

## HOLISM IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a task that demands from the teacher a continuous process of training and innovation. The traditional methodologies have given rise to the development of different activities and techniques that permit the teacher to innovate his teaching process and provide the students with different possibilities in their learning process. One of the theories that has given the opportunity to English teachers to develop new learning strategies is known as Holism. This theory is presented here and some implications for the EFL classroom are exposed with some possible activities that help to apply holism in EFL contexts.

Holism is a theory or doctrine according to which a whole cannot be analyzed without residue into the sum of its parts or reduced to discrete elements, it is an emphasis on the organic or functional relationship between parts and wholes.

In less erudite terminology, and in relation to reading instruction, holism means the integration of the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A common term for holism in schools where it is used is "the whole language classroom".

For those educators who believe in the holistic approach, what should be taken into account is that for teaching any complete thing the teacher does not separate it into its parts; for instance, when teaching about an animal, a teacher does not present first a leg of the animal, then an ear, then the nose, and so on. The teacher presents the animal as a complete body (Hodges, 1987). The holistic approach,

then, is opposed to segmentation; there need not be –indeed there should not be – separate classes for reading, writing, with spelling lists of words unrelated to any other learning; grammar or speech.

Instead, all those "language arts" should be interrelated and integrated such as in the following description. Listening should be active and involved. The teacher should read to the students every day, and read well, with enthusiasm and dramatic ability. As the teacher reads, he/she should ask questions intermittently. Predictions should be asked for. When learning to read, students need predictable books, ones they can make guesses about outcomes, but ones not too easily solved by guessing. Prediction is the most important aspect to model.

Speaking is an important prereading and writing step. It helps the learner organize his/her thoughts. Talking is good rehearsal for writing.

Reading should be accomplished with whole, authentic texts with natural dialogue and figurative language so that the beauty of the story remains. An essential aspect of learning to read is the rapport that develops when teachers take the time to share the pleasures of reading with the students. Do not read condensed, cut up stories or simplified, rewritten stories. Avoid using basals for any purpose other than as supplemental texts. Reading materials must be relevant, comprehensible, and predictable. Readability formulas used in selecting and rewriting materials do not

produce appropriate readable texts. Tinkering with texts to produce acceptable readability levels may actually turn them into texts which are harder to read (Goodman, 1986). Further statistical analysis of the effects of materials, grouping, and decoding on achievement and attitudes toward reading indicate that the use of appropriate literature to teach students to read has a positive effect upon students' achievement and attitudes toward reading – much greater than the traditional methods used. The materials teachers use in class make the difference (Eldredge & Butterfield, 1986).

Remember that reading should be student centered and something the students can relate to. Remember that reading for meaning is paramount; that reading should be rewarding, and that students learn to read by reading (Goodman, 1987).

Writing should be done both as a response to literature and as an expression of students' own experiences. Spelling behaviors should be carefully observed and spelling lessons should be constructed according to the words most frequently misspelled in students' writings. Grammar instruction could be incorporated into writing activities.

*A procedure for the integration of the language arts with activities.* Real literature will be used instead of basal readers. Literature used in a holistic way can serve the students well. It can kindle their imagination, persuade them to listen and read more carefully, and provide topics for enthusiastic discussions and writings.

Students, working with partners, will talk through their learning in all subjects; talk; talk out their compositions before they write, and engage in activities that promote

oral expression: story telling, choral reading, reader's theater, creative dramatics, etc.

Students will write daily. As a follow-up to reading, writing assignments will be given instead of workbooks or worksheets. Worksheets tend to be little more than busy work. The model will be one of prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

The students' difficulties in oral and written discourse will determine what they need to study in grammar and usage. Spelling lists will be made from the students' errors in writing. Practice in handwriting will be emphasized when the students write their revised compositions.

Pre-reading activities:

Partners will brainstorm the title of the story, freely associating a variety of divergent ideas which generate a range of vocabulary and concepts and focus the students' attention on the story. Both students contribute ideas which one student writes down. Students are guided by the wh-questions: who, what, where, when, why, how. Two sets of partners who are reading the same story read their list of brainstormed words to each other, noting similarities and differences. The two sets of partners group words that "go together" one another and decide upon a name for that category. They write the category at the bottom of the page. The partners map their ideas, drawing a circle in the center of the page, in which they write the title and then extend as many lines from the circle as there are categories. Under each category they write the individual words, producing a structured, organized schemata of interrelated ideas. Using the map as a guide, each partner tells and writes a story, incorporating as many

ideas as possible. Each illustration in the story is carefully observed and described by the partners who pay particular attention to details. After a partner describes the factual information in the picture, he/she then predicts from the pictorial clues what information he/she expects to read in the text. Selecting one illustration, each partner discusses, then writes a paragraph describing or narrating the scene. After all the illustrations are examined, the partner tells and writes a story based upon the pictorial information, hypothesizing the beginning, development, and conclusion of the story.

