



Should Humanism Approach Be Applied In English As A Second Language (ESL) Classrooms?

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Abstract

In the process of learning, many elements fall into place wholly in order to enhance effectiveness. These elements include not only environmental factors but also learners' mentality which involves their feelings, needs and interests. Humanism approach is one which caters these elements required by learners' learning process through emphasis on student-centeredness in class. The paradigm of this approach is mainly on what learners are desire to learn, instead of teaching them what is perceived to be essentially acquired. For years, there have been controversial debates concerning the effectiveness of humanism approach in teaching. With the aim of scrutinizing the relevance and applicability of this approach in the Malaysian teaching context, a humanistic lesson was conducted and recorded in Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN). The lesson was then analysed to obtain some results.

Keywords: Humanism approach, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs learning needs, learning interests

1. Introduction

Humanism approach is a paradigm which instills belief in prescribing students with what should happen in their learning, rather than describing what will happen or is happening. This approach emphasizes mainly on what learners are yearning to learn, instead of what the society thinks they should learn. In other words, students should be given the right to decide on the content of their lesson, as they should be the one to control and empower the learning process. Today, humanistic ideas are no longer existing solely in the word of philosophy, considerable amount of interests as well as controversies about humanistic approach, have emerged in the field of education. Some think that this approach could improve learning outcome among learners when their emotions and needs are considered the priorities in their learning process. Many have debated for it, some, against it. Despite controversies that have arisen in the last few decades, this paper aims to examine to what extend does humanistic matters, in the writers' teaching. This paper consists of five parts including this introduction as its first. Second section includes a review of the humanistic approach in English language teaching (ELT), followed by the third section comprising critical appraisal of this approach (including for and against arguments). In the fourth section, this paper describes how humanistic approach is relevant to the teaching context in Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN), including learners' needs and background. This paper will then end with a conclusion.

2. The humanism approach

The humanism approach believes that human beings possess capability not found in other living objects, hence it concerns about human interests and needs. It demonstrates strong objection towards operant conditioning theory, formulated by behaviourist – B. F. Skinner. The reason being that humanists believe every individual behaves based on intentionality and values. The theory also emphasizes on studying humans as an entirety, specifically when an individual is developing over his or her lifespan.

Carl Rogers – an American psychologist – is one prominent figure in humanistic approach. He believes that human beings have one general objective – “to fulfill one's potential and achieve the highest level of ‘human-beingness’” (See Rogers [1959] in Jarvis, 2000). He also believes that human beings are innately kind-hearted, but become vicious or disparaging when there are external factors which dominate the process of seeking self-value. Rogers's most significant

contribution to the humanistic approach is the scrutiny on the “self” in human beings, which is an essential aspect in human psychology. Rogers states that every individual has a certain level of self-confidence, and positive or negative feelings towards themselves. One is considered to have high level of self-worth, if he or she is confident and injects positive feelings even when challenges and failures approach (Jarvis, 2000; McLeod, 2007).

Rogers and another prominent figure in humanistic approach, Abraham Maslow, both believe that every individual should exercise freewill, which means they should be allowed to choose their way of living. They also propose that the most fundamental motivation in life is personal growth and fulfillment (McLeod, 2007). This is what Maslow tries to introduce as “self-actualisation” in his Hierarchy of Needs (See Maslow, 1943).

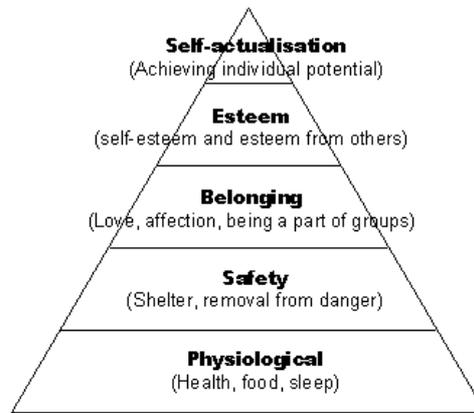


Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Tay L, and Diener E. (2011))

The Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 1) is a model that includes five categories of human needs, according to their importance and proportion in our daily life. Each category is properly explained by Maslow. It is presented in the shape of a pyramid, and starts from the lowest level with (1) physiological needs, which comprises the most basic needs to survive: food, water, air, shelter, and so on. It is claimed that only when physiological needs have been satisfied, can a person be active and concentrate on other matters. At the second lowest level is the (2) safety needs, which explains that human beings need physical as well as mental protection. This means that having a refuge is not enough; one should also feel mentally safe and be free from fear, anxiety, and chaos in life. The third level is (3) love needs, which suggests that every individual needs a sense of belonging and love. Followed by that is the (4) esteem need, which emerges from human beings' desire to lead a reputable and prestigious life, in order to be respected by others. And finally, once all of these needs have been fulfilled, one is expected to achieve (5) self-actualisation, the highest level of the model (Maslow, 1987, 15-22). This model is important because according to Maslow, in order to self-actualise, human beings will be motivated to move from one level to another level higher, even facing problems during the process is taken positively because when one intends to succeed, he/she will learn to solve whatever problems faced (Patterson, 1977).

Stevick (1990, p.23) citing Kurtz, defines “humanism” as “being critical of anything that ‘alienates or depersonalizes’ including ‘ideology, bureaucracy or technology’”. He also adds that humanists' general concerns revolve around perception towards human beings as a whole, the completion of each potential capabilities, and possession of freedom among humans in determining their destiny (see Kurtz, 1973). More to the point, Stevick also identifies five emphases within humanism, which are considered distinctive human qualities (p. 23-24). The five qualities include:

- i. Feelings (emotions and appreciation of beauty)
This emphasis explains that the humanism approach tends to reject whatever factors that hinder gladness and lead to bad feelings.
- ii. Social relations
This emphasis supports friendship and mutual aid between peers, and dissuades the opposite.
- iii. Responsibilities
This aspect emphasizes on the importance of the need of critique, rectification, rejection, and scrutiny from public.
- iv. Intellect (reason, knowledge and understanding)
This emphasis opposes whichever idea that hampers the free exercise of human's mind, and seizes belief in anything can possibly be tested intellectually.
- v. Self actualization (one's recognition of his/her deepest and true qualities)
The emphasis believes that liberation is the result of pursuit of exceptionality.

On the other hand, according to Moskowitz (1978), which has also been widely cited by Stevick, humanistic education is:

... [related] to the feelings, experiences, memories, hopes, aspirations, beliefs, values, needs, and fantasies of students, it strives to integrate the subject matter and personal growth dimensions into the curriculum. In any learning situation, feelings are always present and should be drawn upon, as they exert an influential role (1978, p. 14).

Based on how Moskowitz defines humanistic education, it can be concluded that this approach is closely related to affective education. The term affect, as asserted by Arnold (1999, p. 3), refers to “how [a] thing or [an] action or [a] situation or [an] experience fits in with one’s needs or purpose, and its resulting effect on one’s emotions”. This summarises the core idea of humanistic approach, which suggests that in students’ learning process, their feelings should first be catered before the teacher can assist their acquisition of knowledge. A way of catering their feelings is by granting them much freedom in the classroom. Some examples of such freedom include the right to decide which piece of knowledge would be most useful and important to them, the privilege to select a discussion topic that seems appealing to them, and the permission to select activities that could enhance their interest in learning, hence make them feel motivated to learn. These will hopefully lead to “meaningful learning” (Patterson, 1977), in which students can engage with their personal life, understand the meaning and hold personal relevance. This strives to endow students with liberal education, and authorises them to achieve self-actualisation.

Freedom is particularly important, because it is what Maslow (1987) considers as the preconditions of basic needs in his Hierarchy of Needs before they can achieve the highest level – self-actualisation. Maslow asserts that:

There are certain conditions that are immediate prerequisites for the basic needs for the basic need satisfactions. Such as freedom to speak, freedom to do what one wishes so long as no harm is done to others, freedom to express oneself, freedom to investigate and seek information, freedom to defend oneself, justice, fairness, honesty and orderliness in the group are examples of such preconditions for basic need satisfactions (1987, p. 22).

