produced an extensive problem of illiteracy and that represented much of education in the 1950’s and the early 1960’s. Educational ideology of other times such as those of the 1970’s is apt to be dismissed as a kind of “doing your own thing”.... [that].... “didn’t work” (Nemiroff, 1992, p. 5). However, educational analysis and critiques of that era disclose multiple theories, many of which may be of notable importance to education today. Many of these theories should be rescued, reevaluated and, where appropriate, applied within the present educational programs (Nemiroff, 1992).

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One popular theory of the late 1960's, early 1970's was humanistic education. Although there has not been much written about this theory in the last decade and concerns have changed, evidence of its existence continues to be encountered in educational programs today. These have remained faithful to the precepts of humanistic education maintaining it as their essential ideology in its broadest form (Astuto and Clark, 1995; Nemiroff, 1992). This article will present a brief review of humanistic theory. It will attempt to resurrect some of its finer points and relate them to the overall importance they hold in foreign or second language teaching.

Humanistic education addresses the "whole learner" as a psychological entity rather than a student of a specific subject at a specific time. In the 1970's, 1980's and throughout an important part of the 1990's, the development of critical pedagogy from the writings of Paulo Freire continued to be relevant through a second generation of educational philosophers. What differed between the humanistic education of the 1960's and that of the 1970's, 1980's and early 1990's was that students' sociopolitical realities were taken into account. Attention was given to contextualizing the students within their sociopolitical situations and "engaging with them in an epistemological 'interrogation' regarding their educational needs and how to fulfill them" (Nemiroff, 1992, p.6).

Humanists believe that the purpose of the curriculum is to provide each learner with intrinsically rewarding experiences that contribute to personal liberation and development. The humanist views actualization growth as a basic need. Each learner has a self that is not necessarily conscious. According to McNeil (1985) the self must be discovered, taught, as well as built up. Paraphrasing Astuto and Clark (1995) an educational program or school should be *about* students - their needs, aspirations, talents and successes.

The youth of today require education that will help them make sense of their lives and the world around them. Students want and need learning which is more personal and human. Evidence of extreme dissatisfaction with the status quo notably those during the late 1960's was attested by the countless student uprisings, especially in the United States. Over 2000 protests occurred in the secondary schools in the United States within a 6 month period (Moskowitz, 1978). These statistics are important in order to understand the changes that have occurred and that continue to occur in schools today. What is more, suicide rates and signs of stress in today's youth are evidenced by the continuous increase in school dropouts, drug abuse, vandalism, venereal diseases, AIDS, runaways and mental illness. These signs are found everywhere, but notably in large industrialized societies. Unfortunately, students frequently encounter insuperable obstacles and what they consider wasted, related hours of class work (Moskowitz, 1978).

In direct response to these dangerous warnings, changes have occurred. In the 1980's, curriculum tended to focus on Human Development, while simultaneously acknowledging public pressure for growth in subject-matter knowledge. The purpose of a humanistic curriculum is to provide integrity and autonomy. These ideas differ greatly from traditional education where content is embedded onto or "into" the student. Affective or humanistic education draws "out of" the student, taking into account and dealing with

their feelings and opinions. From a humanistic point of view, affective learning should be used in teaching. How students feel about what they are learning influences its acquisition. In many previous learning approaches, students' feelings and opinions were overlooked or even openly denied. However, healthy attitudes towards one's self, peers and the learning experiences are among humanistic expectations and self-actualization is the overall goal in this type of curriculum. This view of actualization growth is considered a basic need by humanists.

Cecil Patterson (1973) advocates that the purpose of education is the development of self-actualizing persons, that is, human beings functioning to their fullest capacity. He sees this goal as congruent with man's own true purpose in life. "It is the single, basic, common motivation of the individual." Therefore, he feels that education should develop self-actualizing individuals, persons who are "responsible and who understand, accept and respect others and themselves" (p. 22). Producing human beings that can think, feel and act, based not only on their intellect, but also from their feelings, is an outcome Patterson expects from education.

