

# A Humanistic Approach to Foreign Language Education in Japan

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## 要約

本稿の執筆は教育が、知性や人格に肯定的・形成的影響を与える経験であるという意味に於いて重要であり、またこの経験が他の場所と同様に義務教育の授業に於いても十分起こりうるという前提条件に基いている。筆者の論点は、語学の教育及び学習に（現在の試験や技能に基いた枠組みではなく）人間中心的観点で取り組む方が学生及び社会に寄与するというものである。この裏付けとして、デューイの進歩的教育理論 (1997)、言語教育における人間中心的伝統 (マレイ 1983, ステヴィック 1990)、カール・ロジャースの教育への人間を中心とする取り組み (ロジャース 1961, ロジャース&フライベルク 1994)、全体的教育理論 (ミラー 1990, 中川 2000)、及び批判的教育学 (マクラレン 2005, ショール 1992) を参照する。また、筆者は日本の教育現場についての自身の観察結果、高校や大学での指導経験を当てはめ、現場についての改善の余地を提言する。

Almost everyone has had occasion to look back upon his school days and wonder what has become of the knowledge he was supposed to have amassed during his years of schooling. (Dewey, 1997, p. 47)

This paper is written on the assumption that education—in the sense of experience which has a positive, formative effect on mind and character—is important, and that it may as well occur in the compulsory language classroom as anywhere else<sup>1)</sup>. I argue that a humanistic approach to language teaching and learning would serve students and society better than the current test/skill-based paradigm which prioritizes the memorization of prescribed facts and the accomplishment of short-term learning goals over the life-long aims of cultivating self-actualization and responsible citizenship. To support my argument, I refer to Dewey's progressive theory of education (1997), the humanistic tradition in language education (Maley, 1983; Stevick, 1990), Carl Rogers' person-centred approach to education (1961; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), holistic education theory (Miller, 1990; Nakagawa, 2000), and critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2005; Shor, 1992). I also draw on my own observations of the Japanese education scene, and my experience working in high school and university to suggest ways in which the situation can be improved.

**Keywords:** Japan; education; humanistic; reform; English

## 1. Defining 'humanistic'

A humanistic approach to language teaching tends to be associated with the 'Designer' methodologies from the 1970s such as The Silent Way (Gattegno, 1978), Community Language Learning (Curran, 1976) and Suggestopedia (Lozanov, 1979). Maley (1983) claims that the effectiveness of these methodologies was frequently exaggerated, and that they were protected from critical and empirical scrutiny by over-zealous adherents; and yet, he contends: "we owe them collectively an enormous debt" (p. 82) because they contributed to our appreciation of the important role played in learning by factors such as creativity, play, emotions, the teacher-student relationship, and freedom from fear of making mistakes. While I wish to disassociate my use of the term humanistic from any of these specific past uses, there are naturally a number of parallels between the humanistic *methodologies*, and the general *principles* I propose here. Chief among these is an emphasis on psychological rather than cognitive aspects of learning. In a discussion of the influential humanist psychologist Carl Rogers' approach to teaching, Stevick (1990) writes that "Rogers is not as concerned about the actual cognitive process of learning since, he feels, if the context for learning...is properly created, then human beings will, in fact, learn everything they need to..." (p. 27). In terms of pedagogy, then, *who* the teacher is, and *how* she behaves may be more important than the extent to which she commands the latest techniques because, ultimately, the teacher cannot *teach* anything; she can only *facilitate* self-directed learning. Unfortunately, self-directed learning's nemesis, *simulated learning* (McVeigh, 2006), in which students are primarily "coping with the 'imposition' of having to study a foreign language" (Lantolf, 2000, p. 12), can be seen to constitute a great deal of activity in compulsory language classrooms.

