

Critiques of Humanism in Language Teaching

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Introduction

Humanism in language teaching has led to a concentration on the individual learner. In this paper I examine the ways in which the learner is seen as important, and the problems that this learner-centredness brings with it. Many anxieties have been voiced in critiques of humanism in language teaching, and these are reviewed here.

Historical perspective on humanism

In a study of humanism and the consequences of humanism in English language teaching, it is important to trace back to the origins of the earliest humanistic movements to demonstrate just how strongly humanism has been associated with the development of Western civilization, how it forms part of our cultural base, and to what extent it informs our cultural assumptions. As we shall see, the word 'humanism' has many connotations because it has been used in several contexts. There are scientific humanists like Plato, religious and rational humanists, great classical humanists like Erasmus, and what Edward Power calls 'romantic humanists', like Carl Rogers (Power 1982: 159). The earlier humanists were united by their efforts to improve the condition of humanity, finding models of human excellence in the scientific, literary, religious or intellectual tradition and imitating them. Their search for a good and happy life is what connects these humanists with their 'romantic' successors, who tend to reject tradition as limiting while claiming that the primary purpose of humanistic education is to enable one to live 'a joyous, humane and meaningful life' (Valett 1977: 12).

Humanism and education have been linked since the fifth century B.C. Plato and the scientific humanists believed that the intellectual cultivation of the most able in society, through education in science and philosophy, would lead to the attainment of true knowledge and ultimately to human perfection. The belief in intrinsic human perfectibility and in humanity's autonomous power of self-determination was later to be taken up by humanists of the Renaissance.

The tenets of humanism were lost with Augustine, who emphasized the effects of original sin on humanity's natural power, but Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-74) successfully provided the basis for a more optimistic understanding of the world and human experience, building a theological system on some Aristotelian concepts of psychology and the theory of knowledge. Aquinas believed that the human mind was a reflection of the rationality of the divine mind, and that it was capable of making moral judgements which agreed with divine law because both were based on the same rational norms. Because of the related concepts of reason and law, humanity's rational nature tended towards perfection naturally, rather than relying upon revelation or authority to discover the norms by which perfection might be achieved.

In the humanist movement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, humanity's perfection was intrinsic to moral achievement, and moral self-determination was put into humanity's autonomous power. The leader of the humanist movement in northern Europe, Erasmus, was reliant in his early writings on the Platonist tradition. The belief in intrinsic human

perfectibility and in the autonomous power of self-determination were the two ideas central to Erasmus's arguments against many clerics of the time.

Other religious men did not follow Erasmus's humanistic leanings. Beginning with John Comenius's realism in the sixteenth century and continuing with Locke's empiricism in the seventeenth, educational philosophy made steady progress in reforming and expanding the content of schooling. However, education was meant to prepare persons to find suitable places for themselves in society. This aim was criticized in the eighteenth century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his book *Emile* (1762). Rousseau argued that the end of education was not 'the formation of a diplomat, a priest, a teacher or a soldier, but a person' (Power 1982: 56). Rousseau also claimed that schools and education were based on the premise that human beings have a natural propensity for evil, and that education must correct nature. Rousseau wrote that children are naturally good when they are born, and that evil is learnt from society and in particular from schools. This despair with the school system and the belief in humans as naturally good resonates back and forward, from Thomas Aquinas to modern humanists like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers.

Modern humanism

There is an echo of Rousseau's criticism of schools in the dissatisfaction with educational systems expressed in the 1960s, particularly in the USA. The publication of Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* in 1960 began a spate of books which documented the degree to which American schools 'encouraged mindless conformism, a deadening of excitement and a sense of pessimism' (Shaffer 1978: 95). Modern humanistic concepts of education generally try to eliminate these negative characteristics of traditional education, so that

learning is experienced as a source of pleasure in its own right, rather than as an instrument for competing with others or for guaranteeing one's social status in the future...the teacher is encouraged to pay some heed to the learner's emotional response to what he is learning. (ibid., pp. 95-96)

In a humanistic approach the teacher is no longer an authoritarian. Instead he/she is a facilitator or catalyst, providing the environment in which the learners can best pursue their own interests and curiosity. The learners are the source and motivation of their own learning, and their individuality and autonomy are respected by the teacher.

