



HUMANISTIC LEARNING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

This conceptual paper proposes principles for humanistic learning in English Language Teaching (ELT) and focuses on psychological safety, emotional involvement, worthwhile communication, and learners' actualization in language learning through an effective, holistic approach. There have been studies on humanistic learning, but they tend to treat it separately. The objective of this conceptual paper is to draw together the concepts of humanistic in ELT through the incorporation of humanistic theory and the pedagogical tradition of language. This paper places humanistic learning not only as a fragmentary instructional approach, but also as a systemic pedagogical philosophy, referring to the theory of humanistic learning proposed by Carl Rogers, the need hierarchy of Abraham Maslow, and the principles in the humanistic language teaching tradition. This paper suggests an integrated concept through conceptual analysis and theoretical synthesis to show how humanistic learning affects the learners, teachers, pedagogical practice, and assessment in ELT.

Keywords: Humanistic learning, English language teaching, language teaching traditions

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the development of English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone significant changes, shifting from a teacher-centered approach and linguistic mastery to a student-centered approach. These can happen because learning a language does not only focus on cognitive aspects, but also affective, emotional, social, and psychological aspects of students. In this context, humanistic learning stands as a teaching method that focuses on language learning as a personal and meaningful process. It also aims at the development of humanity as a whole (Changli, 2025; Manohar & Reddy, 2018; Slamet & Kweldju, 2025).

The learner-centered strategy is influenced by the humanistic school of psychology. Referring to the philosophies of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, it sees the learner as an individual who can develop psychologically and reach self-actualization. This perspective in ELT also views learners as more than passive recipients of linguistic input and takes into account their emotional, social, and experiential backgrounds, as well as their personal values and individual needs. First language (L1) learning occurs most successfully within instructional environments that nurture psychological safety, provide emotional validation, and promote positive teacher-student relationships (Shirkhani & Danesh, 2013).

Evidence from empirical research indicates that the implementation of humanistic-oriented pedagogy contributes positively to the development of learners' language proficiency, particularly in oral communication, by fostering classroom environments characterized by support, openness, and meaningful interaction (Harefa & Zebua, 2025). A humane learning

environment helps students overcome the fear of making mistakes and encourages more meaningful use of language.

Besides its impact on learners, the humanistic approach immensely reorients teachers' pedagogical orientations and instructional behaviors. If teachers of language who themselves have adopted a humanistic philosophy view language learning as a relationship between mentor and pupil in the process of growth, not only of linguistic but also of emotional development, they are better able to guide students. Empirical and systematic investigations also show that humanistic pedagogy fosters formative, reflective, and empathetic assessment practices, in which feedback is conceptualized as a driver of ongoing learning rather than simply an evaluative measure of attainment. (Harefa & Zebua, 2025; Khatib et al., 2013; Rido et al., 2024)

Despite extensive acknowledgment of the advantages associated with humanistic learning in ELT, the existing body of literature reveals notable conceptual and empirical gaps. A considerable proportion of prior studies adopt a fragmented perspective, concentrating primarily on isolated classroom practices, particular language skills, or context-specific applications. Consequently, humanistic learning is frequently reduced to a collection of instructional techniques, rather than being articulated as a coherent and comprehensive pedagogical framework (Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020; Rido et al., 2024; Shirkhani, 2013).

This paper aims to understand humanistic learning in ELT as a conceptualized integrated pedagogy by synthesizing primary research components and outcomes. The central objective of this paper is to provide an insight into the humanistic learning perspective in ELT and to defend its place in the integrated pedagogy framework with particular emphasis on language learning as a process of whole-person development.

Carl Rogers' Humanistic Learning Theory in English Language Teaching

The most relevant aspect of humanistic learning is the learner-centered theory by Carl Rogers (1969). Learning is an individual and personal process, which is best supported in a warm, nurturing, and emotionally secure environment. According to Rogers, learning becomes deep and meaningful when a student is involved and is allowed to speak out and to do so in a safe environment.

Figure 1 below depicts the interrelation of the dominant constructs of Rogers' humanistic theory within the ELT context. The principles of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and authenticity of the teacher facilitate a psychologically safe classroom, thereby fostering active engagement, linguistic risk-taking, and meaningful communication in English.