Outside of past usage in language education, the term *humanistic* can refer to a variety of perspectives in philosophy and the social sciences, from a secular ideology to a historical movement. For the purposes of this paper, I intend it to be understood as a useful guiding philosophy to teaching, in much the same way as Miller (1992, in Nakagawa, 2000) defines holistic education: "[not] a particular method or technique...[but] a *paradigm*, a set of basic assumptions and principles that can be applied in diverse ways" (p. 71). However, parallels between a humanistic and a holistic approach to education go beyond these general parameters. Central to both is the idea of a self-directed search to grow as an individual and member of society, to understand, and come to terms with one's existence and place within the social world and even the cosmos; in short, to *know thyself*. This powerful existential motif forms an important part of diverse religious, philosophical, and social scientific traditions. Western traditions, for example, tend to focus on the growth of the individual, while Eastern traditions emphasize the dissolution of the individual. Yet, viewed against the stark background of contemporary education, their differences—to an extent, and for practical purposes—can be understood as a matter of nuance rather than divergence, constituting a powerful moral alternative to current educational practice. I now give an overview of some of these different motifs.

The philosopher Richard Rorty (2000) describes moral development in the individual and the human species as:

...a matter of re-making human selves so as to enlarge the variety of the relationships which constitute those selves. The ideal limit of this process of enlargement is the Self envisaged by Christian and Buddhist accounts of sainthood—an ideal self to whom the hunger and suffering of *any* human being (and even, perhaps, that of any other animal) is intensely painful (Rorty, 2000, p. 79).

This process of “re-making” is viewed by the influential educational philosopher John Dewey (1997) as being inherent in true learning. He argues that values and norms such as beauty, goodness, and truth emerge naturally from teaching and learning as “a continuous process or reconstruction of experience” (p. 87). The humanist Carl Rogers (1961) conceptualized the ultimate end of this process to be a *person-centered way of being*:

...something into which one grows. It is a set of values, not easy to achieve, that places emphasis on the dignity of the individual, the importance of personal choice, the significance of responsibility, the joy of creativity. It is a philosophy, built upon a foundation of the democratic way<sup>2)</sup>, that empowers each individual (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p. 123).

Maslow (1943) uses the term *self-actualization* to describe the “full realization of one’s own deepest true qualities...”, adding that “...since conformity leads to enslavement, the pursuit of uniqueness brings about liberation” (1990, p. 24). By contrast, eastern philosophical traditions place less emphasis on the self, and more on the self-in-context. Nakagawa (2000) understands Eastern holistic education as an “attempt to explore multidimensional reality in our own existence”, to help us “to attain the depth of our existence and thereby recover the wholeness of reality” (pp. 34-35). The philosopher Aldous Huxley (1992), who can be seen to bridge Eastern and Western perspectives, writes that education:

...aims at reconciling the individual with himself, with his fellows, with society as a whole, with the nature of which he and his society are but a part, and with the immanent and transcendent spirit within which nature has its being (p. 101).

This central theme is the most difficult aspect of a humanistic approach to define and defend, especially within an academic context which maintains a largely reductionist, short-term view of education and academic research. Nonetheless, it is a profound aspect of the human experience, central to Socrates’ admonition that “the unexamined life is not worth living”, and at the heart of a humanistic approach. For the purpose of lucidity, I shall refer to it (rather prosaically) as the

*cultivation of wisdom*. Other aspects of humanistic learning—a place for emotion in the learning process such as the development of social relationships through friendship and cooperation, responsibility for one’s actions, intellectual stimulation (Stevick, 1990) and, ultimately, skill acquisition and testable knowledge—are emergent outcomes of this central concern rather than primary goals of learning.

The cultivation of wisdom involves a process of *unlearning* that which is taken as axiomatic according to conventional ideology—as Laing (1967) writes: “True sanity entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self competently adjusted to our alienated social reality” (p. 119). While Laing’s views can be seen as extreme in terms of their position on mental health (Raschid, 2005), in a broader sense they touch on the essence of what it means critically question axiomatic assumptions about society: GDP as a measure of success, higher education as a means of preparing people for the workforce, the standardized test as the primary measure of learning etc. From the perspective of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2005; Shor, 1992), industrial-age culture, sustained by compulsory education, is materialistic, reductionist, economically focused, and discriminatory (Nakagawa, 2000). The cultivation of wisdom therefore involves gaining critical awareness of the ideological environment maintained by political and power structures; or, in more straightforward terms, to recognize the fact that “One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit” (Frankfurt, 2005). By gaining awareness, students are empowered to play an active role in reshaping their own social reality into a more agreeable form; to make the world better (Kesson, 1993). Cultivating wisdom also demands critical inquiry into the nature of values, which are often introjected from other individuals or groups significant to us but, paradoxically, regarded as our own (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), leading to an inauthentic sense of self. Challenging prevailing ideologies and their ‘approved’ values threatens existing power structures and is likely to be attacked by those unaware that they are themselves in thrall to ideology (or those who are happy to maintain it). It is the inherently audacious quality of a humanistic outlook which gives it the power to effect change in the individual and in society. Before turning to an examination of the educational context in Japan and some of the challenges which it poses, I offer the following working definition of a humanistic approach in terms of the principles upon which it is based:

