

Humanistic Techniques in Language Teaching

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Humanistic techniques can be very effective in language teaching. This article distinguishes humanistic techniques from other communicative language teaching, and examines self-esteem and inhibition which may help to explain the effectiveness of humanistic techniques. Examples are given of these techniques. The conclusion suggests some guidelines for fitting humanistic techniques into an existing curriculum.

Dr. James Asher (1982) has pointed out that due to the stressful nature of language learning, less than 5% of the students who begin language study go on to proficiency. The dropout rate in most language programs is very high. Any method of language teaching which can bring about better results than this should be considered. One inner city Spanish teacher who used humanistic techniques reported that 100% of her students elected to continue the course for the following year (Moskowitz 1978). While this case is most likely an exception, it is still worth considering. What, then, are humanistic techniques and why would they lead to the kind of results that this teacher reported?

First, an analysis of communicative language teaching (CLT) by Stern (1981) will assist in clarifying where humanistic techniques fit within the field of language teaching. Stern distinguishes two general approaches to CLT. The first is the L approach (linguistic approach), which is based on work from the fields of linguistics, semantics, sociolinguistics, ethnomethodology, and pragmatics. The functional-notional approach is a good illustration of the L approach in CLT. The second approach in CLT, Stern calls the P approach. "It operates in

a psychological and pedagogic framework” (136). The P approach is based on the premise:

...that a language is learned when the learner becomes involved in real communication so that he is a user of the language rather than a detached observer who analyzes and rehearses the language for later use (139).

Humanistic techniques, Community Language Learning, immersion programs, and content oriented courses exemplify the P approach. Stern envisions a four level language curriculum with a structural aspect, a functional aspect (L approach), a sociocultural aspect, and an experiential aspect (P approach). From this analysis it can be seen that humanistic techniques are a part of communicative language teaching. Humanistic techniques fit within the experiential, or P approach, as described by Stern.

How are humanistic techniques different than other communicative activities ?

Humanistic, affective, or awareness exercises ... attempt to blend what students feel, think, and know with what they are learning in the target language ... self-actualization and self-esteem are the ideals the exercises pursue (Moskowitz 1978:1, 2).

Humanistic exercises are more than a linguistic technique; they are a means for student and teacher alike to grow and better fulfill their potential as human beings. It is this emphasis on personal growth and personhood, beyond language mastery, that distinguishes humanistic techniques from general communicative techniques. The emphasis on personal growth is not done at the expense of linguistic goals, rather, personal growth can enhance linguistic growth.

Krashen (1981) in particular, has written on the importance of what he calls the affective filter in second language acquisition. Krashen hypothesized that students with more self-confidence, less anxiety, and greater motivation will have a weaker or lower affective filter allowing more acquisition. Brown (1980) has also dealt extensively with affective factors in language learning. His analysis of inhibition and self-esteem

is relevant to the understanding of humanistic techniques since humanistic techniques involve developing the self-esteem of students.

According to Brown, one explanation for the difficulty of learning a second language as an adult involves the concept of the language ego, proposed by Alexander Guiora. The language ego accounts " ... for the identity a person develops in reference to the language he speaks" (53). For a monolingual speaker, one's self identity and language ego are virtually the same. To a child, whose ego is not so well established, learning a new language presents little threat to the ego. The changes at puberty seem to bring about the development of defensive mechanisms.

From that time on, the language ego will likely cling to the native language as a source of security and protection. Adults, with their own identities and inhibitions to protect them, need to develop enough ego strength to overcome these inhibitions in order to learn a second language. Self-esteem is closely related to ego strength and inhibition as can be seen from the following quote:

Some persons—those with higher self-esteem and ego strength—are more able to withstand threats to their existence and thus their defenses are lower. Those with weaker self-esteem maintain walls of inhibition to protect what is self-perceived to be a weak or fragile ego, or a lack of self confidence in a situation or a task (105).

This has a lot to do with learning a foreign language because learning a foreign language involves making mistakes and mistakes can be perceived as a threat to one's ego(106).

