

A Study of Four Affective-Humanistic Foreign Language Teaching Approaches: Comprehension and Pedagogical Reflections

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Abstract: *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* adopts a three-dimensional analytical framework consisting of Approach, Design and Procedure to systematically sort out mainstream foreign language teaching methods in modern times. Among them, the Total Physical Response, The Silent Way, Community Language Learning and The Natural Approach fall under the affective-humanistic teaching school. Though the four approaches share the core educational philosophy of humanism, they differ sharply in classroom organization and instructional implementation. Based on the theoretical framework of this book, this paper first elaborates on the internal connections among the four approaches rooted in the same theoretical origin and compares their differentiated implementation paths. It then analyzes the strengths and inherent limitations of each approach one by one, and summarizes the general merits and demerits of the entire humanistic teaching system. Finally, combined with the current teaching situations of foreign language classes in China, this paper extracts practical inspirations of humanistic teaching thoughts for modern foreign language classrooms, so as to provide theoretical references for frontline teachers to carry out integrated eclectic teaching.

Keywords: Humanistic Language Teaching; Foreign Language Teaching Approaches; Classroom Implementation Pathways.

1. Introduction

In the mid-to-late 20th century, the interdisciplinary integration of linguistics and psychology gave rise to a wealth of innovative foreign language teaching schemes. Breaking the tradition of introducing teaching techniques in isolation, Richards and Rodgers put forward in *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* that all teaching models can be decomposed into three logical layers: the underlying layer refers to linguistic and psychological theories supporting instruction (Approach); the middle layer covers teaching objectives, syllabuses, teacher-student roles and activity design (Design); the surface layer consists of specific classroom operational procedures (Procedure). Chapters Six to Nine of this book introduce four affective-humanistic approaches, namely the Total Physical Response (TPR), The Silent Way, Community Language Learning (CLL) and The Natural Approach [1].

Criticizing the mechanical stimulus-response training model of behaviorism, humanistic psychology points out that negative emotions such as anxiety and inferiority will form an affective filter that hinders the internalization of linguistic input. All four approaches take “reducing learning anxiety, centering on learners, and realizing the holistic development of human beings” as their underlying logic, yet they adopt completely different classroom implementation plans. This paper clarifies the homology and divergence of multiple teaching approaches under the same ideological system, dialectically analyzes their applicable scenarios and drawbacks, and explores the integrated application path of humanistic concepts in current foreign language classrooms.

2. Internal Connections and Path Divergences of Four Teaching Approaches under the Humanistic System

2.1. Homologous Common Ground of the Four Approaches

From the perspective of the overall humanistic teaching theoretical system, the four models including TPR, The Silent Way, Community Language Learning and The Natural Approach share a unified theoretical foundation and form close internal connections.

First, all four approaches place affective factors at the core of language acquisition. They agree that psychological security is a prerequisite for language acquisition. Traditional Grammar-Translation Method and Audiolingual Method feature frequent error correction and mechanical recitation, which easily raise learners' anxiety and block language absorption. These four approaches hold that the primary goal of classroom teaching is to eliminate students' fear of speaking and build an inclusive and relaxing learning environment.

Second, the four approaches advocate a learner-centered teacher-student relationship. They abandon the traditional classroom model of one-way teacher indoctrination and weaken the authoritative identity of teachers, who only play the roles of guide, facilitator and counselor. The initiative of language learning is returned to students, whose learning pace, willingness to express and personalized needs are fully respected.

Third, the four methods jointly uphold the notion of holistic human development. Language teaching should not be confined to the transmission of cognitive knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar; it needs to take into account the growth of learners' emotions, self-confidence and

communication competence, so as to realize the coordinated development of cognitive ability and psychological personality.

At the level of classroom implementation, the four approaches also share common features: they all reduce immediate and harsh error correction, abandon extensive mechanical pattern drills, mostly adopt concrete materials, interactive activities and life-related contexts for teaching, and recognize that physical movement, peer communication and graded input can ease learning pressure.

