

## **The Challenges of Humanistic Approach to FLT towards Traditional Approach in China**

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### **Abstract**

*Traditionally, FLT in China attaches too much to the mastery of target language, ignoring learner's personal development in the learning process. Humanistic teaching voices an objection to the mechanistic, dehumanizing, inhuman emphasis of traditional approaches to education, and a plea for the adoption of new attitudes, concepts and approaches in this area. FLT, as one part of education, has also been influenced by this new force, and requires some innovative approaches to replace the conventional ones in methodology. This paper intends to analyze the big challenges provoked by humanistic teaching towards traditional approach to FLT in China, such as, "student-centered" vs. "teacher-centered"; "process-oriented" vs. "product-oriented"; and "holistic-oriented" vs. "knowledge-oriented". This detailed analysis is intended to help better comprehend humanistic teaching ideas and provide a new perspective on FLT in China.*

**Key words:** Humanistic Approach; student-centered; process-oriented; holistic-oriented

Since the 1970s, the appearance of Humanistic teaching has aroused widespread interest of foreign language teachers. People began to turn their attention to the learner's variations in order to find some new ideas which can be more effective in promoting FLT. Humanistic Approach has the following assumptions: The affective aspects of language learning are as important as the cognitive aspects and the learner should be treated in some sense as a "whole-person". This innovative approach has caused a big challenge towards traditional approaches, including three aspects: "student-centered" vs. "teacher-centered"; "process-oriented" vs. "product-oriented" and "holistic-development-oriented" vs. "Knowledge-oriented". People began to see that traditional model violates some of the efficient instruction of language: sufficient opportunity for the creative and truly communicative use of the language and the provision of a rich language acquisition environment. As the antithesis of traditional approach, Humanistic approach provides us with a new perspective On FLT in China. Teaching has been conventionally defined as "showing or helping someone to learn how to do something, giving instructions, guiding in the study of something, providing with knowledge, causing to know or understand" (Kimble & Garnezy, 1963) [1]. Accordingly, learning is defined as "acquiring or getting knowledge of a subject or a skill by study, experience, or instruction" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). According to Humanistic teaching ideas, however, teaching is guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn and setting the conditions for learning. Meanwhile, learning not only includes the learning of skills or the acquisition of knowledge, it also refers to abstract and psychological aspects of learning, such as learning to learn and learning to think, the modification of attitudes, acquisition of interest, social values, or social roles, and even changes in personality. Apart from this change, some other aspects can be summarized in the following table:

**Table1: comparison between traditional and humanistic Approach**

	Traditional approach	Humanistic Approach
Features	Teacher-centered	Student-centered
	Product-oriented	Process-oriented
	Knowledge-oriented	Holistic-development-oriented

## 1. “Student-centered” vs. “teacher-centered”

From the historic point of view, humanistic approach can be regarded as a rejuvenation of student-centered theory, which caused a big challenge to traditional teacher-centered teaching approach. As Widdowson (1990: vii) said, “The notion of teacher control is anathema in many quarters. It smacks of prescription and even suggests the suppression of human rights. The view which prevails in many places is one which holds that the description of language use and promotion of language learning should proceed without preconceived ideas, because otherwise the language behavior of real people, users and learners, is cramped into conformity and so misrepresented on the one hand, inhabited on the other. Instead, it is argued, we should let the people speak, as it were, for themselves. If they are learners we should let them find their own natural way as they go, instead of confining them to an itinerary fixed in advance” [2]

As in language teaching, the idea that the teacher should direct the progress of learners has been questioned on the grounds that such direction impedes the natural process of learning in both theoretical and practical domains; therefore, the exercise of authority is seen to result in the artificial manipulation of the actuality of experience. The description of language use is thereby distorted. The development of language learning is thereby disrupted (ibid, 4).

The “teacher-centered” teaching impedes the natural learning process since it does not allow for learner initiative; it does not give the learner scope to draw on the available resources of intuition and inventiveness, or to engage freely the procedures for learning which he or she has acquired through previous experience of language (ibid,181).

Tarlor(1987:85) argues for the need to foster “self-investment” and whole-person goal accomplishment as a condition for effective learning through engagement with communicative tasks. Such an approach, he says, points at the need to maintain a non-authoritarian presence throughout this process so that students can feel secure and non-defensive to enable them to learn not because the teacher demands it of them, but because they need to, in order to accomplish their own goal. [3]

In recent years, great changes have taken place in the English classroom in China. More and more teachers have accepted a learner-centered approach for the effectiveness of classroom teaching (Zhang Fengqin, 2000) [4]. Teachers and students all participate in the teaching and learning process, which breaks down the traditional teaching patterns.

