

A Case Study on Tertiary-level FLT nFrom the Perspective of Humanistic Teaching in China

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, the appearance of humanistic teaching has aroused widespread interest of foreign language teachers. People began to turn their attention to learners' variations in order to find some new ideas which can be more effective in promoting FLT and personal growth, namely, there appears a humanistic trend which focuses on the students' affect in learning process, student-centeredness and the individualistic teaching. In order to know whether humanistic teaching has been employed by teachers in tertiary-level FL classrooms in China, a case study has been conducted. Based on the findings of the case study, this paper also proposes a way to apply more humanistic teaching to tertiary-level FLT by exploring some important factors concerning foreign language classroom teaching.

Key words: humanistic teaching, basic features, case study, pedagogical suggestions

1. Introduction

Before the 1970s, the influence of Behaviorism in psychology and structural linguistics was so widespread and dominant that FLT was almost exclusively teacher-centered. The implicit assumption was that foreign language learning was nothing more than a process of behavioral change and habit formation by way of stimulus response. The task of the learner was to acquire linguistic forms and structures effectively. It was the teacher's task to explain what has been learned clearly and precisely to the learner before it could be fully understood and assimilated. The learner was extremely passive in language learning. Conversely, the role of teacher in FLT was much over-emphasized. Since the early 1970s, it has become more and more clear that the learner himself actually plays an important role, and gradually he has become the center of attention. In opposition to the authoritarian teacher-centered classroom, learner's subjectivity has been well-recognized. Both FLT & L have shifted the focus from the teacher to the learner on the grounds that successful foreign language learning is determined largely by the learner, and involves not only cognitive and sociocultural variables but also affective factors of the learner as well. To some extent, affective factors and individual variables had been ignored before. As Stern (1983:321) said, "Second language learning was related to life style, personality, and affective psychology of the individual, a valuable trend of thought which was somewhat lost sight of until the seventies." [1] There is now an increasing tendency to shift from the view of the teacher as the controller of learning process toward a more learner-centered view which stresses learners' creative role in FL learning. Another tendency is to focus more on the learner as an individual and a person in order to react against the mechanical and "cold" drill techniques of language training of the previous era, to attempt to sensitize teachers to human values and human relations in the language class, and to create an awareness of the hidden curriculum of the social and affective climate created by the interaction among students and between students and teachers. In a word, there is an increasing trend in FLT, which is being summoned by the open society and demanded by practical needs. Today, social contacts and communications in this world are becoming more frequent, and meanwhile, more cosmopolitan and relaxed, less egocentric and more democratic. This calls for new approaches

in the classroom. Humanistic FLT is an attempt to respond to these needs. Furthermore, since the 1970s, teachers and researchers came to realize that conventional research findings and teaching methods could not usher in absolute and predictable variations in order to find some new ideas which can be more effective in promoting FLT, therefore, a new teaching concept –humanistic FLT –came into being.

2. Basic features of humanistic FLT

Humanistic teaching ideas have had a deep influence on modern FLT. Nowadays, teachers and researches have come to recognize that we should not only pay attention to the language system itself, but to the learner and the learning process. As Combs (1974:13) said, “Nowadays, our education has moved increasingly towards more humanistic philosophy which finds expression in practices designed to facilitate and assist learning rather than to control and direct it. We have outrun traditional psychology; modern educational thought and practice calls for new understandings of behavior more adequate to deal with our current problems.”[2] Humanistic approach has its solid psychological foundation-Humanistic Psychology. Carl Rogers, the most famous humanistic psychologist, introduced us the theory of person-centeredness. Rogers’ theory emphasizes individual differences, entire personality and behaviors as a function of the private, unique way in which individuals experience their world. The goal of education had become the facilitation of change and learning. In adopting Rogers’ ideas to FLT, we need to consider the student as a “whole person” who needs to understand oneself and communicate oneself to others freely and non-defensively. In general, humanistic teaching is characterized by the following aspects (Zhang Yong, 2012:363) [3]

1) More concern for affective needs in learning

Students’ emotional status and other affective factors filter what they learn. Positive emotions cultivated foreign language learning will foster a good personality and enhance self-actualization.

2) Emphasis on learners’ autonomy

Three qualities are necessary in learning: independence (i.e. being aware that we can rely on ourselves making use of what we already know and possess), Autonomy (i.e. making choices and exercising initiative) and Responsibility (i.e. using our free will select carefully).

3) Emphasis on interpersonal relations in learning

Learners are more likely to make the necessary commitment in groups in which they are respected and supported. Individualization of instruction, group work, and humanistic techniques changed the social climate of the language class and expressed a new awareness of human relation as an important factor in language teaching (Stern, 1992:13)[4].

