

Humanistic education in Spanish context: its value in the secondary classroom

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Abstract

In this paper, we report the findings of a collaborative case study where an English teacher in the Spanish secondary school uses humanistic exercises to enhance motivation. Data collection procedures such as audio-recorded lessons, language tests and motivation questionnaires were used leading to both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The results indicate the usefulness of these humanistic activities as key elements in fostering the type of meaningful contextual interaction that promotes high motivation and selective attention. They also generated a sense of community and the emergence of collaborative relationships. Therefore, more oral contributions in the target language were observed as learners exhibited interest in expressing their feeling and thoughts.

1. Humanistic Education

Humanistic ideas in education are widely known since in the 60s and 70s the work of well-known psychologists such as Rogers or Maslow put forward theoretical bases for the humanistic movement. The writings of proponents of humanistic language teaching such as Moskowitz (1978), Rinvolucrí (1982), Stevick (1990) and Arnold (1999) have focused on the cognitive, affective and physical needs of the learner and several alternative methods for language teaching have offered different ways of putting all these ideas into practice. Humanistic language teaching places great emphasis on the human natural capacity for learning. The development of this innate capacity is based on personal meaning, that is to say,

For education to be an enriching experience the meanings that emerge must become **personal**, and they must be significant and important in some part of the person's life. Meanings must also be **viable**, that is they must prove useful and effective in mediating one's transactions; transactions with stored knowledge, with people and with the world. (Thomas y Harri-Augstein, in Williams y Burden, 1997: 51)

Therefore, learners' personal experience is considered as valuable knowledge that can be used as a resource for language learning. Language learning is strongly linked with interpersonal communication skills. These communication skills are not only based on cognitive aspects such as the knowledge of the language *per se*, but also on affective ones as, for instance, the capacity of relating to others that, at the same time, depends on personal security and self-confidence. Stevick (1990) affirms that pupils learn more and better if they feel comfortable with themselves and with their group, and that a teaching method which emphasizes their personal strength will lead to more effective learning. Moreover, from a humanistic point of view, the way teachers present material to their students, the steps followed to involve students in language learning and the type of feedback teachers give to students' responses are also carefully to be considered as all these pedagogical interventions can influence learners' belief of their ability to participate successfully in any language task.

Moskowitz (1978) also observes that everybody needs to mature in his/her affective and intellectual dimensions for a complete development as a human being. She emphasizes empathy as an important aspect to be thought of in the language classroom. Empathy can be defined as the process of "putting yourself into someone else's shoes"; it helps students to recognise that their way is not the only way and possibly not even the best way (Arnold 1999). Empathy developed through group activities helps to create a relaxed classroom atmosphere and an adequate climate where learners can feel more self-confident and willing to speak in the target language.

Another point that humanistic language teaching stresses is that learners are responsible for their learning. It means that the teacher has to favour students' learning autonomy and this can be achieved through reflections about learning styles and strategies, and self-assessment tasks. Learners are seen as active participants that cannot be filled with teacher knowledge, but that have to construct their personal understanding of the world.

This article examines the potential value of humanistic language teaching in the EFL classroom as a useful way to help students to improve their communicative competence. One of the main aims stated in the Foreign Language Curriculum in Spain is the development of students' communicative competence. However, due to many factors, among which discipline problems or simply teacher and student burnout can be cited, the oral skills are neglected in many classrooms and

individual grammar and vocabulary activities are essentially the tasks that the secondary EFL learner faces. Some applied linguists and even some language teachers may regard humanistic language teaching ideas as inappropriate or unworkable in “mainstream” contexts. They may argue that these techniques are only for use with small groups in language schools or that they are too “touchy-feely” or even that they are “out on the fringe”. The results of our research point in a completely different direction.

2. Teaching English to Teenagers

Teaching English to teenagers is not an easy task. For this age group, peer approval becomes more important than that of adults. There is a gradual increase in reasoning abilities and management of abstractions, but also a need to talk and argue instead of listening to the teacher. Moskowitz (1978) remarks that teenagers involved in the construction of their own identity. The image that teenagers have of themselves is vital for their whole growth. For learners’ self perception, the interaction in the classroom between teachers and learners is highly significant, as it is the existence of responsive educators and attractive courses (Hargreaves, Earl y Ryan, 1998). Therefore, a supporting environment at school becomes crucial for them to develop self-acceptance and a sense of acceptance from others. Moskowitz (1999) suggests that humanistic activities can help in this process.

Rinvolucrí (1982) justifies the use of humanistic teaching for increasing communicative competence. Communicative competence has been considered the most significant aspect in the study of a foreign language during the last decades. According to MacIntyre et al. (2002) second language communication is “heavily determined by fundamental characteristics of the learner” (p. 560). Teenagers have so much energy that their ability to concentrate is generally limited, but it is also true that it is easier for them to pay more attention to those subjects and to participate in activities that interest them (Epstein 1988). In the secondary FL classroom, it is not useful to postpone practice in actual communication until intermediate or even advanced levels of instruction because, among other reasons, those levels may never be reached by the majority of students. In traditional classrooms, learners usually spend many hours doing mechanical exercises in the second language before trying to encode their own thoughts into the FL. Humanistic activities, however, take into account students’ interests, favour the exchange of

learners' personal experiences and therefore, create situations where students can work towards their fluency in the second language.