2.2. Divergent Implementation Paths under the Same Ideology

Despite their unified theoretical core, the four approaches adopt entirely different core means to relieve learning anxiety and organize classroom teaching, forming four independent instructional paths.

2.2.1. Total Physical Response (TPR): Building Input Channels through Physical Movement

Representative scholar Asher drew on the laws of children's native language acquisition and adhered to the principle of "listening first, acting second, delayed oral output"[2]. Classroom activities revolve around teachers issuing commands and students responding with physical movements. The multi-sensory linkage of hearing, vision and bodily movement establishes a direct connection between language and meaning, minimizing the pressure to speak for zero-basis learners.

2.2.2. The Silent Way: Realizing Independent Inquiry via Teacher Reticence

Gattegno argued that over-reliance on teachers deprives students of the ability to generalize linguistic rules independently[3]. In class, teachers remain silent as much as possible and guide students to spell autonomously and construct sentence patterns with visual aids such as colored rods and sound-color charts. Learners finish phonetic and grammatical learning through peer checking and trial-and-error, practicing the student-centered concept of "minimal teaching, maximal learning".

2.2.3. Community Language Learning (CLL): Alleviating Isolation Anxiety through Peer Communities

Curran introduced the doctor-patient metaphor of psychological counseling into classroom teaching[4]. Students sit in small group circles and are allowed to express inner thoughts in their mother tongue first, after which teachers translate these ideas into the target language for students to repeat. Learning topics are chosen by students themselves. Equal peer relationships and gentle teacher counseling ease the tension of public expression.

2.2.4. The Natural Approach: Gradual Progression through Comprehensible Graded Input

Supported by five core hypotheses of second language acquisition proposed by Krashen and Terrell, this approach centers on "comprehensible input (i+1)" and the affective filter hypothesis[5]. Classroom teaching is divided into three stages: pre-production, early production and speech emergence. Teachers provide appropriately difficult linguistic input via pictures, real-life scenes and daily topics, without forcing students to speak immediately; learners are expected to express themselves independently only when they possess adequate linguistic competence.

In short, the four humanistic teaching approaches merely

differ in the tools used to relieve anxiety and organize instruction: TPR relies on physical interaction, The Silent Way on independent inquiry, CLL on peer circle communication, and The Natural Approach on graded input, while they are underpinned by identical humanistic theories.

3. Analysis of Strengths and Limitations of Four Humanistic Teaching Approaches

3.1. Total Physical Response (TPR)

The Total Physical Response boasts distinctive teaching advantages. Highly suitable for young learners and zero-basis students, it only requires learners to understand instructions and perform corresponding physical movements, imposing little pressure on oral production and quickly stimulating interest in foreign language learning[6]. Learning outcomes prove better for learners who comprehend language via physical linkage; this method is not restricted by linguistic complexity or learning intervals and enables rapid language comprehension[2]. In addition, TPR features simple operation and low requirements for teaching props, serving as a pre-class warm-up activity adaptable to various offline and online courses.

Nevertheless, this approach has obvious limitations. Its applicable content range is narrow, only covering simple action and object vocabulary; abstract viewpoints, argumentative essays and complex communicative topics cannot be taught via TPR[7]. Long-term exclusive application leads to insufficient systematic grammar and sentence pattern training for students, who can only understand simple commands yet fail to construct long sentences independently. Therefore, TPR is inapplicable to advanced literary courses and reading-writing specialized classes.

3.2. The Silent Way

The pedagogical value of The Silent Way lies in its proposition that "teaching serves learning" and its focus on fostering students' autonomous learning ability[3]. It fully exercises students' capacities for independent spelling and self-correction, reducing their reliance on teachers. Supported by sound-color charts for phonetic and phonics teaching, it caters to learners with poor pronunciation. With student-centered classroom activities, it is highly consistent with the concepts of autonomous learning and humanistic education.

