

## A Humanistic Approach-Based Didactic Strategy to Improve Rural Students' English Language Learning

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**Abstract:** *To design a Humanistic Approach-Based Didactic Strategy to improve rural students' English language learning, a qualitative investigation of an exploratory scope was carried out in some rural areas of Esmeraldas-Ecuador with a population of 30 rural English language teachers and a sample of 10 of them, who were selected intentionally. The methods of investigation used were the analytic-synthetic, inductive-deductive, and hermeneutics with the technique of the survey. The results revealed that teachers of rural areas mostly used cooperative, direct, and traditional teaching strategies. It was also shown that the teaching-learning process was mainly teacher-centered because most of the activities were developed around the teachers' interests. Some humanistic elements such as collaborative learning and freedom at choosing the topic that students want to learn were occasionally applied in the English language teaching-learning process and finally, actions and procedures rooted in the principles of the humanistic approach were implemented in the proposed didactic strategy which consisted of five stages: pre-planning, activation of previous knowledge, learning immersion, feedback, and community involvement. To sum up, even though some rural teachers' teaching practices may be focused on certain humanistic principles, it did not imply that they had a broad knowledge about the humanistic approach that enable them to create humanistic based didactic guidelines to be followed in the rural students' English language learning.*

**Keywords:** Didactic Strategies, English Language Learning, Humanistic Approach, Rural Areas

### Introduction

Humanism considers that the way students feel about themselves plays a fundamental role in how effective their English learning process is. In addition, learning achievements are directly related to the inclusion of their personality in the classroom. (Kathib, 2013).

Ecuador has been ranked as one of the countries with the lowest levels in English language proficiency in Latin America. Catholic, public, as well as private schools in rural and urban areas of Esmeraldas-Ecuador, must teach English as a foreign language; nevertheless, it has resulted in some emerging issues. On one hand, qualified English language teachers are not enough to cover the educational needs in the whole territory and, on the other hand, most of the people in rural areas of Esmeraldas still have a mindset that maintains the English language as an unnecessary, complicated, and boring subject.

Due to the qualified English teachers' shortage, in many schools belonging to the rural area, the English teacher is the same who teaches the other subjects, causing a lack of effective methods and strategies to teach English in the classroom environment. Rural teachers of Esmeraldas are trained enough to teach principal subjects such as Mathematics and the Spanish Language, but they do not have the required English level proficiency to teach English. Even worse, teachers lack knowledge about how to handle methodologies and resources to make students learn the English language causing unmotivated and discouraged learners whose general view of this subject is that of a very difficult and boring one.

The use of Humanism as a teaching approach could influence positively on the English language learning of students from rural areas, therefore the following question is posed: how can a Humanistic Approach-Based Didactic strategy contribute to improve rural students' English language learning?

The general objective was to design a Humanistic Approach-Based Didactic Strategy to improve rural students' English language learning in rural areas of Esmeraldas province. To accomplish it, the specific objectives were to determine English teachers' didactic strategies to teach English as a foreign language; to identify rural students' English language learning needs; to determine who has the central role in the English language learning process and to create some actions based on a Humanistic approach that English teachers can use to improve the teaching-learning process.

## Rural Students' English Language Learning Needs

**Parental awareness building about the importance of learning English:** The reasons why learners do not pursue the English language learning and instead of that prefer to be dedicated to farmland and trading activities must do directly with their parents' low expectations about personal growth through education.

**Free access to a wide range of learning English resources:** An effective learning English process implies the use of a variety of innovative resources like technology but, unfortunately, most of the families in rural areas lack enough income and, in some cases, they live in poverty. They also experience abandonment by government authorities since their investment in rural students' education is weak. Given that, learners should be supplied with materials and resources because this would contribute to improve their English learning process.

**Logistic support:** Multilevel and multitask classrooms are common in rural areas due to the insufficient logistic support, that is why for many years, rural schools have required classrooms and proper spaces to promote a high-level education has been the main need of rural principals and teachers.

**Better qualified teachers:** Teaching the English language requires trained teachers not only with a suitable level of English proficiency but also with enough knowledge about teaching methods and techniques to enable students through language skills. Rural areas lack qualified English teachers and consequently, it affects the students' learning negatively.

## A Humanistic Approach to Teaching

According to Freire (1972), "humanization is the process of becoming more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons who participate in and with the world" (p.8). In this context, the main purpose of a humanistic teaching approach is to provide an education model that teaches students to be aware of their real situation first and then to think about ways to improve their development to contribute to the world improvement.

