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A Systematic Review of Humanistic Foreign Language Education in Higher Education (2020-2026)

Si Miao*

University Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia
Southwest University of Science and Technology, Mianyang, China

Melor Md Yunus and Norzaini Azman

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia

Abstract. Humanism is still an important feature of higher education (HE) since it condemns instrumentalism and focuses on developing the whole person. This is especially important in the context of the increasing integration of digital tools in HE. Essential implications and methodologies in foreign language (FL) teaching remain. However, how they affect those methods is still inadequately comprehended. This paper examines the key elements of learner-centred humanism, the impact of technology, and how FL can be integrated within HE. A systematic search of the Scopus and Web of Science databases was conducted based on the terms "humanism," "humanistic education," "foreign language learning," and "learner-centred," which yielded 40 English-language publications from 2020 to 2026, following the guidelines outlined in PRISMA. The data was synthesised by employing thematic analysis. Based on the research, it can be concluded that humanistic FL education has been redefined as a twofold commitment. On the one hand, it is committed to learner affect and

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*Corresponding author: Yunus Melor Md; *melor@ukm.edu.my*

subjectivity while on the other, technology has a facilitating and hindering role in relation to these two aspects. The main strategies identified are student centeredness, interpersonal connectivity, and empowerment-driven assessment. The essence of humanistic FL education is therefore not to blindly empower, but to help preserve the growth of learners comprehensively in the technological era in an empathetic way.

Keywords: Humanistic education; foreign language education; Higher education; Systematic review

1. Introduction

The growing use of AI in HE brings up a major basic question: can technical efficiency and humanistic principles coexist in FL education? The humanistic ideal and technical efficacy have surfaced in the context of using technology in HE (Mohamed, 2024; van den Berg & du Plessis, 2023). Technological progress is the main focus of academic debates on computing perspectives, with educational agents and humanistic contexts barely appearing (Piedra-Castro et al., 2024; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). This efficiency-driven academic paradigm mirrors the existential crises and shrinking of FL majors both globally and locally (Crompton & Burke, 2023; Heller, 2023).

Despite the doubts cast on the usefulness of FL majors, dominated by artificial intelligence, humanism that focuses on student autonomy, emotional engagement and potential can serve in sustaining the intrinsic value of FL majors (Amini et al., 2025; Arnold & Foncubierta, 2021; Farikah, 2019; Stevick, 1990). This basic educational philosophy is capable of enjoying the greatest potential in the era of AI, as it focuses on education as an entire human being, including affective, moral and cognitive growth, while treating the student as an actual human being with emotional needs (Amini et al., 2025). It additionally offers the valuable protection of FL education in an age of high technology.

Humanism focuses on the human inner world (Rahman, 2013), defining learners as a human being and not just a recipient of learning (Arnold & Foncubierta, 2021; Hogan, 1978). The environment is conducive to facilitation and people tap into their deep inner resources in order to gain insights about themselves and to self-sustain. Rogers (1961, 1969) suggested the student-centred approach, which is based on the concept of intellectual and emotional potential in order to enable significant learning. The hierarchy of needs shows the underlying mechanism: when education addresses the basic needs of security, belonging and self-esteem, then individuals are able to fully engage, grow and reach their

potential (Maslow, 1954, 2014). Social interactions, situational constructivism and basic psychological needs can be the means of concretising this perspective. According to Sociocultural Theory (SCT), FL acquisition s, first of all, a social process in which the "more knowledgeable other" (Vygotsky, 1978) collaborates with the learner before the knowledge is internalised for further problem-solving without assistance. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding show how teaching and development are in a dynamic interaction, such as the human-AI hybrid assessment (Wei & Shin, 2025), interventionist dynamic assessment (YarAhmadi & Kargar Behbahani, 2025; Kargar Behbahani et al., 2025), and peer feedback.

Ecologically, learner agency is a dynamically emergent process affected by education (Schoon, 2018; van Lier, 2010; Biesta & Tedder, 2007), teacher presence and guidance (Liu & Chao, 2017; He et al., 2024), perceptions of technology (Liu & Chao, 2017), and changes in classroom context (Peng, 2011). Autonomy, competence and relatedness are all key factors in FL learning, as posited by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This also predicts Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (Fu, 2025), as well as the mediation of teacher support and enthusiasm in relation to engagement and motivation. The demands can be achieved through interpersonal interaction and technology (Annamalai et al., 2024).

The "whole person" development contains social interaction within the humanism as well as situational constructivism and basic psychological needs. It transforms the "mediator" of Sociocultural Theory into Rogers (1969)'s actual, empathic "facilitator," and social contact from a cognitive exchange to a ZPD of the mind. A technology learning environment should do more than just provide information; it should also satisfy the needs of safety and belongingness, as suggested by Maslow (1954).

Thus, FL education is grounded in respect for dignity and satisfaction of basic needs, and it fosters the whole person by enabling him/her to reach their inner resources to influence positive change and development on his/her own (Zein, 2017). Humanism is a fundamental component of the university's responsibility for the pursuit of knowledge and in social service (Boulton & Lucas, 2011; Mielkov et al., 2021), which makes it possible to establish a relation between the development of professional skills and humanistic literacy (Mielkov et al., 2021).