Other than looking at students’ needs, educators’ role is another important element that must not be forsaken in humanistic approach. The term “facilitator” has been granted to educators in this approach, in order to assist students in achieving self-actualisation. The function of educators in the classroom is as helpers who provide guidance to students in their knowledge acquiring progress. They should play their part as friends who are approachable to spare freedom to students, so that they can learn according to their ability, tempo, and interests, rather than forcing them to follow the educators’ methods of teachings (Jain, 2011).

2.1 History and development humanism in teaching

According to the Encyclopaedia of Philosophy of Education, the history of humanism in teaching can be traced back to centuries ago during the time period of Ancient Rome, “with its central notion of *Humanitas*” (Aloni, 1999). Aloni asserts that it was only until the 18th century, when the Humanistic Education and Liberal Education were parallel in terms of importance, that education was considered appropriate for every individual. A shift from the paradigm of science and critical thinking to equality and freedom happened around two centuries ago, which was consequential to the development of humanism in education. Education hence became far more liberal, accessible to public, as well as receptive and selfless without highlighting cultural or individual differences and wants (Ibid).

Humanism became more widespread in 1940’s – some time post World War II – when the school of humanism was established. The main intention of its establishment was to defeat behaviourists’ idea of what was coined by Jarvis (2000, p. 62) as “determinism”, which means “what makes us behave as we do”. During the “golden age”, Decarvalho (1991) of behaviourism, humanists were dissatisfied with behaviourists’ perception towards human nature and methods, which centralised on stimulus and reinforcement (positive and negative). In year 1943, American psychologist introduced the Hierarchy of Needs which explained different stages of human needs and motivation. Three years later, Rogers’s *Significant Aspects of Client-centered Therapy* was published, and the world was exposed to the Rogerian Theory – Person-centered Therapy. The humanistic movement continued to be influential in the 60’s when Maslow, together with another psychologist, founded the Association for Humanistic Psychology in 1961, and had their first issue of *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* published in spring of the following year (McLeod, 2007).

The humanists were strongly against scientific reductionism, in which they regarded human beings as objects (Smith, 1999). Also, they rejected the application of results which were heavily dependent on animals to human beings (McLeod, 2007). Consequently, humanists aimed to reinstate equilibrium in psychology, with the least assistance of psychological theory, by attending to humans’ individual wants, motivation, feelings, as well as targeting to focus on human potential, dignity, and most importantly, freedom (Jarvis, 2000, p. 63; Smith, 1999; Huitt, 2001).

2.2 *The humanistic approach in ELT*

Since the exposure of humanistic approach to the world in 1940's, it has brought about certain extend of resonance to the field of education. Learning in today's world no longer revolves solely around the academic or knowledge that equips one to locate a good occupation. On the contrary, people seek to gain basic skills of surviving, skills that go beyond writing, reading, language, mathematics and science. These are the most basic components of a traditionally designed curriculum, which the world used to consider as what learners ought to learn in a formal setting. Nonetheless, with the evolvement of humanism in the world of education, the world no longer holds the same belief. Learners nowadays are aspired to always expand their understanding about problem-solving, critical thinking, innovation and creation.

The humanism approach has brought about great changes to teaching methodologies. Its profound impact was most significant throughout 1970's and 1980's when several new methodologies which were associated with "designed methodologies" such as Communicative Language Learning, Suggestopedia as well as The Silent Way which emerged in late 70's (Pigott, n.d.; Gadd, 1998; McLeod, 2007) until eventually learners achieving self-actualisation.

