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Humanistic English Teaching: Theoretical Reflection and Optimization Strategies

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Abstract: **Foreign language teaching is undergoing a transition from simple language knowledge teaching to humanism paradigm, and increasingly pays attention to learners' emotional needs and cognitive development. Based on the theoretical framework of human-centered psychology, this paper systematically discusses the practical path of human-centered principle in English language teaching (ELT), and innovatively utilizes gamification, aesthetic immersion and social adaptation, integrating three humanistic elements to break the limitations of the traditional ELT model and finally realize the deep value of language education—cultivating lifelong learners with both language ability and humanistic quality.**

Keywords: **Humanistic English Teaching; Gamification; Aesthetic Immersion; Social Adaptation.**

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the field of English language teaching (ELT) is changing from the traditional structuralist paradigm (such as grammatical translation, listening and speaking method) to the humanistic teaching concept, which indicates that ELT has shifted from the pure cultivation of language skills to the comprehensive focus on learners' emotional needs, cognitive development and social interaction. This change is deeply influenced by humanistic psychology theory, which emphasizes self-actualization, intrinsic motivation and personalized learning as the core elements of modern language teaching. In order to achieve these research objectives, this paper will demonstrate the effectiveness of gamified interaction (such as task-based role-playing), artistic immersion teaching (such as drama training) and social adaptive training in practical teaching by analyzing empirical cases.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CORE PRINCIPLES OF HUMANISTIC ENGLISH TEACHING

2.1 The emergence of humanistic teaching methods in language education

The humanistic turn in the field of English teaching represents a profound change in the paradigm of education. This shift is essentially a shift from the behaviorist stimulus-response model proposed by the American psychologist B.F. Skinner in the mid-20th century (Skinner, 1938) and the evolution of the structuralist systematic view of language (Chomsky, 1965) by Noam Chomsky, the most revolutionary linguist in 20th century linguistics, to the holistic view of education in humanistic psychology. This shift is actually a major breakthrough in the transformation of language from a system of knowledge to a human experience, and the key to it is a profound insight into the nature of learning, that is, the process of reshaping the previously mechanistic acquisition of language knowledge into a process of individualized growth that integrates cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions.

Abraham Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs theory revolutionized psychology in the mid-20th century by shifting focus from pathology to human potential. While his five-tiered model—physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization—is widely known, his later introduction of "peak experience" developed in *Toward a Psychology of Being* remains a pivotal yet underemphasized contribution. Carl Rogers' (1951) client-centered therapy systematically established

a facilitative learning environment based on three core conditions: (1) unconditional positive regard, accepting learners without judgement, creating a safe space for linguistic risk-taking (such as making errors without fear of ridicule). (2) empathetic understanding, deeply grasping learners' perspective, including their affective and cognitive struggles without second language acquisition. (3) congruence, teachers authentically engage with learners, fostering trust and reducing the "affective filter" (Krashen, 1983)

During this theoretical transformation, Earl W. Stevick's *Memory, Meaning, and Method* (1996) stands undoubtedly as a groundbreaking works in language pedagogy. He not only demonstrated the practical manifestations of the affective filter hypothesis proposed by Krashen, but more importantly, he established the critical framework of "language self", revealing the dynamic interplay between learners' self-identity development and the acquisition of language skills. Its groundbreaking contributions can be analyzed through three interconnected frameworks: (1) Stevick operationalized Krashen's affective filter—a psychological barrier influenced by anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence, and he illustrated how anxiety reduction through learner-centered activities (e.g., role-playing, storytelling) lowers the filter, facilitating input intake. (2) Stevick's most revolutionary contribution was noticing the dynamic interplay between learners' evolving identities and linguistic competence. He stresses that learners assimilate L2 not as a neutral tool but as a medium for self-expression and social positioning. (3) Stevick critiqued behaviorist drills, advocating instead for tasks like repeating utterances with emotional intonation.

When these psychological principles are applied to language education, they fundamentally challenge traditional teaching methods. The grammar-translation approach reduces language to a combination of vocabulary lists and grammatical rules, while the audio-lingual method objectifies learners by training them through patterned exercises. In stark contrast, from a humanistic perspective, learners are redefined as cognitive agents with "self-directed learning abilities" (Knowles, 1975). Malcolm Knowles' conceptualization of self-directed learning (SDL) in *Self-Directed Learning: A Guide for Learners and Teachers* (1975) revolutionized adult education by asserting that learners can and should take ownership of their educational processes.

2.2 The Core Principles of Humanistic Language Teaching

The core principles of humanistic language teaching are built on three interconnected fundamental principles that together form the essential characteristics distinguishing it from traditional methods. These principles not only have a solid theoretical foundation but also demonstrate continuous innovative vitality in contemporary educational practice.

