

# Humanistic Approach and Affective Factors in Foreign Language Teaching

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**Abstract:** In foreign language teaching, there appear a lot of approaches. This essay lays special stress on humanistic approach and analyses the influence of some important affective factors on language learning, for the purpose of inviting teachers' attention to students' emotions in fulfilling their teaching task.

**Key words:** humanistic approach    affective factors    foreign language teaching

## I. Introduction

From 1970s, humanism in education has attracted more and more people's attention. According to its theories, the receiver in education is first a human being, then a learner. If a person cannot satisfy his basic needs physically and psychologically, he will surely fail to concentrate on his language learning whole-heartedly. Affect is not only the basic needs of human body, but also the condition and premise of the other physical and psychological activities. So language learning and the affect are closely connected and have aroused many theoretical educators' interests to do research in this field.

## II. What Is Humanistic Approach

Humanism is originally a psychological term. It emphasizes the importance of the inner world of the human being and places the individual's thoughts, feelings and emotions at the forefront of all human developments. There are three prominent figures in this field.

Erik Erikson is generally accepted as developing his theory from Sigmund Freud, but he sees that "human psychological development depends not only on the way in which individuals pass through predetermined maturational stages, but on the challenges that are set by society at particular times in their lives" (1963). Erikson calls this the fundamental "epigenetic principle". Another is Abraham Maslow (1968), who proposes a famous hierarchy of needs---deficiency (or maintenance) needs and being (or growth) needs. Deficiency needs are directly related to a person's psychological or biological balance, such as the requirements of food, water or sleep. Being needs are related to the fulfillment of individual potential development. The third one is Carl Rogers (1969), who advocates that human beings have a natural potential for learning, but this will take place only when the subject matter is perceived to be of personal relevance to the learners and when it involves active participation of the learners.

Although these three humanists have different ideas, their theories are all connected with humanism and their theories contribute greatly to the appearance of humanistic approach.

Humanistic approach is a language teaching method which emphasizes humanism as the most significant element in the teaching process. According to *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*, the definition of

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“Humanistic Approach” is like this: (in language teaching) a term sometimes used for methods in which the following principles are considered important:

- a) development of human values
- b) growth in self-awareness and in the understanding of others
- c) sensitivity to human feelings and emotions
- d) active student involvement in learning and in the way learning takes place

Earl Stevick may be the most important figure for humanistic approach. He (1980) points out: “in a language course, success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom”. From humanistic approach, there arise three prominent methodologies---the silent way, suggestopaedia and community language learning.

The silent way originated from Gattengo (1972), and it means the teacher remains as silent as possible when the learners are involved in learning, but the teacher still remains the firm controller of the class. Suggestopaedia is founded by Lozanov (1979) on the principle that people are capable of learning more if their minds are clear of other things and also free of anxiety. Community language learning was developed by Curran (1972), on the basis of counseling, that is, the learners sit in a circle as a community and decide what they want to say. Hamachek (1977) points out the significance of humanistic approach in language teaching: “humanistic education starts with the idea that students are different, and it strives to help students become more like themselves and less like each other.”

### **III. What Are Some of the Important Affective Factors**

As the humanistic approach develops, affect in education gains more and more attention. Some humanistic educators, such as the learning and cognition specialist Ernest Hilgard sets out the ideas that the development of the whole-person must be based on the connection of cognition and affect, the purely cognitive theories of learning will be rejected.

Generally, affective factors in language learning are divided into two types: one is individual factors including anxiety, inhibition, extroversion-introversion, self-esteem and motivation, etc.; the other is rational factors comprising empathy, classroom transaction, cross-cultural processes, and so on.

#### **3.1 Anxiety**

Anxiety is, perhaps, the most pervasively obstructive factor in learning process. Up till now, it is not clear how this foreign language anxiety comes into being, yet it proves to be overcoming. It may be caused by either personal factors or learning situation and research evidence shows it is related to the repressed distress in the past---the personal hurt, failure, and others’ negative attitudes, etc., especially in the childhood. These unhealed past wounds may influence present situation with language learning. Anxiety makes learners nervous and afraid and thus contributes to poor performance; this, in return, creates more anxiety and even worse performance. Eysenck (1979) says that “the feeling of fear and nervousness are intimately connected to the cognitive side of anxiety or worry, and worry will waste energy that should be used for memory or processing on a type of thinking which in no way facilitates the task at hand.”

Language anxiety falls into two categories: state/situational anxiety and trait anxiety. State/situational anxiety appears in responses to a particular situation or event. For example, a student is asked to perform an action or to

make an oral speech before the class. At this time, the anxiety is in a passing state. Ideally, as time goes on, this anxiety will diminish in degree. But if it occurs repeatedly, then it becomes a trait anxiety. Once the anxiety becomes a trait one, it will hinder language learning.

### **3.2 Self-esteem**

Self-esteem is a kind of self-judgment of worth or value. It is a basic requirement for successful cognitive and affective activity. People have this notion of self-esteem from their inner experience and their relationship with the outside world. Self-esteem has three levels: global/general self-esteem, situational self-esteem and task self-esteem. Normally, successful language learners have higher self-esteem than unsuccessful ones. Cognitive learning is fostered in an atmosphere in which self-esteem is promoted.

### **3.3 Language ego**

Language ego refers to the relation between people's feelings of personal identity, individual uniqueness, and value (i.e. their ego) and aspects of their first language. Guiora and others suggest that a person's self-identity develops as he or she is learning the first language and that some aspects of language may be closely linked to one's ego, which may hinder some aspects of second or foreign language learning. The degree to which one keeps aspects of one's personal experience separate is called ego boundaries, which falls into two types---thick ego boundaries and thin ego boundaries (Ehrman, 1999).