Learners in a humanistic program are permitted to express, act out, experiment, make mistakes, get feedback and discover who they might be. In the foreign language curriculum these issues are very important. Inferring from Tracy Terrell and Stephen Krashen's (1983) widely read and discussed book *The Natural Approach*, the ideal classroom could be considered one in which both acquisition and learning are possible. Experienced teachers know the creative construction process is stimulated by contextualized exercises and by the opportunity to use natural language (Krashen and Terrell, 1983). In the foreign language classroom students should be able to experiment with the target language and its cultural aspects along with getting the feedback needed to explore and continue on the road of acquiring/learning the target language.

Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Arthur Combs, Paulo Freire, Maria Montessori, Georgi Lazonov and many others have put the humanistic philosophy into their curriculums and have further contributed to it. Maslow, one of the fathers of humanistic psychology, searched for common characteristics among a number of people considered outstanding examples of self-actualization, those judged as living to their fullest capacities and making the best use of their potential. As we consider Maslow's (1971) approach, we learn more about ourselves by examining responses to what he refers to as "peak experiences", which are those experiences that give use to love, hate, anxiety, depression and joy. He felt that the peak experiences of awe, mystery and wonder are both the end and the beginning of learning.

Maslow (1971) stressed that schools seem to depreciate children learners "having a good time". He affirmed that schools can give a student a sense of accomplishment and that teachers should be joyful and self-actualized themselves. The humanistic curriculum thus tries to value, and attempts to provide for "peak experience" moments in which cognitive and personal growth take place simultaneously. Integrating these opinions and findings into the foreign language curriculum is essential. Learning a foreign language

can be a difficult as well as a stressful task, especially when opportunities to practice are restricted, and often limited even to within the classroom. Motivating students to learn about themselves and others through peak experiences, for example, while simultaneously accomplishing this type of "learning" in the target language, is of the utmost importance and value. In fact, it has been demonstrated that learning is actually enhanced.

In a nutshell, humanistic education promotes the study of oneself. The content relates to the experiences, hopes, beliefs, needs, feelings, values, memories, aspirations and even fantasies of students. The integration of subject matter and personal growth dimensions is a constant goal of this curriculum. Feelings must be incorporated in the learning process while information is assimilated as well. According to Moskowitz (1978, p.14) "affective education is effective education". Humanistic education is a method of relating and concentrating on increasing skills in developing and maintaining good relationships. It shows concern and support for others, as well as teaches these values. Through this method, comprehension and intimacy grow slowly, trust develops and, as thoughts, feelings and experiences are increasingly valued in school, school becomes more important to students.

The role of the teacher in this curriculum is pivotal. It demands the context of an emotional relationship between student and teacher that is vital for foreign language learning and teaching. Foreign language teachers often feel distant from their students, believing that they do not impact their lives. Teachers of a humanistic curriculum should provide warmth and nurture the student's emotions while continuing to function as a resource center and guide. They should present materials imaginatively and create challenging situations, motivating students through mutual trust. They should encourage student-teacher and student-student relationships by teaching from students' own interests and commitments while holding the belief that each person can learn through meaningful interactions.

Human education does not include manipulative methods. It is not a form of therapy although, as is seen with such methods such as Suggestopedia, students tend to think of it as therapeutic. Gertrude Moskowitz (1978) states in her still very relevant sourcebook on humanistic techniques, *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class*, that "It is neither sensitivity training, permissiveness or license, nor a confessional. It is definitely not a way to hold students' attention on difficult days, something to be taken lightly or, in our own case, a way to trick students into learning a foreign language" (p. 15). McNeil (1985) states that only those who are truly committed to the ideas underlying the techniques are considered truly humanistic. Therefore, humane and kind teachers are not necessarily humanistic.