(1) Principle of learner autonomy: The theoretical roots of this principle can be traced back to Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, The theory establishes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the three pillars of intrinsic motivation. Unlike traditional teacher-oriented "pre-determined teaching", humanistic classrooms achieve learner empowerment through strategies such as autonomy. This autonomy is manifested by the learner's ability to customize the learning path, pace and assessment method. In China, with the continuous renewal of educational concepts, more and more schools begin to pay attention to cultivating students' independent learning ability. For example, schools can adopt project-based learning, allowing students to choose their own research topics, make study plans, and complete projects independently under the guidance of teachers. This way of learning not only improves students' learning interest and enthusiasm, but also cultivates their independent learning ability and problem solving ability. In a word, self-determination theory provides meaningful feedback to enhance students' sense of competence, and fostering a positive classroom community to meet their need for relatedness.

(2) Emotional Engagement Principle: this principle originates from Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, and it represents a significant advancement in understanding the affective dimensions of second language acquisition. Focusing on learners' emotional experiences and regulation strategies innovative methods such as collaborative storytelling and process drama which emphasizes the active participation in constructing the drama is employed. This process not only reduce learning anxiety but also actively cultivate emotional intelligence. In English teaching in China, teachers are increasingly aware of the importance of emotional factors. For example, in classroom instruction, teachers create contexts and organize group activities to stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm for learning, allowing them to learn English in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. At the same time, teachers pay attention to students' emotional states, provide timely encouragement and support, and help students overcome difficulties and setbacks in their studies.

(3) Holistic Development Principle: Moving beyond traditional language skill views, this principle emphasizes the dynamic growth of the "language self" (Stevick, 1980) and "possible selves" (Dörnyei, 2009). Stevick's language self includes self-image (perceived abilities), self-esteem (learner value), and ideal self (aspired proficiency), shaping motivation, anxiety, and strategy use. Positive self-perceptions enhance engagement, while negative ones hinder performance. Dörnyei's possible selves—ideal (aspired identity), ought-to (external pressures), and feared self (negative outcomes)—guide motivation, goals, and strategies. The ideal/ought-to selves drive proactive learning, while the feared self promotes avoidance. Together, these theories link learners' psychology to language behaviors, offering a framework for holistic development.

Teaching methods show a clear trend towards interdisciplinary integration: mindfulness training enhances metacognitive awareness, arts-integrated instruction fosters creative thinking, and service learning strengthens social responsibility. In China, the principles of holistic development have also gained widespread recognition and application. Schools focus not only on students' language knowledge and skills but also on their moral character, emotions, and cognitive abilities during English teaching. For example, activities such as English speech contests and drama performances help build students' confidence and expressive abilities, while organizing English volunteer activities cultivates their sense of social responsibility and teamwork spirit.

3. IMPLEMENTING TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES IN HUMANISTIC ENGLISH TEACHING STRATEGIES

3.1 Remodeling teachers' identity

The transformation to humanistic English teaching requires a fundamental reshaping of the identity of educators, reshaping the classroom ecology, breaking the traditional model of absolute authority of teachers, and building a more complex and diversified teacher-student relationship that fully respects individual learners. In the process of humanistic English teaching, teachers play three important roles: the guide of experiential learning, the builder of emotional environment and the collaborator of knowledge construction. As the leader of experiential learning, teachers must master the art of guided discovery teaching, carefully design a series of coherent and inspiring learning tasks, and guide learners to actively discover the laws and patterns behind language through personal experience and independent exploration, rather than relying solely on teachers' direct teaching. As the builder of the emotional environment, teachers need to have a keen and comprehensive perception and control of the classroom ecosystem. From the clever use of classroom space layout to the careful design of daily teaching and many other aspects, the purpose is to reduce students' learning anxiety to the greatest extent. As a collaborator of knowledge construction, teachers need to be brave enough to break the power barrier in traditional teaching and position themselves as seekers to explore the mysteries of language with students. Teachers can share their own difficulties and challenges, or actively participate in the activities of exploring language phenomena with students, to show their curiosity and exploration spirit of knowledge.

3.2 Principles of course design for humanistic language teaching

English curriculum development from the perspective of humanism needs to adopt an ecological design idea, which closely integrates language learning objectives with learners' exploration of identity, cultivation of emotional literacy and improvement of cross-cultural understanding. In the design of the humanities language learning curriculum, we abandon the traditional model of starting from the grammar outline, and start from a series of fundamental questions that can artfully connect language learning to larger issues of human society. For example: How does language shape individual and group identity? What is the essential connotation and practical significance of cross-cultural communication? What role does English play in the process of personal growth and social change? These questions provide guidance for integrating cognitive and affective learning goals and designing specific learning tasks.

