Humanistic Approach to Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Intelligibility is considered as one of the most important parameters while assessing the language skills of a person and it is regarded as the primary understanding of a person's communication ability. In order to be intelligible, one needs to be good at language application which should be taught in a positive and stress-free environment. It has been observed that Engineering students in Andhra Pradesh (India) have some problems in pronunciation due to various reasons, the major reason being mother tongue influence. This applies to many other Indian states where mother tongue accent influences communication in English. This variation between the first language and English causes many difficulties in mastering the English language. Since language is a skill that is functional in nature and is used in everyday situations, care should be taken by facilitators while imparting the skills to young learners. In this context this paper discusses the major impact factors of humanistic approach in which an effective teaching and learning process, learner motivation, good learning environment, and effective role of the facilitator are included.

Keywords: English language, ELT, spoken English, learner motivation, learning environment, facilitator.

Introduction

English language has always been considered as the *sine qua non* in the wake of cross-cultural global communication. The necessity to expand one's horizons and prove oneself in the contracted global arena has further rendered it as a necessary skill and tool to avail the resources. It becomes even more crucial in the Indian context that is considered as the IT hub of the world and to students who are ready to take over the corporate world as employees. As Pondra observes:

> The liberalization of the Indian economy ushered in all kinds of reasons to learn the language. While earlier in the century students who had specialised in English joined either teaching or the civil services, now a whole new spectrum of job opportunities has opened up. There are now call centres that need trainers to equip their employees with communication skills, there are multinationals who have been recruiting marketing staff that needed to be taught spoken English, there are medical transcription centres which need efficient translators and reporters. Those desirous of immigration to the west needed professional help for clearing tests like the IELTS. Hence, the avenues where ELT came to be required in India are unlimited today (23)

This is where the problem arises as companies are keen on recruiting job-ready graduates who do not require any training in language and soft skills except in their specialized area. This is

only half the concern as various other issues crop up simultaneously to face the Indian learners of English: lack of motivation and conducive learning environment, outdated teaching and learning practices and so on.

Mother Tongue Influence

One of the major reasons that can be claimed as possible influence in this regard is the mother tongue influence that invariably affects English language. For instance, if the state of Andhra Pradesh is taken into consideration the influence of mother tongue, Telugu would incessantly be present and can be prominently observed in the accent – pronunciation and stress. Another reason is the system of education at primary and secondary levels where the students can choose between English medium and Telugu medium instruction. This proves to be a problem to students from Telugu medium background as in Professional courses from graduation level education is imparted through the medium of English. These conditions hamper the smooth process of attaining proficiency in English language. This situation is one of the key reasons for the mitigated recruitment of graduates into corporate sector as the students are required to excel not only in acquisition of language skills but also other life skills that would assist them to succeed.

Need of a Good Approach

In such a state of affairs, it is imperative that an integrated method of teaching along with the humanistic approach can be implemented that would widely benefit the individuals who desire to learn English language either for a specific or general purpose. This proposal is much more relevant in such a competitive educational context where language learning is not given enough priority at the intermediate level which results in the development of apathy and reluctance towards the language. Majority of the students who enter the Engineering programme struggle to speak on a given topic in the presence of their peer groups only because of the lack of practice in language. This leads to low self-esteem and confidence which is a precarious situation to be in. Since ESP (English for Specific Purpose), more than ELT, is ruling the roost, the choice of the right method is an important factor in the development of individuals. And the options are with the facilitators as each teacher re-creates the principles of teaching in relation to each new class and each new student. In this context this paper proposes to recommend an approach to teaching English where both the teachers and learners would benefit equally.

Humanitarian Approach

"An approach is the set of basic assumptions and beliefs about language and language teaching and learning" (Anthony 63-67). Speaking about humanistic approach to general education Lei states "the humanistic educations is characterized by learner-centeredness in which the aim is not merely developing the cognitive and linguistic capabilities of the learners but also paying attention to the learners' emotions and feelings" (60-67). Before considering the actual hypothesis, it is useful to begin with the necessity for humanistic approach in any teaching-learning scenario. It is a well-known notion that human learning is best possible in a friendly, comfortable and natural environment. Such creation of ambience is possible only with an approach that would place a learner in a comfortable zone. This can best be done with humanistic approach that shares the above mentioned idealistic nature of learning.