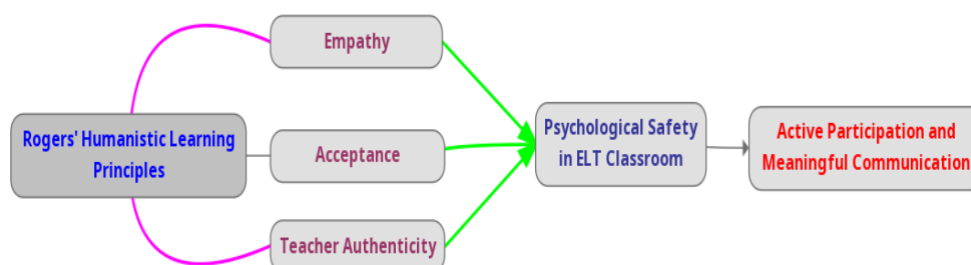


Figure 1. Rogers' Humanistic Learning Theory (Rogers, 1969)

The application of Carl Rogers' theory in ELT is crucial because acquiring a new language is an emotionally challenging process. Students endure a lot of anxiety about making mistakes, speaking in front of others, or being evaluated and judged negatively. Teaching environments that focus on formal evaluations and corrective feedback exacerbate the emotional strain and result in reducing the amount of effort expended by the learners. The humanistic principles of Rogers, in this particular scenario, provide a different pedagogy of empathy, unconditional acceptance, and genuineness as central tenets of the teacher–learner relationship (Changli, 2025; Harefa & Zebua, 2025; Khatib et al., 2013; Soviyah, 2015).

The three features of Rogers' pedagogy are: empathy, unconditional positive appraisal, and teacher genuineness. In the English Language Teaching field, these principles can be put into practice by fostering constructive teacher-student rapport, regularly employing endorsement and supportive speech, and framing constructive recognition-based instructional strategies, which focus on learners' efforts and developmental progress, as opposed to results. When learners are psychologically safe, they seem willing to take linguistic challenges and are more involved in real communication tasks in English (Shirkhani & Danesh, 2013; Harefa & Zebua, 2025).

One significant consequence of Rogers' theories in ELT is the change that is required of teachers' roles. Humanistic approaches place teachers less in the role of knowledge transmitters (passivized) and more in the role of mediators who have created an environment for learners to develop. This reconstructs the pedagogical position that teachers have to take to create environments for students to develop cognitive and affective skills. This means she has to be in tune with students, emotionally, and navigate different pathways for different students to facilitate different forms of knowledge. This means the emphasis is on the learner's involvement in the process of language learning. It positions the learners to be more active, engaged, and less passive in taking in what is taught (Amini et al., 2025; Khatib et al., 2013).

Moreover, Rogers explains why teaching in a humanistic way and positive attitudes, motivation, and self-confidence in language learning align. Students who believe that they are treated in a respectful and caring way develop positive attitudes towards learning English and develop better relations with the language. These results relate to the contemporary approach of modern English Language Teaching focusing on genuine communication, active involvement, and the construction of meaning as integral constituents of beholders (Harefa & Zebua, 2025; Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020).

In this case, Rogers' humanistic learning theory is the most appropriate for infusing humanistic values in ELT. However, the theory should not be considered in isolation, and it is just one piece of the puzzle in a broader theory of pedagogy. Therefore, the next section broadens the scope of the discussion to include the application of Maslow's theory of human needs to analyze the motivational and emotional facets of the language learning process (Khatib et al., 2013).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in English Language Teaching

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory is the cornerstone of the humanistic approach to learning. Maslow (1954) posited a hierarchical model of human motivation, where needs at a lower level are fulfilled before progressing to the next. The fulfillment of these needs in sequence is held to be a prerequisite for optimal human development; this includes the ability to function effectively in learning situations (Khatib et al., 2013)

Maslow's theory is useful in the field of ELT because it provides helpful information about which affects and emotional states affect second language learning. Learning a language often requires a willingness to practice in front of others, attempt new modes of expression, and be okay with the possibility of making mistakes. Because learners whose basic needs are not being met—especially those that address things like safety and belonging—are at increased risk of finding it hard to engage and participate. High levels of stress, heavy negative feedback, or competitive practices that are perceived as unfair in classroom environments will necessarily be obstructions to the fulfilment of these needs (Amini et al., 2025; Harefa & Zebua, 2025; Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020).