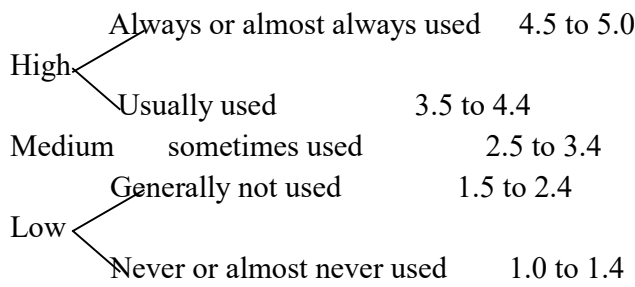
As far as language is concerned, spoon-feeding does students more harm than good and that has been a well-recognized fact. So it is time to take a strong stance and initiate a change towards autonomous learning. Is the classroom teaching still teacher-centered? Has any changes taken place in our classroom? All these questions will be solved next in order to make further exploration about FLT at the tertiary-level.

3. A Case Study

3.1 Methods

A case study has been carried out to investigate these problems mentioned above. The questionnaire is based on the multi-aspects of the concrete practices of humanistic approach in classroom, including, teacher’s role, learner’s role, teaching atmosphere, and class room evaluation, etc. Four hundred college students from 10 classes were chosen randomly as the subjects. Results are presented in Appendix II.

We can analyze the results of the questionnaire according to Oxford’s understanding of the averages (1990:300) [5]:



The mean scores of all items varies from a high of 3.58 to a low of 2.77, among which only Item 5 (with 3.50; 3.58 respectively) usually happen in foreign language classroom. The use of other items is moderate (the mean score of each item is under 3.5).

3.2 Results analysis & explanation

Result of the present questionnaires is presented in Appendix II. The main findings from this case study are as follows:

1) Less concern for learners’ affective needs in teaching

Earl Stevick (1982) concludes that success or failure in language teaching depends not on so much whether one adopts inductive or deductive techniques for teaching grammar, vocabulary and so on, but on the extent to which one caters to the learners’ affective domain [6]. In his eyes, perhaps the most important article of faith is that the learner’s attitudes towards the teacher, towards fellow learners, and towards the target language are the single most important variable in language learning. The atmosphere set will determine whether students’ non-linguistic emotional needs are met in the classroom. However, it’s found that Chinese foreign language teachers emphasize only the cognitive process but neglect the importance of “affect” in language learning. According to this survey, over 33% of students admit that they never or seldom feel comfortable in FLT classroom. Students learn foreign language with a high degree of personal threat and anxiety. In general, there are two aspects which can arouse threat and anxiety. One is within students themselves and the other comes from external factors, such as the uncomfortable teaching setting and inappropriate teaching methods. Students may feel basically inadequate (12% of students feel that foreign language learning is too difficult), fear rejection by others, and generally lack confidence in coping adequately with problems in the learning process. They feel worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or negative comments from the teacher, fear losing face or are simply shy.

2) Less students’ involvement in the learning process

In our classrooms, students are still considered as passive receptacles to be filled with knowledge. But, actually, students dislike classes in which they sit passively learning. The teacher must consider students’ desire for self-actualization, acknowledging each of them as an independent entity and a separate and autonomous individual (Maslow, 1970) by involving them in decisions, affecting their learning---getting them to take responsibility for their own learning process, and to constantly develop learning skills [7]. The ineffectiveness of FLT lies in the fact that it’s difficult for students to convert what they have learned into daily usage. Moreover, students are often deprived of learning autonomy in that teachers always decide to dedicate their own views upon the subject being discussed and decide what should be done in the classroom, regardless of their students’ needs and demands. FLT is dominated by a teacher-centered, exam-oriented, grammar and vocabulary-based method. Students often complain about the boredom in foreign language classroom. In this study, 31% of students dislike learning English, partly because the teaching content is too boring (11% of students) and partly because the teaching method cannot arouse learning initiative (5% of the students). Most FLT classes are still based on mechanistic, product-oriented exercises and drills.

4. Pedagogical suggestions on towards more humanistic approach to tertiary-level FLT

The case study shows us many problems in FLT. Some key factors, such as the students' affect, the learning context, the relationship between teachers and students, etc. have been ignored. Therefore, it's high time for us to employ more humanistic approach to FLT.

4.1 Exploring teaching contexts' space

We know that in an environment where learners feel anxious and constrained they are likely to be psychological barriers to communication, and if anxiety rises above a certain level, it's an obstacle to learning. Learner, it seems, need to feel secure and to be free of stress before they can focus on the learning task---the importance of which is directly acknowledged in humanistic approaches to language teaching (Ellis, 1994:479) [8].