- i. Through the cultivation of wisdom we can live more enriched and worthwhile lives.
- ii. Reverence for life and nature, empathy towards fellow humans and animals, and the acquisition of relevant skills and knowledge are likely to be emergent qualities of this cultivation.
- iii. The search for meaning will involve the stimulation of the emotions, the intellect, and the creative instinct.
- iv. Critical awareness of the ways in which we are shaped by social, political and power structures will form a part of this cultivation.

## 2. Language education policy in Japan

One reason why many existing analyses of the Japanese education system from *within* fall short of significant insight may be that they tend to concentrate on critiquing or attempting to fix a *part* of a system that is in fact dysfunctional as a *whole* (intellectually akin to the medical act of putting a Band-Aid on a cancer patient). In the following section I therefore take as wide a view as possible, so that I may set the reforms that I propose later in an appropriate context.

With the recent introduction of English lessons to elementary school, children who continue through high school—96.3% of students in 2004 (Fujita-Round & Maher, 2008)—will undergo eight years of compulsory English classes. A child continuing to university can expect an extra year studying English regardless of whether or not her major has anything to do with English. Judged in terms of the positive role that it plays in the cultivation of wisdom, English education in Japan leaves a lot to be desired: One only need talk to a sample of adults who have passed through the foreign language system to be made clearly aware of the deep sense of frustration and even resentment that many Japanese people hold toward a system which is, for the most part, synonymous with exam preparation, crippled by bureaucracy, and entwined with corporate interests.

Testing is the commonly used method to grade, classify, and decide the future educational and career-paths of students in Japan, and teachers are consequently under pressure from administrators and parents to teach to the test. The problems with testing are well-known, well-documented, and well-ignored. Writing on the American situation, Rogers and Freiberg (1994) note that:

Standardized tests are now so pervasive and powerful in our public schools that they have greatly diminished the quality of our schools...The emphasis is...not on the joy, excitement, and/or challenge of learning; rather, it is on...mastery of isolated skills...test-taking skills, etc. Curricula are no longer based on interests, needs, or curiosity, but are dominated by what is on the tests (p. 105).

In Japan, the testing system acts as a feeder for industry. The advance of the corporate interests into the university can be seen in the way in which university students are pressured to search for jobs from the third year of (four-year) undergraduate courses (Stewart, 2009). Writing on the increase in corporate influence on the running of universities in Europe, Phillipson (2008) observes, sardonically, that:

...universities should no longer be seen as a public good but should be run like businesses, should privatise, and let industry set the agenda...degrees must be 'certified' in terms of the 'employability' of graduates. 'Accountability' no longer refers to intellectual quality or truth-

seeking but means acceptability to corporate-driven neoliberalism...These ideas are insulting to higher education. (p. 13)

Perhaps the idea of higher education as an academic utopia free from 'real-world' political and financial constraints is overly idealistic. Nonetheless, a humanistic perspective would direct us to look critically upon collaboration between government, corporate entities, and academia<sup>3)</sup>: the first two are motivated in part by gaining re-election and financial gain; the latter should, ideally, be motivated by higher ideals.

Combined with the influence of corporate interests and a governing neo-liberal philosophy, entrenched bureaucracy works to stifle administrative creativity, preventing effective change. Fromm (1976) notes that for bureaucrats: "there is not even a conflict between conscience and duty: their conscience *is* doing their duty" (p. 151). In practice, this means that: "Administrators don't want to share their power with teachers for fear of losing some of it; and teachers, in turn, don't want to pass on their power to students for fear of losing control" (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). The influence of an amoral bureaucracy on education therefore warrants attention. For example, it could be argued that one measure of whether or not a teacher can be said to be utilizing a humanistic approach is whether she has resisted the urge to become a bureaucrat.

