A Humanistic Perspective for the Mixed-Proficiency Language Class[1]

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Abstract

English language teaching theories, approaches, and methodologies overlook the complexities of teaching the mixed-proficiency language classroom (MPLC). This is evident in the low number of English language teaching books that directly address this topic in their content, leaving language teachers without any guidance on strong principles to face this challenge. Unfortunately, many are the language teachers, in both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, who struggle to provide students with equal learning opportunities despite the disparity in the students' language proficiencies. The MPLC is an area that needs special consideration. This paper has practical implications for language teachers who are confronted with the challenges of the mixed-proficiency language class, and who accept and practice humanist principles. This article identifies how humanistic principles encourage the unlimited potential for growth and development of both teachers and students. Building on the research on humanistic principles, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: How might the humanistic approach to education contribute to language learning in the MPLC? What humanistic principles stand out as needed in the language class?

Resumen

Las teorías, enfoques y metodologías de enseñanza del idioma inglés tienden a pasar por alto las complejidades que implica la enseñanza a estudiantes que presentan diferentes niveles lingüísticos en una sola clase. Esto es evidente en la forma en que los libros de enseñanza del idioma inglés tienden a ignorar o tratar brevemente este tema, dejando a los profesores de idiomas sin principios sólidos para abordar este desafío. Desafortunadamente, muchos son los profesores de idiomas, tanto en contextos de inglés como segunda lengua e inglés como lengua extranjera, que buscan brindar a los estudiantes las mismas oportunidades de aprendizaje a pesar de su disparidad en el dominio del idioma. La clase de inglés que presenta esta variedad de niveles lingüísticos es un área que necesita más atención. Este artículo tiene implicaciones prácticas para docentes de inglés que enfrentan los retos de clases de diferentes niveles lingüísticos y que aceptan y practican principios humanistas. En este artículo se identifican maneras en algunos los principios humanistas como una estrategia que ayuda a abordar el tema en cuestión para fomentar el potencial ilimitado de crecimiento y desarrollo tanto de profesores como de estudiantes respondiendo las preguntas: ¿Cómo podría el enfoque humanista de la educación contribuir al aprendizaje de idiomas en clases que presentan diferentes niveles lingüísticos? ¿Qué principios humanistas se destacan como necesarios en la clase de idiomas?

Understanding the Mixed-Proficiency Language Class (MPLC)

The MPLC class is one with language learners "whose competencies in English are quite different from each other" (Bekiryazici, 2015). The MPLC groups students with varying linguistic proficiencies ranging from novice to advanced. This situation creates a complex scenario where language teachers struggle to achieve course objectives (Abbott, 2018).

But the language differences of learners are not always easy to identify since the MPLC also refers to classroom experiences where students have different abilities, backgrounds, and interests (Ashton, 2019; 2020; Bell, 2004; Bell, 2012). Having different abilities refers to the English language strengths and weaknesses that make learners develop at different rates or what Ur (2016) identified as heterogeneity. This process includes the fact that some language skills are easier to learn. Learners with different backgrounds include those who have learned linguistic skills differently such as those who learned orally and those who have learned reading and writing mainly from a textbook. Similarly, language learners may have a different motivation to invest their time in learning a second or third language. This reality makes it difficult for teachers to plan their instructional practices. The MPLC's classroom organization is a complex scenario where the teacher is challenged to develop strategic techniques that provide all students with equitable English language learning opportunities (Abbott, 2018; Bell, 2012; Şalli-Çopur, 2005).

No formal or informal English language learning process is exempted from the MPLC scenario since there are multiple reasons why learners with different proficiency levels are together in a classroom. Reasons vary from context to context, ranging from registration procedures, ineffective placement tests, budget decisions, curriculum design, and the diverse array of learners' preferences and backgrounds.

Contributions Addressing the MPLC

Even though the MPLC is not frequently and strongly addressed in English Language Teaching (ELT) methodology books, many books have contributed to better practice. Earlier research reports that task

differentiation (Borja et al., 2015, Raza, 2020), material adaptation (Budden, 2008), open-ended tasks and strategic class organization (Ur, 2016), affective tools (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015) are effective classroom techniques that can develop students' motivation, interest, participation, and responsibility (Hess, 2001) are examples.

Task differentiation, as explained by Lindstromberg (2004), "refers to the practice of consistently having different students doing very different class exercises at the same time" (n. p). A positive aspect of task differentiation in the MPLC is seemingly the only strategy that aims to teach all students despite their differences. The negative point is that having many students makes it hard and even impossible for instructors to particularly direct attention to each student's motivation and discipline. For Budden (2008), material adaptation could be addressed by specifically rewriting reading texts and grading the language according to students' different English language levels. He offered the possibility of designing extension activities for students with a higher language level and providing support activities to students with a lower level (e.g., pre-teaching vocabulary activities). Bowler and Parminter (2002) suggested tiered tasks to adapt listening and reading material. They claimed that whichever level of task students get, the result is the same or similar for all if the following equation is followed: "text level of challenge + task level of support = student success" (p. 59).