Partners discuss and write a predetermined number of questions they want to have answered from the reading. If there are questions following the story, the partners attempt to answer them before they read, striving to make good guesses.

#### Activities while reading:

Partners read orally to one another. The listener follows along in the text, asks questions, and predicts what is to come next. Partners read silently, discuss the story, and make up a list of comprehension questions.

#### Post reading activities:

Partners discuss and then write a preface to the story, describing what might have happened before the story began. Where were the characters?, What were they doing?, What events could have happened that led up to the story beginning as it did?

Partners discuss and write a sequel to the story, continuing the plot while bringing in new complications, events, and perhaps, characters. Partners discuss and write a different ending to the story, exploring the

possibilities and selecting one that logically relates to the development of the story. Partners identify the main event in the story which determines the outcome, then change that event, discuss and write the results of the change. They also discuss and write a letter to the main character in the story, relating their opinions of what the character did in the story and what he/she might have done. Later, they discuss and write a critique or evaluation of the story, focusing on what was interesting or boring and why, supporting opinions with quotes from the text. Partners map out the who-what-where-when of the story, supporting each category with significant details from the story. They also discuss and draw a three-part picture depicting the introduction, development, and conclusion of the story. Using the pictures as a guide, partners retell the story.

Provide students with a story frame such as: This story is about \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ is an important character. \_\_\_\_\_ tried to \_\_\_\_\_. The story ends when \_\_\_\_\_. Use different types of frames. Then they retell and rewrite the story in dialogue, producing a script. If needed, students should include a narrator.

Another possibility is for students to discuss and write the main idea of the story and the main idea from each paragraph and list the ideas in outline form. Students are supposed to keep a journal, so they can discuss and write in their journals their feelings, reactions, and opinions of the story.

A very nice exercise is to make students discuss and write a comparison and contrast between two characters in the story or between a character in one story with a character in another story.

A writing task that is underused but very useful is to make students write a one paragraph summary of the story, including all significant details (Mahoney, B., 1988).

## APPLICATION OF HOLISM IN EFL CLASSROOMS

All of the procedures shown above can be applied to EFL classrooms. Moreover, the following aspects should be taken into consideration.

Students of English as a foreign language must be conceptually ready for reading tasks. Therefore, reading activities must either connect with the students' knowledge of the world, or the teacher must fill in the gaps before activities are begun.

Various ways to help the students understand reading texts could include the following suggestions: Vocabulary items should be given in meaningful contexts and they should show relationships with other words, through such means as mapping and vocabulary grids. Role play of values and attitudes expressed in stories as a post reading activity, could explore comparisons and contrasts with the foreign and the students' native cultures and could be used to assess understanding. One knowledge of a student could be used to compensate for another, unknown knowledge. Reading materials should be of high interest and should relate to the backgrounds of the learners (Florez & Hadaway, 1987).

The holistic approach can be quite effective because students are free to choose their own texts. They can choose literature of which each student could have much background knowledge, rather than prescribed basal readers or other texts containing much unfamiliar cultural or

historical material (Zvetina, 1987).

Literature is more culture specific than other types of reading material, such as expository prose, but culture as a component of knowledge and experience is a crucial factor in reading comprehension. Research suggests that students recall is significantly higher when reading about their own culture, and students usually prefer stories from their own culture. If reading material about the students' own culture is not available, the students could write their own reading material. However, reading implies learning, so students need to be encouraged to read about other cultures as well (Nelson, 1987).

For beginning EFL students, wordless picture books can be used with a strategy such as SQ3R. Students can survey by flipping through the book; they can devise questions of all sorts about the pictures; they can "read" by looking through the entire wordless picture book to answer all of the questions asked by the students; they can recite by having a class discussion, answering questions and referring to the illustrations to support answers. Cultural differences can be discussed during this time so that students can understand why there may be more than one interpretation of the story. Finally, review can be accomplished by looking through the book again and discussing various concepts and illustrations (Flatley & Rutland, 1986).

For adult basic readers, instruction should focus on aiding the search for meaning, making inferences, and drawing conclusions about what is read. Meaning based instruction that involves writing, speaking, and listening, as well as reading, can help students achieve goals (Padak & Padak, 1987).

The holistic approach is rapidly gaining in popularity in language arts programs. It

has proven to be a highly effective means of teaching the several components of language in a meaningful, interrelated, integrated fashion which can be utilized for maximum benefits in the EFL classroom.

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