One of the severest critics of the traditional classroom, and one of the most famous proponents of humanism in education is Carl Rogers, who in his influential book *Freedom to Learn* (1969) explores various parallels between psychotherapy and pedagogy. He emphasizes that important elements in a relationship between teacher and student are akin to those between therapist and patient: genuineness, acceptance, empathy and trust (Rogers 1969: 106-112). Rogers writes that in contrast to conventional education, humanistic education has a learning process which is shared between learner and facilitator; that the learner develops his/her own programme of learning alone or in co-operation with others; and that self-initiated learning which involves the whole person of the learner - feelings as well as intellect - is the most lasting and persuasive (ibid., p.162).

One can see similarities between the attitudes of Rousseau and Rogers to educational systems, and it is possible to see other parallels between the modern humanists and their predecessors. There is a reflection of the Socratic exhortation to self-knowledge in one of the

primary goals of humanistic education: to enable one to know others through knowing oneself. An important spokesman for contemporary humanists, Paul Kurtz, has written that major concerns of modern humanism include the fulfilment of human potentialities (Kurtz 1973: 7), which echoes Plato's determination that 'good minds must have a common intellectual meeting place to ensure the full and complete cultivation of their capacities' (Power 1982: 31). Plato's scientific humanism worked towards truth and virtue from a foundation in science and philosophy; Kurtz writes that modern humanists are committed to the method of reason as the chief means of solving problems, and that science and logical analysis are critical tools for this purpose (Kurtz 1973: 5-7). One last reference to Kurtz finds a parallel with the Renaissance humanist Pico. Kurtz writes that humanists consider 'modern man [as] largely responsible for his own destiny' (ibid., p.5), and in Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) we find these words spoken by God:

Confined within no bounds, you shall fix the limits of your own nature according to the free choice in whose power I have placed you...with freedom and honour you should be your own sculptor and maker to fashion your form as you choose. (Quoted in Levi 1971: 23)

Educating the whole person has been another major concern of the modern humanists, and particularly of those who have turned from psychotherapy to language teaching. It would be wrong to give the impression that these writers have gone uncriticized, while criticizing so much themselves, and in fact there are many critiques of humanism in language teaching. It is to some of these that I now turn.

Humanism and humanistic approaches

It is important to distinguish from the outset the differences between humanism and humanistic approaches to language teaching. Earl Stevick has provided a five point summary of the emphases within modern humanism, after a careful consideration of many definitions and uses of the term. I reproduce here an adapted version of this very useful summary.

1. *Feelings*, including both emotions and aesthetic appreciation. This aspect of humanism rejects whatever makes people feel bad, or whatever destroys or forbids aesthetic enjoyment.
2. *Social relations*. This side of humanism encourages friendship and co-operation, and opposes whatever reduces them.
3. *Responsibility*. This aspect accepts the need for public scrutiny, criticism, and correction, and disapproves of whoever or whatever denies their importance.
4. *Intellect*, including knowledge, reason and understanding. This aspect fights against interference with the free exercise of the mind, and is suspicious of anything that cannot be tested intellectually.
5. *Self-actualization*, or full realization of one's own deepest true qualities. Conformity leads to enslavement; the pursuit of uniqueness leads to liberation. (Stevick 1990: 23)

In his consideration of writing on humanism by language teachers, Stevick is able to relate the majority of points made by the authors to one or more of the above categories (ibid., pp.24-28).

By 'humanistic approaches' I mean those methodologies which appeared in the 1970s; Curran's Community Language Learning, Gattegno's Silent Way, and Lozanov's Suggestopedia. Descriptions of these methods can be found in Richards and Rogers (1986), Larsen-Freeman (1986) and Stevick (1980), as well as in the authors' own works, for example Curran (1972 & 1976), Gattegno (1972) and Lozanov (1979).