**Learners centered class:** It consists of an education which is primarily focused on learners rather than instructors. This means that learning emerges from students' interests and needs as well as it is deeply rooted in students' knowledge inquiry, experiences, and exploration. It refers to the "balance of power between teachers and learners" (p.16). In that way, learners centered classes offer the flow of rapport in the classroom. (Chen, 2016)

**Critical thinking:** Critical thinking (Scriven and Paul, 2003) refers to "the intellectually disciplined process of thinking actively and skillfully" (p.25) which involves thinking critically to understand how world works and adopt diverse stands. These stands will contribute to the learners' personal development and optimizing their performances in the different life aspects.

**Collaborative learning:** As its name suggests, it is mainly based on group members' cooperation, which involves dealing with a diversity of beliefs interests, and ways of thinking so, collaborative learning highlights personal values such respect and tolerance. The main characteristics of collaborative learning are a common task or activity; small group learning, co-operative behavior; interdependence; and individual responsibility (Lejeune, 1999).

**Experiential Learning:** It refers to the learning that comes from the experience. According to Kolb (1989), “Knowledge results from the combinations of grasping and transforming the experience” (p.74). It means that learners’ experiences are the base above the coming learning is constructed.

### Antecedents

Schmidtke and Chen (2016) conducted research to show how the inclusion of humanistic elements in teaching could enable teachers to be more efficient at helping students to learn. The results revealed that they used some methods and strategies that could be perceived as humanistic elements, such as working in teams and learners-centered which clearly helped students to succeed.

Jin (2014) recorded a lesson that was taught using a humanistic approach in English as a second language target group which was formed by multicultural learners. The humanistic aspects applied on this lesson consisted of giving freedom to the students at choosing the type of ceremonial speech they like, in that way their self-confidence increased because they selected a topic they were interested in; the students were allowed to work in groups using cooperative learning and social interaction and finally, the teacher was a facilitator who supported students all the time and encouraged them to try their best.

Korobchenko & Khmelnitskiy (2015) did an investigation throughout a critical analysis, which concluded with the need of designing an educational reform which includes the following humanistic principles: respect for the personality of a child and teachers as the main characters, consideration of individuals’ age special characteristics of pupils as well as their skills; the individualization of instruction and the respect for the man’s right to make his life and career choice by himself. Mora & Villegas (2019) carried out research whose main objective was to propose a humanistic pedagogical model to teach.

Ramirez (2020) designed a Humanistic Theoretical Approach to Educational Research on English language teaching at PUCESE University in Esmeraldas, Ecuador. There, three fundamental dimensions have been established to help teachers and students to research about real and significant educational problems as well as finding solutions to benefit the educational community. The dimensions are ELT contextualized assessment, ELT innovative intervention and ELT experiment projection. From these dimensions, three qualities emerge: ELT educative context appropriation, ELT educative context intervention and ELT educative context evaluation. The qualities orient researchers to diagnose teachers’ and students’ needs and create teaching strategies or didactic materials, implement these tools in the classroom, evaluate the results and finally share the information obtained with the community.

### Method

The present investigation was conducted in some rural areas of Esmeraldas province where there are few schools. In rural areas of Esmeraldas, inhabitants are early involved in agricultural and livestock activities so that, some students’ parents have not completed their educational background. Consequently, parental support in rural students’ education is generally limited.

Regarding the investigation design, it was qualitative non-experimental because as Hernández, (2016) states it will be intended to “analyze a theme of investigation which has not been deeply studied and it has generated many doubts which have not been clarified before”. Rural communities experience vulnerability situations such as poverty, isolation, and a state of abandonment. In addition, it was descriptive research because its purpose was to “specify relevant properties or characteristics of any phenomenon and describe groups or population trends” (Hernández, 2016, p. 382).

The population consisted of 30 teachers and the sample was 10 of them who teach at different rural schools. The hypothesis was: The design of a Humanistic-Based Didactic Strategy to teach English as a foreign language could improve students’ English language learning in rural areas of Esmeraldas.

The methods that were used were analysis-synthesis, inductive-deductive and hermeneutics because the information revealed was carefully examined to organize it and on the other hand, the most relevant aspects were considered to conclude with accurate results starting from general aspects to the most specific ones. The investigation was supported on bibliographical reviews and a survey that involved a questionnaire. This last one consisted of nine questions posed to elicit answers from the participants that permit the fulfilment of the objectives.

## Results

In relation to teaching-learning strategies that work better for rural teachers in the classroom (table 1), the results revealed that the main strategies were cooperative learning strategies such as dialogues and discussions in group work or pair work.