The studies on humanistic FL teaching in recent years focus on emotional involvement, subjective motivation and interpersonal relations (He et al., 2025; Huang & Liu 2025; Lu & Watanapokakul 2025; Li et al., 2024). Most of these studies are review papers that often focus on one feature at a time, and don't

necessarily integrate discoveries systematically. The importance of humanistic education, as proven by a review, in the development of student motivation, emotional involvement and supporting students' total development is undeniable. The same review has pointed out conventional educational methodologies and actual implementation issues (Amini et al., 2025). What is more, a theoretical classification of humanistic approaches has been achieved (Shakirova & Valeeva, 2016). However, most of these reviews are narrative and do not meet the standards of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), nor are the methodological quality of the main research referred to.

Furthermore, they only focus on general EFL contexts and do not specifically target the HE context (Amini et al., 2025; Shakirova & Valeeva, 2016). Most importantly, the issue of conceptual ambiguity is still a serious matter. Grammar-Translation and Communicative Language Teaching have been considered 'humanistic' but there is no real connection with the main notions of humanism (Shakirova & Valeeva, 2016).

To overcome these deficiencies, the present study asks the following three research questions:
RQ1: What are the fundamental aspects of humanistic learner-centeredness in FL education in the context of HE?
RQ2: What is the impact of technology on humanistic issues in FL education?
RQ3: How is it possible to apply the humanistic principles of FL education in concrete pedagogical practices?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The systematic review was carried out following the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al. 2021) as shown in Figure 1, following the processes of identification, screening, eligibility and exclusion (Liberati et al., 2009; Moher et al., 2014). The rigorous and transparent method uses explicit search tactics and inclusion criteria to minimise bias and synthesise the research findings on certain themes to guide decision-making and practice (Liberati et al., 2009; Snyder, 2019).

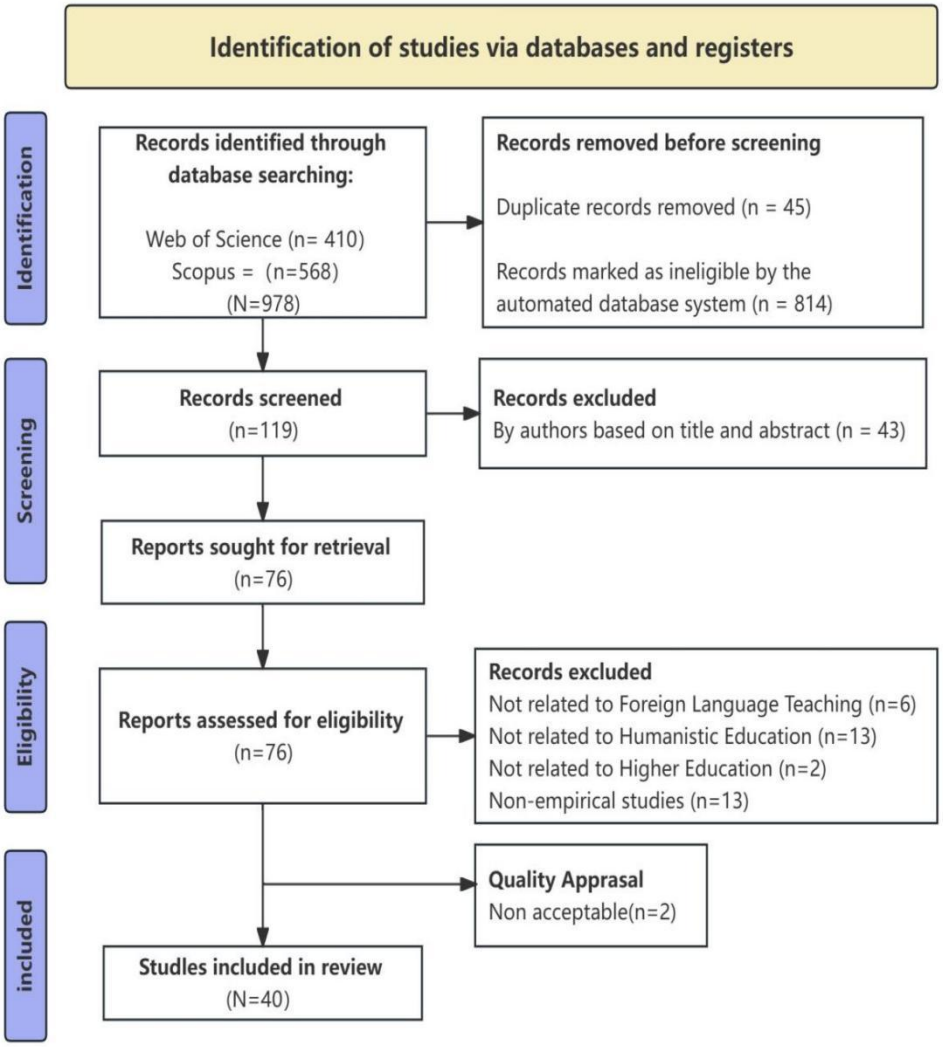

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram

2.2 Sampling and Selection Strategy

2.2.1 Identification Phase

We initially looked for pertinent studies according to the PRISMA criteria (Page et al., 2021). The selected databases were the Web of Science and Scopus as they have broad academic coverage (Zhu & Liu, 2020). The search strategy was developed by identifying and improving the key words, synonyms and related terms (Okoli, 2015) in three key areas: 'higher education', 'humanism' and 'foreign language teaching'. The particular search strings are presented in Table 1. This yielded 978 results.

