

# Responding to Students as Individuals: A Rogerian (Re)view

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## چکیده

هدف از نگارش این مقاله، بررسی شالوده‌های روان‌شناسی انسان‌گرایانه‌ی کارل راجرز و پیامدهای آن در زمینه‌ی تدریس به‌طور عام و تدریس زبان‌های خارجی به‌طور خاص بوده است. ابتدا این مسئله که روان‌شناسی مأخوذ از دیدگاه راجرز پدیدار شناسانه است، مطرح می‌شود. این یعنی افراد، جهان را به‌صورت مختلف درک می‌کنند و این که واقعیت پدیده‌ای خاص برای هر شخص محسوب می‌شود. لذا فردیت هر شخص خاص اوست و این باید توسط معلمان (زبان‌های خارجی) مورد پذیرش و احترام باشد. همچنین، این‌طور استدلال می‌شود که معلمان زبان خارجه‌ای که دنبال روی رویکردهای راجرز هستند، باید برای دانش‌آموزان در این موارد احترام قائل شوند: نیاز به سکوت، در نظر گرفتن علائق آن‌ها و میل برای ایجاد نوآوری در برنامه‌ی آموزشی. سرانجام این که بهترین جایگاه برای معرفی چنین مسائلی، دوره‌های تربیت دبیر است.

کلید واژه‌ها: تئوری کارل راجرز، روان‌شناسی انسان‌گرایانه، تفاوت‌های فردی فراگیران زبان.

## Abstract

This paper aims to explore the basic principles of Rogerian humanistic psychology and their implications for teaching in general and language teaching in particular. At first, it is suggested that Rogerian psychology is phenomenological. That is, it is based on the assumption that people perceive the world differently and that reality is something private for each individual. Thus, each person's individuality is unique to him or her, which should be understood and respected by the teachers. It is argued that (language) teachers who follow Rogerian approach should respect learners' need for silence, take learners' interests into consideration and be willing to bring about curricular innovations. Finally, it is recommended that the best place to introduce these issues to teachers is in teacher training programs.

**Key Words:** Carl Rogers; humanistic psychology; learner differences.

## **I** Introduction

Carl Ransom Rogers was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1902. He was the fourth child of six children in his family. He was brought up in a devout Christian family. Being a gifted child, Carl started school from the second grade because he could read even before he attended kindergarten. When Carl was 12 years old, his family moved to a farm 30 miles west of Chicago. Having strict parents and being involved in hard work, Carl developed an isolated, independent and self-disciplined character.

Carl attended the University of Wisconsin and studied agriculture. Later he got married and went to New York, where he studied religion for some time. While in New York, he was attracted to psychology. He entered the world of psychology at Columbia University, where he received his masters in psychology and his doctorate in psychotherapy in 1931. He started his work at the Rochester Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to children. In 1942, Rogers wrote his first book *Counseling and Psychotherapy*. When he accepted the professorship at the University of Chicago, Rogers set up a counseling center where he developed and published his seminal work *Client-Centered Therapy* in 1951.

At the age of 55, Rogers went to teach at his alma mater, the University of Wisconsin. Seven years later, he accepted a research position at La Jolla, California. He provided therapy, gave speeches, received award, and wrote until his death in 1987.

Carl Rogers, no doubt, is one of the

leading figures in humanistic psychology, which will be briefly touched upon in the next section.

## **H**umanistic Psychology

Humanistic psychology emphasizes the importance of the inner world of human beings and regards each person's thoughts, feelings and emotions as the focal point of all his or her development (Williams and Burden, 1997). Thus, this branch of psychology is concerned with the uniqueness, the individuality, and the humanity of each individual (Lefrancois, 1991). Humanistic psychology rightly claims that although human beings resemble each other both physically and physiologically, they are different from one another emotionally and behaviorally. This means that each person is unique because he or she has his or her own *self*. Hence it can be concluded that humanistic psychology has an affective orientation rather than a cognitive one (Brown, 1994). Now that the basic tenets of humanistic psychology have become clear, we can shift our attention to basic principles of Rogers's humanistic views. The following principles are taken from Kohl (1969), Borton (1970), Simpson and Gary (1976), and Lefrancois (1991).