**Table 1: Strategies that work better in teaching English as a foreign language**

Teaching strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Cooperative teaching strategies	8	80%
Directive teaching strategies	6	60%
Traditional teaching strategies	4	40%
Gamification strategies	4	40%
Communicative language teaching strategies	3	30%
Task based learning strategies	2	20%

Source: Survey. Author's own elaboration

In regards with the rural students' needs, it is observed in table 2 that parental support and awareness about the importance of the subject is pointed as the greater need that students have in relation to the English language learning. Likewise, other aspects are noticeable.

**Table 2: Rural students' needs in the English language teaching-learning process**

Rural students' needs	Frequency	Percentage
Parental support and awareness about the importance of English language	8	80%
Free access to a wide range of technological resources	6	60%
Logistic support in their educational institutions	6	60%
Better qualified teachers	6	60%

Source: Survey. Author's own elaboration

In respect to whom must be placed as the central role in the teaching-learning process, as revealed in table 3, the answers stated that teachers are greatly believed to be the learning center over the students in English language learning.

**Table 3: Central role in the English language teaching-learning process**

Central role	Frequency	Percentage
Teachers	6	60%
Students	4	40%

Source: Survey. Author's own elaboration

To design a didactic strategy based on the humanistic approach, it was firstly necessary to research about the application of humanistic elements in the rural students' English language learning process. As it is exposed in table 4, humanistic elements are occasionally used by rural teachers.

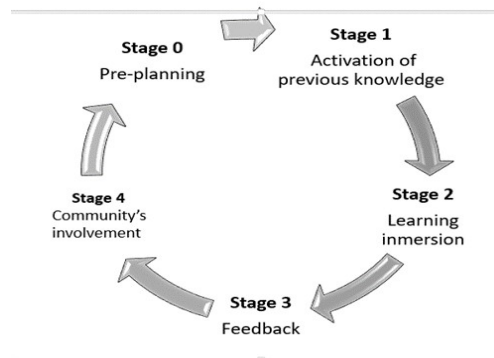
**Table 4: Humanistic elements in the English language teaching-learning process**

Humanistic aspects	Frequency	Percentage
Consideration of students' interests before designing a teaching strategy	Never	50%
Free decision making about what topics they want to learn about	Sometimes	60%
Planning curricular or extracurricular activities that involve students' parents or community.	Sometimes	50%

Source: Author's own elaboration

### A Humanistic Approach - Based Didactic Strategy

After the diagnosis made, the design of a Humanistic Approach-Based Didactic strategy has become an emergent need in some rural areas of Esmeraldas. The strategy consists of 5 stages: pre-planning, activation of previous knowledge, learning immersion, feedback, and community's involvement. These are explained in detail in the following figure and table.



**Figure 1: Stages of the Humanistic Approach -Based Didactic Strategy**

Source: Author's own elaboration

**Table 5: A Humanistic Approach -Based Didactic Strategy**

<b>GENERAL OBJECTIVE</b>	<b>To improve the English language learning through the application of a humanistic strategy</b>
<b>STAGE 0: Pre-planning</b> (The purpose of this stage is to provide students an amicable classroom environment which dismisses their anxiety or fear)	<b>Teachers' actions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ To propose a close dialogue among students to promote interaction among everyone.</li> <li>✓ Based on what the students have talked about, to allow them to choose what they want to learn among a variety of contents.</li> <li>✓ To plan the further lessons taking into account the staff that students have affinity with.</li> </ul>
	<b>Students' actions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ To express their emotions, feeling, experiences and interests. (On this stage, students are allowed to use the L1).</li> <li>✓ To choose the topic they want to learn about in a democratic scenario.</li> <li>✓ To start creating expectations about the topic they have chosen.</li> </ul>