Table 1: Search string

Database	Search String
Web of Science (WoS)	TS= (("higher education*" OR university* OR college*) AND (humanit* OR "liberal arts" OR "humanistic") AND ("foreign language*" OR "second language*" OR "language teaching" OR "language learning"))
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("higher education*" OR university* OR college*) AND (humanit* OR "liberal arts" OR "humanistic") AND ("foreign language*" OR "second language*" OR "language teaching" OR "language learning"))

2.2.2 Screening Phase

Initially, 45 duplicates were deleted, leaving 933 records for the initial screening. Academic document type, empirical studies, time period (2020-2026), and English language were the database filters. The time period was selected to reflect current results in relation to the educational disruptions and changes in post-pandemic instruction worldwide. The complete text integrity was evaluated only for Open Access papers. The criteria were FL learners, in-service and pre-service teachers. Following these processes, 814 records were removed and 119 were left for further evaluation.

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Conducted between 2020 and 2026	Conducted before 2020
From journals	Book, Review, Book chapter, Conference paper, Retracted
With open access	Without open access
Written in English	Not written in English
Related to higher education, humanism, and foreign language teaching	Not related to higher education, humanism, and foreign language teaching

2.2.3 Eligibility Phase

There were 119 papers evaluated during two phases of manual screening in the eligibility examination; 44 were excluded based on the title/abstract screening due to not being relevant. Of these, all 75 were screened, and a subsequent 33 were excluded (6 of which were not relevant to FL education; 13 were lacking a humanistic perspective; 13 were non-empirical; and 2 were not in HE). Following this, 42 articles were evaluated for methodological quality and 77 articles were excluded.

2.2.4 Appraisal of quality

To ensure the methodological rigor of the studies included, the Quantitative-Qualitative-Mixed Methods Checklist (Tang et al., 2025) was used, which has some criteria for empirical research. Consistent with previous systematic reviews (Deng et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2008), the raw scores of each study were converted to percentage values, and four levels of quality were established: low quality (< 50%), acceptable (50%–70%), good (71%–80%), and

exceptional (> 81%). The inclusion criteria were 'acceptable'. Each work was independently assessed by two researchers, and a third researcher was used to resolve any disagreement. To test inter-rater reliability, Cohen's Kappa coefficient was used and the value was 0.85, indicating a considerable level of agreement. Two studies were excluded as they received a quality percentage of less than 50%, and 40 studies were included in the final analysis (see Table 3).

2.3 Data extraction and data thematic synthesis

The data was extracted and thematically synthesised from all 40 studies. Based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, relevant texts from the abstract, findings, and discussion sections were organised in a standardised coding matrix. Open coding was done independently by two coders (Cohen's k = 0.82). Where disagreements arose, they were resolved by discussion and if necessary, by involving a third researcher. Three main themes were drawn from the data, namely humanistic care, technology and specialised humanistic practices, which included seven sub-themes (Tables 4–6).

Table 3: Included Studies and Quality Scores

No.	Author(s), year	Aim	Finding	Research Design	Score (%)	Quality
1	Abdulaal et al., 2022	To examine how foreign language gaiety (FLG) and foreign language apprehension (FLA) influence the ideal L2 self of Saudi EFL learners.	FLG had a strong positive correlation with the ideal L2 self, whereas FLA showed a strong negative correlation. Overall, learners did not enjoy learning English, as their ideal L2 self was negatively shaped by high apprehension and low gaiety.	Quantitative	69	acceptable
2	Abdullah Alkathiri et al., 2021	To explore students' perspectives toward virtual classes and the impact of such classes on EFL learners' communication skills.	Students had positive attitudes toward virtual classrooms. Such classes could enhance their communication and improve their technical and self-learning skills.	Quantitative	60	acceptable
3	Abdullateef & Muhammedzein, 2021	To examine how Dynamic Assessment can enhance EFL learning	Dynamic Assessment showed a significant relation with language learning improvement.	Mixed-Methods	55	acceptable
4	Akylbekuulu et al., 2024	To identify pedagogical conditions that model intercultural communication in FL learning.	Students showed growth in intercultural communication, language skills, and their readiness for international academic engagement.	Mixed-Methods	50	acceptable
5	Al Mukhallafi, 2024	To explore Saudi EFL students' attitudes toward the usage of Web-Enhanced Language	Students' attitudes were positive toward the usage of Web-Enhanced Language Learning in EFL.	Quantitative	76	good

