

THE IMPACT OF HUMANISTIC TECHNIQUES ON SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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People today want an education that will help them make sense of their lives and the world around them. They want learning which is more personal and human. Everyone is searching for identity, asking "Who am I?" and "What am I like?" and everyone, without exception, needs self-acceptance.

It has been recognized that most of us achieve only a fraction of our potential. Some of the conditions which foster growth in achieving our potential are: developing fulfilling relationships, expressing our feelings, sharing ourselves, giving and receiving positive feedback and support, trusting others, understanding ourselves and others, becoming introspective, and discovering our strengths. In summary, greater self-knowledge and greater self-fulfillment can enhance achievement of more self-potential.

Second language classrooms have also been falling short of their potential. Too often the second language class has been depicted as having interaction that is rote, automatic, controlled, with too much parroting. The teacher often assumes the role of a drill sergeant. As a result, contemporary second language teachers are searching for new ways to help their students achieve a higher level of their learning potential.

There is an approach to education which holds promise for changing such stereotypes of the second language class and for humanizing it instead. The spread of this area of education seems related to this concern for personal development, self-acceptance, and acceptance of others. This type of instruction is known as "humanistic," "affective," "confluent," or "psychological" education. The aim of these approaches is to combine the subject matter to be learned with the feelings, emotions, experiences, and lives of the learners. Humanistic education deals with educating the whole person--the intellectual and the emotional dimensions. It considers that learning is influenced by how people feel about themselves, that the self-concept affects achievement.

Humanistic education recognizes that it is legitimate to study oneself. It strives to increase understanding, rapport, and learning to care more for ourselves and others. Self-discovery, introspection, and self-esteem are areas that receive attention. Furthermore, although humanistic education is fun, it is not a fad or gimmick. It is not therapy, though it may be therapeutic. Nor is it something to be taken lightly or a way to trick students into learning.

Several noted psychologists and educators regard self-actualization, that is achieving one's fullest capacities and making maximum use of one's potentials, as the true purpose of education. Educator Cecil Patterson views this goal as the most motivating force in individuals.¹ Combs and Snygg agree that self-actualization is the "need which motivates all behavior at all times in all places."²

Psychologist Abraham Maslow regarded satisfying the basic psychological needs of people as vital. Among these needs are dignity, respect, belongingness, love, and esteem. He charged that teachers must not only accept students, but should help them learn about what kind of persons they are. Psychologically healthy people are much clearer about their values, and teachers can help students derive their values from a knowledge of themselves.

How does all of this relate to the ESOL class? Suppose English is taught so that learners discover more of their positive aspects and what they are really like. Such an approach can help increase the esteem and understanding students have for themselves and others, thus enhancing growth in the direction of becoming more self-actualized. Since self-actualization is such a powerful inherent need of humans, as students view English as self-enhancing, it will be seen as even more relevantly related to their lives. They will become more motivated to learn to use the language, and are therefore more likely to achieve. So a very strong connection can be made between humanistic education and English as a second language.

Many ESOL teachers already teach humanistically, that is, they have empathy and regard for their students. But this is not the same thing as using humanistic techniques to teach ESOL, although it is surely a vital component of it. ESOL teachers have long recognized the importance of personalizing the content by asking students related questions about them-

selves. But the kinds of questions asked are frequently impersonal rather than personal. "How many brothers and sisters do you have?" and "How many rooms are in your house?" evoke factual information about students which can be superficial and not necessarily interesting.

Humanistic techniques take personalizing to a deeper level. More humanistic questions dealing with similar topics might be:

- "How does it feel to be the oldest (middle, or youngest) child in your family?"
- "What advantages and disadvantages are there?"
- "What special object do you have in your room that gives you pleasant memories?"
- "What does it mean to you?"
- "What do you think of when you look at it?"

These kinds of personal questions share the person that really is.

The ESOL class presents a rare opportunity for content that is truly interesting and meaningful to students--the study of themselves. Talking about their own growth and development, sharing what is important to them, and being involved in personally reinforcing interaction are valued areas of communication: the very essence of language.

Primary aims of humanistic techniques are to help students be themselves, accept themselves, and be proud of themselves. Through the techniques students come to see the human side of one another as well as the teacher. They foster self-esteem and trust through sharing. We must let others know us to value us. In turn, trust is built by letting others know us--by disclosing what we are like--and discovering that others accept us for what we are.

Self-esteem is also built through becoming aware of one's strengths: the qualities, characteristics, and skills we have. Identifying the strengths of others and hearing your own expressed by others are powerful ways of relating in any language.

To give you some more specific ideas of their possibilities, here are examples of humanistic activities which can be used to instruct ESOL. They appear in a collection of 120 techniques for this purpose in a recent book entitled Caring

and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class: A Sourcebook on Humanistic Techniques.³

NAMES PEOPLE PLAY

Purposes:

Affective -- To enable students to develop greater sensitivity into a rarely discussed area that all of us experience as we interact each day of our lives.

Linguistic -- To practice the vocabulary of feelings and structures related to giving one's name, i.e., "My name is . . ." and "I used to be called . . ."

