

## **Teacher and Learner in Humanistic Language Teaching**

Davoud Amini<sup>1</sup>, Mansour Amini

### **Abstract**

Since ‘the development of whole person’ was brought to the focus of attention by humanist psychologists as a central concern in educational theory, affective variables have been assumed to have a significant share in the learning process that goes on in a pedagogical setting. Meanwhile, the process of second language development, because of the very nature of language as a vehicle for communication, is immensely influenced by socio-affective variables. In an instructional setting, on the other hand, emotional factors are clearly manifested in what goes on between the teacher and learners. As a result, the way the affective dimension of teacher-learner interactions is handled can predict, to a large extent, the effectiveness of interactional activities in second language classes. In this paper, having reviewed the learner-teacher relationship in methodologies that were particularly based on humanistic language teaching, I will argue, following Kumaravadivelu’s post-method pedagogy, that humanistic handling of the instructional situation by the teacher, beyond any methodological considerations, pledges a more positive atmosphere and better chances of language acquisition as a consequence. A set of guidelines are proposed to ascertain a humanistic relationship between teacher and learners in a language class.

**Keywords:** Humanistic Language Teaching, Affective Variables, Teacher-Learner Relationship

---

<sup>1</sup>Assist. Prof, English Department, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz-Iran. Email: davoudamini2014@gmail.com

## INTRODUCTION

From the class management point of view, a teacher's position in the class can range from authoritarian to laissez-faire and even indifferent. However, teacher-learner interaction is not relevant to disciplinary issues only. It is a central issue in the learning process. Hedge (2000) quotes an unpublished research concerning teachers' assessment of their role in the classroom. Facilitator of learning, source of advice, source of expertise, management, caring and sharing roles were among the ones receiving the highest approval among the teachers, respectively. Whatever terminology is used in talking about teachers' role, one point is assumed as certain; the traditional image of teacher as the paragon of wisdom and the authority in the group is not acceptable anymore. Teacher and learners' attitudes, expectations and beliefs concerning each other, themselves, pedagogical setting and classroom activities are so important for education that the whole instructional procedure is sometimes defined in terms of what goes on between the teacher and the learners. So the success or failure of a language teaching program relies to a large extent on the teacher-learner relationship.

On the other hand, humanistic language teaching, due to its unique emphasis on learner autonomy and affective factors is more sensitive to LTR (learner-teacher relationship). Fundamental principles of humanism such as 'development of the whole person' and 'self-actualization' (Rogers, 1961; Stevick, 1990) will not occur unless the teacher and learners are mentally tuned to the requirements of a humanistic language class which ought to be reflected in their attitudes and behavior. Accordingly, apart from what approach, method or technique is adopted for language instruction, the true development in the learners will not take place unless the characteristics of the instructional setting require the teacher and learners to commit themselves to the demands of humanistic LTR (Stevick, 1990; Arnold, 1999).

In this paper, following a brief overview of humanistic language teaching and the LTR within this paradigm, a set of fundamental suggestions will be set forward as guidelines to ensure humanistic language teaching. The reasoning is inspired by post-method argument.

## OVERVIEW OF HUMANISM IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

There's not a unified definition of HLT in the literature. While some observers attribute the title to a set of innovative methods of the 1970's such as community language learning, silent way and suggestopaedia, others consider it as a general approach encompassing broader visions than that of a particular method. When the origins of these methods are reviewed in retrospect, it becomes clear that HLT grew out of humanistic psychology and education. The two founding figures of humanistic psychology, which emerged as a reaction to behaviorist claims of mechanical learning, are Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. In Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs, self-actualization was proposed as the ultimate and highest level of human development (Williams and Burden, 1997). Self-actualization defined as the realization of one's full potentials and real qualities will not be achieved before lower-order deficiency needs, which are directly related to the person's biological or psychological balance, are satisfied. Rogers, on the other hand, as the founder of counseling psychology introduced experiential self-initiated learning originating from inside the learner into the psychology of learning (Rogers, 1961). To him, a precondition for learning to take place is that the subject of learning be relevant to the learner and stimulate active participation of the learner.