No.	Author(s), year	Aim	Finding	Research Design	Score (%)	Quality
		Learning and to shed light on the problems they face.				
6	Alharbi & Hassan Al-Ahdal, 2025	To explore Saudi EFL learners' perceptions, attitudes, and intentions regarding using ChatGPT for English language learning.	Learners perceived ChatGPT as useful and emotionally supportive. They used it strategically but expressed concerns about overreliance and erosion of critical thinking.	Mixed-Methods	93	excellent
7	Antonova & Tyrkheeva, 2021	To examine the role of formative assessment in developing critical reading skills in emergency remote teaching	Formative assessments were effective in supporting critical reading skill development during the pandemic.	Mixed-Methods	57	acceptable
8	(Baideldinova et al., 2021)	To improve the structure of students' independent work under teacher supervision in foreign language learning.	Innovative methods and structured supervision enhanced students' cognitive activity and interest in additional education.	Quantitative	57	acceptable
9	Barili & Byram, 2021	To explore the impact of intercultural citizenship and service learning on language learners	Students developed heightened language and intercultural competence through volunteer work with immigrants.	Qualitative	76	good
10	Borzova et al., 2023	To explore trends in university foreign language teaching in Russia and China.	Both countries emphasised learner-centred, interactive, and engagement-focused approaches.	Mixed-Methods	58	acceptable
11	Chen et al., 2021	To explore the effects of integrating meaning-centred positive education into an English-speaking class.	Students enhanced their understanding of mature happiness and life meaning through the CasMac model.	Mixed-Methods	80	good
12	Dashkina et al., 2022	To assess the effectiveness of computer-supported collaborative learning for language proficiency	Team formation based on academic performance was most effective; student engagement positively influenced outcomes.	Quantitative	74	good
13	Dudău et al., 2024	To uncover emotional dimensions in Romanian students' academic writing in L1 and L2.	Romanian texts were more formal and indirect; English texts were more assertive. Emotional expression varied by discipline and genre.	Mixed-Methods	75	good
14	Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021	To explore EFL learners' attitudes toward English and their speaking anxiety.	Females had higher anxiety; working students were more confident. Humanistic approaches were recommended.	Mixed-Methods	57	acceptable
15	Guan et al., 2025	To explore GenAI-mediated informal digital learning of English	GenAI improved oral proficiency but alone was insufficient for sustained	Qualitative	95	excellent

No.	Author(s), year	Aim	Finding	Research Design	Score (%)	Quality
		(IDLE) practices.	engagement.			
16	Guan, 2025	To examine the intersection of social class and gender in Chinese EFL learners' investment in English learning.	Social class and gender shaped learners' access to and engagement with EFL practices.	Mixed-Methods	90	excellent
17	Hadra et al., 2026	To evaluate the accuracy and reliability of AI content detectors in academic contexts.	Detectors performed poorly on hybrid texts and showed fairness concerns; they should not be used as sole evidence for misconduct.	Quantitative	88	excellent
18	Hundarenko et al., 2022	To examine students' views on online vs. traditional learning during COVID-19.	61.6% of students were satisfied with blended learning and ready to apply it in future teaching.	Mixed-Methods	68	acceptable
19	Jamshed et al., 2024	To assess Saudi EFL learners' perspectives on ChatGPT in EFL classrooms.	Learners had favourable views but noted challenges like plagiarism, critical thinking loss, and cultural misunderstanding	Quantitative	62	acceptable
20	Kanoksilapatham, 2021	To explore the potential of OER online lessons in enhancing English skills.	Students showed significant gains in English performance and demonstrated learner autonomy.	Mixed-Methods	85	excellent
21	Kerras & Baya Essayahi, 2022	To analyze difficulties in online Arabic learning and recommend improvements.	Emotional education and communicative approaches were key to improving online language learning.	Mixed-Methods	52	acceptable
22	Khimich & Terentieva, 2023	To explore the integration of classical literary texts in Spanish foreign language teaching.	Students reported enhanced cultural knowledge and professional competence.	Quantitative	67	acceptable
23	Kohnke et al., 2022	To explore pre-service teachers' perceptions of EAP instruction in China.	Challenges included top-down systems, learning styles, and a lack of professional development.	Qualitative	95	excellent
24	Korkmaz & Akbiyik, 2024	To examine EFL learners' attitudes toward AI in language learning	Students had moderate attitudes; engineering students showed more positive attitudes than humanities students.	Mixed-Methods	83	excellent
25	Li, 2024	To explore L2 learning motivation of English majors in a transnational EMI university in China.	Liberal arts students were more sensitive to the ought-to L2 self and anxiety than science students.	Mixed-Methods	88	excellent
26	Liu, 2023	To examine the relationship between English classroom anxiety,	Anxiety negatively predicted achievement; visual and group styles positively predicted	Quantitative	76	good

No.	Author(s), year	Aim	Finding	Research Design	Score (%)	Quality
		learning style, and English achievement	achievement			
27	Lopez-Ozieblo, 2021	To improve students' academic writing through SFL-based instruction	Students' writing confidence and grades improved compared to the previous cohort.	Mixed-Methods	70	acceptable
28	Luo et al., 2023	To develop an instructional model to promote Chinese reading and writing skills for Thai university students	Students' reading and writing skills improved, and attitudes toward the model were very positive.	Mixed-Methods	77	good
29	Lyu et al., 2025	To explore Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of blended learning in an English Extensive Reading Course	Teachers faced challenges in interactions, material selection, and engagement; they adopted multiple roles to enhance learning	Qualitative	86	excellent
30	Matviienko et al., 2023	To describe gamified English learning in Ukrainian teacher education	Gamified learning positively transformed English education and teacher competencies	Mixed-Methods	58	acceptable
31	Mustafa & Paçarizi, 2025	To explore the role of near-peer feedback in shaping EFL teacher identity and enhancing learning	Near-peer feedback positively shaped teacher identity and improved student learning.	Qualitative	95	excellent
32	Pecić & Vlahović, 2025	To explore the use of photographs to enhance functional competence in ESP for social sciences and humanities	A three-dimensional model for using photographs was proposed and found to be effective	Qualitative	71	good
33	Polyakova & Lovrović, 2024	To explore the effects of virtual exchange on L2/3 learning and competence development	Virtual exchange enhanced intercultural cooperation and sustainability awareness	Mixed-Methods	70	acceptable
34	Quieti & Nanni, 2025	To compare perceptions of effective English teachers between IEP and matriculated Thai students	Significant differences were found in affective, student knowledge, and content knowledge areas	Quantitative	81	excellent
35	Rezk, 2026	To investigate the efficacy of stylistic pedagogy in enhancing critical reading among Egyptian EFL students	The experimental group showed a significant improvement in critical reading skills.	Quantitative	86	excellent
36	Taha et al., 2025	To examine the interplay between EFL teachers' professional identity and students' grit in Libya.	No significant correlation was found; teachers' identity was not a source of students' grit.	Quantitative	93	excellent