### ● *Rogers' Humanistic Principles*

Before investigating principles of Rogers's psychology, it seems necessary to elaborate on an often-heard term with respect to Rogerian psychology. This term

is *phenomenology*, which emphasizes that human beings perceive the world differently. Thus, it is often said that Rogerian theory is phenomenological in that it is concerned with the individual's own view of the world. In other words, people see the world as it seems to them rather than as it appears to others. This phenomenological view, as we will see below, is at the heart of Rogerian psychology.

The essence of Rogerian psychology is summarized as follows:

1. Each human being possesses a world of private experience unique to himself or herself. This suggests that Rogerian theory is fundamentally phenomenological. Each person's phenomenological world is private, and cannot be completely known by anyone else. As an example, let's think about the common fear of children from darkness. Almost all children are afraid of walking into dark rooms. However, the fear that Jack, a typical child, experiences, though real, is different from the fear that his peers feel. This indicates that their phenomenological worlds are different.

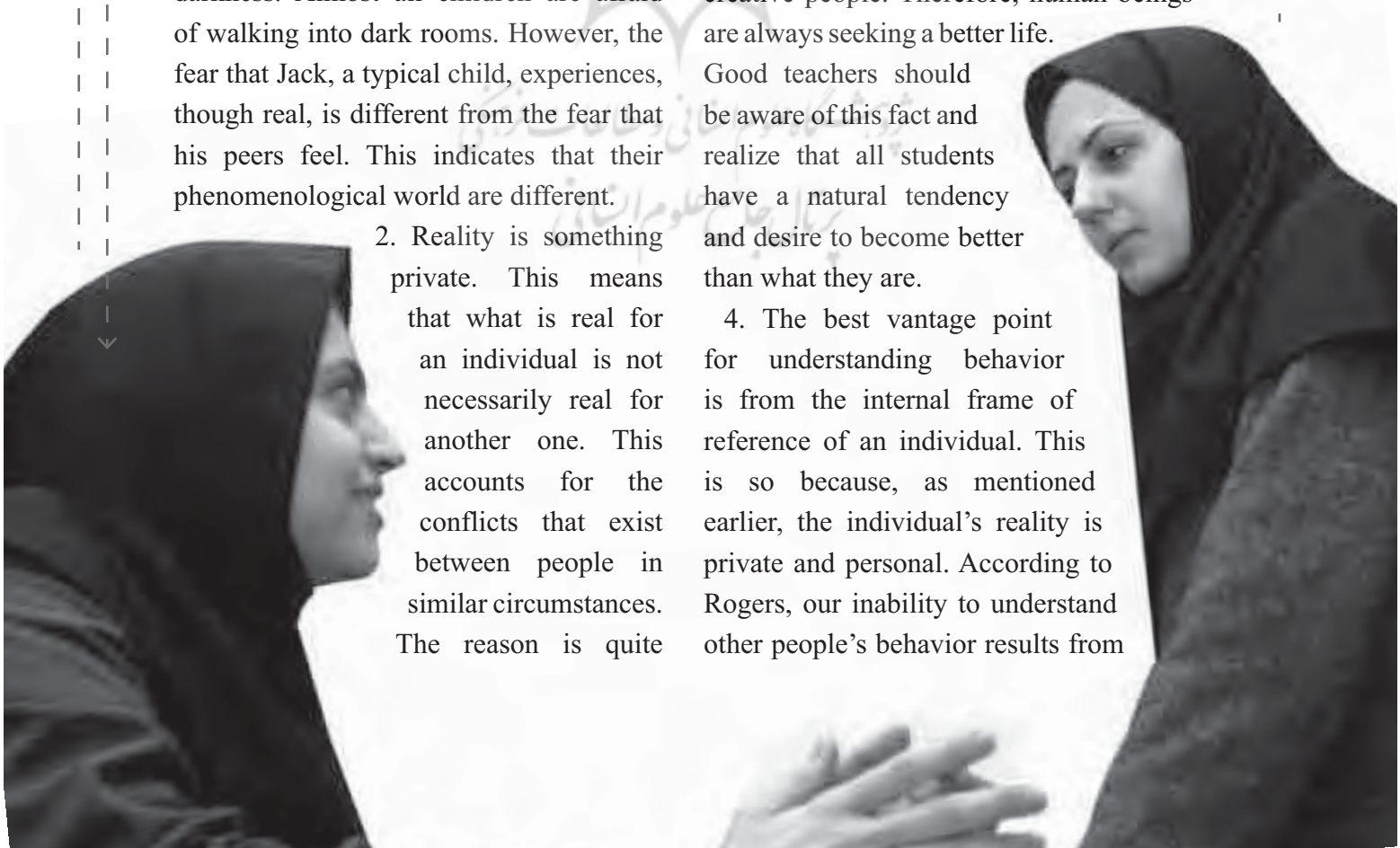
2. Reality is something private. This means that what is real for an individual is not necessarily real for another one. This accounts for the conflicts that exist between people in similar circumstances. The reason is quite