Criticisms of the humanistic curriculum do exist. McNeil (1985) identifies four of the most common as: 1) Humanists prize their methods, techniques and experiences instead of appraising them in terms of consequences for learners. 2) Humanists are not concerned enough about the experience of the individual. 3) Humanists give undue emphasis to the individual. 4) Humanist theory on which the humanist curriculum rests is

deficient. Instead of advancing unity and relatedness, it increases the disconnectedness of scientific knowledge. Some feel that it is chaotic, lacking a purpose and a set of goals. They feel that emphasis should be given to subject areas. In an English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) learning situation, for example, the language is what is of importance and its communication and input merely are secondary. However, critics fail to understand the emphasis of this philosophy.

Humanists are the first to admit that their educational approach can be misused, as can any philosophy. The important curriculum area objectives of self-evaluation, creativity, listening, openness to new experiences and goal setting are all present in the humanistic curriculum. In this type of curriculum, self-direction may well follow if the trust is also provided. If students participate in making decisions about what and how they will learn, great efforts to foster confidence and self-esteem are made.

In the more recent humanistic curriculums, more attention is given to the physical and emotional needs of learners while attempting to design learning experiences to fulfill these needs. We see examples of this in Asher's Total Physical Response, Wilkin's Notional Syllabus, Krashen and Terrell's Natural Approach and Montessori's methods and techniques which subscribe to humanistic curriculums. Their common core revolves around the major points earlier mentioned. They feel it essential to establish a warm, supportive, nonthreatening and accepting climate. These methods accentuate the positive: identifying strengths, developing a positive self image, giving and receiving confident feedback, enhancing self concepts and methods that students use to relate to others and to help develop powerful and interpersonal skills. These methods avoid a "negative focus", creating a supportive and encouraging environment for learning. Low risk activities, such as games, story sharing or singing songs (Moskowitz, 1978) lead to "meaningful communication" which is the common underlying goal in a humanistic and communicative curriculum.

According to Omaggio (1986) humanistic strategies have been used in various other language teaching approaches since the early 1970's. Many different names have been given to these such as affective, facilitative, personal, confluent, futuristic, psychological and approaches. An example of a humanistically oriented language teaching methodology is the Community Language Learning (CLL) also known as the Counseling-Learning approach. Developed by Charles Curran in 1976, its overall theoretical premise is that the human individual needs to be understood and assisted in the process of fulfilling personal values and goals. This is best accomplished in groups with others trying to attain the same objective. Today this methodology is still widely accepted and applied.

Humanistic curriculum is highly advantageous in the foreign or second language classroom. According to Krashen's affective filter, monitor and input hypothesis (which is still being applied in one way or another in different language teaching situations), learners of another language should feel comfortable, at ease, unintimidated and secure for maximum and affective learning to take place (Krashen and Terrell, 1983). Krashen, Asher, Lazonov and others go to great lengths to use varied techniques such as songs, games,

and role play to lower stress and the "affective filter". Thus, students reach the ultimate goal of language acquisition/learning in every sense of the word. They reach this goal in a humanistic curriculum with the constant use of comprehensible input to obtain meaningful (especially to the learner) communication. In this way learners feel free, secure and motivated to talk, write, read, listen to and share in the foreign language.

The implications of a humanistic philosophy in a foreign language curriculum are extremely positive and healthy. As Carl Rogers (1975) has summarized, much of the research shows positive association between affective classrooms and student growth, interest, cognition, productivity, self-confidence and trust. Students learn more, attend school more often, and are more creative and capable of problem solving when the humanistic curriculum is implemented. Foreign language curriculums applying humanistic philosophy tend to use communicative methods. These methods involve a global approach to the whole personality and include expressions of the self. They allow for one's personality to surface and develop through the use of such activities as art, music, suggestion, drama, role play, games, concentrative relaxation to name a only a few of the most popular.

Foreign language teaching has not always reached its goal of producing language learners that are functional in their new language. Thus, many times the different approaches and methods don't meet what the learner needs most for this to occur effectively. By using the methods outlined here, and incorporating the teacher as a resource or "guide", language learners will be encouraged to develop their areas of special interest within the context of the foreign language classroom. Meaningful integration of the learners and of their different personalities, needs and learning styles is conducive to successful language learning. In fact, through these practices and methods, the humanistic curriculum has continued to be both widely applied and highly successful.

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