HUMANISM: A HUMAN PERSPECTIVE IN
ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

- *T*his paper was presented at the International Seminar on Humanistic Language and Literature Teaching on February 18th & 19th 2011, organized by The Anna University, Chennai.

R.Vasuhi
Asst. Professor of English
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University
Tirunelveli.

ABSTRACT

In recent years, language teaching has been influenced by a number of methodologies. The creators of these methodologies claim that their method or approach breaks the barriers in the traditional methods and applies the latest technology to cater to the needs of the language learners. This paper attempts to realize that the relationship between teacher and student matters more than methods, techniques and approaches. Great teachers, whatever methodology they follow, provide us with a human connection that is more vital to education and which makes the learners self-actualize their learning process. We stand on the shoulders of giants and we are the better for it.

Humanism, as per the Cambridge Learners' Dictionary, is a belief system based on human needs and values and not on God or religion. So a humanistic perspective in life will create an amicable ambience that creates wonders. Naturally so, a teacher who deals with his/her lessons with a humanistic approach gets a very good result as compared to a teacher without humanism. It was in America that humanism gained popularity in the 20th century. In the academic context, humanism or humanistic approach most possibly referred to the school of psychology called Humanistic Psychology (HP) that emerged in the 1950s (Wikipedia,2010).

It was the works of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow that accelerated the development of Humanistic Psychology in the early seventies which was called Counseling Learning. According to Roger, the learners were not to be considered as a 'class', but as a 'group'. Curran suggested that the learners ought to be considered as 'clients' and the teachers were 'counselors', who addressed the needs of the learners. Curran believed that by this method, the anxiety or fear of making a 'fool' of oneself will be lowered. Another important goal of this kind of an approach is to perceive a teacher as an empathetic helping agent in the learning process and not as a threat.

This method of Counseling Learning when applied to language learning came to be known as Community Language Learning (CLL). Community Language Learning seeks to encourage teachers to consider the learners as 'whole' persons where their feelings, intellect,

protective reactions, interpersonal relationships, and desire to learn are considered with empathy and balance. Initially, the learners are encouraged to interact with each other in their native language in an informal manner and then the teacher translates them into English and encourages them to do the same. Gradually the students learn to use the target language independently. Here humanism adds to the effectiveness in the learning process. The students with the humanistic approach of the teacher-counselor are able to self-evaluate themselves and realize their self-worth and responsibility in the learning process that helps them learn out of interest and not out of compulsion. In a way, a humanistic approach to learning will surely make learning an interesting process for the students, a viable method to teachers and more plausible approach for the academicians.

Perhaps Gattegno (1972) and Curran (1976) can be considered as the forerunners in the application of humanism in English Language Teaching. Gattegno advocated the *Silent Way Approach* where the students are made aware of the various challenges that are presented before them in the process of language learning or acquisition. Here learners are given their full freedom. As mentioned already, Curran, on the other hand, encouraged counseling- Learning wherein the learners are given the independence to talk about their personal and linguistic problems and can decide their curriculum. The teacher is just a facilitator who creates an emotionally secure environment that alleviates their anxiety and fear of learning. The question is: Is this kind of the application of humanism feasible and effective in an educational environment as ours? The answer, according to me is a positive 'yes' and also the need of the hour in our educational system because as far as my experience is concerned, most of the learners fail in acquiring the English language due to the fear and anxiety caused by the language teachers and their own apprehension that they cannot compete with many others.

A Humanistic approach to language teaching is a welcome method. But how do we apply this methodology to our system of education. Humanism would concentrate upon the development of the child's self-concept. When a child feels good and confident about himself/herself, it shows a positive beginning. Only when a learner's self-esteem is raised, he/she realizes his/her responsibilities in the learning process. Now the learner has not only started his/her learning earnestly but also is progressing towards self-development. If there is humanism in teaching and learning, self-development is accelerated. Humanism in any field can do wonders, but when applied to teaching it gains significance because it is with the teachers that the learners spend most of their valuable and mouldable years. Teachers should realize that their responsibility doesn't stop in just imparting knowledge to the learners, but also in facilitating them toward self-motivation.

A humanistic approach in teaching not only helps learners easily learn things but also develops their personality in various ways. They easily solve problems in life situations, have good reasoning capabilities and are self-developed with free-will and co-operation. So long, there was value-education that taught humanism to the learners. But today, thanks to the various researches done in the field of education, teaching with humanism not only inculcated values in learners, but also enabled them to grasp their subjects easily in a natural way.

