

The EFL teacher as a humaniser

Francisco Gomes de Matos suggests ways that all of us can ‘humanise’ our approach to teaching

In interacting with EFL teachers in workshops, one of the provocative questions I like to ask is this: Have you been doing your job as ‘humanizers’? The effect of my query is puzzled/perplexed/intrigued looks. Why? Because, although notable advances have been made in the study of the kinds of professional knowledge expected of teachers of English (and other languages, for that matter), the fact is that the humanizing dimension tends to be left out.

Thus, it is commonplace to talk about the teacher’s theoretical and practical knowledge or more inclusively, background knowledge, and therein to include such types of knowledge as linguistic (knowledge of English and of language in general), pedagogical (techniques, strategies, tasks), psychological (knowledge of second language acquisition/learning, learner development, motivation), cross-cultural (awareness of/ respect for intercultural differences), and technological (knowledge of multimedia resources, uses of the Internet) but the notion of humanizing knowledge does not yet have its place in the sun of curriculum design and implementation, as it should.

In such spirit, a brief, open-ended checklist is presented, so as to arouse colleagues’ interest in probing what is a conspicuously under-researched domain in English Language Teacher Education. Before sharing the checklist, I would like to clarify what I mean by ‘as a humanizer’. I see the teacher of English as a humanizer as a professional who shares a belief in such fundamental values as human rights, justice, peace, and dignity and who applies them in his/her teaching of English, as well as outside the classroom. Speaking of ‘humanizing’, do look up the verb in your dictionaries. The usual meanings found in reference works can be summed up this way: to humanize is to make or become human/humane, kind, gentle. To me, that is too narrow a perception of humanizing, a powerful socio-communicative force available to human beings.

Here is a list for self-check. Before reading it, ask yourself: which of the actions listed below would apply to my teaching? How? To what extent? Where? When? With what results? Such questions can be part of an in-depth analysis/self-evaluation.

I am a humanizer when I ...

1. view and apply English Language Teaching as a system for helping learners grow as individuals and as members of communities, both inside and across cultures.
2. view and apply assessment of learners’ performance in a positive way, by emphasizing their strengths in using English as a means of interaction.
3. view and treat my students as persons who have both communicative rights and responsibilities. Examples: the right to be heard (by all in the classroom), the duty to listen (to other classmates).
4. create peace-building-enhancing-promoting activities so that learners can communicate as caring and compassionate users of English, that is, as appliers of what I call ‘communicative peace’
5. use inspiring literature which exemplifies humanization through dialogue (between/among fictional characters). Such applications could be extended to performing arts such as the theater, cinema, TV dramatization (serials).
6. Use examples of humanizing illustrative sentences from learners’ dictionaries and stress the importance of such dignifying uses of English.
7. Prepare learners to make humanizing uses of the Internet, through chatting with English-language-using e-friends. The creation of humanizing phraseologies for use on the Web could become a project for groups in different EFL contexts.
8. Within copyright law restrictions, adapt and/or change materials so that they can contribute to personal and to interpersonal humanization. The use of ‘positivizers’ (for instance, adjectives enhancing positive human qualities, traits) could be systematized in the learning of humanizing vocabulary.

The list of things teachers of English can do as humanizers is long and other items can easily be added by you and your students, in a spirit of fruitful sharing, so do take on the challenge of creating other ways of teaching English humanizingly ...

Email: fcgm@hotmail.com.br



Francisco Gomes de Matos

Francisco Gomes de Matos is an applied linguist from Recife, Brazil, and has taught at the Federal University of Pernambuco and at the Catholic University of São Paulo. He is the author of Criatividade no Ensino de Inglês.