Stevick (1990) as an enthusiastic advocate of HLT identified five emphases within humanistic pedagogy including feelings, social relations, responsibilities, intellect and self-actualization. The two key concepts that are manifested in almost all interpretative evaluations of humanistic theory are 1) development of the whole person i.e., the idea that learners have physical, social and emotional dimensions in addition to cognitive sides and 2) the concept of self-actualization i.e., full realization of learner's deepest true qualities. Moskowitz (1978) is considered as the pioneering figure in outlining a principled definition of HLT and putting it into classroom practice. However, the innovative methods of early seventies inspired by humanistic psychology were already at place before Moskowitz. Curran, as a student of Rogers, had applied the theory of counseling learning to the field of language teaching and offered community language learning (Curran, 1976). In this method teachers are primarily counselors who voluntarily give up their power and let the learners to realize their

worth and responsibility in the learning process so that learners are gradually led to independence in using second language. Gattegno's silent way was another method inspired by humanistic psychology that emphasized potentials of learners to deal autonomously with learning situation while teaching is subordinated to learning. Teachers are mainly elicitors of students' inner resources (Gattegno, 1972). With desuggestopaedia, too, teachers are caretakers who try to release the reserve powers of learners' mind by infantilizing them. In addition to these methods, almost all of the methodological proposals for language teaching seem to contain some elements of HLT. In this regard, no language teaching method is non-humanistic in nature.

In communicative language teaching, as the dominant doctrine in language teaching, the teacher and learners are primarily communicators who participate in meaningful activities through maximally authentic use of language. So the teacher's main role is facilitation of communication during fluency-based activities throughout focus-on-meaning sessions. In Brumfit's words "only when there are messages being carried which are significant to users will there be full engagement with the linguistic code" (Brumfit, 1984). The main goal is to provide appropriate input and output opportunities for learners. However, the teacher will also monitor the learners' performance and provide the relevant feedback to improve the students' interlanguage during incidental focus-on-form episodes (Ellis, Basturkman and Loewen, 2002). Error treatment in this regard is assumed to be a social activity involving joint participation and meaningful transactions between the teacher and learner (Nassaji and Swain, 2000).

Similarly, task-based language teaching has borrowed a good number of axiomatic beliefs proposed by humanistic education. Emphasis on holistic development of the learner, personal relevance of the subject matter to the learner, imagination and creativity and goal-oriented classroom activities are among the many common features of TBLT and humanism. TBLT is supported by two theoretical streams, i.e., information-processing models and socio-cultural theory (Ellis, 2003). According to the 'activity theory' which is a basic argument within socio-cultural framework, tasks as classroom activities cannot create learning opportunities by themselves. Rather, it is the participatory structure of task performance and learners' orientation toward the task that will lead to learning from tasks. Lantolf (2000) asserts that people with different motives and goals will perform the

same task in different ways. How learners view the task (e.g., as fun, drudgery, serious learning activity, etc.) is socio-historically determined. So it is quite probable that a communicative task be treated like traditional exercise type by the learners as a result of deviated orientation. Therefore the joint ownership of the activity (intersubjectivity in socio-cultural terms) is a necessary condition for the success of task implementation. This is achieved when the teacher admits learners' goals or tries to establish rapport with them so that both the teacher and learners get engaged in an activity with identical orientation in mind.

From this review of common frameworks for language teaching it becomes evident that almost all methods or approaches of language teaching have been benefited from humanistic guidelines. Despite some critical opinions to reduce HLT to specific methods or learner-centered learning (e.g., Gadd, 1998), basic tenets of HLT are broad and comprehensive enough to be relevant to all general aspects of language learning/teaching. In fact, the pedagogical success in language instruction is more a matter of 'learning process' than methodological options. These processes, according to Underhill 'contribute to the ambient learning atmosphere, including the attitudes, values and awareness of the teacher and of the learners' (Underhill, 1989, p. 251). The favorable learning process cannot be created by the instructional prescriptions of this or that method. Rather, it is the teacher and learners' conceptualization of the learning process that will determine the success or failure, the idea which was reiterated by Kumaravadivelu more than a decade ago.