It would be useful to recollect Earl Stevick's (1990) classification of what he considers the most important characteristics of humanism; "feelings, social relations, intellect and self-

actualization". The following principles are crucial to such an approach: the development of human values, growth of self-awareness and in the understanding of others, sensitivity to human feelings and emotions, active student involvement in learning and in the way, learning takes place. Each of these components caters to the holistic development of a personality. The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (1985) defines the humanistic approach as it concentrate and put effort to the development of human values, growth of self-awareness and in the understanding of others, sensitivity of human feelings and emotions and includes active student involvement in learning and how learning takes place (57)

This kind of 'Learner-centered approach' is the need of the hour.

Humanism - Application

At this juncture it is useful to, first, take a glance at the word 'Humanism'. A widely suggested definition of the word 'Humanism' is that it is an approach in study, philosophy, or practice that focuses on human values and concerns. And the immediate question that arises is 'what the need is to focus on human values while teaching language?' This has been rightly answered by scholars, and academicians. Many studies and researches have been exploring the nature of humanistic approach in the context of teaching language, specifically, foreign language and the common consensus is that such an approach is suitable and relevant in teaching a foreign language as it impacts the learners' attitude towards the language. The most well-known applications of humanism in ELT are those of Curran (1976) and Gattegno (1972). The former advocated the use of 'Counselling-Learning' practice where teachers sit outside a circle of learners and help them to talk about their personal and linguistic problems. The students are given the opportunity to decide the 'curriculum', while the teacher is more of a facilitator who fosters an emotionally secure environment. Gattegno advocated the Silent Way approach where he presented challenges for learners which developed the students' awareness.

Regarding the need for such an approach, it would be appropriate to mention a widely believed notion that the studies that develop human intellect are those that make humans most truly human. Humanistic approaches to language or literature teaching are considered as the most thought-provoking methodologies, for they have people as their focus and the concern is about the individual learners. To ensure a sustained learning it is important that the language teachers are supportive, caring, understanding and non-critical of the learners. This helps develop a positive attitude in learners towards language acquisition and also towards life, as this kind of approach boosts their confidence.

Teacher as Motivator and Facilitator

It would not be an exaggeration if it is stated that the onus of imparting knowledge related to moral values lies on language teachers. As facilitators, language teachers understand that effective learning takes place in an environment where qualities of independence, autonomy, creativity are nurtured in an accepted and mindful approach. The teacher should play the role of the facilitator who should impart language skills in a friendly atmosphere that nourishes the interest to learn and that would make learning easy and joyful. For this, to materialise, the facilitator should frame the activities in a way that would generate interest in learning. In this context humanistic method of teaching plays a key role as it tends to see language learning as a process which engages

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Dr. CH. Swathi, M.Phil., Ph.D.
Humanistic Approach to Language Acquisition   273

the whole person and not just the intellect and also takes into account the emotional needs of a learner.

The objective of language acquisition is its application and not just securing grades and so learners should be motivated in such a way where the focus is more on language acquisition and its usage. Motivation is a crucial factor in learning new skills and it is vital in effective teaching and learning process. The activities should be designed to tap the interest in the learners. There is also a need to strike a balance between the different kinds of learners: those who wish to acquire language for specific purposes like job and competitive exams; and those who wish to learn the language for self - sufficiency in using the language for general purposes. The activities should be designed to meet the requirements of both these kinds of learners. For this to take place, a widely accepted strategy is using the students' varied societal and cultural experiences to facilitate the language acquisition as they can relate to the context easily. This sense of familiarity motivates them to use their language expression which in turn improves their proficiency. Understanding and boosting learner motivation also caters to the awareness of teachers who can easily prepare and design classroom activities accordingly.

The Role of the Facilitator

The role of the facilitator is the key factor in shaping the interest of the learners. Since language acquisition happens best in a stress-free environment, learners should be given enough chance to learn from their mistakes. If the mistakes are strongly disapproved it can have a negative impact on learners and can dishearten them. This issue is much more grave and relevant at the graduation level where learners view themselves as adults and expect to be treated with dignity and respect and hence should be handled carefully. Instead of treating them with a sense of authority, it is appropriate and more productive to treat them with care and respect, understanding the struggles that the learners face while learning the target language. This will help the learners overcome the psychological barriers.

Conclusion

It has always been difficult to mark the distinction between the various approaches that can be adapted in teaching and learning process. Though it is widely accepted that humanistic approach in teaching is a crucial method in inculcating the right emotional attitude, the extent to which this approach can be extended is always an idea to be contested. Keeping this in view, a teacher must apply a blend of methods and approaches that are available abundantly adding the touch of humanistic elements discussed here.

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