The selection of curriculum content should follow four humanistic principles: close relevance to the real life of learners, stimulating the potential of individuals to create unique meaning, realizing the organic integration of cognitive and emotional dimensions, and building a bridge of cross-cultural communication. Based on these principles, the curriculum system usually adopts modular structure design to provide learners with personalized learning path selection. The core language objectives of the course can be flexibly adapted to different thematic contexts, from environmental justice to digital citizenship, providing students with a wide range of learning horizons. The design model repeatedly focuses on key language functions with increasing complexity, so that learners can not only improve their proficiency in language skills, but also enhance their emotional resonance and personal understanding of the learning content in the process of constantly reviewing and deepening their learning.

3.3 Teaching strategies for humanist language development

The implementation of humanistic English teaching concepts in daily teaching practice relies on a series of teaching methods, which transform the theoretical principles of humanism into concrete and operable classroom interaction forms. This paper focuses on three aspects: gamification, aesthetic immersion and social adaptation. On the basis of integrating the core principles of humanism, a new humanistic language teaching classroom has been constructed.

Gamification teaching mode is an innovative method that organically integrates game elements into language teaching process. Its core idea is to enhance students' learning motivation and effect through fun, interaction and incentive mechanism. Based on a solid theoretical foundation, Behaviorism mainly includes: Behaviorism emphasizes the influence of external stimuli on learning behavior. In gamified teaching, behaviorism is manifested as follows: The point-based system, leaderboard, achievement badge and other immediate reward mechanisms can effectively strengthen students' learning behavior; Adopt progressive difficulty design to help students gradually establish good learning habits; Provide instant feedback so students can keep up to date with their progress. From the perspective of Constructivism theory, gamification teaching focuses on: creating learning environments in real situations, such as simulating life scenes such as shops and hospitals; Adopt a student-centered teaching approach that encourages independent exploration and knowledge construction; Design collaborative game tasks to promote interaction between learners. Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the cultivation of intrinsic motivation in the following aspects: providing the choice of task difficulty and path to enhance learning autonomy; Establish achievement system to enhance students' sense of competence; Introduce team competition and leaderboard mechanism to strengthen the sense of belonging.

Under the support of the aforementioned learning theories, gamified teaching offers several irreplaceable advantages. Firstly, it enhances learning motivation by using game mechanisms to stimulate interest and a sense of achievement. Secondly, it reduces anxiety, creating a relaxed learning environment and decreasing the fear of language expression. Additionally, it increases interaction, promoting multidimensional interaction between teachers and students, as well as among students. Lastly, it provides realistic scenarios, simulating real-life situations to improve language application skills.

In terms of specific implementation, various forms can be adopted. (1) Level-based challenges: set progressive language tasks; (2) Fun competitions: conduct quizzes on vocabulary, grammar, and other knowledge; (3) Role-playing: simulate real-life communication scenarios; (4) Story creation: engage in collaborative language output training; (5) Technological support: use language learning apps to assist teaching, employ gamified learning platforms to manage progress, and integrate multimedia resources to create contexts.

Gamified teaching requires the implementation of a formative assessment system, providing periodic feedback and diverse evaluation criteria. Compared to traditional teaching methods, gamified teaching has made significant breakthroughs. It transforms the mechanical process of 'question-respond-evaluate' into open-ended questions that encourage multi-angle thinking and in-depth communication. Studies show that this teaching model can significantly enhance classroom engagement, particularly in multilingual learning environments. Teachers should pay attention to: designing appropriate game difficulty levels, balancing competition and cooperation elements, ensuring that game mechanisms serve educational goals, and adjusting teaching strategies in a timely manner. In future game design, efforts should be made to strengthen personalized game design, deepen technological integration (such as VR/AR applications), and improve the evaluation system. This teaching model, by integrating

Aesthetic immersion teaching mode is an innovative teaching method that integrates art education, psychology and digital technology. Its core is to cultivate students' aesthetic perception, creativity and cultural understanding in a highly engaged state through multi-sensory experience and contextualized design. This model is based on a solid theoretical foundation: First of all, from the perspective of the perceptual nature of aesthetic education, Aesthetics comes from the Greek "αἰσθητικός" (perception), emphasizing that emotional resonance can be triggered through sensory experience. The founder of aesthetics, German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's seminal works *Esthetics* (1750) laid an important philosophical foundation for modern immersive teaching. He advocated that perceptual knowledge (such as emotion, imagination and intuition) has the same cognitive value as rational thinking, and emphasized that people's perceptual ability can be systematically trained through artistic and aesthetic experience. This point of view directly challenged the educational tradition of valuing rationality over sensibility, and foreshadows the core concepts of multi-sensory participation, emotional drive and contextualized learning in modern education. Constructivism and contextual learning theory emphasize the active construction of knowledge in real or simulated situations. This pattern has three core features: Multi-sensory integration

(through AR/VR virtual art scene, music and painting linkage, physical expression into creation, etc.), context-driven (including real situations such as outdoor sketching combined with poetry appreciation, and virtual situations such as AI digital human-guided meta-universe art class) and subjective participation (abandoning traditional demonstration and imitation mode, emphasizing independent exploration and emotional expression). At the specific implementation level, the aesthetic immersion teaching model focuses on space design, curriculum development, and technology empowerment.