Figure 2 below illustrates an adaptation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954) as applied to English language learning, highlighting the close relationship between the satisfaction of learners' emotional needs and their level of engagement in the language learning process.

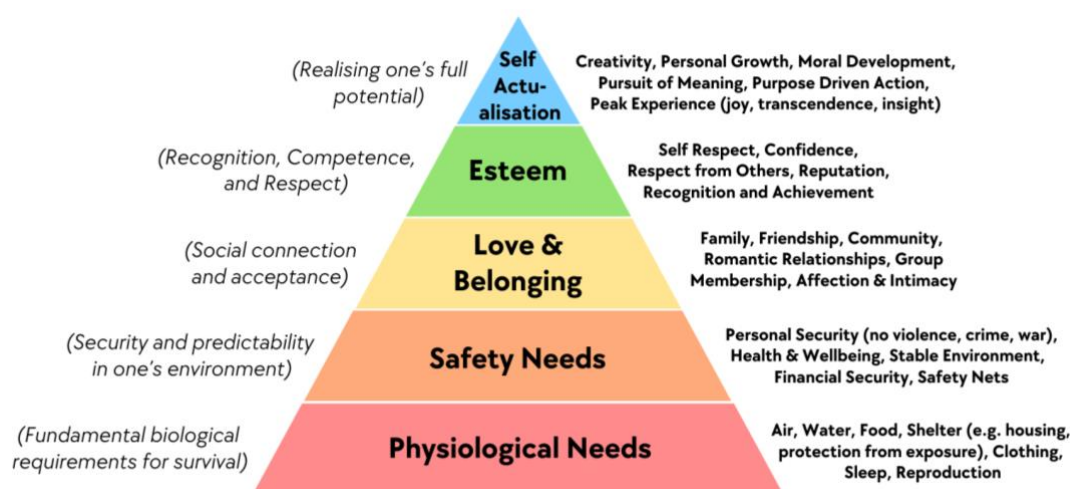


Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954)

ELT at the bottom-most level of physiological comfort and psychological safety needs a learning environment conducive to both physical well-being and emotional security. The secure space where students can feel comfortable performing in English is provided by the classroom that promotes encouragement, non-judgmental interaction, and acceptance of errors as part of learning. When these necessities of life are met, students tend to be more likely to engage and take risks with the target language without the interference of an extreme amount of anxiety (Amini et al., 2025).

The role of belongingness also operates in language learning. Language learning is based on social interaction, so working together in pairs, groups, and teams can make students feel part of a community of learners. Such a belongingness fosters students' social and emotional engagement, which develops motivation to learn English. In a humanistic framework, language classes are seen as a learning community, not just an instructional space (Changli, 2025; Slamet & Kweldju, 2025).

At the esteem level of Maslow's hierarchy, constructive feedback, acknowledgment of learners' efforts, and sustained teacher support play a pivotal role. The ELT considers various student factors outside the prism of language acquisition, including the students' desire to communicate, take on challenges, and engage in self-enhancing practices which develop self-belief and a constructive disposition towards learning a new language, critical to the development of communicative competence (Harefa & Zebua, 2025).

Self-actualization, the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy, within the context of ELT, represents learners' ability to experience the empowerment that using the English language brings. Language, then, moves beyond being a mere academic tool to being a resource through which learners express and communicate their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs and construct their identities. With a humanistic type of ELT, the self-actualization of learners is achieved through the provision of spaces and opportunities for creative expression, reflective practices, and meaningful learning that is anchored in the lived experiences of the learners (Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020).

Therefore, Maslow's theory supports the claim that for effective language learning to take place, the emotional and social aspects of the students must be addressed. This theory complements Rogers' views by bringing in the motivational aspect and the relevance of the emotional and social aspects of learning. In the next section, the discussion will be expanded to discuss *the humanistic language teaching* tradition to show how these humanistic principles are translated into ELT pedagogical practice more concretely (Khatib et al., 2013).