An example of the influence of bureaucracy at a higher hierarchical level is a white paper from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology (MEXT)—"Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" (in Okuno, 2007)—which states that:

For children living in the 21st century, it is essential for them to acquire communication abilities in English as a common international language. In addition, English abilities are important in terms of linking our country with the rest of the world, obtaining the world's understanding and trust, enhancing our international presence and further developing our nation.

At present, though, due to the lack of sufficient ability, many Japanese are restricted in their exchanges with foreigners and their ideas or opinions are not evaluated appropriately. It is also necessary for Japanese to develop their ability to clearly express their own opinions in Japanese first in order to learn English...

...Cultivating "Japanese with English Abilities" is an extremely important issue for the future of our children and for the further development of our country. (p. 138).

This manifesto for the pursuit of English on a national scale contains several assumptions:

1. National economic prosperity is among the purposes of English education.
2. English ability causes economic prosperity.

3. English is essential for *all* children.
4. English education is for the future.
5. Young Japanese people are deficient in that they are not even able to express themselves in Japanese (elsewhere in this manifesto they are also said to lack critical thinking skills).

Given the lack of supporting evidence, these assumptions are presumably seen as axiomatic. Yet it is a simple matter to build a counter-argument to each of them. First, the idea that one purpose of education is to serve the state or nation runs counter to the humanistic principles I outlined above, the consequences of which affect the individual and the people with whom he/she comes into contact directly or indirectly, within or without the state. Further, while there is no reason why economic prosperity should not be an emergent outcome of humanistic learning, it is not a primary focus. Second, any causal relationship between English and economic prosperity is likely to be mediated by multiple other factors such as exchange rates, the cost of labour, engineering expertise, 'human capital', natural resource wealth etc. If current shifting relationships between the non-English speaking creditor nations in the East and the English-speaking debtor nations in the West are taken into account, the picture is likely to become murkier still. Past events such as Japan's post-war 'boom' years of the '70s and '80s show us that economic success and English proficiency do not necessarily have to go hand in hand. Third, it is quite clear that English is not essential for all children, most of whom satisfy the bulk of their communicative and economic needs through Japanese. It is hardly surprising that motivation to learn English may be lacking in such circumstances (Ellis, 1997). It is true that many Japanese are interested in English and worry about their level of proficiency, thanks in part to the prevailing ideology and the commercial proliferation and adoption of the TOEIC and TOEFL tests. However, there is a great difference between an earnest desire to learn English and the concrete sacrifices needed to achieve a certain level of proficiency over a number of years. Seargent (2009) writes that "For vast portions of the world's population English remains a foreign language—often an obscure and unnecessary one—despite the prominent discourse which promotes its global reach" (p. 63). The idea of English in Japan, powerful though it may be, ultimately founders on the rocks of reality: The majority of Japanese people do not need English for everyday life. Fourth, even if conventional wisdom on the necessity of English based on the 'inevitable tread of globalisation'-type sound bites turns out to be true, it remains a future need, not a present need. The folly of planning for a future situation that is not heartfelt by young people is addressed by Dewey (1997) as follows:

The idea of using the present *simply* to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future. We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything (my

italics, p. 49).

In more simplistic terms, Whitehead (2001) writes: “The present contains all that there is. It is holy ground; for it is the past, and it is the future” (p. 201). It follows that education must equip children to *deal* with the future rather than second guess it. Effective, en masse, English education will become a real possibility only when there is a concrete present need for it. Finally, the protest that young people are in some way deficient is a perennial complaint of older generations; it is no surprise that students fail to display ‘critical thinking skills’ in lecture-style lessons of little relevance to their lives.