### **POST-METHOD PEDOGOGY**

Kumaravadivelu's agitation against the concept of method introduced a new vision to the field of language teaching and terminated controversies over methodological preferences. In his earliest introduction of post-method conditions Kumaravadivelu (1994), offered to rearrange the instructional scene by redefining the roles of theorizers, practitioners and learners. A canonical element of post-method conditions was the summons, in line with critical pedagogy, to empower teachers to "theorize from their practice and practice what they have theorized" (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p.30). Given the autonomy they deserve, teachers are emancipated from curricular

constraints, so that they can make use of their learning and teaching experience and initiatives. The classroom procedure is shaped and managed by teachers through the process of principled pragmatism. In his later publications (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, 2003 & 2006), Kumaravadivelu argued for autonomous and critical teachers and learners as the two fundamental elements of post-method pedagogy. Such autonomy will be developed not through transmission models of teacher education rather through a dialogic understanding between teacher educators and practitioners by 1) recognizing teachers' voices and visions and 2) developing teachers' critical capabilities (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). However, the most pedagogical part of post-method framework are the macro-strategies proposed for teachers to follow as general guidelines to classroom procedures and operationalized via micro-strategies. Although, Kumaravadivelu asserts that these strategies are theory-neutral and method-neutral, an analogical review will reveal that most of the macro-strategies such as maximizing learning opportunities, promoting learner autonomy, ensuring social relevance and rising cultural consciousness, etc are mostly comparable and compatible with basic humanistic guidelines including the development of whole person, self-actualization and social and cultural awareness.

So, it is proposed here that a humanistic LTR can provide a general framework where teachers, away from any methodological bias, can be assured of learning outcomes. A set of guidelines to ensure a humanistic LTR are introduced in the following section.

### **GUIDELINES TO ASCERTAIN HUMANISTIC LANGUAGE TEACHING**

**1. Personalization:** A subject alien to the learners will not involve them in the learning process. Subjects to which students feel detached, for some socio-cultural or historical reasons, need to be made relevant to the learners' personal experience. In this regard, pre-reading and pre-listening phases of teaching can provide an opportunity to personalize the upcoming content of a text. Moreover, personalization of a subject can always be actualized by teacher's being sensitive and attentive to students' common experiences and feelings as well as individual particularities in terms of activities eliciting personal views and feelings. Touching upon learners' individual interests and

highlighting their specific strengths will create better chances of personalization.

**2. Intersubjectivity:** Students need to know about the nature of the activity that is going on in the classroom. To this end, the teacher must take time out, when opportunities rise incidentally, to discuss very briefly the nature of the activity that is going on. Students ought to be convinced with the profitability of what they are asked to do. Otherwise, classroom activities will turn to service-like drudgery with no reward. Furthermore, learner-training sessions in language teaching institutes can be conducive to placing and maintaining learners on the educational route delineated by policy makers and educationists affiliated to the program.

**3. Imagination:** Not all language use in real-life situations is aimed at serious interactional or transactional purposes. As Cook (1997) reaffirms a great deal of language used by native speakers is playful in nature rather than involving meaning and reality, a fact that must somehow be reflected in classroom activities. Teachers' resorting to their imaginative power on the one hand and encouraging and rewarding students' imagination on the other can have a crucial role in involving and developing the whole person which is a fundamental achievement from HLT point of view. Imagination manifests itself in language classes in the form of language games, role plays, fun, narratives and mimicry. Of course, bringing imagination down into classes may demand personality qualifications on teacher's part. However, this will not detract from importance of the issue. After all, language teachers are 'unemployed actors' (Mole, 2011). The issue will gain greater significance when the cyclical nature of skill development in language is reminded. Learning language does not happen one-shot. Control over language items develops in a spiral manner through partial learning succeeded by repeated practice and review. Activities involving fanciful and fictional use of language are one means of creating varied contexts for using a particular language item. As an illustration in a class for introductory level young learners, when the newly-presented sentence "Are you hungry?" is repeatedly used by the teacher or students in various imaginary contexts characterized by different dramatic features, say, 'a lamb captured by a wolf', 'a scarecrow to crows', etc., there will be better chances of

internalizing and perpetuating the command over the newly-acquired item.