During implementation, movie dubbing can be used to integrate students' language into its storylines, liven up classroom atmosphere, and enhance their language output. Another distinctive method is process drama techniques, which include using "role teachers" and "expert costumes", creating imaginative language learning scenarios for students. In these scenarios, students use English for genuine communicative needs rather than mechanical language practice tasks. Research shows that systematically applying process drama in teaching increases vocabulary acquisition rates compared to traditional methods. For example, when performing short English plays in class, students need to deeply understand the language and emotional content of the script to naturally use and learn English in real contexts. Looking ahead, this model aims to transform from "knowledge transmission" to "life experience" through an aesthetic education path of "contextual activation of sensibility-interaction deepening cognition-technology expanding boundaries", ultimately achieving the educational ideal of "approaching freedom through beauty" as mentioned by Schiller.

The Social Adaptation Teaching Model is a paradigm focused on cultivating students' social adaptability. Through creating real or simulated social contexts and employing interactive, collaborative, and practice-oriented teaching strategies, the model helps students acquire essential skills for social survival and development. The Social Adaptation Teaching Model is grounded in solid theoretical foundations: Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory emphasizes the role of observation and imitation in the socialization process, providing a basis for teaching methods such as role-playing and case analysis; Anthropologist Jean Lave and educator Etienne Wenger's Situated Learning Theory which was developed in 1991. The theory challenges traditional views of learning by framing it as an inherently social and context-dependent process. At its core lies the idea of Legitimate Peripheral Participation, where learners—such as apprentices or interns—start as passive observers within a Community of Practice before gradually assuming more active roles. A Community of Practice refers to a group with shared objectives, methods, and language, where learning occurs naturally through participation rather than formal instruction. Crucially, knowledge is not detached from reality but rooted in practical experience and calls for learning environments that replicate real-world engagement, whether through apprenticeships, collaborative tasks, or mentorship programs. Ultimately, by prioritizing social interaction, authentic contexts, and progressive involvement, this theory has reshaped modern perspectives on constructivist education and lifelong learning.

The social adaptation teaching model has three typical characteristics: contextual authenticity (manifested through simulated environments like mock trials and market transactions, as well as real-world participation such as volunteer work), interactive collaboration (promoted by group projects and social feedback to facilitate social learning), and practice orientation (emphasizing problem-solving and skill training for applied learning). In implementation, this model primarily employs three strategies: social context simulation (such as Model United Nations, VR social training, and other classroom and virtual simulation activities), social practice projects (including community environmental protection and corporate internships for genuine societal involvement), and structured reflective assessment (using tools like learning logs and competency scales). Future development trends point towards three directions: technology-enhanced adaptive training (such as AI social robots), global adaptability skills cultivation (focusing on cross-cultural communication), and lifelong learning-oriented adaptation mechanisms (spanning school education and career development). The ultimate goal of the social adaptation teaching model is to transcend traditional academic evaluation frameworks, fostering well-rounded individuals capable of addressing complex societal challenges, thereby achieving an elevation from academic success to life success in educational value.

4. CONCLUSION

The return to humanistic approaches in language learning signifies a fundamental reshaping of the essence of foreign language education. This study reveals that humanistic English teaching is not merely an innovation in methodology; its revolutionary significance lies in elevating language learning from a tool-based rationality to a philosophical level of holistic development. When teaching practices genuinely focus on learners' emotional needs, creative potential, and cultural identity, language skill acquisition becomes only the most basic explicit outcome. The deeper value lies in triggering a fundamental transformation of educational paradigms. This transformation first manifests at the theoretical breakthrough level: the

"cognitive-emotional synergy" language acquisition model constructed in this study emphasizes motivational and confidence-related emotional factors alongside language cognitive abilities. It fully leverages core competencies such as cross-cultural empathy and aesthetic creativity, which machines cannot replicate, fundamentally addressing the structural dilemma of traditional teaching that prioritizes skills over humanity. Humanistic teaching safeguards the essence of education—awakening human wholeness through language learning. This requires teachers to transition from knowledge transmitters to "learning experience architects", with their core abilities shifting to creating a learning environment that integrates emotional safety, cultural immersion, and cognitive challenges. In this environment, language is no longer an emotionally detached cultural symbol but a living medium through which learners construct self-awareness and understand human civilization.

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