In the current climate, MEXT’s power to influence practice is mixed. Schools may or may not follow policy according to the extent to which policy is backed by law (for example, the censorship of textbooks) or financial inducements (the withholding of funding), and the extent to which it fits with their own objectives, which are typically geared towards maximising test scores. Regardless of its real power to influence peoples’ lives, MEXT’s stated plans for reform of English education in Japan are arguably unrealizable in the current sociological context (Locastro, 1996, in Seargeant, 2009). One reason for this is that the only real sense in which Japanese people can be understood to have a real and present need for English is for tests. Stewart (2009) observes that:

The MEXT slogan *Japanese with English abilities* implies communicative ability, while *juken eigo* (English for entrance exams) remains entrenched. In spite of a curricular emphasis on communicative English since 1989, the entrance tests continue to set the standards for English study in Japan. (p. 10)

The curricular emphasis on communicative English has involved the recruitment of teachers—often without formal training—from overseas. On the one hand, the classes they teach (or assist in teaching) are in danger of being deemed ‘playtime’ by students, because they are not directly focused on exam preparation. On the other, they are free from the pressure to teach to the test. However, they are not inherently any more humanistic (or if so, only slightly more so) than exam preparation classes because they are built upon the questionable MEXT assumptions discussed above; these classes, too, tend to be based on a linear or product model, with pre-specified objectives and post-evaluation of whether the objectives have been achieved. Many classes are therefore a mix between pseudo-systematic nature of a *juken* approach and postcolonial ideological tenets that Phillipson, in his book, *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992) argues are in fact fallacious:

- English is best taught monolingually.
- The ideal teacher of English is a native speaker,
- The earlier English is taught, the better the results,



- The more English is taught, the better the results,
- If other languages are used much, standards of English will drop.

Adherence to these tenets supports the myth of English as a panacea, Phillipson argues, as well as vested, corporate interests (publishing, examination certification, private conversation schools).

Is there a choice then between the panacea of English supposedly guaranteeing economic success, and the pandemic we are experiencing of corporate and military globalisation, environmental degradation, energy and food crises, and an intensifying gap between global Haves and Never-to-haves, mediated and constituted by the key international language, English? (Phillipson, 2008, p. 3).

Phillipson argues that giving children a choice of languages to choose from is a way to counter English hegemony. Giving students more choice to 'self-direct' their foreign language studies would naturally be in line with a more humanistic approach to the classroom.

### 3. Interim summary

In figure 1, I give an overview of the three positions I have discussed so far: *juken* English, communicative English, and the humanistic position.

<b>Juken English</b>	<b>Communicative English</b>	<b>Humanistic position on language education</b>
Decisions about who learns English are made by the state	Ruling ideology strongly suggests the <i>need</i> to study English	<i>Opportunities</i> to learn a variety of languages are provided by the state.
English can be taught through compulsory classes.	English can be taught with good teaching and methodologies, given sufficient motivation.	English is unlikely to be learnt where it is not needed.
English is learned to pass exams.	English is learned to communicate.	A second language is learned for various, deeply held personal or practical reasons.
Good teaching is about following appropriate procedures laid out in teacher training and textbook guidelines.	Good teaching is a matter of technique.	Good teaching is about setting the appropriate conditions for learning.
Succeeding within the system is the highest good	Becoming fluent is the highest good.	Progress along the path of cultivating wisdom is the highest good.
Learners should sit and learn.	Learners should be active in the same way as their English/American counterparts.	Learners are free to be themselves.

Fig. 1: general principles of *juken* English, communicative English, and a humanistic approach.

In conclusion, the Japanese language education system as a whole can be seen as being governed by decidedly un-humanistic ideals. By forcing people into the language classroom, by limiting choice to English, and by focusing on the peripheral and short-term aspects of learning such as isolated skills and test scores, there is less chance that students will engage in a fundamentally self-enriching search for meaning through their time in the classroom. Space limitations and the complexity of the subject matter combine to make the above analysis necessarily simplistic. Taken as a whole, however, I hope it serves to illustrate real and pressing issues.

#### **4. The case for a humanistic approach**

We are loathe to give up the old. The old is bolstered by tradition, authority and respectability; and we ourselves are its product. (Rogers, 1961, p. 309)

A humanistic approach to language education recognizes that English is unlikely to be learnt where it is not needed, and that there is little point in acquiring English unless it is part of the cultivation of wisdom. These 'ideology-busting' assumptions form a basis for change. A further justification for humanistic reform is outlined by Rogers (1961), writing against the backdrop of the Cold War:

If, as a people, we enjoy conformity rather than creativity, shall we not be permitted...[to choose conformity]? In my estimation such a choice would be entirely reasonable were it not for one great shadow which hangs over all of us. In a time when knowledge, constructive and destructive, is advancing by the most incredible leaps and bounds into a fantastic atomic age, genuinely creative adaptation seems to represent the only possibility that man can keep abreast of the kaleidoscopic change in his world. (Rogers, 1961, p. 348)

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Rogers' warning is as germane as ever. The shadow of nuclear armageddon still looms (though it has ceded media coverage to pop stars); dwindling oil supplies, skyrocketing population, global warming, wealth inequality, and many more issues besides, threaten us all, especially the poor, and all future generations. There is a need for creativity and change in the way we live our lives and the way we interact with the environment and each other, and current models of education based on the idea of perpetual economic growth and slavish devotion to neoliberal values are failing in their responsibility towards future generations. A humanistic approach offers hope for the future.

## 5. Practical suggestions

The idea of 'compulsory language education' is antithetical to an extreme humanistic position: Compulsion and meaningful learning do not go together. However, a more moderate position accepts that a certain amount of time spent encouraging children to learn a foreign language/culture is an important way to develop the realization that their own values/words are contingent, and thus to break out of the constraints of cultural ideology and achieve the re-making and growth alluded to by Rorty (2000), Rogers (1961) and Dewey (1997) (see above). The English-monopoly on language education in Japan, and its compulsory nature, can be viewed as targets for reform from such a moderate position. There is no reason not to allow students to opt out of English as they progress through adolescence, formulating more concrete plans for their futures. In addition, English classes need to be made as relevant as possible to the present (not imagined future) needs of students. If language proficiency is not one of these needs, then perhaps it would be more worthwhile introducing them, in Japanese, to various world cultures and viewpoints, as well as pressing issues facing them as global citizens. From here, an interest in studying the language of particular countries would presumably grow for certain students. In tandem with these new classes, the national obsession with testing as a measure of learning and as a value of 'human capital' needs to be addressed, and the school system changed from a production-line model to a more ecological system with longer-term (i.e. lifelong or longer) objectives. As a whole, these changes need to occur under a general reconceptualization of education as the cultivation of wisdom rather than an accumulation of facts, test scores and course credits.

Top-down changes are perhaps likely to be brought about, for better or worse, by a barrage of 'jolts' to the system (Mason, 2008) such as an economic shock, resource shortages, war, etc. I will therefore focus on the bottom-up changes that teachers can instigate through practice. I will briefly discuss the characteristics of the teacher-students relationship, the idea of 'stepping back' from conventional practice as part of a critical deconstruction of the conventional classroom, and approaches towards assessment. I will finish by addressing the significant challenges that face teachers in their endeavours.

Rogers (1961) uses the term *congruence* to describe the characteristic that allows us to enter into rewarding, therapeutic relationships. Reflecting on his own schooling, he writes:

As I think back over a number of teachers who have facilitated my own learning, it seems to me each one had this quality of being a real person...perhaps it is less important that a teacher cover the allotted amount of the curriculum, or use the most approved audio-visual devices, than that he be congruent, real, in his relation to his students (p. 287).

A congruent teacher, it follows, is not one who has a 'teaching persona', but one who is *herself*—or, at least, the *best version* of herself: Someone who takes an active interest in students,

who respects their opinions regardless of whether she agrees with them, and who empathises with students, even those whom she does not particularly like. Perhaps most importantly for the humanistic language teacher in the compulsory classroom, she empathizes with students who are apathetic towards the study of English, maintaining “an essential trust in the capacity of others to think for themselves, to learn for themselves” (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p. 212).

Regarding the humanistic teacher’s critical awareness of conventional practice, I have found that a useful metaphor is that of ‘stepping back’ from the type of orthodox practice promoted in the prevailing ideological climate. For example, in terms of curriculum and lesson planning, Rogers and Freiberg (1994) note that teachers tend to think in terms of *what* students should learn, *how* to plan a curriculum, *how* to teach, *how* to motivate, and *how* to evaluate. By stepping back, we can approach the issue of education from a different perspective. The effective *facilitator*, they argue, asks herself:

...how can I help students to find the resources—the people, the experiences, the learning facilities, the books, the knowledge in myself—that will help them learn in ways that will provide answers to the things that concern the things they are eager to learn?...How can I help them evaluate their own progress and set future learning goals based on their self-evaluation? (p. 170).

