Humanism in Language Teaching: Roots and Practices

Rod Bolitho, UK

Rod Bolitho is a freelance ELT trainer and consultant. He has worked in both state and private sectors in the UK and abroad, and from 2007 – 2015 was Academic Director at Norwich Institute for Language Education (NILE). He has directed and taught on Masters programmes at NILE and at Marjon in Plymouth. He has worked on projects in curriculum reform, textbook writing and teacher education in India, Romania, Russia, Belarus,and Ukraine, and remains a long-standing consultant to the ELT Reform Project for the British Council in Uzbekistan. He has written articles and chapters in a number of journals and edited collections, and has co-authored books, including Discover English (with Brian Tomlinson), Trainer Development (with Tony Wright), Continuing Professional Development (with Amol Padwad), and The Internationalisation of Ukrainian Universities (with Richard West), Language Education in a Changing World: Challenges and Opportunities (with Richard Rossner) and Language Sensitive Teaching and Learning (also with Richard Rossner). Email: rodbol44@yahoo.co.uk

Introduction

This 25th Anniversary edition of HLT Magazine is a useful reminder that humanism in language teaching is far from being a new phenomenon. On the contrary, there have certainly been teachers instinctively practising humanistic classroom approaches for many centuries. But the sixties, seventies and eighties of the 20th century saw a surge of interest in humanism, and in this paper, I will try to go back to that period in order to identify, very briefly, some of the thinkers who were responsible for this surge, and some of the teachers and teacher educators who started putting humanistic principles into practice. I will then examine more than a dozen key concepts associated with HLT and how some of these concepts might play out in learning and teaching in today's classrooms.

Possibly the most influential figure in that period was Carl Rogers, an American psychologist, psychotherapist and educator who advocated person-centred counselling based on these three core principles:

Empathy The ability to put yourself in the shoes of the other person in a counselling encounter. To do this, you have to clear your mind of anything that might interfere with your capacity to do that.

Congruence refers to the balance between ideal self and actual, lived experience. It depends on the therapist's ability to be genuinely present and transparent during a counselling session.

Unconditional Positive Regard describes a therapist's attitude to the client during counselling and it implies acceptance of the client and what s/he says or does without judgement or preconceived ideas. It is the essential basis of trust between therapist and client during and beyond the encounter.

These three principles underpin humanistic practices in teaching and learning as well as in counselling, something that Rogers himself understood very well and wrote about in his

seminal work *Freedom to Learn,* which has gone through several revisions since its original publication in 1983. The profound influence that Rogers has had on educational thinking and practice will become apparent a little later in this article.

A second key figure, Abraham Maslow, became known for his belief in the power which all of us have to reach a state of full 'self-actualisation', and in his hierarchy of human needs, see *Motivation and Personality* (1954), he showed, graphically, the conditions which have to be met in order to achieve this. These days, most schools' mission statements refer in some way to the objective of 'helping their students to reach their full potential'.

In an article in ELTJ, Adrian Underhill (1989) gives a fuller account of the important influence of these two men on what we have come to understand as humanistic education. This article is in itself an example of the kind of bridge-building that went on in the eighties and early nineties between humanistic psychology and its practical implications for learning and teaching in general and ELT in particular.

That bridge-building came in different forms. Charles Curran, an associate of Rogers, developed a method which came to be known as Community Language Learning, in which the learning group sits in a circle with the teacher outside the circle, available to be called on by any individual needing help to express something in the target language.

Caleb Gattegno, an Egyptian mathematician and psychologist, picked up on humanistic principles through his belief in 'the subordination of teaching to learning', realised through a method he called 'The Silent Way' (Gattegno 1963). This method was very different from Curran's but was underpinned by an understanding, similar to that proposed by Rogers, that a teacher is there to *facilitate learning* rather than to transmit knowledge.

Specifically in ELT, bridges were built through publications and teacher training by practitioners who read Rogers, Maslow and others and had begun to experiment with what their ideas might mean in practice. Chief among these in terms of influence were Mario Rinvolucri and Alan Maley in the UK and Gertrud Moskowitz in the USA, but there were others, too numerous to mention. All of them produced ground-breaking resource books for teachers which were widely used in classrooms and eagerly discussed in staffrooms. They all added a humanistic dimension to classroom practice which attracted many teachers and learners but also threatened the orthodoxy still favoured by members of the language teaching establishment, especially in universities.