Khatib's Humanistic Language Teaching Traditions in English Language Teaching

Beyond the humanistic psychological frameworks proposed by Rogers and Maslow, the evolution of humanistic learning in ELT has also been informed by a range of language teaching traditions that foreground the affective and human dimensions of learning. These humanistic-oriented pedagogies emerged largely in response to structuralist and behaviorist models, which tend to prioritize the technical manipulation of linguistic forms while marginalizing learners' emotional experiences and personal engagement in the learning process (Khatib et al., 2013). Table one below illustrates features and characteristics of the humanistic teaching tradition.

Table 1. Features and Characteristics of Humanistic Language Teaching Traditions in English Language Teaching (Khatib et al., 2013)

Features	CHARACTERISTICS
Community Language Learning	▪ Teacher as counselor ▪ Student as client ▪ Trust ▪ Security
Suggestopedia	▪ Relaxed and stress-free ▪ Security ▪ Comfort
Humanistic Principles in ELT	▪ Students' engagement ▪ Learning motivation ▪ Courage

Community Language Learning constructs the approach as a counselor/client relationship, emphasizing the importance of trust and psychological safety in the learning process. This model draws on elements of Carl Rogers, where empathy and positive regard are essential in creating an effective learning environment. In contrast, Suggestopedia places primary importance on cultivating a calm, comfortable, and low-anxiety learning environment, a focus that indirectly corresponds to the fulfillment of safety and comfort needs articulated in

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs (Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020; Khatib et al., 2013; Rido et al., 2024).

In the context of contemporary ELT, the principles of *humanistic language teaching* remain relevant even though the form of implementation has undergone adaptation. Activities such as reflective discussions, group work, experiential projects, and creative expression through English reflect humanistic values that place students as learning subjects. (Khatib et al., 2013; Soviyah, 2015)

Empirical findings are consistent with the argument that integration of humanistic goals in ELT tends to help students become more involved in learning processes, and that when intrinsic motivation grows stronger, they tend to make a greater effort to use English in real-life communicative situations. Meaning-focused and personally relevant instruction allows learners to form more positive, emotionally rich relationships with the target language in order to help offset some of the anxiety frequently associated with linguistic learning (Shirkhani & Danesh, 2013).

Nevertheless, existing scholarship also reveals that humanistic language teaching is frequently implemented in a fragmented and disconnected manner. Many studies fail to articulate a cohesive conceptual framework that systematically links humanistic psychological theories with classroom practices in ELT. As a result, humanistic pedagogy is often described as simply a collection of disconnected methodologies or discrete language learning exercises that do not convey it as a unified educational vision underpinning the whole process. Seeing the inadequacies, there is an urgent requirement for a unified model that genuinely reflects and combines the theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical approaches of ELT.

Proposed Conceptual Framework of Humanistic Learning in English Language Teaching

Based on the discussion of Carl Rogers' humanistic learning theory, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and the principles of humanistic language teaching tradition, this section proposes an integrative conceptual framework to understand the position and role of humanistic learning in ELT. This proposed framework was developed to address the limitations of previous studies that tended to discuss humanistic learning separately, both as a psychological theory and as a specific pedagogical technique.

The theoretical outline suggested that human sentimental learning was a type of global pedagogic theory for all the vital elements in ELT. This value is based on the belief that language learning is inherently a uniquely human activity; an activity which involves not only cognition but also affective, social, and personal aspects. Consequently, the effectiveness of English language learning cannot be evaluated solely through measures of linguistic attainment, but must also be understood in relation to the quality and depth of learners' educational experiences. (Khatib et al., 2013)

Humanistic learning in this context-based learning is defined as an underpinning philosophy that integrates the three key theories: Carl Rogers' humanistic learning theory, Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, and the tradition of language teaching from a humanistic perspective. The intellectual work of Rogers is illuminating because he insists on the importance of relationships, empathetic conversations, and psychological safety in order to make meaningful learning. Maslow's theory supports this explanation and is partly similar to the self-regulation model, which stresses that learners cannot learn effectively unless their motivational and emotional needs are met incrementally from one stage to another in order to

sustain learning and personal growth. On a pedagogical level, the humanistic tradition in language teaching instantiates these humanistic values by incorporating them into ELT practices that focus on meaning-making, learner experience, and the subjective aspects of learning a language (Changli, 2025; Harefa & Zebua, 2025; Khatib et al., 2013).