In other words, instead of thinking about what students should learn, we need to ask ourselves what students *want* to learn, and how we can use our personal expertise to help them to do this. Another way of stepping back is to question the conceptualization of English as a commodity which can be taught. Dewey (2008) writes: “When it is taken from its natural basis, it is no wonder that it becomes a complex and difficult problem to teach language. Think of the absurdity of having to teach a language as a thing by itself” (Dewey, 2008, p. 38). It follows that, in the compulsory humanistic language classroom, there is a de-emphasis on language *ipso facto* as an object of study; language proficiency arises primarily as a side effect of the principle purpose of learning—to cultivate wisdom. Practical skills are gained because there is a need for them in order to fulfill a personally meaningful goal. This does not rule out grammar-focused instruction, for example, but it does rule out grammar-based instruction forced upon students who have no present need for, or interest in, English.

As an example, consider an English class in which there is a healthy atmosphere, lots of intense, serious discussion but only about 20% of this discussion is in English, and 80% in the L1. This is natural enough: Detailed, meaningful exchange involves the transmission of rather difficult and subtle ideas that may be difficult to express in the L2. By a communicative yardstick this may not be a successful lesson, but if students leave with a heightened sense of wonder about the world, an appreciation of their classmates and the importance of human relationships, for example, then something valuable has been achieved. Furthermore, if, ten years later, some of the students recall

their experience and take up English study as a hobby that adds something valuable to their lives, then the class is (by conventional standards) a success over a longer time-scale. Such a class requires teachers and students alike to maintain a faith in the process rather than the end: The end will ultimately depend on the quality of the process. The longer-term effects of teaching and learning are much harder to measure and quantify than the short-term effects, but this is no reason to focus exclusively on short-term objectives. In fact, by focusing only on the 'measurable', and neglecting the quality of the 'moment' and the mysterious future, we impoverish teaching<sup>4)</sup>.

I will resist giving prescriptive detail on particular activities that make up the humanistic classroom, because the primary characteristic of a humanistic teacher is a general ideology and outlook: That of someone with an expertise in English who uses this resource among others to facilitate worthwhile learning in class, as opposed to an *English Teacher* in the literal sense. In general terms, activities are likely to include a treatment of student-generated topics integral to the problems that students face in their everyday lives, student-led research projects, the use of documentaries and authentic real-world materials for discussion and analysis, as well as the judicious introduction of existing academic paradigms and research if and when the teacher deems it relevant (Shor, 1992). A general rule of thumb may be that *activities should be interesting even if they were to be conducted in the L1*.

Testing knowledge of facts, and standardized testing in particular, has a reduced role to play in the humanistic classroom for reasons stated above. In its place, self-evaluation and portfolio work allows students freedom to shape their studies in a way that can be as meaningful for them as possible. As Rogers and Freiberg (1994) write:

The evaluation of one's own learning is one of the major means by which self-initiated learning also becomes responsible learning. When the individual has to take the responsibility for deciding what criteria are important to him, what goals must be achieved, and the extent to which he has achieved those goals, then he truly learns to take responsibility for himself and his directions. For this reason, it seems important that some degree of self-assessment be built into any attempt to promote an experiential type of learning (p. 206).

While this may be true, tests, and the pressure to teach to the test, are of course a salient reality for many teachers in Japan and elsewhere. How can a teacher hope to introduce a more humanistic approach in such a climate?

## 6. Challenges

Perhaps one feasible approach is illustrated by the following extract, in which a teacher, who had adopted a humanistic approach, talks to her class after the test period:

When I asked the class how it was that they had done so well, the answer was a comment, both humorous and sad, on our usual approach to learning. “What difference does it make? You always study for the final the week before—then forget everything the next day. So we did the same thing this time. The only difference was that we did a lot more interesting things all year long too” (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p. 92).

For the teacher working in high school, perhaps the ratio of *juken* to ‘real’ learning can be ratcheted up as test-time nears, or perhaps teacher-led discussion can stimulate ideas about how to deal with test-taking which do not involve the devotion of the entire curriculum to rote learning.