Research also supports the relation between self-esteem and language learning. Self-esteem can be divided into three levels: general, or global self-esteem, situational or specific self-esteem, and task self-esteem. A study of the effects of these three levels of self-esteem on performance by American college students of French on an oral production task was reported by Adelaide Heyden in 1979.

She found that all three levels of self-esteem correlated positively with performance on the oral production measure, with the highest correlation occurring between task self-esteem and performance in

oral production. That is, students with high self-esteem actually performed better in the foreign language (104).

Thus, the development of better self-esteem, a goal of humanistic exercises, may help students to overcome or lower inhibitions that hinder second language learning.

How can humanistic techniques help students to develop more self-esteem? As Brown notes, "A person derives his sense of self-esteem from the accumulation of experiences with himself and with others and from assessments of the external world around him" (103). Self-esteem, then, is influenced to some extent by experiences one has with other people. Humanistic techniques focus on the experience of sharing oneself with others in a positive way. Humanistic exercises involve things like: "... identifying our strengths and those of others, giving and receiving positive feedback, and learning to understand ourselves and others better ..." (Moskowitz 25). This focus leads to better self acceptance and acceptance of others. This is a worthy goal in itself. When this building of positive self-esteem is done in the target language it leads to a much healthier climate and greater motivation for language learning to take place. As Moskowitz says,

Since self-actualization is such a powerful inherent need in humans, as students see the subject matter as self-enhancing, it will be viewed as relevantly related to their lives. They will then become more motivated to learn to use the foreign language and, as a result, will be more likely to learn (13).

Others, as well, have recognized the value of this type of education and the need for teachers to utilize it. According to Stevick, "Failure to deal successfully with needs for identity and self-esteem results in emotional problems, the side effects of which may be both physical and intellectual" (1976:50). Rogers wrote that the teacher's acceptance and understanding of the students' feelings "... are related to the person's becoming, to his effective learning and effective functioning ..." (1961:288). Rogers went on to say that the basic motive a teacher should depend on is the students' self-actualizing tendency. Summing

up research on affective factors, Stern stated, "... *the affective component contributes at least as much as and often more to language learning than the cognitive skills* represented by aptitude assessment" (1983:386).

Although humanistic techniques aim at meeting some of the deep needs of students, this doesn't require that the teacher become a licensed therapist or psychologist. While humanistic exercises may at times be therapeutic, they are not meant to take the place of therapy. The focus of humanistic exercises in the language class is on the positive for good reasons. Focusing on the positive leads to more warmth, understanding and acceptance, a climate where personal and linguistic growth can more readily take place. Delving into the negative can bring up problems that few teachers have had training in how to handle. For humanistic exercises to be effectively used, the teacher's interest and enthusiasm are necessary ingredients. This implies that the teacher should be involved in the same process of growth as the students. The teacher should, whenever possible, participate with the students in these activities.

The next section of this paper will help to illustrate, by way of example, what is meant by humanistic exercises. Two humanistic exercises will be given. These exercises follow the format of *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class* where teachers can find many more examples.

The Gift I Would Like to Give

"There is more happiness in giving than in receiving."

Acts 20:35

Purposes:

Affective — To share good will and intentions with others, to promote creativity, happiness, and appreciation.

Linguistic — To express hypothetical willingness.

Levels: Intermediate-advanced

Size of Groups: pairs

Procedures: This activity is most appropriate at the Christmas season or in the last week of a course.

The teacher should give the following directions: Imagine that you have unlimited wealth and power. You need to give a gift to your partner. To choose the best gift, you need to find out what your partner likes, dislikes, wants, or needs. Take a few moments to find out what a good gift for your partner might be. Questions you might use are: Where would you like to travel? Where would you like to live? What would you like to do? What would you like to have? What would you like to be? Next, decide on a gift. Then share the gift idea saying, "I would like to give you ...". The receiver of the gift should share their feelings about the gift and express their thanks to the giver. After the exchanges are finished, form a circle and let each member share with the class who their partner was and what was given.