Figure 3 below presents an integrative conceptual framework of humanistic learning in ELT, illustrating how humanistic theories inform learners, teacher roles, pedagogical practices, and assessment to support meaningful and holistic language learning.

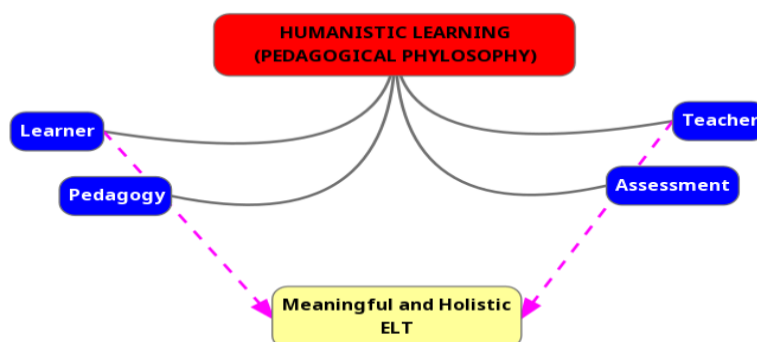


Figure 3. Proposed Conceptual Framework of Humanistic Learning in English Language Teaching

The merging of all three theoretical foundations subsequently restructures the four essential elements of ELT, including students, instructors, pedagogy, and evaluation. Within the learner component, the framework particularly emphasizes the acknowledgment of students' emotional states, individual stories, and unrecognized possible future abilities. Learners are regarded as meaning-makers and, as such, are recognized as active participants who create understanding through a process of individual reflection and social interaction. Likewise, within the teacher component, educators are reconceptualized as compassionate guides who are tasked with the creation of learning scenarios that are psychologically safe and supportive and are optimally focused on the needs and development of the learners (Harefa & Zebua, 2025; Khatib et al., 2013; Soviyah, 2015).

From a pedagogy perspective, the framework suggests teaching approaches that prioritize authentic communication, meaningful participation, and active learning through collaborative work and reflection. Similarly, assessment is reconceptualized as not merely a tool to quantify learners' achievements, but rather an empathetic and constructive process aimed at the continuous development of learners. Constructive and dialogic feedback is employed to support learners' reflection on their progress and to strengthen their confidence as developing users of the language.(Harefa & Zebua, 2025)

Taken together, the proposed thematic framework claims that successful and enduring learning of English only occurs if all parts of ELT are provided according to humanistic values. By placing humanistic learning as the foundation for unity, this framework presents a picture of how humanistic principles, as they apply to ELT, can be better understood in an integrated and systematic manner, contributing at the same time to dynamic theories of teacher welfare which foreground pedagogical approaches that are inherently sympathetic and politics that are more inclusive rather than hierarchical and controlling.

CONCLUSION

The conceptual synthesis in this article illustrates that the quality of language learners' educational experience is more important than the learners' language outcome. According to Carl Rogers, meaningful learning occurs when there are safe relationships and empathetic interactions. Also, in the context of language teaching, learners' emotional and social fulfillment explains their active participation and high achievement. These social and emotional needs are articulated in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Humanistic language teaching draws on these psychological principles, putting the humanistic values of teaching into practice through genuine communication, active participation of students in the learning process, and the fostering of autonomy.

The article's main scholarly contribution is developing an integrative conceptual model of humanistic learning in ELT, which combines three compatible but separate models into one model. The model shows that humanistic learning simultaneously and interdependently impacts all four core components of ELT—learners, teachers, teaching methods, and assessment. The model places humanistic learning as the core philosophy and, in doing so, expands the scope of understanding of language teaching and learning to include the socioemotional, personal, and holistic development of learners, in addition to linguistic proficiency.

Finally, the paper advances the field of ELT by offering an interconnected and comprehensive conceptual framework of humanistic learning. From a pedagogical standpoint, the proposed framework serves as a guideline for English language teachers as they design and arrange classroom space in humane, inclusive, and meaningful ways. Moreover, this study lays the groundwork for further empirical research on the implementation and effects of humanistic language learning within ELT.

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