The learners with thick ego boundaries prefer to compartmentalize their experience clearly. They like to separate themselves from the outside world and are slow to accept the new knowledge. They are likely to have a clearly structured curriculum and conscious approaches to learning, and reject the ambiguity of language. The learners with thin ego boundaries do not purposely compartmentalize their experience. They believe in their intuition and tend to have content-based learning where the focus is on what is being said rather than how it is said. They prefer the non-linear approaches to learning and tolerate the ambiguity. So it is clear that thin ego boundaries do good to foreign language learning while thick ego boundaries are on the opposite.

### **3.4 Empathy**

Empathy means putting oneself into someone else's shoes of reaching beyond the self and understanding and feeling what another person understands or feeling. Empathy is thought to contribute to the attitudes people have towards a person or a group with a different language and culture from our own, and it may contribute to the degree of success with which a person learns another language. With empathy, one does not necessarily give up his own way of feeling or totally agree with the position of the other, he is just able to imagine and share the thoughts or feelings. Empathy is perhaps the most important factor in the harmonious coexistence of individuals in society.

## **IV. What Are the Implications to Language Teaching and Learning**

### **4.1 Developing the "whole person" of our students intellectually as well as emotionally**

According to Daniel Goleman, author of the best seller *Emotional Intelligence*, emotional intelligence refers to the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves and for managing emotions well in ourselves, and in our relationships. Emotional intelligence describes abilities distinct from, but complementary to academic intelligence, the purely cognitive capacities measured by IQ. It is proved that when teachers take care of the students' EQ, students will be more likely to take care of their own IQ. Therefore it's

better for teachers to communicate openly and empathically with their students and encourage them to do the same. Neural scientist LeDoux also sees emotion and cognition as partners in the mind, and neither can be separated from each other. When both are used together, the learning process can be constructed on a firmer foundation, thus, the aim of developing the “whole person” of the students is realized.

**4.2 Teachers have genuine trust and acceptance of the students as worthy, valuable individuals, and help them to build up positive self-concept**

Self-concept is the most important psychological discovery in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It refers to a general idea of one’s conception of him. A person’s own experience and people’s attitudes towards him are important factors for constructing this self-concept. Researches show all of people’s actions, feelings, behaviors and even beliefs are always consistent with this self-concept. So in language learning, if a person conceives himself to be a successful one, he will try his best to prove this so as to keep accordance with the self-concept in his mind. Thus, he will become more and more successful, and this constructs a beneficent cycle. While a failure type of person will also find proofs to verify and strengthen his wrong self-concept and thus a vicious cycle is formed.

**4.3 Teachers should be real facilitators of learning and focus more on how to learn than what to learn, i. e. provide students with fishing gear rather than fish**

Adrian Underhill (1999) divides the teachers into three types: lecturers who only have the academic knowledge of the topic; teachers who not only know the topic, but also are familiar with the methods and techniques of teaching this topic; and facilitators who, in addition to knowing the academic topic and methods, are also familiar with the psychological learning process and atmosphere. Actually only the last type best reflects humanistic approach. Underhill also suggests 7 points which a teacher should pay attention to if he wants to be a real facilitator: 1) the way you listen; 2) the way you speak; 3) your use of power and authority; 4) your attention to the processes in the group; 5) noticing your own attitudes and beliefs; 6) redefining problems, seeing things differently; 7) your own inner state.

## **V. What Do Teachers Do in the Classroom**

### **5.1 To create a community learning environment where a sense of belonging permeates**

By this, to some extent, it also means student-centered classes based on humanistic approach. In these classes, teachers are not the controllers but the real facilitators. The students’ multiple perspectives are valued and their errors are allowed. Some of the cooperative activities, such as pair-work or group-work are good models for this point, because in such activities, the students can best express their ideas and the anxiety is much less. But attention needs to be paid for the following points in group-work: 1) exchange the members in every group once in a while, for freshness is often an important factor to arouse students’ interests in learning; 2) the slowest student and the best one should be avoided being in the same group, because the slowest student can benefit nothing from such group except that his self-esteem decreases. Before an excellent partner, the only thing he can do is to keep silent.

### **5.2 To provide students with genuine and real challenge**

At present, the university students have studied English for at least six years, some maybe for over ten years. If foreign language teaching is still only confined to the textbook, undoubtedly, it will lead to failure. It might be advisable that teachers should add some supplementary materials containing some genuine challenges. In this way,

the students' interests are aroused and they have a strong desire or motivation to learn this language. Activities for this point are: class debate on a topic, role-playing, English speeches or songs contest, a class press conference and so forth. In these activities, students are required to do a lot of work, they need to collect materials, allocate the task in the group, practice their oral English and imitate the native speakers. All these are real challenges to students, yet they have great interests in doing this. By doing so, students develop the ability of learning autonomy.

### 5.3 To use multiple entries in language teaching

In language teaching and learning, the environmental influence is very important, so teachers need to try their best to create a pleasant atmosphere for the students by using the modern teaching equipment. For example, teachers can use music, art and action to make the class interesting and lively. Nowadays, multi-media have been frequently used in language teaching and have produced good results. For instance, teaching plan by PowerPoint has replaced the traditional written plan; teachers can give their courses with the aid of front-page, the Internet and other software.

## VI. Conclusion

Language teaching and learning is a complex process. In this process, what to learn and how to learn are influenced by the cognitive motivation, yet cognitive motivation is determined by individuals' affect. So in language teaching, teachers should always bear the affective factors in their minds and put students in the first place, then they may achieve the success in language teaching.

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