Short critiques of humanistic approaches

Humanistic approaches in language teaching have often been criticized for their failure to define terms explicitly, for their dogmatic, unsupported statements about learning, and for the unfalsifiable nature of many of the claims that are made within them (see for example, Maley 1983; Scovel 1983; and Atkinson 1989). Scovel quotes an unpublished paper by Mark Clarke:

The current humanistic orthodoxy.....rests on unspoken assumptions, with the result that one cannot easily disagree, because criteria for disagreement are not universally acknowledged or understood. The effect is that the closest a critic of 'humanism' can come is an uneasy feeling that something is not right. (Scovel 1983: 7)

While this is strong criticism of some humanistic writing, Scovel does not try to get closer to that which is 'not right'. Instead he sees a solution to the shortcomings of humanistic and interactional approaches in their combination with 'a traditional emphasis on language structure', despite the fact that a large part of the new synthesis has not been defined to his satisfaction. He does not clarify the 'vague precepts of humanism' (*ibid.*, p.87), but argues that the goals of humanism can best be achieved by using 'what is common to us all and what is essential to our students' success - language' (*ibid.*, p.96). Brumfit (1982a: 79) has written that the literature in humanistic psychology and language teaching has shown that no sensible person should want to reject the tenets of humanism. Scovel, although finding serious problems in the definition of the term, includes it in his new synthesis, but moves us no closer to a solution of the central problem, that humanistic writers fail to define their terms adequately.

The underlying assumptions of humanistic approaches may remain a mystery to many language teachers (Underhill 1989), but the practical aspects of the Silent Way, Community Language Learning (CLL) and Suggestopedia, are familiar to them. Atkinson (1989) argues that a misrepresentation of traditional classroom practice and the emotive nature of the word 'humanism' lead many teachers, and especially the inexperienced, to feel that there is something wrong with their teaching if they do not give wholehearted support to a humanistic approach (Atkinson 1989: 269). The seduction of teachers into an uncritical acceptance of one or other of the humanistic approaches is the subject of Maley's 1983 paper, "I got religion!": evangelism in TEFL'. Maley echoes Scovel's criticism that humanistic approaches are not open to refutation 'because they define and operate within their own terms. They assert but they cannot prove' (Maley 1983: 80). Maley notes that the proponents of approaches like Suggestopedia and Silent Way are also very concerned about scientific respectability, yet they are not open to the principle of verification, nor to the Popperian criterion of falsifiability. None of the strong claims which are made about the effectiveness of each method 'can be substantiated in a way which would be acceptable to a researcher in the hard sciences' (*ibid.*, p.81).

Maley argues that the humanistic approaches present a reductionist view of the problems

of language learning. The set of procedures, or 'ritual' in Maley's terms, reduces the complexity of the problem, diverting attention away from the subtle factors which might interfere with the neatness of the solution. Working from a series of not always stated observations and precepts, the architects of humanistic approaches form a construct of the problem from their inferences. The construct does not 'exist' in an absolute sense but is defined into existence, and consequently involves a degree of subjectivity on the side of the definer. If solutions to the problem-construct are then perceived to be successful, the author of the solution may claim great things for his/her approach. But of course another observer will make different observations and draw different inferences, and together with an element of subjectivity, will form another problem-construct, for which he/she may provide an equally 'successful' answer. The complexity of language learning is such that there is no option available but to simplify; to use a construct or model of the problem. Using this kind of technique we are firmly in the realm of the social sciences, and it is unrealistic to claim hard scientific respectability as Gattegno does, or to expect that humanistic approaches be open to the verification of a hard-science researcher. This is not to advocate a sloppy attitude to research in language learning and pedagogy; humanists should still define their terms as sharply as possible, avoid obscurantism, and provide a clear definition of the construct. If we accept that any attempt to define and solve this problem will be subjective, we may at least try to be 'intersubjective' (Hofstede 1980: 15), pooling and integrating a variety of subjective points of view. Hence we reach the same conclusions as Brumfit, that 'there is no guru who is granted more than partial understanding, and there is no teacher, researcher or learner who cannot potentially improve on earlier work' (Brumfit 1982b: 93). The healthiest attitude to humanistic approaches is eclecticism among the successes. Success does not necessarily mean that a particular construct is the 'right' representation of what happens in learning a language, and one has only to consider the variety of Stevick's successful learners (Stevick 1989) to support this. However, it does show the richness and complexity of a process which we always tend to oversimplify in order to understand it.