No.	Author(s), year	Aim	Finding	Research Design	Score (%)	Quality
37	Uryu, 2025	To explore a new approach to assessing transcultural competence and empathy in language education	Discourse analysis revealed differences in how students imagined the cultural "other."	Qualitative	95	excellent
38	Wang et al., 2021	To explore identity tensions in multilingual learning in China	Learners negotiated ideological discourses and made agentive decisions, shaping their motivation and identity.	Qualitative	95	excellent
39	Zhang & Lütge, 2023	To explore Chinese students' understanding of home culture in ELF communication	Students lacked deep home culture knowledge, but recognised its importance in ELF	Mixed-Methods	83	excellent
40	Zimik et al., 2024	To examine the effectiveness of gamified grammar learning in Thai HE	Gamified learning was more effective than traditional methods, and enhanced learning enjoyment.	Mixed-Methods	83	excellent

3. Results and Findings

3.1 Core Dimensions of the Humanistic Focus

In this systematic review, the core dimensions of the humanistic focus on the learner within foreign language education are categorized into learner affective domain and subjectivity.

Table 4: Dimensions of Learner-Centred Humanism

Dimension	Sub-Dimension (Code)	Literature (No.)
Learner Affect Domain	Enjoyment (AE)	1, 6, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30, 40
	Self-Confidence (AC)	3, 11, 14, 18, 19, 27, 31
	Empathy (AEM)	9, 31, 32, 33, 37, 38, 39
	Anxiety (AN)	1, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 25, 26, 40
	Loneliness (AL)	18, 20, 21, 38
Learner Subjectivity	Professional Identity (SP)	8, 23, 30, 31
	Cultural Awakening (SC)	4, 9, 22, 33, 35, 37, 38, 39
	Subjectivity Empowered (SE)	11, 13, 16, 31, 38

3.1.1 Learner Affective Domain

Enjoyment (N=8) is conducive to good emotions and persistent motivation in language acquisition (Matviienko et al., 2023; Zimik, 2024), whereas its absence

may not only hinder the development of the Ideal L2 Self but also worsen learning anxiety (Abdulaal et al., 2022). Gamified learning has become a major source of fun (Korkmaz & Akbıyık, 2024; Matviienko et al., 2023; Zimik et al., 2024). Interestingly, a quantitative survey indicated that the majority of students deemed AI technology as fun (M = 3.9/5) (Alharbi & Al-Ahdal, 2025, p. 7), while a qualitative study showed that students thought the technology was "not enjoyable enough" to use regularly (Guan et al., 2025, p. 325). Besides technology-mediated enjoyment, students can realise "mature happiness" and profound experiences of "joy," "enjoyment," and "shared humanity" through language practices devoted to serving others (Barili & Byram, 2021) or the pursuit of meaning in life (Chen et al., 2021), especially in the face of adversity or negative external circumstances like the pandemic and working with refugees.

Self-confidence (N=7) is a facilitator of taking ownership of one's own education, leading to advancement and development (Hundarenko et al., 2022; Jamshed et al., 2024; Mustafa & Pacarizi, 2025). It is grounded in realistic self-assessment and feasible aims, rather than unqualified self-confidence (Lopez-Ozieblo, 2021). Experiments on oral English using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) show that emphasising meaning-making and real idea exchange rather than correcting grammatical errors helps to increase learners' confidence when expressing (Chen et al., 2021).

Gamified learning environments boost self-efficacy through the students' involvement in task-oriented assignments (Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021). Positive feedback in potential-focused assessment strategies assists students in gaining confidence in their language skills as they observe their progress (Abdullateef & Muhammedzein, 2021). Modern technology creates the "pressure of observation" and, therefore, a safe and autonomous atmosphere for development (Hundarenko et al., 2022; Jamshed et al., 2024). Importantly, work experience increases linguistic confidence since employed students rank higher than non-employed students (Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021).

Empathy (N=7) is a motivational pedagogical tool (Mustafa et al., 2025; Pecic & Vlahovic, 2025), and an important educational target (Uryu, 2025; Barili & Byram 2021). Visually, it facilitates creative empathy, verbal expressiveness and critical analysis (Pecic & Vlahovic, 2025). By sharing the same experiences among their peers, it helps them to be ready for feedback (Mustafa et al., 2025). Empathy, as the willingness to change one's perspective based on others' emotions (Uryu, 2025), is viewed as an educational goal, and it can be enacted best in intercultural language learning. Community service and virtual exchange programs allow students to recognise the similarities in cultures and understand that 'everyone in the world is alike' (Barili & Byram, 2021; Polyakova &

Lovrović, 2024; Uryu, 2025). "Inclusive attitudes" and intercultural awareness can be developed by recognising the "common beliefs" across cultures (Zhang & Lütge, 2023, pp. 5–6). This approach also enables students to break away from the narrow nationalistic scope to mediate among the native culture and the target culture, and what is more, they can make both rational and emotional projections related to the target language country (Wang et al., 2021).