Accordingly, this learner-centered approach can help students use the target language to communicate efficiently within a relaxed atmosphere.

## 2. “Process-oriented” vs. “product-oriented”

Traditionally, foreign languages have been taught using what is called the product-oriented approach, which is totally teacher-centered and product-focused. The teacher is primarily interested in assessing what comes out at the end, rather than in catering to students’ needs and development in the learning process. In recent years, the methodological shift, which has accomplished those trends, has encouraged a focus on interactional competence, the acquisition of core competence (i.e. the ability to cooperate with others, to learn on one’s own initiative, etc.) and the development of reflective skills. This necessitates a corresponding shift in classroom-

based knowledge acquisition to skills-based learner competence, and from product to comprehension. FLT should adopt a more “process-oriented” rather than “product-oriented” approach to language learning so as to help people take charge of their own learning process, in that the process-oriented approach caters to a learner’s affective domain, establishing the optimal conditions whereby learning can come out about mainly through the learner’s own efforts.

As the antithesis of the traditional approach, a humanistic approach with a “process-orientation” is an avant-garde one, having a lot of merits that benefit students. It draws on the rationale of humanistic psychology and attaches importance to affective as well as cognitive aspects. As Widdowson (1990:13) said, “Humanistic approaches are centrally concerned with the actual process of learning and therefore have a bearing primarily on methodology”.

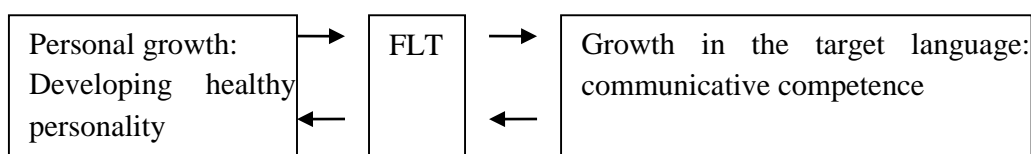
### 3. “Holistic-development-oriented” vs. “knowledge-oriented”

Generally, learners don’t know how to do communicative things with what they have acquired as knowledge but simply learn how to display their knowledge according to conventions established by teaching and to meet the requirements of the examinations based on the same conventions. These are traditionally designed to test knowledge of the subject itself as defined by the language teachers, and not what learners have learned to do by means of the subject (ibid,159). In effect, however, apart from language acquisition, there are many other aspects of language instruction which should be considered deliberately. Genesee & Upshur (1996:16) divide the objectives of the foreign language classroom, as the following table shows [5]:

**Table2: Multidimensional goals of FLT (created from Genesee & Upshur, 1996:18)**

1	Language : language skills
2	Strategic: strategies for communicating, learning and critical learning
3	Socioaffective: changes in learners’ attitudes or social behaviors
4	Philosophical: changes in attitudes, values, or beliefs of a more
5	Methods and process: methods, processes, experiences, materials, activities, or other aspects of instruction

From the table above, there are two aspects of FLT. One aspect is concerned with the “person”, and the other, “knowledge”. The humanistic approach is intended to foster “whole-person” growth, to nourish human relations, and to develop skills mastery in a foreign language. Some researches on a humanistic approach to FLT have proved that given the opportunity to talk about themselves in personally relevant ways, students tend to become much more motivated. The result is that they want to be able to express their feelings and ideas more in the target language. They want to communicate. When this happens, growth becomes a reciprocal process: enhancing personal growth enhances growth in the foreign language (Moskowitz, 1978:4) [6]. So as to better comprehend this reciprocal process, a figure is constructed here:



**Figure 1: Two dimensions of FLT**

Moskowitz (1978:13) describes the relationship between personal growth and foreign language learning: Suppose the target language is taught so that students develop more positive feeling about themselves and their classmates and find out more about what they are really like. Such an approach will help increase the esteem

and understanding students have for themselves and others, thus facilitating growth in the direction of being more self-actualized. Since self-actualization is such a powerful inherent need in humans, as students see the subject matter as self-enhancing, it will be viewed as relevantly related to their lives. They will then become more motivated to learn to use the foreign language and, as a result, will be more likely to learn.

Learners are seen not so much as full-time linguistic objects at whom language teaching is aimed, but rather as human individuals whose personal dignity and integrity, and the complexity of whose ideas, thoughts, needs, and sentiments, should be respected (Medgyes, 1986) [7]. People begin to see that the traditional model violates some of the conditions of learning found in natural acquisition conditions that are probably necessary for the efficient instruction of language: sufficient opportunity for the creative and truly communicative use of the language and the provision of a rich language acquisition environment.

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