3. Critique

Similar to other theories introduced to a related field of study, the humanistic approach, too, received both criticisms and positive reinforcements. One of the criticisms which was worth mentioning would be from American behaviourists, Burrhus Frederic Skinner. Skinner was not convinced by Rogers's humanism theory, due to the reason that Rogers's conclusions about humans' needs were drawn from his patients' therapy. Skinner doubted the reliability of Rogers's inferences on the theory because what had the patients expressed to Rogers may or may not be true. Hence interpretations that Rogers made based on his therapy sessions with the patients could be questionable (Jarvis, 2000, p. 67).

Other than Skinner, psychologists who are firm believers of other theoretical background refused to agree with Rogers. He was criticised that his over optimistic perception towards human beings as "essentially good and striving to fulfill their potential" to be unrealistic and immature (Ibid). Terms such as "naïve, romantic, and unrealistic" have been used to give negative attributions to the approach. Critics are doubtful about the idea that good qualities in every individual is innate and "and growth oriented" as proposed by this approach (Bernstein, 2010). It is believed that the lack of attention on many factors could also affect personality growth. The factors are, for instances situational stimulus, inborn traits, learning, as well as unmindful motivational reasons (Ibid).

Apart from that, there have also been negative comments on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow suggests that if the first four levels are not fulfilled, it will lead to deficiency of motivation in students' learning process. Nonetheless, it is not clearly defined and stated that to what extend could the deficiency impact students. Also, one deficiency that could impinge on an individual does not necessarily bring the same influence to another individual, because some do not agree with Maslow that the satisfaction of lower needs must be met before one can move on to higher needs (Smith, 1999; Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2012).

4. The relevance of humanism approach to students of Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN)

4.1 *Teaching context and methodology*

In order to investigate the relevance of Humanistic approach with UNITEN students, a lesson using the approach was conducted and recorded. Participants involved in the research included an assistant lecturer who teaches English to foundation students, and 30 Foundation in Information Technology students. The composition of these students was 12 Indians, 10 Malays and 8 Chinese. The students were aware that they were being recorded.

The lesson which the recording took place was a public speaking class named English for Academic Purposes (ENGF103). This course prepares foundation students in the institution with presentational skills, communicative strategies, outlining techniques for speeches, as well as presentation visual aids preparation.

In this particular lesson, the students were exposed to several types of ceremonial speeches, namely speech of welcome, speech of introduction, speech of nomination, speech of recognition and speech of acceptance. It was a one-hour class with a 15-minute lecture and 40-minute activity. The methodology applied in this lesson was task-based learning, in which students were divided into six groups of five, and were allowed to choose a type of speech to read and present to their peers.

4.2 *Teaching method employed in the lesson*

The teaching method employed in conducting the lesson was the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method. In this method, students participate in activities that are meaningful, which focus on information sharing. For instance, students will be asked to work together and contribute to their groups (Li, 2012). In this video, students were given handouts to read up and understand their respective type of speeches, which were then presented to their peers in class.

In CLT, the teacher plays the role of a facilitator, which is as suggested by humanistic approach, to ease the process of communicating among students (Ibid). After students were divided into groups and started their reading task, the instructor went from group to group, to assist their understanding about their own topic. This was to make sure that students could grasp a complete idea of their part before explaining to other students. The reading and facilitating process lasted for 15 minutes.

The CLT method provides a more interesting learning process because elements related to communication and context is brought into consideration. This is coincidentally proven by the first group of students who presented about speech of acceptance by doing role play – one was presenting an award; another was accepting it. Their peers enjoyed their presentation and could understand the topic easily because the pair of students provided a context (award giving ceremony) to what they were explaining, hence they were able to engage to their previous exposure to the situation. Role-playing is indeed a powerful educative tool as described by Eiben & Milliren (1976, p. 81). At the end of the first group's presentation, the instructor recapped the recently presented subject matter, and added missing pieces of information to enhance students' understanding.

There are, nonetheless, disadvantages of this method. Students who are weaker in grammar for example, will have problems playing their part in their teaching-learning groups, and might struggle through the lesson (Ibid).

4.3 Elements that are already part of the teaching in response to video

A comparison was done between what the instructor had planned to do in class and what was eventually carried out.