Here I must apologise for dealing so briefly and superficially with the ideas of such important educational thinkers and hardly at all with the practical implications of their work. All this has been dealt with in much greater depth in multiple articles and books over the last 40 or more years. I'm not going to quote directly from them in this article, but many of them are mentioned in the bibliography. My purpose here was to remind readers of the key names in the emergence and development of HLT, thereby providing a necessary backcloth to the discussion of key concepts that now follows.

Key Concepts in Humanistic Language Teaching

In this section I will try to share my understanding of these concepts based on the way I have gradually come to terms with them and in most cases put them into practice in a career that has spanned well over 55 years.

Active Listening

We all appreciate it when someone listens to us and we often (but not always!) enjoy listening to others. It's a natural human characteristic. In language classrooms, however, the quality of listening varies considerably. Teachers are sometimes guilty of listening to *how* learners speak rather than to *what* they are saying. Yet they have it in their power to encourage learners to listen to them and to each other. One very useful technique is based around simple summarising and paraphrasing a contribution, e.g.

Teacher: Who likes football and why?

Learner: I like playing football with my friends. I want to play in a team but in our village only is a team for big guys.

Teacher: So, there's no team for boys! That's a pity.

Here, the teacher chooses to ignore the very small mistake the learner has made and shows that she has understood and sympathises with what the learner has said. Humanism in practice on a small scale!

Affect

For a very long time, the emphasis in research and practice in teaching and learning was mainly on cognition, largely based on the assumption that human brains are primed to think logically. There is clearly some truth in that assumption. But it is nowhere near enough to explain everything that happens between teachers and learners in a classroom. We now understand that there is a significant degree of asymmetry between what teachers teach and what learners learn. There are many reasons for this, but one of them is certainly connected with emotions. I didn't like French at school because I didn't like the way it sounded, and I didn't like how I sounded when I spoke French. Much later, as an older teenager, I found that I loved listening to a French singer called Françoise Hardy who had a very sexy voice. I began to try harder in French lessons and went on to study it at university.

Affect is a variable rather than a constant and teachers and learners alike have to understand this. A learner who is temporarily distracted by emotions is likely to find it difficult to concentrate in class and the teacher will probably notice this. A quick word after the lesson may help to reassure the learner. Equally, a teacher with family concerns may not be able to give her full attention to planning and teaching their lessons. Learners will notice this too and, in a humanistic classroom atmosphere, will make allowances for this.

Authenticity

Teacher authenticity is clearly related to Rogers' notion of congruence. I see teaching as an extension of self. It's a long career and there's no reason to be a different 'you' inside and outside the classroom. Learners have very active antennae and they easily spot a lack of authenticity or genuineness in a teacher. I have no truck with those who see teaching as performing or acting. The classroom is a social space shared by people with common objectives. A teacher has a role to fulfil in the classroom but teaching is not role play. Authenticity is about bringing your real 'self' into that shared space and making it available to facilitate learning through shared understandings of who you and your students

are and what this regular encounter signifies for you. If you approach teaching like this, it also makes it possible for learners to be themselves and to open up to learning.

Autonomy

A key process in learners' development is the gradual move from dependency ("I need my teacher.") to full autonomy ("Thanks, but I don't need you any more."). A teacher who helps her learners to achieve this goal can be satisfied that she has done a good job. An obvious analogy is with the way a child first reaches the stage of being able to walk alone and later is ready to leave home and face life without support. What could be more in tune with humanistic values than that?

In practical terms, it means gradually giving learners more and more responsibility for their own learning through individual and group tasks rather than continuing with high levels of teacher-controlled activity. With children, as they mature, this process may take months or even years. With adult learners it is more likely to be linked to the degree of security they feel as they find their voice in the new language.

Choice

Syllabus documents and textbooks are often designed on a lockstep principle, with progress through a language prescribed by decisions taken by the designers and authors rather than learners and teachers. While this may provide a semblance of organisation and order in the teaching and learning process, it also takes many important decisions away from teachers and their learners.

However, given that textbooks are usually prescribed 'from above', an important part of a teacher's role is to make adapt and supplement them to make them more relevant to their learners' needs and interests. This may involve adapting or supplementing the textbook material and also giving choices to learners: *"Do we need to do a bit more work on adjective order or are you comfortable with it now?" "Do you want to take turns to read the text aloud, or would you rather read it silently and then answer questions?" "Choose one of the following options for your homework today……."* Even these small concessions to learners freedom of choice can feel liberating and will give them a personal stake in their own learning.