From the perspective of language teaching materials, secondary textbooks today contain many communicative tasks that are designed to help students to get control of the linguistic forms and, at the same time, to centre their attention on the meaning of what is heard and said. Some of those activities are little more than structural exercises with a communicative veneer. Others are role-plays, drama, problem-solving activities, or games that could motivate students to participate actively. However, many of these are considered by the learners to be merely enjoyable activities, without involving true interaction. These so-called communicative activities often do not have a personal meaning for students and learners frequently do not see them as something that will be useful for their future.

Through the use of humanistic activities which also give students exposure to new vocabulary and grammatical concepts, students learn more about themselves and their classmates while using the second language. With these activities, according to Moskowitz (1999), teachers find that more is involved than the practice of new linguistic concepts; they observe that the relation among the members of the group and their own attitude towards the tasks proposed is changing. They notice that students are motivated. In fact, motivation is not only the engine of learning, but also its effect.

According to Ryan (1994), teenage students describe the attention they want to receive from their teachers with respect to two factors: firstly, the training and the guidance of their classes which implies a concern in their academic level and secondly, the personal attention they get, which indicates that the teacher has taken time to get acquainted with them personally. Humanistic teachers are particularly concerned with both types of attention required by students. Hooper-Hansen (1999) explains how demanding teaching in a humanistic way is. Humanistic teachers need to engage "many levels of mind, bringing emotion, intuition, gross and subtle senses to bear on the same goal as intellect" (Hooper-Hansen 1999: p.1).

3. Humanistic education in the FL classroom: a collaborative research study

In the present study, two propositions are examined. It is hypothesised, firstly, that elementary language students will be able to understand and will be willing to

participate actively in the foreign language when there is a meaningful contextual interaction where they are encouraged to express their own ideas instead of replicating model utterances. Secondly, learners' motivation towards English as a foreign language will increase when there are class interactions which reinforce their self-esteem and help to promote good relations in the group.

The participants were a class of 30 Spanish students in their first year of Secondary Education. They were between twelve and fifteen years old and two of them were learners with learning disabilities. The students had been learning English for five years, but they still had low proficiency and none of them was effective at communicating in English. All students were from a rural area where interaction in the foreign language outside the classroom is nearly impossible. In an initial interview, their teacher observed their negative attitude towards the oral use of English in the classroom and also their general demotivation and lack of interest in this subject.

The teacher participated in a teacher training program (120 hours) organised by the University of Huelva with financial support of the Junta de Andalucía. The main aim of that program was to provide English teachers with tools to educate the whole person. Topics such as whole-person teaching, learning styles, self-esteem, task-based learning, multiple intelligences, strategies, cooperative learning, anxiety, visualisation, movement, among many others, were covered. She decided to participate in a collaborative research study to analyse the effectiveness of humanistic exercises in her classroom.

Questionnaires adapted from the Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) developed by Gardner (1985) and translated into Spanish were administered to the participants at the beginning and the end of the semester. The questionnaires included the following three scales:

- interest and attitudes toward the English language and culture;
- motivation based on their desire to learn English and their effort investment;
- evaluation of the course.

In addition, students took a language proficiency test at the beginning and end of the research period so that the improvement of their linguistic competence could be observed. Several lessons were also audio-taped to analyse students' oral contributions.

A humanistic approach to language learning was implemented during one semester. The class met three hours per week. All the humanistic activities used were designed to enable the students to get to know each other better. They sat in a circle and their interventions were only interrupted by the teacher to clarify meanings rather than to correct grammatical errors. The students were always encouraged to use the target language to express their own feelings, enhancing in this way both their linguistic ability and their emotional improvement.

The introduction of the new grammatical concepts and vocabulary was always related to the humanistic activities. For example, the exercise "Special Day" (White 1992) was used to practise the verb *to be* and positive personality adjectives. In the group-project called "Let's make something together", the students practised the past simple of regular verbs and the present simple and continuous. The activity "Circle time" (White 1992) helped to review telling the time, numbers and the present continuous. Drama activities and songs were used to reduce anxiety and to help students with pronunciation and sentence structure in the L2 (Fonseca 2002).

4. Practical application of a humanistic exercise

The activity "Special Day" (White 1992) was chosen as it had been described by De Andrés (1999) as a

Significant activity used to promote a sense of security, identity and belonging. It was aimed at helping children learn to listen to each other, to wait for their turn and to develop language skills. Above all, it encouraged them to praise others....this is one of the most effective ways of enhancing children's self-esteem; making positive remarks about others makes children think positively about themselves too. (De Andrés 1999: 94)

Pupils were given in this case a piece of paper where they had to write a positive comment about one of their classmates. In the beginning, students could choose from expressions written on the blackboard and then read them. But they soon added some new expressions in order to refer directly to each other. They also asked the teacher for the language they needed to express what they wanted to say. When everybody in the class had all the contributions from their classmates, they completed a certificate that started with the phrase "*I am special to this class because...*". These certificates were put up on the classroom walls.