The first humanistic element found in the lesson is addressing students' rights to freedom in learning. This was at the beginning of the lesson after the instructor explained to the students their task of the day, and previewed the five types of speeches which they would have to present. They were given the liberty to select the type of speech they wanted, instead of being assigned with a random topic. Giving freedom to students in their learning process is one of the most prevalent characteristic of humanistic approach (Moskowitz, 1978, p. 12). It is believed that students have more confidence in sharing their knowledge if they are allowed to choose what they want to learn. This is because having freedom of selection would result to students learning about a topic which they are interested in, and feel certain that they will be able to accomplish the task by meeting required standard. Such an important precondition of basic needs in the Hierarchy of Needs could then lead to indefinite possibilities for individual development. As proposed by Stevick, one learns best when a person has some control over that he would like to learn (Maslow, 1987; Smith, 1999; Gadd, 1999).

Apart from catering students' freedom in selection of the topic that they would like to work on, the instructor abandoned the traditionally prescribed teacher-centered style of teaching, and showed sincerity in her teaching. Patterson (1977) states that when a teacher is willing to put aside his or her public image of an educator, he or she will come across more direct and closer relationships with students. This was experienced by the instructor as students had no fear in approaching her for queries. It was also observed that students felt less restricted in class, and were asking extensive amount questions while being facilitated. This was especially obvious among students who usually remain completely silent in class – they raised their hands and were eager to seek clarification from the instructor. The class activity is perceived as great success as the facilitation was able to motivate them to read and listen to others, at the same time elicit realness from students during their group discussion.

4.4 Elements that are not part of my teaching and how to incorporate them in the future

Another comparison was done between what the instructor had planned to do in class and what was not and should have been carried out in the class.

The first element is catering students' feelings, which is considered as one of the two major emphases that Moskowitz (1978) perceives as most essential. Moskowitz (1978, p. 12) writes that "humanistic education should take into consideration that learning is affected by how students feel about themselves". She asserts that students' feelings about themselves is an important factor which could affect their motivation and eventually affect their learning process. In order to boost students' positive self-concept, instructors should be reminded that students need to be given positive reinforcements to feel motivated and have a sense or assurance. It is noticeable that praises is one element which was lacking in the lesson. Students were not praised after their presentation even though they had done a good job. It is important for instructors to verbalize their opinions about students' performance in helping them to improve especially if the feedbacks are positive. It is only then that students will have higher self-esteem and feel motivated to learn.

Other than that, it was also found that students participated in given tasks solely because they were asked to, without recognizing the needs of the group discussion and the purpose of the topics learned in class. When the needs are not made aware of, there is again, no motivation to acquire a certain piece of knowledge or information (Moskowitz, 1987, p. 12), hence knowledge that students learn in class will not be retained in their memory, because there is no motivation for them to remember the information received. Therefore, the instructor should have started the lesson with a set induction, for instance have students to share their experience about giving ceremonial speeches in special occasions, to capture their interest in different types of ceremonial speeches taught in class. Set induction would be the best timing to explain about the importance of the topic and the relevance of the topic in their daily lives, and make clear about the aims and objectives of the lesson. Only when students feel engaged to the topic, will they be able to see the needs for them to learn about the topic.

5. Conclusion

Learning is a process which does not revolve bluntly on gaining knowledge. Rather, it involves many factors that would affect the effectiveness of it, for instance feelings, needs and interests of the learners and the educators. While emphasizing on maximizing learning outcome, educators should take into consideration the emotions of learners and engage them in the whole process to enhance their eagerness to learn. Additionally, educators must not see themselves as an emotionless and distant source of knowledge to the students. It is important to make themselves real role models,

and demonstrate liberty, belief, faith, reliance, reality, support, dedication, accountability, fairness, as well as respect in class, in order to create a truly humanistic environment. If these components are lacking, the approach would be meaningless, even “the most beautiful movern theory of humanistic education would fail to become a lived reality for its teachers and students” (Aloni, 1999).

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