The most common affective code was anxiety (N=9). The level of anxiety found among university FL learners is moderate to high, and is context and group specific (Abdulaal et al., 2022; Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021; Li, 2024). The sociocultural norms experienced by female learners have contributed to a higher level of anxiety while the wider social experience of in-service students has contributed to a lower level of anxiety (Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021). Humanities students are more anxious than science students in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) contexts (Li, 2024), while this gap is less noticeable in general EFL contexts (Liu, 2023).

The pressure to perform and fear of being wrong leads to anxiety, which hinders performance (Li, 2024; Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021). Empathetic feedback, collaboration, and positive teacher-student relationships are some of the measures that can be taken to mitigate these problems (Mustafa et al., 2025; Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021). Generative AI and gamified learning provide safe, non-judgemental learning spaces, but can also amplify anxiety due to AI's ambiguity (Jamshed et al., 2024) and detector misidentification (Hadra, 2026).

Loneliness (N=4) was less common but was relevant in the context of the transition to remote learning during the pandemic. Students reported feelings of isolation, of lacking interactions and of wanting to be able to communicate in person (Kerras & Essayahi, 2022; Kanoksilapatham, 2021; Hundarenko et al., 2022). Multilingual learners also felt psychological isolation when they were trying to negotiate themselves in the midst of social stereotypes or an environmental misunderstanding (Wang et al., 2021).

3.1.2 Learner subjectivity

Professional identity (N=4) refers to the internalisation of professional attributes by FL learners. Teacher-guided autonomous work is essential for professional adaptation (Baideldinova et al., 2021). Near-peer feedback helps senior pre-service teachers develop pedagogical responsibility (Mustafa et al., 2025), while gamification fosters the creative mindset needed for their careers (Matviienko et al., 2023). Strong professional consciousness also prompts

learners to actively internalise specialised knowledge when generic curricula fail to meet their academic needs (Kohnke et al., 2022).

The most frequent sub-dimension of subjectivity was Cultural Awakening (N=8). It implies a rethinking of one's native culture (Zhang & Lütge, 2023), a development of intercultural empathy (Barili & Byram, 2021; Uryu, 2025), and the critical analysis of cultural stereotypes（Uryu, 2025). Classroom cultural reflection through intercultural encounters allows for the modification of the students' cultural views. Critical cultural awareness can be formed through traditional stylistic analysis (Rezk, 2026) and classical literature instruction (Khimich & Terentieva, 2023), and also in technological ways such as international collaboration and cultural comparison in virtual exchanges (Polyakova & Lovrović, 2024). Wang et al. (2021) highlight the relationship between patriotism and language learning in an era of increased nationalism. Uryu (2025) advises that the absence of intercultural empathy can cause learners to inadvertently reinforce cultural stereotypes.

Subjectivity Empowerment (N=5) promotes critical thinking and independence (N=5). It is linked to humanistic pedagogy and is reflected in learning (Guan, 2025; Wang et al., 2021; Dudau, 2024). Guan (2025) refers to the development of a feminist discourse, critical thinking, and the rejection of Confucian patriarchal standards in female EFL learners. Poor pupils shift from instrumentalism to humanism, valuing language for self-awareness, cultural enrichment and global empathy rather than professional development (Wang et al., 2021). The various emotive personas in L1 and L2 writing indicate that FL learning cultivates subjectivity within a sociocultural framework (Dudau et al., 2024). The subjective experience focus improves self-efficacy and agency through meaning-centred education and near-peer feedback (Chen et al., 2021; Musafa, 2025).

3.2 Technology influence in humanistic focus in foreign language education

As indicated in Table 5, the technological impact on the humanistic focus is formed by two dimensions, emotional impact and subjective impact, with four sub-dimensions.

Table 5: Dimensions of Technology Influence

Dimension	Sub-Dimension (Code)	Literature (No.)
Technology Affective Impact	Positive Affective Impact (PTA)	2, 4, 5, 6, 15, 18, 24, 30, 33, 40
	Negative Affective Impact (NTA)	15, 18, 19, 20, 21, 29
Technology Subjective Impact	Positive Subjective Impact (PTI)	2, 6, 12, 15, 18, 19
	Negative Subjective Impact (NTS)	6, 15, 18, 19, 20

3.2.1 Technology Influence on Learner's Affective Domain

The affective benefits of technology-enhanced language training are both good (N=10) and bad (N=6). Students in gamified, AI-supported, or virtual classroom environments experience learning as fun and exciting (Korkmaz & Akbıyık, 2024; Matviienko et al., 2023; Zimik et al., 2024). They demonstrate increased motivation and intercultural interactions (Matviienko et al., 2023; Zimik, Khan & Waluyo, 2024; Polyakova & Lovrović, 2024). Virtual classroom and Web-Enhanced Language Learning views, improvements in WTC, and engagement (Alkathiri et al., 2021; Al Mukhallafi, 2024) have supported the positive attitudes towards technology-mediated environments.

Technology provides a psychologically safe setting (Guan, Zhang & Gu, 2025; Hundarenko et al., 2022; Korkmaz & Akbıyık, 2024) and decreases linguistic anxiety (Alharbi & Al-Ahdal, 2025). In traditional settings, "some students felt neglected due to the teacher's perception bias" while AI "improved their willingness to communicate" (Guan, Zhang & Gu, 2025, p. 325). Introverted learners said it "allows us to communicate more easily and make mistakes recklessly since we are dealing with a robot" (Korkmaz & Akbıyık, 2024, p. 10), similar to students who felt "much more confident when speaking in front of our laptops" (Hundarenko et al., 2022, p. 56).

