

The Emotional Pivot: Humanistic Theory and the Development of English Language Teaching.

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Abstract:

The domain of English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone a significant transformation where the approach of seismic shift from structuralist, teacher led methodologies to a framework that prioritizes the holistic development of the individual. Humanistic theory, rooted in the psychological paradigm of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, asserts and maintains the language acquisition which is not merely a cognitive venture but also an emotional and social one. This article explores the integration and impact of humanistic principles within ELT, focusing on the interplay among the self-actualization, empathy, and the reduction of psychological barriers. By analysing the transition from "the sage on the stage" to "the guide on the side," where the discussion highlights how prioritizing the learner's emotional well-being facilitates superior linguistic consequences. Furthermore, it analyzes the specific benefits of this approach in secondary education, particularly in fostering communicative competence and resilience.

KeyWords: Humanism, Affective Filter, Self-Actualization, Learner-Centered Pedagogy, Unconditional Positive Regard, Communicative Competence.

Introduction

For long time, the language teaching highly relied on the "banking model" of education whereby teachers deposit knowledge into the passive minds of students dominated the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). However, the late 20th century saw the emergence of a more compassionate philosophy called Humanism. At its core, Humanistic theory suggests that learning is most effective when it engages the whole person with their intellect, feelings, and social identity.

To comprehend this shift, one must look at three major foundational pillars:

Self-Actualization :

Maslow's hierarchy defines that once basic physiological and safety needs are attained, individuals strive for self-fulfillment. In an ELT context, this means the classroom must be a safe space where the ultimate goal is not just passing a test, but the realization of the student's potential through the learning new language.

Unconditional Positive Regard :

Carl Rogers argued, for the growth to occur. For instance, a person needs an environment that provides them with genuineness, acceptance, and empathy. When an ELT practitioner displays unconditional positive regard, they value the student regardless of their grammatical errors, thereby dismantling the fear of failure.

Low Affective Filters :

Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis bridges psychology and linguistics. He suggests that variables such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and lack of motivation act as a mental block which acts as filler that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition device in the brain. These concepts represent a move away from rigid, teacher-centered models toward learner-driven environments. In this new innovative model, the teacher's role is not to dictate, but to facilitate an environment where the learner innately feels empowered to take risks.

Humanistic Theory in ELT:

When discussing Humanism in English Language Teaching, the focus is fundamentally on centering the learner's personal experience within the educational process. This philosophy is most vividly embodied in methods such as the Silent Way, and Community Language Learning. In these approaches, students are not simply passive receivers of a predetermined curriculum; rather, the content emerges organically from their lived realities, their emotions, their individual interests, and not merely from what is preselected in a prescribed Textbooks.

This learner-centeredness ensures that language learning becomes a deeply relevant and meaningful journey, tailored to each student's unique context.

The Teacher as Facilitator:

Within a humanistic classroom, the teacher transitions from the traditional figure of authority to assume the role of a "facilitator." This does not mean that the teacher becomes invisible or uninvolved. In contrast, the teacher's attentiveness to the emotional dimension of learning becomes even more critical. Instead of hastily correcting every errors in which can often feel like a personal criticism and can dampen student motivation where the teacher employs strategies such as recasting mistakes or offering feedback in ways that nurture the learner's self-confidence and sense of competence. This approach is rooted in the understanding that language is not a neutral skill; it is intimately bound up with identity, self-expression, and vulnerability. Attempting to communicate in another language can leave learners feeling exposed or inadequate, which is why the humanistic approach seeks to bridge this emotional gap, ensuring that each student's voice is not only heard but also truly valued and validated.

Personalizing Content:

Humanistic ELT deliberately avoids the pitfalls of “one-size-fits-all” curricula. If a student is passionate about environmental science, for example, lessons are thoughtfully connected to that area of interest, fostering a sense of personal relevance and motivation. The underlying philosophy is to ignite and sustain each learner’s intrinsic motivation by making learning experiences resonant with their passions, aspirations, and curiosities. This personalization is key to achieving authentic engagement, as it allows students to recognize themselves and their journeys in the language they are acquiring.

Benefits for School-Aged Learners:

Bringing humanistic principles into school environments particularly for adolescents who are navigating the complex process of self-discovery can yield profound and lasting benefits that extend beyond language proficiency.

A. Lowering Language Anxiety:

Traditional classroom environments can often be sources of significant anxiety, with high-stakes testing and public correction amplifying pressure and inhibiting risk-taking. In contrast, humanistic classrooms intentionally cultivate more relaxed, supportive atmospheres, often emphasizing collaborative work in small groups. The result is a notable reduction in anxiety; students feel less fear about making mistakes, allowing them to focus their mental energy on actual communication and experimentation with language. This emotional freedom is crucial for genuine language development.

B. Building Socio-Pragmatic Competence:

Effective communication transcends the mere mastery of grammatical structures. Humanistic learning environments encourage students to engage in meaningful exchanges that require sharing, active listening, and empathy. Through these interactions, learners develop the subtle skills necessary for real-world communication: how to disagree diplomatically, how to offer encouragement, how to express complex emotions appropriately in another language. These socio-pragmatic abilities are essential for functioning successfully in global contexts where nuance and interpersonal sensitivity matter as much as linguistic accuracy.

C. Fostering Autonomy and Agency:

When teachers empower students to have a say in shaping classroom activities such as by choosing topics for projects or presentations students begin to take genuine ownership of their learning processes. They move from being passive recipients of information to becoming active agents in their own educational journeys. This growing sense of autonomy not only enhances engagement within the classroom but also cultivates the capacity for lifelong, independent language learning and problem-solving beyond school walls.

D. Creating a “Safe-to-Fail” Environment:

In humanistic classrooms, errors are not stigmatized as failures but embraced as valuable indicators of learning and progress. Students are assured that their efforts will be met with respect and understanding, regardless of the imperfections in their speech or writing. This psychological safety net emboldens learners to take risks, experiment with

unfamiliar linguistic forms, and stretch their interlanguage without fear of ridicule. Such risk-taking is essential for genuine growth and fluency development.

Conclusion

Humanistic theory has fundamentally transformed the traditional dynamics between teacher and learner in ELT. By interconnecting the Maslow's emphasis on self-actualization, Rogers' championing of empathy, and Krashen's focus on the emotional aspects of learning. The humanistic approach fosters classrooms that prioritize not only language acquisition but also holistic Self-development.

Although some critics argue that humanistic methods sacrifice academic rigor, research and classroom evidence suggest otherwise: when students feel emotionally secure and intrinsically motivated, their language learning outcomes are enhanced, not diminished. As global interconnectedness continues to intensify, skills like empathy and cultural sensitivity are becoming at least as vital as linguistic precision. Ultimately, the humanistic approach is not just an alternative among many where it is an indispensable strategy for preparing learners to communicate authentically and effectively in our increasingly complex world.

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