Empathy

Although it is perhaps the most widely quoted of Rogers' 'core conditions', empathy is sometimes very challenging to conceive of and to realise in practical terms. To me it has come to mean, essentially, the ability to put myself into the shoes of learners, to remember what it's like to be a learner. It is also about clearing my head, as far as I can, of my own preoccupations and concerns in order to be able to start a lesson or training session *where my learners or trainees are* rather than where I am, and thence to walk through the learning experience hand in hand with them.

When learners make mistakes, I need to understand where the mistakes come from in order to be able to help them. If a learner is distracted in my class, I need to find out why and to react supportively. If learners are nervous about an upcoming examination, I have to understand this and help to make them feel more confident. In short, if learners feel that you see things as they do, they will learn more readily.

Exploration and Discovery

Babies and young children are natural explorers. Yet this very human spirit of exploration and discovery is too often lost as they go through schooling. Holt (1982), Neill (1960) and many others have written extensively about this in powerful arguments about the way formal school education is organised and implemented. While discovery learning is still extensively practised in the early years of primary school in the UK, for example, it has been slowly but surely squeezed out by the demands of assessment and achievement at each key stage in children's progress through the system.

In a language class, teachers can encourage discovery learning in a number of ways, for example by giving learners sufficient samples of language to allow them to 'discover' a grammatical rule themselves rather than being asked to learn it and then apply it. It can be exciting, too, for more advanced learners to explore a text and to engage with some of the language features that make the text interesting or controversial. This kind of awareness-raising work allows learners to engage directly with the target language rather than being forced to accept their teacher's or their textbook's version of it.

Facilitation

Most proponents of humanistic education from Rogers onwards, lay emphasis on the role of a teacher as a facilitator of learning rather than as a transmitter of knowledge. Put simply, facilitation means creating the conditions in which learning can take place. This has both a physical and a psychological dimension. The way a classroom is arranged and learners are seated in relation to each other and to the teacher, is acknowledged to be important in language learning which requires channels of communication to be open.

The concept of *learning space* is relevant here. When a teacher encroaches too closely on a group discussion, for example, it can inhibit the process she has asked them to engage in. I have been reproached more than once by learners for doing this. Equally, when a teacher asks a tough or interesting question and then demands an instant answer, maybe nominating a learner, an opportunity is lost as the learning tension is broken. Much better in such cases, I have found, to let the question 'hang in the air' for a while to allow learners to think, or alternatively to allow learners to discuss possible responses before answering.   Learners value both their physical space and the space they need to think and work things out, and they don't enjoy being harassed or hustled by a teacher intent on keeping the lesson on time and on track. For much more on facilitation, see Underhill (1987).

Learners' Rights and Responsibilities

One of the criticisms levelled at humanistic educational thinking and practices in the 80s and 90s was that it lacked discipline and direction. There was a mistaken belief that it was all about a kind of 'educational free-for-all in which anything goes. Far from it. In his school, Summerhill, A.S.Neill gave students the right to make many important decisions, but with that right came responsibilities related to how the decisions were implemented and how the school was organised.

It isn't always easy to get the balance right between rights and responsibilities but one way of doing this, is by the use of ground rules. Many groups of learners and teachers I have worked with have benefited from drawing up a set of rules such as '*We must not interrupt each other*

or the teacher.'; 'We should be on time for classes.'; 'We must keep our classroom tidy.'; 'We should always ask a question if there's something we don't understand.' etc. These rules were usually written on a poster which was pinned to the wall for all to see. While the rules usually referred to responsibilities, rights were also often listed, in particular the right to call out any infringement of the rules by any group member, including the teacher!

Learning as a Social Activity

The social dimension of learning and the notion of a class as a learning community has long been an established ingredient of humanistic thinking and practice in education (as in Curran's 'Community Language Learning'), alongside the theories of social constructivism derived from the work of Vygotsky and others. From a purely human perspective, we are all aware that we learn from each other as well as through more formal educational channels. A humanistic teacher will be aware of this potential for learning, and will do her best to create classroom conditions and relationships that allow this to happen.

One very simple way of encouraging this is by putting stronger and weaker learners together in groupwork and encouraging them to support one another. Another way is to ask groups of learners to give each other constructive and non-judgemental feedback on written work and presentations. In this way, learning becomes less competitive and more cooperative.

Positive Attitudes

Here, the link with Rogers' core condition of 'Unconditional Positive Regard is immediately evident. What it means in an educational setting is clear: teachers need to bring a positive attitude into every class, not only towards their learners but also to the language they are teaching. In doing so, they set a tone of positivity in every lesson which, over time, will be picked up and replicated by learners.