However, this has resulted in the sacrifice of the connections between teachers and students, and emotional touchpoints (Kanoksilapatham, 2021; Kerras & Essayahi, 2022; Lyu et al., 2025). "WTC becomes weak when "many classmates are shy to answer, thus making the lecture awkward" (Hundarenko et al., 2022, p. 54). Teachers find that "text-based interaction is difficult to convey emotions and tone", and lacks "vivid communication and ideological collisions" (Lyu et al., 2025, p. 616). Technology fails to offer "human likeness in the interactions" (Guan, Zhang & Gu, 2025, p. 326), which leads to feelings of loneliness. One student felt "lonely, missing the opportunities to interact with her peers in

person" (Kanoksilapatham, 2021, p. 11). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the students experienced a "lack of social interaction… having a deep effect on mental health" (Kerras & Essayahi, 2022, p. 43). Another observation from ChatGPT is that it is not aware of culturally embedded words and phrases (Jamshed et al., 2024, p. 3841).

3.2.2 Technology Influence on Subjectivity

Positive Technology Subjective Impact (N=6) is a combination of greater confidence in learning, respect for individual needs and assistance for marginalised learners. As for confidence, 61.8% of the EFL students agreed that "ChatGPT enhances a person's confidence in his/her academic performance" (M = 3.72/5) (Jamshed et al., 2024, p. 3841). Virtual classrooms provide the temporal and geographic flexibility to meet the individual demands of students (Alkathiri et al. (2021). EFL students expressed a high degree of acceptability of the chatbot (M=3.83/5) and believed that it addressed their specific learning goals (M=3.86/5), created specialised resources and offered timely feedback (Alharbi & Al-Ahdal, 2025).

Similarly, 69.8% of the respondents agreed that ChatGPT can fulfil some learning needs (Jamshed et al., 2024). Technology is highly helpful, especially for low-proficiency pupils (Dashkina et al., 2022; Guan et al., 2025). The CSCL settings were most supportive of low-proficiency students (Dashkina et al., 2022). The learner with poor competency (pre-test 4.5) found that GenAI offered them sufficient time to read and understand. The highly proficient student (pre-test 6.0) stated that GenAI did not provide them with enough time "for using more complex sentence structures" (Guan et al., 2025, p. 10). Technology also helps underprivileged students, such as introverts, limited proficiency pupils (Guan et al. 2025) and students with disabilities (Hundarenko et al. 2022).

Negative Technology Subjective Impact (N=5) is comprised mainly of cognitive fatigue, the impairment of critical thinking and poor self-discipline. Students said that prompt engineering was "…tiresome because I had to control every conversation and… think of different prompts to get what I needed" (Guan et al., 2025, p. 11). Too much reliance on technology may lead to "diminished critical thinking" (Alharbi & Al-Ahdal, 2025, p. 2).

Additionally, 64.1% of EFL students agreed that "an over-reliance on ChatGPT for answers could hinder students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills" (M = 3.86/5). (Jamshed et al., 2024, p. 3841). In an OER course, 45 of 189 students (23.81%) accessed all online lectures (Kanoksilapatham, 2021, p. 136) These problems are compounded by systemic ones: students were "much more

distracted" by online education, with "technical issues" standing in the way of engagement (Hundarenko et al., 2022, p. 53; Kanoksilapatham, 2021, p. 10).

3.3 Strategies applied in humanistic foreign landuage education principles

Three core strategies and seven sub-dimensions were identified as shown in Table 6: Student-Centred, Interpersonal Connectivity, and Empowerment-Driven Assessment.

Table 6: Pedagogical Strategies for Humanistic FL Education

Dimension	Sub-Dimension (Code)	Literature (No.)
Student-Centred (STC)	Student-Centred Meaning (STCM)	2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 23, 27, 29, 35, 37, 40
	Student-Centred Limitations (STCL)	1, 3, 15, 18, 20, 23, 29, 31
Interpersonal Connectivity (IC)	Teacher-Student Interpersonal Connectivity (PIC)	4, 6, 14, 24, 27, 29, 30, 36, 40
	Student-Student Interpersonal Connectivity (SIC)	12, 21, 26, 31, 33
Empowerment-Driven Assessment (EA)	Empowerment-Driven Assessment - Agency (EAA)	3, 7, 17, 27, 33
	Empowerment-Driven Assessment - Cognition (EAC)	27, 37

3.3.1 Student-centered instruction

Student-Centred Meaning (N=11) involves learner empowerment and independent control, which are supported by technology-based training like gamified learning, AI-supported learning and online learning as mentioned by Zimik et al. (2024), Alharbi and Al-Ahdal (2025) and Alkathiri et al. (2021). Educational innovations are presented, such as SIWT (Baideldinova et al. 2021), the SPA model (Luo et al. 2023), and the TLC cycle (Lopez-Ozieblo 2021). The goal is that students acquire a "active, questioning and evidence-based relation to literature" (Rezk, 2026, p. 1).

The instructor should be a "course designer and organiser, learning facilitator and instruction deliverer" (Lyu et al., 2025, p. 618). Specifically, the results of cross-cultural comparison reveal that there are different interpretations: involvement and motivation are highlighted in the Chinese context, whereas interactive communication seems to be at the forefront in the Russian setting. This finding is also echoed in other studies as Chinese students are usually passive learners in the classroom and often play the role of "receivers" (Lyu et al., 2025; Kohnke et al., 2022).