Then there is a chance that Humanist theory can be confused with the Behaviourist theory of expecting rewards like praise, money, gifts, etc. for an achievement. Humanist theory makes one expect rewards from within oneself like satisfaction and this creates in the child the eagerness to excel and achieve more.

As per the Behaviourist approach, the learner is praised and awarded for his/her achievements and reproved for his/her negative approaches. In any way, the child is not self-motivated. A learner who is accustomed to praises and accolades stops working once he/she doesn't receive them. Similarly, a punishment can force a person to rote-learn or make him/her averse to education and to life. Feeling and thinking are interlinked. The more a child thinks positively, the more he/she is facilitated to learn. A humanistic approach to learning gives importance to the self or the individual. It is concerned with the learner's academic and emotional needs. It is a learner-centred approach. Humanism highly values the development of the human potential. By this approach the learners are de-emphasized to attain material goals. The primary goal of humanistic learning and teaching is self-actualization.

Humanistic Psychology, which is closely associated with works of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, offered a more holistic approach to psychology than those prevailing practices and focused on the whole person. In clinical terms, Humanistic Psychology is closely connected with counseling and notions of self-help. In research terms, it leans towards qualitative analysis rather than the quantitative iron clad boot of statistics. Its insistence on the uniquely human aspects of human existence, on the importance of considering 'wholes' rather than parts, struck a popular chord and a series of almost 'evangelical writings catapulted Humanistic Psychology into the mainstream.

In the world of language teaching, humanism of the Rogerian kind made an indelible mark. In Roger's humanism, one can see quite a departure from the scientific analysis of Skinnerian psychology. Roger's humanism is not concerned with the actual process of cognitive learning since, he feels, if the context for learning is created properly, then, learners will learn everything they need to. The teacher as a facilitator must therefore provide the nurturing context for learning and not see his mission as one of rather programmatically feeding students, quantities of knowledge which they subsequently devour. (1980)

This distinctively human quality, named Humanism shows itself in terms of one or more of the five overlapping components:

a) Feelings: Personal emotions and aesthetic appreciations should be encouraged. This aspect of humanism tends to reject whatever hurts people and supports aesthetic enjoyment. In a humane language classroom, the learners' feelings are respected.

b) Social relation: This encourages friendship and cooperation. The learners develop interpersonal skills that accelerate language learning.

c) Responsibility: This aspect accepts the need for public scrutiny, criticism, and correction and disapproves of whomever or whatever denies their importance.

d) Intellect: It includes knowledge, reason and understanding. This fights against whatever interferes with the free exercise of the mind and is suspicious of anything that cannot be tested intellectually.

e) Self-actualization: The quest for full realization of one's own deepest true qualities. This aspect believes that since conformity leads to enslavement, the pursuit of uniqueness brings about liberation.

Moskowitz' first emphasis is that "Humanistic education takes into consideration that learning is affected by how students feel about themselves" (12). It is concerned with educating the whole person – the intellectual and the emotional dimensions (11). Her second emphasis is on bringing out the uniqueness of each individual. To be self-actualizing is to function to one's fullest capacity (12). In this connection, Moskowitz quotes Carl Rogers' conviction that one should get in touch with one's 'real self', the self that underlies surface Behaviour. 'How can I become myself? Am I living in a way which is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me? (13)

Richard and Rogers (1986), again citing Moskowitz, say that 'In sum, humanistic techniques engage the whole person, including the emotions and feelings as well as linguistic knowledge and behavioural skills'(114). Terrell (1982) describes 'affective humanistic activities' as those that 'explore the students' values, ideas, opinions, goals and feelings as well as their experiences' (281). Roberts (1982) speaks of the 'humanistic/psychological' or 'whole-engagement' approach which at least shares two assumptions:

That the affective aspects of language learning are as important as the cognitive aspects, [and so] the learner should be treated in some sense as a 'whole person'. The answers to language learning problems are more likely to come from psychology than from linguistics (p.101).

Many humanistic methodologies in language teaching and learning were introduced as early as the 1970s. They were the Total Physical Response, the Silent Way, Community Language Learning and Suggestopedia. In the 1970s, these methodologies remained as theories, but now they are being carefully put into practice.