This method also faces prominent practical drawbacks. Its overall teaching pace is slow and time-consuming, making it difficult to align with standardized curriculum standards and exam-oriented teaching schedules in China. Furthermore, it sets high requirements for students' self-discipline and logical thinking; students with weak foundations and short attention spans tend to fall behind in class. Moreover, special teaching aids including colored rods and phonetic wall charts incur high supporting costs, rendering regular implementation of The Silent Way infeasible in ordinary classrooms.

3.3. Community Language Learning (CLL)

Regarded as a representative of the Affective-Humanistic Approach, Community Language Learning advocates a holistic educational view that attaches equal importance to cognition and affection[8]. It demonstrates remarkable advantages in psychological counseling: extremely introverted students who fear public speaking can release mental burdens and take the initiative to express themselves

in small circles. Classroom topics are self-selected by students and closely connected to real life, effectively stimulating intrinsic learning motivation. The group circle teaching format promotes equal interaction among peers and simultaneously cultivates students' collaborative communication skills.

Its drawbacks mainly lie in the standardization of curriculum design. There exists no preset syllabus of grammar and vocabulary in this complete model, resulting in fragmented linguistic knowledge acquired by students that fails to fulfill systematic teaching tasks specified by curriculum standards. Since learning topics are controlled by students, teachers struggle to regulate teaching pace and easily deviate from key and difficult points of each lesson. In addition, the small-group circle format only works for small-class teaching and cannot be implemented in large-sized classes.

3.4. The Natural Approach

Rooted in mature second language acquisition theories, The Natural Approach features a scientific teaching rhythm and staged design of linguistic output tasks without forcing students to speak. It filters learners' negative emotions and builds a relaxed and joyful classroom atmosphere, providing an effective environment for both language acquisition and formal learning[9]. With pictures, real scenes and daily-life materials to construct comprehensible input, the classroom is highly engaging and suitable for learners of all ages including children and adults.

Exclusive long-term use of The Natural Approach reveals its inherent defects. The whole teaching system weakens systematic grammar instruction; prolonged learning tends to cause insufficient grammatical accuracy, forming an obvious disadvantage in written examinations. In addition to factors similar to those constraining first language acquisition, the development of second language competence is restricted by maturational constraints, cognitive resources, as well as interference from native language and affective factors[10][11]. Meanwhile, implementing The Natural Approach requires teachers to stock a large number of pictures, videos and real scene props, imposing high demands on teachers' preparation resources. Classroom focus is concentrated on listening and speaking, lacking supporting systematic training frameworks for reading and writing.

3.5. General Strengths and Weaknesses of the Entire Humanistic Teaching System

From a macro perspective, all humanistic teaching models share unified merits. They break the fixed model of "prioritizing grammar over affection" in traditional classrooms, targeting the core pain points of students' reluctance to speak and fear of foreign language learning. Adhering to the philosophy of whole-person education[12], they balance linguistic competence development and mental health growth, conforming to the overall direction of current quality-oriented education reform[13].

However, this theoretical system also has holistic shortcomings. All humanistic teaching models prioritize classroom affective experience while generally lacking systematic frameworks for grammar and vocabulary instruction. Most teaching schemes fit small-class environments better; in mainstream large-sized exam-oriented classrooms in China, they can only serve as auxiliary teaching tools rather than sole instructional modes.

4. Practical Inspirations of Humanistic Teaching Thoughts for Contemporary Foreign Language Teaching

Combining the theoretical analysis of Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching with realistic teaching conditions of primary, secondary and university foreign language classrooms as well as adult education in China, full replication of a single humanistic teaching approach cannot be well implemented. Nevertheless, extracting core humanistic concepts and integrating strengths of the four approaches carries vital practical value.

4.1. Constructing Low-Anxiety Learning Environments as Classroom Priorities

The most critical pedagogical enlightenment delivered by humanistic teaching approaches is that psychological security lays the foundation for language learning. Affection stands as one of the dominant factors influencing foreign language learning[14], so language classrooms must foster a safe and inclusive atmosphere.