In a language class, there is always a temptation to focus on mistakes that learners make rather than on what they get right or do well. In some contexts, mistakes in assessed written work are counted up in order to arrive at a grade. In my experience, learners find this profoundly discouraging. Much better to give them credit for what they have expressed well in their writing. In a speaking-focussed class, a teacher may be tempted to correct learners' mistakes on the spot rather than praising them for what they have succeeded in communicating effectively. This all too often results in learners feeling more and more inhibited about speaking or resorting to avoiding mistakes by using short utterances in very simple language. We and they have to understand that all learners need to make mistakes in order to learn. This is another reminder of the importance of empathy in teaching.

Self-Awareness

Rogers' core notion of Congruence in a teacher is partly dependent on self-awareness. We should be completely clear about who we are when we enter a classroom and what impact we are having on our learners. If we don't know ourselves and what we represent, there is no chance of our learners getting to know us and the values and beliefs that matter to us and hence to them.

Self-awareness is not a given for any of us and we sometimes need the help of others in order to better see ourselves. I have benefited enormously from being observed in my classes by a colleague, from team-teaching with a colleague, and from frank feedback from learners and

trainees. Many of the changes I have made in my practices over the years have happened as a result of the enhanced self-understanding that has come from feedback of this kind.

Human Needs

According to Maslow (1954), in order for us to reach our full potential as human beings, certain conditions have to be in place. The most basic human needs are physiological, for nourishment, sleep, shelter and water. In the context of schooling, many of us know from experience that a hungry child can't learn effectively and nor can a child who is desperate to go to the toilet. The next level in Maslow's model is concerned with feeling healthy, safe from threat, and secure in social terms in order to concentrate on learning. In addition, we need a sense of belonging, to a family, a friendship group or other community. If any of these three levels of need are not met, it may be difficult or even impossible to reach our potential and our goals, whether in education or in our careers. Many of you reading this article will know how difficult it is for migrants or refugees to concentrate on learning for long periods after being displaced, or for orphaned children to feel safe and secure enough to learn.

When Maslow proposed his hierarchy of human needs, he laid particular emphasis on self-esteem. We all need to feel good about ourselves, to have a sense of achievement, to be acknowledged and respected by others and to be confident in ourselves and our abilities. Having a real sense of self-esteem is the main platform for any of us to reach our full potential.

Yet self-esteem is a fragile concept for all of us. In a teaching and learning context, it can easily be shattered by a chance remark, a put-down or a random misunderstanding. This applies equally to us as teachers and to our learners. This is why Maslow's model is so important for us to understand. Staffrooms can be hotbeds of gossip, not all of it kind, and we need to take seriously the preservation of good collegial relations, and to stand up against any attempt to disrupt a positive workplace climate. Further, when we enter a classroom we need to be aware of any factors which may prevent learners from giving their full attention to the shared processes of learning. This kind of human sensitivity is part of being a professional and we should know both the possibilities and the limits of what we can do to help our learners. We can't compensate for what a refugee has lost, for example, and we may need to refer a displaced child or adult to one of the agencies that can provide counselling or expert help. A student may reject a new language because of the danger of loss of identity that goes with the realisation that their native language is of no use in their new environment. In such sad circumstances, we can only hold on to our own basic humanity and self-belief.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to relate some of the key concepts in humanistic education to some of our practices in English Language Teaching. I hope that those of you who are new to our field have, by reading it, been able to link these concepts to your own beliefs about teaching and learning as well as to your classroom practices. Understanding and working with even a few of these concepts will help to make your classes more congenial and inclusive for you and your learners.

References and selected bibliography

Curran, C. 1976 *Counseling-learning in Second Languages* Apple River Press

Gattegno, C. 1963 *Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools – the Silent Way* New York: Educational Solutions

Holt, J. 1982 *How Children Fail* (revised edition) Merloyd Lawrence Books, Delta/Seymour Lawrence Books

Maley, A. & A. Duff, 1983 *Drama Techniques in Language Learning* Cambridge University Press

Maslow, A. 1954 *Motivation and Personality* Harper & Row

Moskowitz, G. 1978 *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class* Rowley, Mass: Newbury House

Neill, A.S. 1960 *Summerhill* Hart Publishing

Rinvolucri, M. 2002 *Humanising Your Coursebook* DELTA Publishing

Rogers, C. 1986 *Freedom to Learn* New York: Merrill Publishing

Underhill, A. 1989 Process in Humanistic Education *in* ELT Journal 43/4 pp 250 - 260