**4. Students as language users:** Students must be viewed in the first place as language users rather than language learners. This will place them in an equal position with the teacher so that the participatory structure of the class and conversational moves such as turn-taking, topic development and initiation will be dominated by conversational rules rather than classroom regulations. Despite its promise to create meaningful interaction, communicative language teaching may not be fully successful in initiating communications in the classroom. Jonathan (2006) sees this as a result of the contradictory and sort of mutually-exclusive roles that teachers take in a communicative class: One as the manager of class activities, which rises from institutional duty and power, and the other as conversational partner, which demands egalitarian participation in communicative activities. HLT can resolve the paradox of genuine communication between teacher and learners. By giving up part of his/her power and authority as the controller of pedagogic activities and adopting the role of facilitator by participating in egalitarian interactions, the teacher provides equal opportunities for students to take the initiative in communicative activities.

**5. Diversifying resources:** Whole person development and activation of reserve powers of the learners, as underscored in HLT, requires flexibility and adaptability on teachers' part with relevance to teaching material and resources. Textbooks and teacher books should not be viewed as a sort of prescription to specify classroom activities or LTR. The utmost function of a textbook can be to provide a general framework for introducing models and topics of work and also to set the instruction on going. A positive learning atmosphere will be rendered as a result of teacher's capability in creative exploitation of all teaching facilities available. With the technological contributions to instructional environments, confining classroom procedure to mandates of textbook does not seem reasonable anymore. Multimedia environment and on-line language learning programs can be helpful resources for both classroom activities and home-based practice. Learners who attend a language learning program with heterogeneous inner worlds will be better motivated and oriented to course objectives when they get engaged in variety of resources to work with. This will



contribute to self-actualization which is an ultimate destination aimed by HLT.

**6. Choices:** As Arnold (1998) has asserted teacher's free hand in offering learners alternative subjects and even content material is a unique privilege of language teaching over other subjects of teaching. Teachers can take the advantage of this blissful liberty to remove part of the instructional confinements imposed on learners. The wider learners' choices regarding materials, subject areas, procedure, etc. are, the more probably the learning milieu will be humanistic. While encouraging self-initiation, teachers should allow the learners the freedom to involve themselves in learning activities when they feel ready, convenient or appropriate. Maintaining the desired balance between freedom and control is left to the teacher's humanistic sense.

**7. Handling emotions:** In line with a basic tenet of HLT which invokes the involvement of the whole person, both intellect and affect, the way students' emotions are treated has a crucial impact on the learning/teaching process. When students feel good about themselves, the teacher and the course, they will be in a better position to learn. In their interactions with students, teachers should do their best to minimize negative affect such as anxiety, negative attitude, indifference and diffidence, on the one hand, and maximize positive affect including sense of belonging, positive attitude toward target language and society, self-esteem and motivation, on the other. The latter one has probably the largest impact on language learning. Students need to have good reasons for following the language learning program. This is true both for adults and kids. While adults are mostly intrinsically-motivated with self-satisfaction, younger learners are motivated by external drives such as scores, rewards and competition. However, it is always a matter of proportion for learners to be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. So teachers should always take both chances to motivate their learners.

**8. Teachers' vulnerability:** A formal, impersonal LTR can be an obstacle by itself to the learning process. Teachers obliged to HLT are required to open their vulnerability to students in order to provide an amicable ambience in which learners feel free to involve their 'whole'. Writing about the ways of establishing rapport between the teacher and students, Mole (2011) proposes that teachers share with students some

details related to their private life, family life and personal experiences. By exposing their weakness to students, teachers get learners to develop a more realistic image of teachers as having human persona. This will allow them to trust teachers in sharing their own privacy with the class, which seems a necessary condition for genuine interactions required for language learning.