Focusing on strategic grouping and class participation is a proactive strategy to support learners' emotional struggles. Thoughtful planning of student grouping and participation can provide equal opportunities for learning (Barrantes, 2019). In MPLCs, it is possible to find differences in the types of learners' quality and quantity of participation. Similarly, mindful planning of class grouping may foster authentic interaction where learners could potentially develop their communicative skills in a reassuring and less intimidating environment.

Al-Shammakhi and Al-Humaidi (2015) recommend affective strategies: (a) establishing a good relationship with students to reduce their fear and anxiety, (b) being supportive and enthusiastic so students can feel confident, and (c) discussing experiences together with learners to support their learning process.

Aligned with earlier researchers' interests on MPLCs, this paper still argues that additional research is needed to better inform teachers about strategies for dealing with MPLCs. Systematic classroom observation gives an understanding of meaning of the everyday challenges drawn from class experiences. As such, the next section details the experiences of teachers and students in MPLCs.

Real-life Experiences: Sharing from MPLCs

This section reports the perspectives of a group of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and first-year students in a Spanish-speaking country who narrated their experiences when teaching and learning in MPLCs.

The study

A case study was conducted to identify and understand the effects of MPLCs on an English language program in a public university (Barrantes, 2013). Through a diagnostic process, the MPLCs was identified as a challenge for both instructors and learners. Enrollment requirements were the main reason identified. Participants were four language instructors and 33 students who provided data through focus groups, interviews and questionnaires. In addition, structured observations and artifact collection were sources of data. Findings revealed that classes were characterized by having significantly different proficiency levels. These differences caused considerable challenges to participation, language progress, retention, and classroom management. The next section reflects findings that are part of this case study.

Sharing from the Classroom: Learners' and Teachers' Experiences

Participants in the study identified both positive and negative experiences in the MPLC learning process. Novice and beginner learners identified lack of confidence, insecurity, lack of motivation, reluctance to participate, and fear of mockery as negative experiences. Participants also identified some challenges that include students' fear of giving an oral presentation in front of the class, their efforts to try to constantly catch up with classmates' high language proficiency, their determination to not conform to a passing grade but to excel, and their intimidation to participate with classmates and teachers.

On a positive note, these learners appreciated peer-mentoring from more experienced classmates and their constant assistance. They pointed out that vocabulary and pronunciation are the most frequent subskills

needing additional help. They also mentioned that their classmates' higher language skills were a source of inspiration that they aspired to reach.

As expected, intermediate students reported very different and negative aspects and challenges. They mentioned that classes were slow and boring and that their teachers did not take their questions seriously. Both teachers and classmates seemed to think they knew more than they actually did. The only challenge they highlighted was their need to look for other language learning sources as they felt classwork was not challenging enough. Some of their positive experiences include easy and fast learning, peer-mentor opportunities, easy tasks, and the possibility to go over grammar and pronunciation details.

Face-to-face interviews with two teachers provided insightful teaching experiences. The biggest challenge they identified was the inescapable heavy day-to-day decision making about class pace. They found it overwhelming to respond to all students' needs assertively. One teacher vividly expressed, "*It's hard to decide, do I go back? Do I continue? You constantly have to make decisions. And I constantly find myself asking, what am I going to do now?*"

A profound concern about the negative effects of the MPLC on language learners' and teachers' experiences has caused me to look into possibilities to go beyond the problem. I am interested in seeking approaches that will help teachers and learners find plausible answers to their problems.

Approaching the MPLC through Humanistic Principles

The humanistic approach in education embraces principles that emphasize the individual and their needs. As a revolutionary movement in the early 20th century, humanism defied the prevalent educational theories of behaviorism and psychoanalysis. Humanist principles challenged notions of "fixing the defunct learner," and claimed such deficit notions positioned learners negatively. Humanism focused on the principle that teachers might help learners show their best abilities by seeing them as complex thinkers with feelings and emotions.

Humanistic approaches to learning are based on the work of Maslow and Rogers (Shirkhani & Ardeshir, 2013).Both psychologists put the learner at the center of educational processes. A major focus is given to the notion that learning embraces the individual. This notion focuses on achieving a learner's full potential by embracing their personality and individual interests. Learners' well-being is the main aim of humanistic education, which includes values, potential development and dignity (Rohmana & Rinda, 2019).