The Total Physical Response (TPR) is a method developed by Dr.James J. Asher and is based on the premise that the human brain has the biological capacity to acquire any natural language including the sign language of the deaf. Just as an infant who acquires first language by physically responding to its parents' speeches, one can acquire a second language too following this approach. The teacher taking the role of the parent helps the learners to get motivated easily and their self-confidence is boosted. However, there are certain inherent weaknesses in this method as it relies more on imperatives and its sustainability beyond the beginner stage is questionable. This method is an excellent humanistic method of language teaching and learning only at the beginner level and miserably proves to be a failure at the advanced level.

Suggestopedia is another humanistic teaching method developed by a Bulgarian psychotherapist, Georgi Lozanov. Lozanov claims that, by this method, a language can be learned three to five times faster than by the traditional teaching methods. This method is based on the modern understanding of how the brain works and how we learn most effectively. Much of the learning relies on music, games, puzzles etc.

The Natural Approach is a comprehension based language learning method which emphasizes the idea of exposure and the lowering of affective or emotional barriers to learning.

These and many other methods involving a humanistic approach are being developed by academicians and researchers to foster second language acquisition especially English in this global world. Till recently the goal of every English teacher was to develop students' communicative competence. Educationists today stress the importance of moral values and social identities associated with language use in the society. We have great giants before us whose ideas and principles guide us and mould us as true teachers. Their humanistic approach helps the younger faculty to self-actualize their roles as language teachers. To quote Jack Richards in his plenary address, in a period of "post-methodology":

Instructors learn these days from reflection on their own classroom practice. Therefore, methodology is being continually constructed by classroom practitioners. There is no orthodoxy of method, no need to imitate the techniques of a particular methodology formulated by another in order to show that, in the classroom, we can do it "the right way." Methodology is contingent and therefore bound to be different from context to context. Where practice is situated dictates to a large extent how practice is done.

So, whatever be the methodology adopted by the teacher to suit the needs of his/ her students, a teacher with a humanistic approach open-heartedly shares with his / her students his / her wonder and fascination in learning to remember, to understand, to think and to learn. He/she questions and through his/ her quiet questioning teaches the learners how to question thoughtfully.

WORKS CITED

Asher, J.J., "The Learning Strategy of the Total Physical Response: A Review". *Modern Language Journal* Issue: 50, (1966): 79-84.

Berns, M., and Matsuda, P.K. "Applied Linguistics: Overview and History." Brown(Ed), *The Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics*. (2nd ed). Oxford: Elsivier, 2006.

Curran, C.A. *Counselling Learning: A Whole Person Model for Education*. New York: Grune and Stration, 1972.

---: *Counselling Learning i n Second Languages*. Apple River, IL: Apple River Press, 1976.

Dewey, John. *The Child and the Curriculum*. Chicago: Chicago. 1902.

---: *Experiences in Nature*. Chicago: Open Court, 1925.

Gattegno, C. *Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools: The Silent Way*.(2nd ed). New York: Educational Solutions, 1972.

---: *The Common Sense of Teaching Foreign Languages*. New York: Educational Solutions, 1976.

Jakobovits, L.A., and B.Gordon, *The Context of Foreign Language Teaching.* Massachusetts: Newbury House, 1974.

Krashen, S.D., and Terell, T.D. *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom.* London: Prentice Hall Europe, 1983.

Lozanov, G. *Suggestology and outlines of Suggestopedy*. New York: Gorden and Breach, 1978.

Maskowitz, G*, Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class*. Massachusetts: Newbury House, 1978.

Maslow, Abraham. "A Theory of Human Motivation", *Psychological Review 5:4* (1943): 370-396.

Richards, J.C., Platt, J. and Platt, H. *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (2nd ed). Essex: Longman, 1992.

Richards,J.C., and T.S. Rodgers. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching: A Description and Analysis.* Cambridge: C U P, 1986.

Rogers, Carl: *A Way of Being.* Boston: Houghton Mufflin, 1980.

Skinner, B.F. *Recent Issues in the Analysis of Behaviour.* Ohio: Merril Publishing Co., 1989.

Spaventa, Lou. "Heart of the Matter: On the Shoulders of Giants". *Humanizing Language Teaching* .Issue, 3, June, 2009.

Stern, H.H. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: OUP, 1983.

---. *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Oxford: OUP, 1992.

Stevick, E. Humanism *in Language Teaching*. Oxford: OUP, 1990.