Moskowitz (1978:24) said, "It's essential to establish a warm, supportive, and non-threatening climate. In such kind of situation, your students will become more cohesive than you or they ever have been before. You can develop an extraordinary rapport with students, beyond what you already have been doing successfully." If the atmosphere in the group is hostile and the students concerned if afraid of being ridiculed or mocked, inhibition will occur. But in a co-operative and friendly atmosphere, students are more willing to expose themselves in foreign language. In creating a psychological secure environment, teachers' verbal and non-verbal behaviors play a crucial role. Combs(1974:41) provides us with a list of suggestions: 1) the encouragement of fantasy and fun; 2) the provision of wide choices; 3) trust in students so that they, in turn, can trust themselves; 4) encouraging cooperative interaction; 5) creating a feeling of belonging; 6) encouraging cooperation and discouraging competition; 7) encouraging difference, uniqueness, and integrity; 8) encouraging communication; 9) encouraging problem-solving approaches; 10) valuing openness and flexibility; 11) valuing individuality; 12) eliminating censorship; and 13) encouraging experimenting and trying. These suggestions are tremendously helpful for the contrivance of an enjoyable psychological context in FL classroom.

4.2 Exploring students' space

The new approach implies an entirely new role for the student. It aims to make students more independent, since the responsibility for learning is to some extent handed over to him or her. In the new context, students obtain more independence than ever before, developing: self-esteem, self-determination and self-assertion. In order to achieve the goals mentioned above, the teacher need to cultivate students' leaning autonomy consciously, stimulate students' intrinsic motivation and help them foster a positive self-concept. Di Aiying's (2000) experimental project on student's autonomy proved that given an autonomous learning environment, students can learn more efficiently, and students can acquire all around abilities [9]. In this teaching procedure, students should be entirely autonomous to decide their own partners, topics, materials, presentations, etc. in doing so, teachers should change from being the authority to respecting and trusting students; from hard study to happy study and arouse students' interest of study because students who have difficulties with the language lack explicit learning motivation, which is characterized by lack of learning incentive, interest, endurance and good habits; from only teaching knowledge to emotional communication in many directions; from only refuting students to treating praise as the main means and letting students have the feeling of success; and from being afraid of students' mistakes in class to accepting students' mistakes, cultivating student's confidence and encouraging students in showing their own opinion.

4.3 Exploring the teacher's space

A very common role for teachers is to teach linguistic content, direct and control students learning and model

correct language. Students usually assume a relatively passive role in response to the active role of the teacher. In many classrooms, students' voices can hardly be heard. From the case study, we can see that students need the kind of teacher who has not only broad and profound knowledge but also has respect and understanding for the students. The teacher should not only be an instructor, a lecturer, a knowledge transmitter, but rather, a director, facilitator, organizer, and more important, a creator of environment in which learners learn and how to learn. As Zhang & LI (1996) said, "good instructors have not only excellent language skills and knowledge about FLT theories but also the ability to organize and facilitate learning, and positive personalities." [10] Good FLT should at least possess the following qualities: 1) Empathy ; 2) trust; and 3) patience.

Conclusion

In reality, less humanistic teaching still exists in foreign language classrooms. Teachers, as the center, seldom give students opportunity to experience themselves in the target language. A certain degree of anxiety and high pressure from the tests and the boring teaching style combine to lower their motivation in study. Therefore, foreign language teaching in China needs a more humanistic approach.

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Appendix I The questionnaire for the status quo of tertiary-level FLT

Part 1 Please answer the following items by circling the letter of the alternative (A, B, C, D, E) which appears most applicable to you.

1. Do you always feel comfortable or relaxed in FL classroom? ()
2. Does FL teacher always create an enjoyable teaching atmosphere purposely?
3. Does FL teacher always keep patient or encourage you with smile when you cannot answer the question?
4. Does FL teacher trust you or believe you can study autonomously?
5. Does FL teacher always show his or her true feelings or emotions before class?

6. Does FL teacher always walk down the platform and offer help readily?
7. Does FL teacher always adopt student-centered approach or try to provide enough opportunity for students' communication by colorful classroom activities?
8. Does FL teacher always ask for students' advice or suggestions when he or she decides teaching plans?
9. Are the teaching contents always interesting enough to make you amused?
10. Does FL teacher always urgent or force you to study foreign language with tests, such as CET4 or MET4?

Part 2 Tick the one you think is appropriate

1. Do you like studying foreign language? A. like B. dislike
2. If you choose dislike, why?
 - A. Foreign language is too complicated to learn well
 - B. Teaching materials are too dull and boring
 - C. Teaching styles is too bald to stimulate students' interest
 - D. Others (please write down):

Appendix II The status quo of FLT at Tertiary Level

Items	Mean (%)	Never (%)	Seldom (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Always (%)
1	3.04	2.8	20.4	49.3	24.6	2.8
2	3.00	4.9	25.0	40.5	24.3	5.3
3	3.50	4.9	12.3	30.6	32.4	19.7
4	3.35	4.6	15.1	35.6	30.3	14.4
5	3.58	3.5	8.5	35.2	32.0	20.8
6	3.37	3.5	15.8	34.2	33.1	13.4
7	2.95	5.6	31.7	33.1	21.1	8.5
8	2.77	13.7	25.0	36.6	19.4	5.3
9	3.06	1.8	22.2	49.6	21.1	5.3
10	2.77	12.7	32.7	28.5	16.5	9.5

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