Rogers (1969) and Maslow (2000) acknowledged the role of needs in the classroom and claimed their strong influence on the learning process. Along with Rogers' key ideas around freedom of choice and unconditional regard, Maslow's hierarchy of needs identifies safety, belonging, and esteem as immediate needs that should be addressed in a humanistic language classroom. Such needs have significant relevance in MPLCs (Shirkhani, & Ardeshir, 2013). These needs emphasize the inner value of language learners by acknowledging the strong link with interpersonal communication skills, which is a foundational principle of language learning. In her contribution about the Affective Turn in second language acquisition, Pavlenko (2013) recognized the need to acknowledge how speakers make choices based on their emotions in conjunction with their needs to communicate with other speakers.

Principle 1: Freedom to choose

Roger's (1969) notion about the importance of freeing the students from the constraints of the school curriculum is not only challenged but also imposed by language teachers with a set curriculum. However, even though learners are not always invited to make decisions about the school curriculum, they can still be free to explore topics and activities in which they are interested. The emphasis is on the free choice that fosters learners' actualizing tendency or desire for self-improvement.

Encouraging choice in the MPLC can take the form of open-ended tasks and multi-level tasks (Scrivener, 2012). Ur (2016) explained how limiting task time can be effective because this strategy recognizes that students perform tasks at different speeds. She also suggested that teachers use mostly open-ended questions and allow for various answers. Here, learners not only perform at their levels, but they also make their own linguistic choices. Ur explained. "It is easy to change [closed-ended exercises] so that lots of right answers are possible, making the exercise available to many more levels" (p.11).

Inviting students to brainstorm ideas about classroom decisions related to unit topics, assessment strategies, and grouping techniques could potentially foster this humanistic principle and promote the learner's self-discovery and introspection. A humanistic perspective in the MPLC requires teachers to balance

learners' autonomous actions and the demands of the environment. Although the freedom to choose in language learning is stressed, it does not translate into leaving learners to do whatever they want.

Freedom to choose in the language classroom should not bring chaos; instead, it should bring students' voices and decisions. Scrivener (2012) identified this technique as letting students choose what to do. Examples of this classroom environment include having students participate in assessment processes (e.g., asking students to design peer and self-assessment rubrics that they will use later in their classes). Another example is an activity called the Song Project where students are responsible for teaching a class by sharing a song and connecting it with a topic in their course syllabus. They analyze the message, the lyrics, vocabulary, grammar and every detail they find important for their language progress. With every freedom, teachers should make sure there is a corresponding responsibility.

Principle 2: Unconditional positive regard

Unconditional positive regard invites teachers to be empathetic, positive and supportive. Acknowledging the English language level difference in the MPLC is the first step toward a humanist perspective followed by the determination to support learners and their differences. The way errors are treated in the classroom is a good example of showing empathy for the learning path. On this note, Richards (2015) noted that teachers' efforts of "walking in students' shoes" promote a successful learning atmosphere that helps build error tolerance and empathy. It is always important to keep the error correction experience positive, Scrivener (2011) suggested that asking the next four questions could potentially help teachers use learners' errors to identify their progress: "Will it help or hinder learning? Am I correcting something they don't know? (if so, there doesn't seem much point). How will the student take the correction? What is my intention in correcting?" (p. 286).

Language teachers play an important part in students' development of strong self-esteem by unconditionally seeing students in a positive image even when the classroom conditions are not favorable. A humanistic perspective in the language class should focus on the experience of learning and interacting positively. There should be room in the MPLC for exercises that encourage identifying the strengths and weaknesses, and the giving and receiving of positive feedback so that understanding ourselves and others become an open conversation. This type of classroom engagement and environment promote self-respect and respect for others which is an aim of humanism.

Principle 3: Safety

Williams and Burden (2010) assertively noted the impact of creating a safe space in language teaching and learning. They stated, "Language classrooms in particular need to be places where learners are encouraged to use the new language to communicate, try out new ways of expressing meanings, negotiate, make mistakes without fear, and learn from successes and failures. Emotionally, a suitable environment for language learning should be one that enhances the trust needed to communicate and which enhances confidence and self-esteem" (p. 202). Classroom participation carries some risks because they are trying out their language learning in public. They must be challenged but not humiliated. In their roles as facilitators and leaders, teachers need to set the tone to anticipate any mockery from peers. Language teachers as facilitators and leaders should set the tone by communicating classroom behavior upfront. With help from students, teachers can develop a set of rules on the first day of class. It is always important to have a discussion and draw up the rules together in that way teachers give a degree of ownership. Equally important is that teachers consistently follow through when rules are broken.

Dörnyei (2014) stated that being language learning is a social process, learners cannot be separated from their social environment. His research also pointed out that establishing class norms, that come as a result of a social product effort, creates a tolerant classroom climate. Spending class time setting, negotiating and modeling class norms with the learners make long-lasting and constructive relationships that are mindful of class pressures. Class norms then should include a mockery-free environment that prompts learners to feel protected and free from fear.