simple: their concepts of reality are different. A child who likes a certain story, though it might seem boring to others, most probably has a pleasant memory from reading or listening to it. Therefore, it is important for teachers to understand that each student's image of the world is unique to him or her.

3. All human beings strive for self-actualization. According to Maslow (1970), another leading figure in humanistic psychology, self-actualization involves becoming whatever one can become through activities determined by oneself. This suggests that self-actualization is the complicated process of developing one's potentialities. Like Maslow, Rogers similarly believes that human beings have an inner desire to develop themselves so that they become healthy, competent, creative people. Therefore, human beings are always seeking a better life.

Good teachers should be aware of this fact and realize that all students have a natural tendency and desire to become better than what they are.

4. The best vantage point for understanding behavior is from the internal frame of reference of an individual. This is so because, as mentioned earlier, the individual's reality is private and personal. According to Rogers, our inability to understand other people's behavior results from



our failure to recognize that each person's world is unique to him or her. A person who describes the customs of primitive tribes as "ridiculous" looks at their culture from the perspective of his or her own culture. The best solution to this problem is communication as it reduces defensiveness and encourages openness so that both the counselor and the client can mutually understand each other.

5. An individual's self is developed through two sources of information: direct and indirect experiences. A young student who can solve difficult math problems without anyone's help *directly* experiences that she is an intelligent person. In this way, she forms a certain concept of self. Now if this student receives high grades in math, she *indirectly* experiences that she is a specially gifted student. In this case, the child's direct and indirect experiences were compatible. Unfortunately, this is not true about many people. In these cases an individual's incompatible direct and indirect experiences lead to conflicting notions of the self. Let's consider the same hypothetical child who solves difficult math problems at school. If this child gets poor grades at school she has to resolve this conflict. She might think that these grades are a true manifestation of her ability, so she is not specially gifted. She might equally think that she is a talented student, yet her teachers do not like her. According to Rogers the roots of a person's misbehavior should be found in his or her early failure to resolve such conflicts.

### ● *Instructional Implications of Rogerian Theory*

This part of the paper attempts to present some of the most important instructional implications of Rogers's humanistic approach, which, it is hoped, would be value to content teachers in general language teachers in particular.