5. Results

The contrast between results of the pre-test and the post-tests done at the beginning and end of the term were very significant and showed the great improvement in the levels of motivation and interest in the subject (See table-1). As for the language proficiency test, the results illustrate that the time devoted to humanistic exercises was, in fact, well-used. While only the 50% of learners passed the test at the beginning of the term, the 86,7 % did at the end. Although the experiment did not involve a comparison group to eliminate the variable of continued exposure to the language which could have influenced the results of the proficiency test, it is unusual among these students to observe such a great improvement. Furthermore, there was a significant increase in interest and attitudes towards the English language and culture. Learners rated this humanistic English class as interesting and useful.

	Pre-tests results	Post-tests results
Interest and attitudes towards English	23%	60%
Motivation	50%	97%
Evaluation of the course	47%	97%
Language proficiency	50%	86,7%

Table 1. Summary results for questionnaires and proficiency test.

The analysis of the transcript of the audio-recorded lessons showed that students made a great number of contributions with a communicative intention. Their desire to communicate was strong enough to try to overcome their linguistic problems. Due to the fact that students were asking and answering referential questions instead of display ones, the teacher's wait-time for student contributions was longer. The teacher avoided overt error correction and mainly gave feedback on the content of what students said rather than only on the form. There were more self-initiated turns than in traditional classes as students started asking the teacher how to say in English what they wanted to say. They began to ask for help by producing expressions such as *How do you say that in English?*, *I don't understand*, *What does this word mean?*, *Please say it again* o *Please speak slowly*. Once they had the vocabulary they needed, they started speaking directly to each other. The communication in the group was very successful, and students seemed to be satisfied with finding themselves able to communicate in the target language.

The main agents of the activities were the students themselves, so, the role of the teacher was that of facilitator or counsellor, guiding the class but also allowing

space for imagination and spontaneity. The quantitative shift in students' interest in English was also appreciated in the final learner questionnaires. We transcribe directly some of their comments:

- Me he sentido estupendamente conmigo misma, con todos los compañeros y con la profesora porque pocos profesores y amigos están dispuestos a que nos demos unos a otros lo que destaca bueno de nosotros, ya que hay algunos que sólo ven nuestros defectos y no comprenden la edad que tenemos.
- Me he sentido estupendamente, me he dado cuenta de que me valoran, que existe un buen ambiente en esta clase y que hay mucho compañerismo y cariño entre nosotros. Además creo que voy a echar de menos estos buenos momentos y a todos mis compañeros.

In an oral interview with the teacher, she commented that everyone in the group was attentive and showed interest during the activities. Furthermore, students also changed their attitude towards the subject: all of them wanted to participate and would have liked more time for the English lesson. For the first time, the students with special needs did the same activities as the other members of the class and were actually involved. The final written evaluation of the exercises by the students showed that they felt they had learned and had fun doing the activities. In the teacher's report on this language teaching experience, she stated that this class had become less conflictive and more participative. In fact, students started greeting their teacher in English outside the classroom and asked for more time for the English classes after working on these activities.

6. Conclusion

The utilization of humanistic exercises in the English classroom showed that students will interact with each other when they have something important to share. A teacher's job is not limited to the correction of mistakes. And despite the fact that the exercises are teacher-guided, spontaneity and imagination are also in attendance (Rinvoluti 1982). As movements are allowed, students' physical nature is also taken into account. Such a learning approach requires teachers' disposition and a clear definition of which are the cognitive, linguistic and affective objectives to be developed. Meaningful contextual interactions help students to understand that English as a Foreign Language can be used as a real means of communication and not only as a tool to practise new linguistic concepts.

If learning can be considered as the acquisition of knowledge, it is also true that learning becomes more efficient whenever it is perceived as useful knowledge, so it needs to be built on learners' previous knowledge (Ausubel 1968). Learning has taken place whenever there is a change in a person's behavior, disposition or capacity. The syllabus of EFL should help teenagers to learn and grow towards a change in their education that is based on an evolutionary process which embraces their social, personal, physical and intellectual needs (Stillman y Maychell, 1984; Hargreaves, 1986).

The data collected in this study suggests that humanistic exercises enhance motivation in learners and are also a way to improve their communicative competence by making them talk and listen in L2. In fact, the undertaking of humanistic exercises in the FL classroom can be defined as a facilitation strategy for learning that emerges from a positive environment for interaction that benefits students and teachers.

In the humanistic classroom students are involved in something else than in doing mechanical exercises in the second language, they are given the opportunity of encoding their own thoughts into the FL. Humanistic teachers take on the task of guiding, without discouraging, learners' first attempts at saying what they really wish to say in the foreign language. The perception teachers have of their function, their own L2 experiences and proficiency influence the views they have of their goals, and not until they take a critical look at their attitudes will they be ready to eliminate the obstacles that lie in the way of creating the kinds of learning environments that are most constructive for students. The role of language teachers is to facilitate students to handle real-life situations, to find satisfaction in discovering the ideas of others and in gaining new ways of self-expression. Humanistic language teaching allows this and thus has a relevant function in Spanish context.

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