Levels: Intermediate to advanced

Size of groups: Three to six, depending on the amount of time available

Procedures: Inform the students that they are going to discuss a topic about which they probably have many feelings. You could introduce the topic in this way:

"All of us were given a first name when we were born. We had no choice in this name. Yet this name represents us, stands for us, identifies us. When people say this name, we respond to it.

"Think of your first name and any nicknames you have ever been called. Discuss in your group how you feel about your first name and any nicknames you have been given during your life."

Start out by sharing your feelings about your own first name and any nicknames that you were given at any time. After the small groups have discussed the topic, ask for a few volunteers to share their feelings about their given names and nicknames before the total class.

In the second phase of this activity, tell the students to imagine that they can select any first name they want to for

themselves, but they cannot keep their present name. Ask them to decide what they would call themselves and why. Let the class know what name you would select and why, to start off the activity. Have a few shared before the total class once the small groups finish their exchange. Conclude by asking what they learned about themselves or others regarding names and nicknames.

Comments: Students find this a personally interesting topic to discuss. If they are sufficiently able to express themselves in the target language, they may wish to spend more time discussing this topic than you project it will take. If you wish to shorten the time spent on the activity, keep the groups smaller. You can ask students to write about this topic before it is discussed to help prepare them for their participation. As a follow-up activity, students can be asked to write what they learned about themselves and others related to the names people are called.⁴

SOMEONE SPECIAL

Purposes:

Affective -- To reflect over one's life to trace those who have had an impact on it. To appreciate those who have been a positive force in one's life.

Sub goal
Linguistic -- To practice the past tense(s). To practice the use of adjectives describing qualities. To practice the skill of writing.

Levels: All levels

Size of groups: About five

Materials needed: The assignment completed by the class

Procedures: Discuss with the class how throughout our lives, we are influenced by others. Sometimes the influence is positive and other times it is negative. However, in everyone's life there are some individuals who have had a strong impact on us. Our direction of life changed because of them. The

influence might be a way of thinking, acting, or doing something in a different way. It could be a change of attitude, belief, or plans that occurred.

The students are to think of all of the people who greatly influenced their lives in a positive way from their earliest years to the present. Then have them decide who had the greatest influence of all. Ask the students to write a description of what this person was like and how he or she changed the course of their lives. Tell the students to be prepared to share this experience with others in the group they will be in. If they have a snapshot or some tangible remembrance of the person, request that this be brought in as well.

When the assignment is due, put the students into groups of about five. One at a time, the group members should tell the story of the most influential person in their lives and share any pictures or relics brought in with the others. You can provide questions to guide the composition and the discussion, such as:

1. How old were you when you met this person?
2. What was this person like?
3. Do you still see this person?
4. How did this person influence you?
5. How would your life be different if you had not met this person?
6. Have you ever tried to have the same kind of influence on the lives of others that this person had on you? If so, under what circumstances?

In the total class, a number of students can tell who their influential person is and how their life is different as a result of this contact. Reactions to the exercise and/or a discussion of what was learned from it can follow.

Comments: When giving the assignment, make it clear that the person chosen as the most influential should have done positive things which in turn brought about a positive influence. Otherwise some students will come up with people who did very negative things to them and which they combatted by going in the opposite direction.

This exercise can be a warm experience as it often brings back feelings of appreciation, caring, and closeness.⁵

In order to carry out humanistic techniques successfully the ESOL teacher does not have to discard the basic classroom text. Humanistic techniques can be included to supplement, review, and introduce present materials. Use an activity that relates to what the class is studying wherever it is appropriate.

For example, if your class is reading a story in which the theme of exchanging gifts comes up, use the topic of gifts as the focus for an activity. Students can respond to the question of what gift they would like to have more than anything in the world. The gift can be tangible or intangible. When the birthday theme arises, have a discussion related to feelings about age. Some questions might be: How do you feel about being your present age? How did you feel about being five (ten) years younger (depending on the age of your students)? How will you feel about being ten years older? Questions such as these get to the feelings and values of students and help them to reflect on and crystallize them.

In using humanistic techniques it is essential to create a warm, accepting, nonthreatening classroom climate. Incorporating such techniques is conducive to producing this type of atmosphere. You can establish even greater rapport with students than you already have. You'll find increased satisfaction in your teaching results.

From my own experience in group dynamics, sensitivity training, and humanistic education, I have found it important to stress two notions when implementing humanistic techniques in the classroom:

1. Focus on the positive aspect
2. Avoid high-risk activities

A positive focus implies looking at the positive side of people, situations, and life and avoiding the negative aspects of these. For instance, if your students are in groups and are to state something they especially like about the person to their right, that's focusing on the positive. They should not be asked to state something they think that person should change, as that would be emphasizing the negative. Students should be asked to exchange pleasant memories and happy events, rather than to reveal unpleasant or unhappy experiences.

Use low-risk activities, that is themes that are safe and comfortable rather than threatening or overly personal. An example of a low-risk activity would be sharing something you did recently which helped someone: A high-risk activity would be the opposite of this: something you did which hurt someone. It is the latter type of topic to avoid.