Principle 4: Belonging

The feelings of belonging relate to learners' need for interpersonal relationships and motivate the learner's behavior in class. Belonging to a group represents being a member who feels "welcomed, wanted, and respected by classmates and teachers; being familiar with classmates and having friends who understand them" (Jorgensen et al., 2010, p. 58). Coulon (1995) represented one contemporary tendency of associating membership with agency or embodiment, commenting that "a member is not only a person who breathes

and who thinks, but a person with a whole ensemble of processes, methods, activities and know-how that enables her to invent adjusting devices to give some sense to the surrounding world" (p. 27).

There is a tight connection between membership and belonging where membership represents "students having access to valued social roles and the symbols of belonging" (Jorgensen et al., 2010, p. 58). Such symbols might include allowing students a stronger voice in class activities, building positive relationships with other members, and having one's attributes identified as identity markers. Norton (2013) described learners' identity as how they do not perceive themselves as individual entities but as an integral part of a group.

Humanistic classroom exercises and attitudes that foster learners in the MPLC include participating in bonding activities, using one-to-one instruction and teacher conferencing, organizing class discussions, implementing show and tell tasks, and bonding activities. Intentional teacher action that develops effective group dynamics and builds trust among group members also includes teachers' genuine interest in getting to know students' preferences, interests, and concerns, being approachable and available to students in need, providing positive comments and feedback rather than negative, and trying to be empathetic, fair, considerate, and patient.

Principle 5: Esteem

Highly linked with the emphasis on emotion and affect in language teaching and learning, linguistic ability influences learners' self-esteem in the MPLC. As Brown and Lee (2015) suggested, "learning an additional language can be threatening for even the most confident learners, and risking making a fool of yourself in the L2 takes intestinal fortitude" (p. 76). Then, less proficient learners' class participation is an act of courage and strong personal value. Learning a language involves making mistakes, which, if not addressed positively, could potentially be perceived as a threat.

Moving away from reductionist views of affective factors as merely individual characteristics, Pavlenko (2013) explained how speakers, in this case, language learners, live in distinct emotional worlds which influences their risk-taking and willingness to communicate. Emotional worlds shape learners' choices in class and interactions as they are influenced by other interlocutors' (classmates and teacher) linguistic competence. Maslow (2000) explained that "satisfaction of the self-esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength and capability" (p. 261). All of these are necessary for language learners to take risks in class, participate, interact, communicate and consequently learn the new language. Key actions to promote the satisfaction of learners' self-esteem include celebrating successes and achievement as these satisfy the desire for respect from others and a feeling of accomplishment that translates into status and prestige. Some ideas to celebrate students' achievements include organizing events to display projects, stopping the class to give a round of applause, awarding certificates, and sharing encouraging letters and postcards.

Including Humanistic Principles in the MPLC

Humanistic principles to language teaching and learning prioritize the development of learners' self-awareness, feelings and emotions, active engagement of learners in the learning process, and the learners' ability to understand others. Intentional planning that includes humanistic principles in day-to-day language learning is essential to emphasize the inner value of learners. The following advice weaves together theory and teachers' and learners' experiences in the form of classroom practice that could potentially aid the particularities of the MPLC.

Learners need the classroom to be a space where they can express their 'selves'.

Promoting the sense of belonging through good group dynamics promotes self-awareness, a voice and a sense of confidence and help them build trust and acceptance among group members. Quy (2017) shared a set of group dynamics that specifically builds a sense of belonging in the EFL classroom.

Empowering learners optimizes their engagement, agency and autonomy.

Once learners act with intention, they practice autonomy and can take control of their learning processes. Self-regulating strategies guide students toward adjusting and adapting actions in accordance with their language level. Goal setting, strategic planning, self-instruction and self-reflection prepare students to learn how to learn in a less teacher-directive process where they are encouraged to become independent.

Collaborative approaches to language teaching and learning encourage positive social relations.

Collaboration promotes teachers and students to work together to achieve goals successfully, while at the same time, they nurture relationships and create opportunities for genuine interaction (Brown & Lee, 2015). Collaboration is of primary importance in the MPLC, as it requires extensive collaborative interaction to boost language practice at different levels.

Conclusion

Intentionally using humanistic principles in mixed-proficiency classes requires of language teachers an open mind, a willingness to acknowledge the challenges and a clear understanding of the benefits for both teachers and learners. One of the most important benefits is that it acknowledges learners' dignity and potential despite their differences. The key to effectively humanizing the language class lies in teachers' ability to choose what and how specific principles are applicable to their teaching context. Teachers might build an inclusive environment by wisely incorporating humanistic principles in MPLCs. On this note, inclusive environments are key in helping the students achieve their full potential to learn English while attending to the strengths and qualities of students and themselves.

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