Variations: The teacher and/or students could bring catalogs and/or brochures to the class and the gifts could be limited to those from the catalogs or brochures. A financial limit could be put on the gifts, for example, no gift should exceed ¥5,000. In a larger class, for the closing activity, instead of having everybody in one circle to share their gifts and givers, form groups of 4-6 students. Then ask for the most interesting gifts from each group to be shared with the class.

Order a Friend

Purposes:

Affective --- To learn about the qualities that we admire in others,
to give motivation for becoming better persons

Linguistic --- To use descriptive language

Levels: All levels

Size of groups: Total class

Procedures: Ask the students to think for a moment about the friends that they have. Then tell them that they have the chance to order a new friend. Ask them to write a description of the friend that they want. Tell them that the better they make the description, the more likely it is that they will get exactly the friend that they ordered. You may remind them to consider appearance, character, personality, sex, age, likes, dislikes, goals in life, etc. When the descriptions are finished,

ask the students to exchange theirs with others and to comment on each other's. Then share the saying with the students, 'If you want to have a friend, you have to be a friend.' Ask the students to consider which qualities or aspects of the friends that they ordered they already have. Ask them to consider which areas they need to become more like. Ask them to share what good qualities the friends they have at present already have. Ask if anyone wants to change to become more like the friend they ordered.

For beginning students this activity could be simplified by just asking for a list of adjectives that describe the desired friend. More advanced students could write a paragraph or essay. An essay, for example could be organized around the physical, the personal and the social aspects of the friend they want.

How, then, can these exercises fit in a language curriculum? Stern's analysis used at the beginning of this paper shows that using humanistic techniques does not mean the abandonment of other forms of instruction. Humanistic techniques are a useful supplement to a course of instruction. My personal answer to fitting these techniques in is to use them where they can clearly reinforce and supplement the linguistic goals of a course. When personal growth and affective factors are a part of a course's goals, then linguistic concerns could be secondary. For these exercises to work successfully, though, requires language competence. Before doing an exercise, therefore, it may be necessary to provide vocabulary and to practice the necessary grammatical structures.

One source of humanistic exercises that I found helpful in this way has been, *Grammar in Action: Awareness Activities for Language Learning* (Frank and Rinvolucri 1983). These exercises have often been a useful supplement for the structures studied in first and second year oral classes. For example, when my first year oral class was studying adverbs, we used the activity called, "Eat, smile, dance!" (91). The students first wrote questions for one another asking how they eat, smile, or dance in a particular situation. Then the questions were used between students. One student was asked how she danced at the disco.

She answered, 'I dance happily.' Another student was asked how she ate when she was hungry. She answered, 'I eat quickly.' This questioning and answering went on for about ten minutes. The students' laughter and attention to what their classmates were saying indicated that they found the exercise enjoyable and meaningful. At the same time, practice was being done with the structures found in the textbook.

I used humanistic exercises with my first year seminar as well. In that case, there was no textbook to supplement, but care had to be exercised to keep the activities within the language ability of the students. I used, for example, a modified version of "Secret Message," from *Caring and Sharing in the foreign Language Class*. I asked the students to write their names backwards and then to find an adjective to describe themselves for each letter of their name. These adjectives were then written on the chalkboard. I still remember my own feeling of embarrassment when I put my name and adjectives on the chalkboard (we're not used to sharing positive things about ourselves). I also remember feeling good afterwards. The students also expressed their satisfaction with the exercise. These are just two cases of using these exercises. The success that has occurred has convinced me to continue using them.

The final thoughts for this paper are from a poem by Greer and Rubenstein, revised by Altman (1981), to read, "A Real Second Language Teacher." If the principles expressed in these selected lines are put into practice, it is likely that that practice will include at least some use of humanistic techniques.

A real second language teacher is on my side

A real second language teacher lets me be me and tries to understand
what it's like to be me

A real second language teacher accepts me whether he or she likes
me or not

A real second language teacher doesn't have expectations of me
because of what I've been or what he or she has been

A real second language teacher is more interested in how I learn than
what I learn

A real second language teacher doesn't make me feel anxious and
afraid

A real second language teacher provides many choices

A real second language teacher can make mistakes and admit it

A real second language teacher can show his or her feelings and let
me show mine (17-18).

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