Examples of other high-risk topics might be:

"Something I feel ashamed of"
 "What I dislike about myself"
 "My saddest memory"

These topics are not only high-risk but they have a negative focus as well. Reversing the above themes changes them into acceptable low-risk themes:

"Something I feel proud of"
 "What I like about myself"
 "My happiest memory"

By stressing a positive focus and low-risk activities, a bond of closeness and a feeling of belonging develop among the students, and between student and teacher. We can encourage happier, better-adjusted students in ESOL classes by undoing some of the negative things they feel about themselves and the ways they underestimate themselves.

In addition, following these two guidelines helps to build a climate of trust where students feel it is safe to share things about themselves--their feelings, experiences, interests, memories, values, hopes, desires, and daydreams. During this sharing, students get to know one another at a deeper level. This type of sharing acts to enhance acceptance by others. There seems to be a relationship among sharing, being accepted by others, and self-acceptance. Psychologists agree that self-acceptance is essential for sound mental health and growth; increasing its presence in students can only improve learning.

Many humanistic techniques call for students being placed in small groups to allow for maximum participation and involvement in using the second language and in getting the most benefit from the activity. Groups may vary in size from two to seven. In groups larger than seven, there is not sufficient opportunity for participation and the more highly verbal or

more knowledgeable students may tend to dominate. The use of small groups offers the shy and less verbal or less knowledgeable students more opportunity and safety in talking.

Smaller sized groups decrease the necessary time for an activity, so use them for exercises in which each student is to have several turns or is to give a lengthy response. That is, if there are six in a group, the activity will take longer than if there are three. However, for activities in which students give and receive positive feedback to one another, larger groups are desirable to maximize the quantity and impact each student receives.

While the students are in groups, the teacher circulates and listens to the interaction. The teacher can also join a group and be involved in the sharing. In fact, this is highly desirable.

Even though the students are in groups, the teacher brings the focus back to the total class by having individuals in the groups share some of their responses, reactions, and feelings for all to hear. Students are often interested in how things went in the other groups.

It is very important to continually mix the groups so the students become acquainted with everyone in class. This is another way that closeness rather than cliquishness develops.

There are several ground rules to establish with a class upon first introducing humanistic techniques.

1. Everyone gets listened to -- Whether sharing in small groups or participating in front of the whole class, everyone will listen and stop talking when someone is sharing or taking a turn.
2. No put-downs -- No one will be teased, ridiculed, or laughed at in a negative way for what is shared.
3. The right to pass -- If someone has personal reasons for not wanting to respond to a particular question or to share an experience in a given exercise, it is all right to pass and not take a turn and no questions will be asked.

Regarding passing, a few things should be clarified with students. They should not permanently pass because they have not had enough time to think of a response when it's their turn. In that case, students can pass when it's their turn but take their turn after all group members have participated.

The students should also be told not to pass because they are not certain how to say what they wish to in English. In such instances, they should first ask others in the group for help and then call the teacher if they still need assistance.

Activities are chosen or modified to suit the language level of the class. Some activities or exercises can be used at different levels, with the expectations of students differing according to their knowledge of English. Beginning levels will deal with a topic in a more elementary way than intermediate or advanced levels. Some exercises require more complex thinking and expression in English so they can only be used in upper level classes.

There are certain procedures to follow in presenting humanistic exercises to make them a better learning experience. Prepare the class for the activity by letting them know its purpose and giving an appropriate introduction to it. Give directions for carrying out the exercise with examples of responses that might be made.

At the close of the exercise, ask students what they learned from the activity and/or feelings or reactions they would like to share with the total class. This is called processing the exercise and is an important phase that should not be overlooked. During the processing, students may share insights gained about themselves, their group, or the class and feelings they experienced. The teacher can then summarize the purpose and the learnings for the class.

To better understand student reaction to different activities the teacher should also request constant written feedback (with the students names on it) about the humanistic activities the class experiences. This way the teacher can become more sensitive to students' thoughts, feelings, and growth.

Too many humanistic activities should not be planned for one period. They will often take longer than you think when

students become interested in them. Where the responses of students require some time or thought to prepare, when possible, assign the topic first as homework. The students can then use what was written as a guide to their responses. The type of homework humanistic exercises provide is sometimes more motivating than the more general types of assignments given.

I have tried to present a rationale for using humanistic techniques to teach ESOL along with some ground rules, procedures, and ideas for carrying them out. The techniques have appeal for all age levels and all levels of language. They can be exciting and motivating for the teacher and the students. I cherish the rewards I have found in this area and encourage you to enter it and do the same. Helping others to be themselves, to accept themselves, to be proud of themselves, and to care for one another along with acquiring a second language is a valuable combination that's hard to surpass.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cecil H. Patterson. Humanistic Education. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973, p. 22.
2. Arthur W. Combs and Donald Snygg. Individual Behavior. New York: Harper & Row, 1959, p. 38.
3. Gertrude Moskowitz. Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class: A Sourcebook on Humanistic Techniques. Newbury House Publishers, 54 Warehouse Lane, Rowley, Mass. 01969.
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5. Moskowitz. Caring and Sharing. pps. 134-135. Copyright © 1978 by Newbury House Publishers. Reprinted with permission.