<p><b>STAGE 1: activation of Previous knowledge</b> (This stage is intended to activate the students' previous knowledge to connect their former experiences with the further new knowledge and, consequently reach a learning internalization. In addition, motivation and encouragement is a key aspect)</p>	<p><b>Teachers' actions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Once the topic has been chosen, the teacher needs to contextualize it, this means that students are allowed to learn about a topic that belongs to their own environment and implies relevance and significance.</li> <li>✓ To introduce the topic and some techniques such as visuals, realia, and pose questions or problem solving that can be used to motivate, encourage, and inspire students.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Students' actions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ To participate actively.</li> <li>✓ To incorporate any other topics of interest.</li> </ul>
<p><b>stage 2: LEARNING ImMERSION</b> (this stage is the central point of the strategy in which students need to be involved in their English learning process. Even though students are responsible for their own learning, the teacher's support and monitoring are vital to enhance autonomy and learners' internalization.</p>	<p><b>Teachers' actions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ To offer students' freedom to work cooperatively, it means in pairs or groups formed by few students.</li> <li>✓ To divide the topic chosen by subtopics, items, or related aspects.</li> <li>✓ To provide clear instructions.</li> <li>✓ The activities to be done must be according to the students' language level and intended to be explorative, inquiring and, interactive.</li> <li>✓ To provide freedom to choose the space where students want to work in.</li> <li>✓ To have a supporting, enabling, and monitoring role.</li> <li>✓ To listen to and record the student's mini presentations. The assessment is mainly focused on students' efforts instead of students' outcomes.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Students' actions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ To arrange groups according to the affinity they have with their classmates.</li> <li>✓ To select the topic considering the opinions of all their groups members, it means the topic is chosen democratically.</li> <li>✓ To clear doubts about the activities proposed by the teacher.</li> <li>✓ To select a place to feel comfortable and relaxed, it can be even, inside, or outside class.</li> <li>✓ To accept and request the teachers' help when it is necessary.</li> <li>✓ To perform mini presentations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>STAGE 3: FEEDBACK</b></p>	<p><b>Teachers' actions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Once the activities proposed have been finished, to suggest a dialogue that can be carried out with the students in a round.</li> <li>✓ To project a close and confidence figure, listens to the students carefully and congratulates and recognize their efforts to work as better as possible.</li> <li>✓ To correct some mistakes observed or listened to, during the activity development in a general way.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Students' actions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ To make a round and feel close to their teacher and</li> </ul>

	<p>classmates.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ To express their feelings, impressions, difficulties, or limitations in respect to the activities proposed by the teacher.</li> <li>✓ To listen to the teachers' corrections and make commitments for improving.</li> </ul>
<b>STAGE 4: community involvement</b>	<p><b>Teacher's actions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ To plan a curricular or extracurricular activity that allows students to share the skills they have learned.</li> <li>✓ To organize a meeting to invite students' parents to participate in the planned event.</li> <li>✓ To encourage students to present their tasks in a public event involving the local educational community.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Students' actions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ To cooperate giving ideas about how to carry out the event.</li> <li>✓ To participate in the dialogue among parents and teacher.</li> <li>✓ To present their mini presentations and being praised for their efforts by the community.</li> </ul>

Source: Author's own elaboration

## Discussion

Mora and Villegas (2019) revealed that the active participation of students in the class may be also perceived as a humanistic teaching practice and Chen and Schmidtke (2016) admitted that some humanistic elements such as learning centered classes are unconsciously applied by teachers.

Korobchenko and Khmelnskiy (2015) carried out an investigation that revealed the urging necessity of designing a reform in the educational system of Ukraine. According to them, the mentioned reform should include humanistic principles.

Jin (2014) recorded a lesson that was taught using the Humanistic Approach in English as a second language target group. The applied methodology was based on the Communicative language teaching method and included the fact of giving freedom to the students.

Mora and Villegas (2019) proposed a pedagogical model to improve the 5<sup>th</sup> level students' results in external tests in a public school in Colombia. It considered pre-planning, activation of previous knowledge, learning immersion, feedback, and community's involvement. However, they did not include involvement of children's parents in the teaching-learning process.

The results also coincided with previous research by Ramirez (2020) in relation to the necessary diagnosis, educative context intervention and evaluation to consider a humanistic approach to language teaching.

## Conclusions

In respect to the use of teaching strategies, rural teachers use mostly cooperative, direct, and traditional learning strategies because according to them, they work better for delivering accurate results in students' English language learning. Regarding the central role in the teaching-learning process, rural professors consider that teachers are the ones who have a major role over the students in contrast to humanistic theories that set learners as the central point in any kind of methodological processes carried out.

The diagnosis revealed that the lack of parental support and awareness about the importance of English language learning was the most noticeable need in rural students that is why the proposed humanistic

strategy is intended to involve the community to generate a higher level of awareness in parents and encouragement in students.

Despite of the fact that some humanistic aspects such as the consideration of students' interests, freedom to make learning topic decisions and involvement of the community in the English language teaching process are employed sporadically by rural teachers in the classroom, it does not mean that they have a broad knowledge about what the Humanistic Approach.

A strategy based on humanistic elements and principles such as collaborative and experiential learning, critical thinking, learners' centered lessons, relevant contents adapted to the students' reality and a safe and amicable learning ambiance step by step has become a priority in rural communities of Esmeraldas Ecuador.

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