A further challenge a teacher will have to address in trying to incorporate a more humanistic approach in the language classroom is how to cope with or avoid the stigma of breaking with convention (or challenging student expectations). This may be particularly true in Japan, where it is said that *the nail that sticks out gets hammered in*. Rogers and Freiberg (1994) warn that teachers who introduce a person-centered process of learning are in danger of being suppressed, and that this suppression will tend to come in the guise of concerns about the practicality of such methods:

Naturally, the conventional members of the system do not say that they are opposed to a democratic process or to responsible freedom. The most frequent reaction to the threat is “This idealistic notion is very commendable as a dream, but it just wouldn’t and couldn’t work in practice” (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p. 215).

Rogers and Freiberg refer to a ‘pure’ form of a humanistic approach. However, my intention is to encourage teachers to become *more* humanistic. The approach I have outlined in its most extreme manifestation can be seen to exist on the opposite end of a cline to test/skills-based classes. I believe it is to be welcomed if teachers can to some extent move gently along the cline to see if they can enrich their teaching practice positively in some way by the adoption of new practice. In doing so at a measured pace, they can win over students as well as administrators to new ways of being in the classroom (Shor, 1992).

## 7. In closing

This paper is written by someone who makes a living as an English teacher. Perhaps one reason why there is not enough hard-hitting analysis of the English education system is that in doing so honestly we are forced to question our *raison d’être*. And like the bureaucrats that we either are, or are in danger of becoming, we have little to gain from undermining our own position (in fact we are liable to be penalised), except the wisdom we gain from doing so. Such wisdom counts for little in a system which demands short-term results. Ultimately, change from a neo-liberal ideology of compulsory education is unlikely to occur unless there is widespread acceptance

among the power-elites that the idea of perpetual economic growth on a planet of scarce resources is utterly absurd, that current factory-based conceptualizations of education equip us poorly for the present as well as the future.

However, by incorporating humanistic principles into the classroom, the teacher and students' learning experience can be enriched; ideally these principles spread between teachers and, over time, are propagated by students as they grow up and enter professional life—a long-term undertaking whose merits are likely to be underappreciated by those focusing on the short-term. In closing I would like to return to the somewhat ephemeral essence of the humanistic experience. The following is an excerpt from feedback on a class which I believe gives a taste of what a humanistic approach can offer to students and teachers:

As they interacted, there were moments of insight and revelation and understanding that were almost awesome in nature...those pregnant moments when you see a human soul revealed before you, in all its breathless wonder; and then a silence, almost like reverence, would overtake the class. And each member of the class became enveloped with a warmth and a loveliness that border on the mystic. I for one, and I am quite sure the others also, never had an experience quite like this. It was learning and therapy; and by therapy I do not mean illness, but what might be characterized by a healthy change in the person, an increase in his flexibility, his openness, his willingness to listen. In the process, we all felt elevated, freer, more accepting of ourselves and others, more open to new ideas, trying hard to understand and accept (Rogers, 1961, p. 305).

Through a combination of policy change and the efforts of individual teachers, I believe we should attempt to nurture the type of reverence and elevation felt by the students in the extract above<sup>5)</sup>. Experiences such as these are, in my view, far more valuable than the 'learning goals' currently set out in many curricula around the world. I hope the conditions can be put in place whereby they can emerge more often in the compulsory English classroom in Japan.

## Notes

- 1) By 'compulsory', I refer to classes in which a majority of students are taking a given class principally due to external requirements. In addition to classes in compulsory education, this includes classes in high school and first-grade university *zengaku* classes.
- 2) This 'democratic way' can be taken to mean something along the lines of Fromm's (2010) definition: "organization of society and the state in which the individual citizen feels responsible and acts responsibly and participates in decision-making."
- 3) For example, Ritsumeikan University's number one ranking in the 'Industry-Academia-Government collaboration activities' in 2004 and 2005 ([http://www.ritsumei.jp/international/i02\\_e.html](http://www.ritsumei.jp/international/i02_e.html)).
- 4) A notable example is the 'washback effect' whereby university entrance exams have a negative influence (in Japan, at least) on junior high school and high school classes (Cheng, Yoshimura, & Curtis, 2004).

- 5) This class was actually one of Carl Rogers' own classes.

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