Underhill (1989) takes these arguments further by making a distinction between the techniques of the humanistic approaches and the principles and psychology which underlie them. The careful selection of only some techniques is not enough, he argues; if the principles of humanism are not understood and applied in the classroom then the use of techniques selected from the humanistic approaches is pointless. To do the same (traditional) activities with a changed attitude is more important than new activities with the same attitude.

Atkinson (1989) believes that many of the techniques of humanistic language teaching, especially in learner-centred syllabuses, have moved so far from the underlying tenets that they are in fact contrary to the principles of humanism. Humanists often hold that successful language learning needs deep, emotional involvement of the learner, and advocate activities which require students to reveal deep emotions, touch each other in ways that are outside social conventions, or lie on the floor, just because the teacher says so. In some of these activities there is a confusion between what is public and what is private, and a direct conflict between the public mode of the classroom and 'the private individuality of the deep feelings which are glibly referred to' (Brumfit 1982a: 81). It may be difficult to reconcile this kind of probing with the mutual respect which humanists would profess, and which is necessary for a genuine relationship to be formed. Atkinson claims that part of the problem is that many activities

are in fact very impersonal in that they ride roughshod over individual, subtle and private processes, and that insensitivity in such a delicate area has the potential to wreck the teacher-students relationship. This type of activity may defeat the object of much humanistic teaching, which is to reduce alienation.

Stevick's critique of humanism in language teaching

I now want to consider the most comprehensive recent critique of humanism in language teaching. The criticisms looked at above are all from articles, whereas Stevick's *Humanism in Language Teaching* (1990) is a full-length book, which allows him to draw in arguments and sources from outside ELT, and to develop fully his line of reasoning.

Stevick begins from the suggestion made by both Maley and Brumfit, that the critical stance of the scientific philosopher Karl Popper be used as a model for the kind of thinking which is needed in any criticism of the humanistic approaches. Popper writes of three 'worlds'. World 1 is the world of things, of tables and chairs and so on. World 2 is that of subjective experiences and impressions. One person's world-2 object, or subjective experience, may be different from another person's, but it cannot contradict it. World 3 is 'the world of statements in themselves', which includes problems, theories and critical arguments. Stevick assumes that one sentence maxims, whole language teaching methods, and other generalizations from experience enter into world 3 (Stevick 1990: 8). Within world 3 one person's thought may contradict another's and so provide the basis for argument. Theories about subjective experience, according to Popper, should be as objective as other theories, and should be open to his critical method, which Stevick summarizes as follows:

- 1 . Using any means - intuition, insight or investigation of phenomena - arrive at some conjecture about what will/will not happen under a given set of circumstances.
- 2 . Put this conjecture into language. 'If such and such conditions exist, then this thing is likely to happen, and that thing is not likely to happen'.
- 3 . Scrutinize (the ideas behind) the language, testing for circularities and internal inconsistencies.
- 4 . Test the predictions for consistency with the external world.
- 5 . Discard any conjecture that has failed any test. Tentatively retain any conjecture that has not yet failed a test. (Adapted from Stevick 1990: 11)

One is therefore to formulate problems, tentatively propose solutions, and critically examine competing theories. Within a scientific field the definition and measurement or testing of a given conjecture may be relatively straightforward. However, there is no instrument to measure many of the variables in language acquisition theory and language teaching, and so we have to fall back on Popper's 'critical or rational attitude' which recognizes that ideas may be 'criticizable though not testable' (quoted in Stevick 1990: 12). The essence of this attitude is a willingness to be criticized and an eagerness to criticize oneself, which is the kind attitude Maley and Brumfit have called for.