1. According to Brown (2007), the focus of Rogerian views on education is away from "teaching" and toward "learning". The goal of education is the facilitation of learning. Thus, teachers have the role of helping learners how to learn rather than teaching them from a superior vantage point of someone who knows what is "best" for the learners. This is in line with the concept of self-actualization discussed in the preceding section. All human beings - academically speaking, all learners - have a tendency to be better than what they are. So the teacher should be viewed as someone who facilitates this process of self-improvement, i.e. learning. Thus, Rogerian theory makes a plea for learner-centered classes, a philosophy of teaching in which students are given a much more important role in curriculum decisions than has traditionally been the case.

2. Rogerian philosophy is against any sort of performance-oriented, test-dominated



methods of teaching. These methods of teaching, according to Curran (1976), are a threat to the personality of the learners. Blackboard exercises, oral quizzes, teacher-imposed lectures, etc. “move students to learn out of personal anxiety and/ or the fear of a low grade or some similar personal humiliation and embarrassment” (p. 15). Curran argues that in these classes students learn just for the sake of self-protection. He calls this experience of learning as “self-defensive”. Thus, the second implication that the Rogerian philosophy has for instructional purposes is that the learning environment should be as relaxing as possible so that learners do not learn just for the sake of protecting their ego. This type of learning is ephemeral and hence not lifelong.

3. Teacher behavior should invite students to see themselves as valuable, responsible, worthwhile, and important people. In other words, teacher behavior should be inviting rather than disinviting (Purkey, 1984). The following samples are instances of disinviting behavior taken from Purkey.

- The teacher said I didn't want to learn, that I just wanted to cause trouble.
- The teacher said to me in front of the whole class, “I really don't think you're that stupid!”
- I was a newcomer to another school. When I appeared at the teacher's doorway, he said, “Oh, no, not another one!”
- My name is Bill Dill, but the teacher always called me “Dill Pickle” and laughed. Therefore, as can be seen from the

above samples, disinvitation is often communicated to the child through teacher indifference and through failure to respond to students as people.

4. Every learning experience should be

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seen as a golden opportunity to help learners develop a sense of personal identity and relating that to realistic future goals. In other words, learning should be personalized as much as possible (Williams and Burden, 1997). This is a valuable guideline which suggests that teachers should respect the personal needs of each student.

5. The last implication from Rogers's philosophy is that teachers should empathize with their learners by getting to know them as individuals (Williams and Burden, 1997). In other words, teachers should try to understand how learners make sense of the world. This is in harmony with what was mentioned in the previous section of the paper. That is, each person's world is unique to him or her, and each individual's reality is something private. Therefore, it is the teacher's task to protect, respect and appreciate each learner's world and individuality. Hamacheck (1997) cited in Williams and Burden (1997, p. 36), in

this respect, has made the following wise, thoughtful observation:

Humanistic education starts with the idea that students are different, and it strives to help students become more like themselves and less like each other.

### ● *How Do Learners Differ?*

So far it has been repeatedly emphasized that learners are different from each other and that their individuality should be respected by the teacher. But how do our learners differ from each other? According to Kershner (2000, p. 237) they differ in:

- Physical characteristics and abilities: e.g., age, health, appearance, etc.

- personal qualities: e.g., adaptability, determination, competitiveness, etc.

- emotions and motivation: e.g., responses to success and failure, self-esteem, anxiety, etc.

- social behavior: e.g., aggression, communication skills, etc.

- learning skills and strategies: e.g., memory, imagination, awareness and control of learning strategies, etc.

- knowledge, attitudes and opinions: e.g. breadth and detail of knowledge in different subject areas, strength of opinion, interests, etc.

- environment and experiences: e.g., family relations, social classes, hobbies, etc.

How do all these findings relate to language teachers? Does Rogerian thinking have any implications or applications for foreign language classes? This issue will be examined in more depth below.

## **R**esponding to Students as Individuals in Language Classes

Respecting learners' individuality seems to be a recurrent theme in Rogerian humanistic approach to education. This view, for sure, has a number of implications for language teachers, which will improve their practice. Some of these implications are as follows.

