

**UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS  
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

**HUMANISTIC TECHNIQUES  
AND  
HUMANISTIC LANGUAGE  
WITH CHILDREN**

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**Abstract:**  
 In this short paper the intrinsic learning potential of humanistic techniques with children EFL learners is discussed. Then humanistic language and practices in EFL are defined and their relevance to the humanistic approach to language teaching/learning is pointed out.

1.0 A *humanistic approach* to language learning presupposes the involvement of learners as whole persons in sharing activities where emphasis falls on interpersonal communication, learner-centredness, learner feelings and emotions as well as sense appeal. In accord with humanistic ideology, a learning technique or task should satisfy certain criteria in order to be eligible for use in a young learners' class. These criteria derive from children's basic human needs and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Children's basic human needs
1. Physical security
2. Love and attention
3. Creative experiences to promote new ways of expressing themselves as members of their learning group
4. Basic competency in the four skills smoothly intergrated
5. Self-worth experiences where strengths are stressed and weaknesses are played down

In a class atmosphere of caring and sharing young learners are expected to share among themselves and care about each other's:

- a. feelings
- b. experiences
- c. interests
- d. day-dreams
- e. fantasies

among other basic human needs.

Subsequently, in accordance with the humanistic orientation to language learning and teaching, techniques or tasks for young learners should be enjoyable, thought-provoking, reinforcing and non-threatening. Consequently, a humanistic approach to language learning should be characterized by a) learner and teacher awareness of learner learning needs (see Table 2), b) learner psychobiological involvement in order to increase motivation and accelerate language learning (see Table 3) and c) a learner motivating environment (see Table 4).

In the context of the humanistic approach learners are expected to fully understand the learning goals set by administrators and know about the structure and demands of the syllabus and the timing presupposed by institutional learning. Through discussion and evaluation learners are expected to supplement and implement institutional learning with their own understanding of collaborative learning and self-

directed learning, which reflects their own needs, purposes and learning styles as whole persons. On the other hand, teacher awareness of learners' different learning styles is *a sine qua non* if they are to help learners develop a learner-centred orientation in the FL classroom.

Table 2	Table 3
Learner and teacher awareness	Learner psychobiological involvement is achieved by
Learners understand learning goals Learners know about syllabus and timing Teacher awareness of learners' different learning styles	Songs in class Role play Supportive pair and group work Guided visualization Regular revision sessions Stretch breaks Relaxation techniques Learners' work displayed in class Encouragement of positive expectations Encouragement of fun and creativity Games for practice

In this context, learner psychobiological involvement as whole persons is achieved particularly by supportive pair and group work as well as role play which enhance face-to-face communication among learners. On the other hand, activities and tasks such as learners' work displayed in class, regular revision sessions or encouragement of creativity can boost learners' self-esteem and self-confidence. Furthermore, guided visualization, games for practice, songs in class and encouragement of fun can greatly contribute to learners' developing caring and sharing attitudes among themselves. Last but not least, such techniques as stretch breaks, relaxation techniques and encouragement of positive expectations can help learners enjoy language learning more since it presupposes learners' psychobiological involvement. Besides, the environment of the classroom encompassing music, bright colours on the walls etc. can play an important role in enhancing learners' motivation for learning. See Table 4 below.

Table 4
A learner motivating environment is achieved by
Music before class starts Music as background to certain activities Attractive pictures on the walls Free-seating arrangements

**2.0** Humanistic techniques, however, will not work unless they are accompanied by appropriate humanistic language which teachers are expected to make use of in the foreign language classroom. As research indicates teachers may hinder the learning process if they are inattentive to the language behaviours they employ when

addressing learners. Often teachers are indifferent to the rights and obligations of learners as whole persons.

Let us now examine two extracts of classroom discourse and try to evaluate teacher talk and its impact on the humanistic approach.\* As far as the first extract (Example 1) is concerned I consider it to be indicative of non-humanistic practices and language behaviours which teachers unfortunately employ in the foreign language classroom.

**Example 1 (4/33-38)**

1. T: ...Right. How did the owner know where the animal was? Adda.
2. L1: Mrs Newton telephoned the // \*\*
3. T: Mrs Newton telephoned? Had telephoned.  
I think that Dr Newton and Arthur had to work in the garden the other day.  
Why did they have to do that, Kelly?
4. L2: Because the bullock destroyed the //
5. T: (*addressing the class*) Because the bullock had destroyed what?
6. Ls: The garden.

In this extract the teacher interrupted both learners abruptly showing disrespect for their personality and their rights as speakers. This lack of respect, tolerance and understanding for the other speaker's weaknesses - which are called mistakes or errors in the teacher's jargon - create an unpleasant atmosphere of rejection and non-acceptance in the language classroom.

Now let us examine the teacher's practices in the second extract and try to evaluate their effect teacher practices (Example 2).

**Example 2 (1/62-71)**

1. T: Giorgo.
2. L1: Found a note.
3. T: Pardon?
4. L1: Found a note.
5. T: Found a note. Em, em, before that?  
Did anything happen before that?  
(*T addressing the class*)  
Before he went home? Yes?
6. L2: Called in at the local pub. /
7. L3: Called in at the local pub. /
8. T: (*T addressing Giorgos (L1)*) And the last one? Yes
9. L1: Found a note?
10. T: Found a note.

Concerning the second extract I would classify it as a good example of humanistic language in the foreign language classroom. Here the teacher has adopted practices

strongly reminiscent of mother talk. Note in particular the teacher's language behaviours when she treated Giorgio's wrong answers. Firstly the teacher requested repetition of Giorgio's utterance (see speaking turn No 3) hoping that he would provide the correct response. When Giorgio failed to do so the teacher turned to class (see speaking turn No 5). In speaking turn 8 the teacher once more turned to Giorgio inviting him to contribute to the smooth development of the lesson and the discourse in a casual and unobtrusive way. I consider the teacher's treatment of learner error in this extract to be a good example of what I call *humanistic language* and *humanistic practices* in the classroom. Humanistic language, therefore, can be defined as an affective but authoritative language delivered in a casual and conversational style.

When teaching young learners, teachers ought to complement humanistic techniques with humanistic language. In this way, they can show their appreciation of young learners' feelings, emotions, personality and rights as co-participants in the learning and communicating process.

#### NOTES

\* The examples are extracts from transcribed recordings of classroom discourse.

\*\* The symbols mean

// interruptions

/ simultaneous speech

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