For Popper, the basis for action should be knowledge of intellectual theories, and the rational evaluation of them. To this Stevick adds non-intellectual bases: the emotions and values, the second of which one might define as a tendency to prefer certain states of affairs

over others, and which results from subjective experience. Stevick uses the word 'faith' to stand for whatever bases for action have not been subjected to Popperian critical judgement. The relationship between Popper's critical attitude and 'faith' should be, argues Stevick,

to develop and enrich faith through our own experiences and whatever we can learn of the experiences of others, and then to test that faith constantly against reason and subsequent experience. (Stevick 1990: 18)

Working from the starting point of Popper's philosophy we have again reached the conclusion that to expect scientific verification of teaching methods is unrealistic, but that we should still examine the tenets of each approach for circularity, internal consistency, and consistency with statements and observations external to them, despite the fact that their terms are not measurable and testable. The writings of Gattegno, Curran, Lozanov and others should be opened up to Popper's critical attitude, and not be closed off and protected from it, as has tended to happen.

There is no question that the originators of most of the half-dozen best-known alternative methods have conspicuously avoided entering into two-way intellectual exchanges about their brain-children. Their use of controlled research has often been either non-existent or defective. (ibid., p.69)

In chapters 5 and 6 Stevick goes on to examine the writings of Curran and Gattegno in the light of Popper's critical attitude.

Accusations of rigidity amongst the proponents of humanistic approaches find some support with Stevick, who writes that resistance to modification or relaxation of the approaches existed when they were first published, but that it was mostly unsuccessful. Lozanov only provided firm outlines for the initial stages of Suggestopedia and for the 'concert sessions', while Curran did not veto the development of new techniques within CLL. Gattegno refused to provide a Silent Way manual for teachers, although it was solicited by many. He argued that each situation was different and must have a different response, suggesting a degree of flexibility not acknowledged by his critics. Stevick writes that 'Gattegno, Curran and Lozanov were all, to this writer's certain knowledge, more concerned with their principles than their techniques' (Stevick 1990: 63). He concludes that because the techniques of an approach are often systematically related to each other, any may fail when not supplemented and supported by the others; this is especially likely if techniques are adopted without understanding the whole approach and its underlying principles. This argument has been heard before (Underhill 1989), but it seems rather charitable to defend the authors of humanistic approaches for their 'all or none at all' attitudes (Thompson 1991), if at the same time we criticize those teachers who use one or other approach to the exclusion of all else.

Stevick's sections on coercion and exploitation of students, and on teaching as a therapeutic activity, refer to criticisms made by Brumfit (1982a). Stevick echoes Brumfit's unease with some humanistic activities from the approaches inspired by psychotherapy which encourage learners to 'share' thoughts and feelings with their peers. As has been seen above, this may involve very personal or private thoughts, and although learners who are uncomfortable can refuse to join in, the right to silence may not always be effective; the powerful social pressures generated by humanistic methods may negate the right to withdraw. (Stevick 1990: 66). Stevick does not develop this point any further but it could be argued that the 'right to silence', which has positive connotations as a basic human right, is interpreted as 'inhibition'

in the humanistic classroom, and so as negative and detrimental to the cohesiveness of the group. Ridding oneself of 'inhibitions' (right to silence) then becomes a worthy goal and may cause a student to make public what is intimate and distressing. This type of process may be necessary in dealing with mentally disturbed patients, but seems hard to justify in class, especially given that teachers are generally not trained to cope with public declarations of private problems. Students must be truly free to choose whether or not to discuss such private matters and to negotiate the terms on which they do so. Affective teaching is less likely to be successful if it is built into the syllabus than if it emerges naturally from the educational context in which a genuine and respectful relationship has been built between participants.

Onword

I have ended the last two sections with criticisms of humanistic techniques which intrude on the privacy of the individual. Contact between learners is encouraged at a private and emotional level in order to reduce alienation and create a community. In a subsequent paper I shall examine the extent to which this movement from alienation to contact has squeezed out privacy and the benefits of solitude.

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