1. *Respecting learner's need for silence:* Some learners, by nature, are quiet people. They usually do not talk very much. Some other learners prefer not to talk when everyone in the classroom is listening to and gazing at them. One of the most important skills to be developed in foreign language classes is the speaking skill. Obviously, the majority of the learners who attend foreign language classes wish to be able to speak the foreign language they are interested in. Some well-intentioned teachers, in this respect, put the learners under pressure to say something in the foreign language, without being aware that many of them still do not feel confident to speak in public. In this way, many of these teachers, unknowingly, create a stressful atmosphere in their classes. This situation becomes even worse at the time of final evaluation. The teacher fails these poor students simply because they were not active in the class and did not have enough class participation. The teacher who, however, are familiar with basic principles of Rogers's humanistic psychology would never act like this. These teachers are surely

aware of the emotional aspects of teaching and learning. Therefore, they would have more respect for the learners' silence and privacy. A practical solution which seems to work for these reserved learners is to encourage them to speak in pairs or small groups with their peers (Harmer, 2007). The teacher could also have some brief counseling meetings with these learners after class to learn more about their problems. This is the true reflection of a Rogerian approach.

2. *Respecting learners' interests*: It is an admitted fact that matching tasks to individual learners' interests is a very difficult challenge for any teacher due to individual differences when it comes to learning (Cook, 2008). However, in adopting a humanistic approach to their teaching practice, teachers should note that learners have various tastes and interests. Sometimes, it happens that the teacher's interest is in sharp contrast to that of a learner. As a result, the learner does not pursue the assigned task very seriously, which might be interpreted as carelessness or laziness on the side of the teacher. In many foreign language classes, it is common practice for teachers to give extensive reading tasks to learners. In some cases, it is the teacher who decides which novel should be read and what kind of follow-up activities should be done on it. This kind of decision making is not always met with positive feedback from the learners because many of them might not be interested in the novel selected by

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the teacher. Perhaps some of them would like to be involved in extensive reading but they might be interested in reading popular magazines not classic novels. Teachers who are familiar with basic principles of humanistic psychology surely know that in order to promote learning, they need to be flexible and not impose their interests on their students.

3. *Curriculum innovations*: In addition to being flexible to learners' interests, the teacher with humanistic views should be willing to bring about innovative changes in the school curriculum. Teachers who are used to practicing traditionally always stick to the curriculum they have been assigned to teach without reflecting on what they are doing. What has been assigned and prescribed by the authorities does not necessarily mean that it is the best. In my opinion, in the Rogerian approach to education, all school and university curricula should be open to change and adaptation, and this can be done in the hands of innovative teachers. Suppose, for instance, a language teacher who is required to teach English through an

audio-lingual based textbook in a setting where he cannot change the textbook due to institutional regulations. Suppose further that this textbook does not meet the learners' needs and interests. It is thus the teacher's role to present the contents of this book in a way that interests the learners or accompany it with optional activities which would be useful to the learners' real-life events. This is the true meaning of bringing about curricular innovations tailored to the learners' needs and interests.

### Summary and Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to explore some of the most important principles of Rogerian humanistic psychology. It was argued that Rogerian psychology is phenomenological, i.e. it emphasizes that people perceive the world differently and that each person possesses a world of private experience. The conclusion drawn from this phenomenological perspective was that all individuals are essentially different from one another and this has a lot of instructional implications for both content teaching in general and language teaching in particular. It was suggested that language teachers who adopt a humanistic approach respect learners' need for silence, take learners' interest into account, and are willing to bring about curricular innovations.

Now how can we inform language teachers about all these issues? In my opinion, the best place to discuss them is

to incorporate them into the curriculum of teacher training programs. The curriculum of the majority of teacher training programs lacks a course in which novice teachers can become familiar with the "psychology" of their practice. It is hoped that by introducing such courses in the body of teacher training programs prospective teachers bring a fresh pair of eyes to their teaching practice.

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