**9. Self-evaluation:** Certainly, the issue of self-assessment is encountered with such serious impediments in less democratic societies as lack of self-esteem and independence on students' part on the one hand and wrong mentalities of their parents on the other. However, encouraging self-evaluation is quite inevitable as long as we commit ourselves to HLT. In this regard, some forms of self-assessment such as keeping files and portfolios of students' writings, recordings and reports of their experiential contact with the foreign language can be a good point to begin with.

**10. Priority of learning to teaching:** The teaching quality from HLT point of view is not assessed in terms of how well the teacher teaches. Nor can the quantity of teaching material be strictly specified in advance. The evaluation of a teacher's performance as successful depends on how much learning has taken place, and learning, from HLT point of view, is defined in terms of a holistic change in the learner's behavior and mind. Therefore, apart from how satisfied the instructor is with his/her performance or how much of the syllabus is covered, the expected outcome of instruction involves the promotional changes in learners' behavioral capabilities. As a result, a teacher will find satisfaction with the instructional outcome only when a display of improvement with the students' behavioral skills is witnessed.

## CONCLUSION

Learner-teacher relationship defined as duties and control towards the learning process shared between the teacher and learners has a determining role in molding classroom procedure regardless of theoretical or methodological options. Each of the majority of pedagogical implications offered by SL research findings pertain to one aspect of LTR. Therefore, any attempt to set up a principled relationship between learners and teacher will have facilitating effect on

the learning process. Humanistic language teaching with its established principles has a lot to offer concerning a LTR which is amiable to learning. A set of basic principles derived from HLT were offered in this article to the end of arranging LTR in a way that will maximally contribute to a favorable milieu for language learning to take place. Proper teacher education and learner training will be essential to put the suggested guidelines into practice in an instructional setting.

## REFERENCES

- Arnold, J. (1998). Towards more humanistic English teaching. *ELT Journal*, 52(3), 235-242.
- Arnold, J. (1999). *Affect in language learning*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Brumfit, C. J. (1984). *Communicative methodology in language teaching: The roles of fluency and accuracy*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Cook, G. (1997). Language play, language learning. *ELT Journal*, 51(3), 224-231.
- Curran, C. A. (1976). *Counseling-learning in second languages*. Apple River, Illinois: Apple River Press.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: OUP.
- Ellis, R., Basturkman, H. & Loewen, S. (2002). Doing focus on form. *System*, 30, 419-432.
- Gadd, N. (1996). Towards less humanistic English teaching. *ELT Journal*, 52(3), 223-234.
- Gattegno, C. (1972). *Teaching foreign languages in schools: The silent way* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Educational Solutions.
- Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and learning in the language classroom*. Oxford: OUP.
- Jonathan, C. (2006). Humanistic language teaching, facilitation, and classroom conversation. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 2, 159-174.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (1994). The postmethod condition: (E)merging strategies for second/foreign language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 27-48.

- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2001). Toward a postmethod pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35, 537-560.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). A postmethod perspective on English language teaching. *World Englishes*, 22, 539-550.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Lantolf, J. P. (2000). Second language learning as a mediated process. *Language Teaching*, 33, 79-96.
- Mole, I. (2011). Establishing rapport with your students. *Humanizing Language Teaching*, 13(2), (available on-line) <http://www.hltmag.co.uk/apr11/sart08.htm>.
- Moskowitz, G. (1978). *Caring and sharing in the foreign language class*. Rowley: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.
- Nassaji, H. & Swain, M. (2000). A Vygotskian perspective on corrective feedback in L2: The effect of random versus negotiated help on the learning of English articles. *Language Awareness*, 9(1), 34-51.
- Rogers, C. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist view of psychotherapy*. London: Constable & Robinson Ltd.
- Spaventa, L. (2009). Heart of the matter: On the shoulders of giants. *Humanizing Language Teaching*, 11(3), (available on-line) <http://www.hltmag.co.uk/jun09/sart13.htm>.
- Stevick, E. W. (1990). *Humanism in language teaching*. Oxford: OUP.
- Underhill, A. (1989). Process in humanistic education. *ELT Journal*, 44, 250-60.
- Williams, M. & Burden, R. L. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers: A social constructivist approach*. Cambridge: CUP.