Frontline teachers do not need to fully replicate the complete circle teaching of CLL or the full procedures of The Natural Approach, but they can absorb its affective education ideas: classroom teaching should prioritize positive encouragement and reduce harsh public error correction[15]; low-stress tasks such as picture description and physical activities should be designed; TPR mini-games can be adopted at lesson openings to ease students' emotional tension. In primary and junior high school lower-grade classrooms, students' self-confidence should take precedence over grammatical accuracy.

4.2. Optimizing Classroom Design by Decomposing Advantages of Four Approaches and Pursuing Integrated Instruction

Maintaining a lifelong learning attitude, possessing the spirit of brave exploration and innovation, and holding critical thinking are internal driving forces for the growth of educator-type teachers[16] (Li Gui'an & Yang Bodi, 2023). Therefore, teachers should not rigidly adhere to a single humanistic teaching model, but integrate distinctive strengths of each approach into conventional classrooms.

TPR physical activities can be adopted in pre-class warm-ups to activate the class; The Silent Way's concept of teacher reticence can be borrowed for phonetic and vocabulary teaching to guide students in autonomous spelling and peer error checking; CLL small-group discussion patterns can be applied in dialogue sharing sessions; the graded comprehensible input logic of The Natural Approach can be followed for new knowledge presentation. Integrated teaching retains the strength of humanism in relieving anxiety while making up for its deficiency in systematic linguistic training.

4.3. Selecting Humanistic Teaching Means Hierarchically Based on Learning Conditions and Curriculum Objectives

Every student is an individual with unique characteristics. Providing differentiated instruction tailored to student features to promote every learner's progress on the basis of

their original competence has long been the pursuit of education and teaching[17].

For oral classes targeting children or zero-basis adult learners, TPR and picture input of The Natural Approach can serve as primary teaching forms, with moderate weakening of grammar recitation and the core goal of cultivating learning interest. For classes with a large proportion of introverted students and underachievers, small-scale CLL group communication should be prioritized to reduce nervousness triggered by whole-class random questioning. In junior and senior high school exam-oriented classrooms, various humanistic activities are only used as auxiliary segments for lesson openings and consolidation, with main teaching procedures combining situational and communicative grammar training to balance oral fluency and grammatical accuracy. University oral expansion courses can integrate input from The Natural Approach and group discussions of CLL to lower exam pressure and focus on cultivating authentic communicative competence.

4.4. Balancing Affective Cultivation and Systematic Linguistic Knowledge Instruction

Humanism inherently bears the weakness of “prioritizing emotional experience while neglecting linguistic systems”. Modern foreign language classrooms should not blindly pursue a relaxed atmosphere at the cost of fundamental grammar, reading and writing knowledge. Previous disciplinary curriculum design solidifies the boundary between human beings and knowledge and weakens the core literacy of humanism[18].

The optimal teaching path lies in optimizing classroom atmosphere with humanistic concepts while constructing linguistic knowledge frameworks via structural and communicative teaching. Teachers can first relieve anxiety through humanistic activities such as TPR and picture input, then conduct pattern drills, grammar sorting and task-based communication, so as to realize simultaneous improvement of students’ psychological growth and linguistic competence.

5. Conclusion

One set of psychological theories can derive diverse teaching methods with completely different styles. The Total Physical Response, The Silent Way, Community Language Learning and The Natural Approach share the core theory of learner-centered affection, yet they feature unique strengths and inherent limitations due to divergent implementation paths of anxiety relief and classroom organization. There exists no universal and optimal single teaching approach.

The most valuable legacy humanism leaves to contemporary foreign language education is not the full replication of its classroom procedures, but in breaking the old teaching mindset that values grammar and test scores exclusively and reminding teachers to focus on learners’ psychological needs. In practical teaching, teachers should flexibly integrate the strengths of the four humanistic approaches, complement systematic linguistic knowledge frameworks with structuralism and communicative teaching, balance affective cultivation and language learning, and build balanced foreign language classrooms adaptable to domestic

learning conditions.

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