There are student-centred limitations (N=8) which include competence-related and affective costs. ESL students who do not have self-discipline require higher teacher monitoring in terms of competency (Kanoksilapatham, 2021; Hundarenko et al., 2022). The students confessed they "lacked self-discipline" (Kanoksilapatham, 2021, p. 11) and were "monitored and pushed by teachers" (Hundarenko et al., 2022). The majority (84%) preferred a "hybrid model combining traditional classrooms with online learning" (Hundarenko et al., 2022). A cognitive difficulty in low-proficient learners becoming autonomous was that "I had to control every conversation … and think about different prompts to get what I need" (Guan, Zhang & Gu, 2025, p. 11). The efficiency of tailored help is contingent upon personal ability (Abdullateef & Muhammedzein, 2021).

From a teacher's perspective, a student-centred classroom requires a greater cost in both design and management (Lyu et al., 2025). While pre-service teachers recognise the need for a student-centred classroom, they are unable to apply it effectively (Kohnke et al., 2022). The affective side of student-centred activities involves unpleasant feelings (Mustafa et al. 2025; Hundarenko et al. 2022). In the near-peer feedback, the junior students "felt anxious as...their writing skills would be judged by their senior counterparts" (Mustafa et al., 2025, pp. 85) and the senior students "doubted their abilities to provide constructive feedback" (p. 86). The phrase "loneliness" was mentioned in connection with online learning as well (Hundarenko et al., 2022, p. 58).

3.3.2 Interpersonal connectivity-oriented teaching

The Teacher-Student Interaction (N=9) is manifested in emotional transmission (Korkmaz & Akbıyık, 2024; Zimik, Khan & Waluyo, 2024), incomparable value guidance (Matviienko et al., 2023; Lyu et al., 2025; Alharbi & Al-Ahdal, 2025), and strategic learning guidance (Akylbekuulu et al., 2024). It should be noted that authoritarian teaching practices (including public reprimands or forceful requests to participate) may have a negative effect on the relationship and the students' sense of security (Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021), while moderate support may have a positive effect on a collaborative atmosphere where the students are secure (Lopez-Ozieblo, 2021; Akylbekuulu et al., 2024). However, relationship benefits are lessened when the instructional focus is too much on practical goals (Taha et al., 2025).

Student-Student Interaction (N=5) is an emotional buffer, and a location for identity construction. Students reported feeling "alone in front of the screen" (Kerras & Essayahi, 2022), and group activities using affective education and psycholinguistic methods served to lessen the students' isolation. Peer

interactions provided "psychological healing and professional enlightenment". Junior students felt "enthusiastic," "supportive," and "professional," with the relief of their anxiety. Senior students identified the teaching profession as playing a part (Mustafa et al., 2025). The quantitative results are in line with the high scores of "peer assessment" (M = 4.60) and "expressing opinions" (M = 4.65) reported by Luo et al. (2023). But it's crucial that organisations are organised in a certain way. Autonomous grouping is less effective than organised grouping when students need to make progress. For affective and cognitive engagement, students grouped by academic differences did better compared to other grouping strategies (Dashkina et al. 2022). Chinese EFL students also scored the lowest in group learning with six learning styles (M = 33.16 /50), and the male students' scores were higher than their female counterparts ($p = 0.020$). The scores of engineering students were preferred to those of the social sciences and humanities students ($p < 0.001$) (Liu, 2023).

3.3.3 Empowerment-driven assessment

Empowerment-oriented assessment (N=5) focuses on empowering learners' actions instead of verifying them. Formative assessments help students choose the route of their learning and helps them to become learning objects, transforming them into learning participants (Antonova & Tyrkheeva, 2021; Chebiseva, 2019). Using scaffolded guidance, the "learner moved well between tasks within the zone of proximal development and prolonged the potentials to perform complex tasks without any aid" (Abdullateef & Muhammedzein, 2021, p.289).

Academic performance (Cohen's d = 1.04) and writing confidence (Cohen's d = 1.18) improved significantly when knowledge surveys were used, allowing the students the autonomy to decide whether or not to adopt their feedback (Lopez-Ozieblo, 2021). This idea is developed further in the SPA model: the dynamic assessment promotes the students' self-correcting, and peer assessment makes students the evaluator (Luo et al., 2023). But these tools are challenging as they may detect EFL learners' texts as AI-generated, which violates the learner's rights and affects their learning potential.

The Cognitive Empowerment Assessment (N=2) is not a score-based assessment, but a metacognition and intercultural ethics-based assessment. The low levels of attainment were more likely to overestimate their ability to perform the task and the high levels of attainment were less likely to overestimate their ability, indicating that the value may be in helping students recognise that they do not know how to do the task and that they are able to adjust their self-judgement (Lopez-Ozieblo, 2021, p. 10). The high academic scores do not necessarily correspond to intercultural empathy. Based on the comparison of two

high-scoring papers on Japanese hikikomori, it can be suggested that essentialist and Orientalist discourse exists in one of the papers (Uryu, 2025). This implies that discourse analysis can be used as a formative assessment of IC EC.

4. Discussion

There are some studies regarding particular dimensions (He et al. 2025; Huang & Liu, 2025; Li et al. 2024), or narrative reviews with no systematic dimensions (Amini et al. 2025; Shakirova & Valeeva, 2016), or overgeneralisation (Shakirova & Valeeva, 2016). This study reviewed 40 empirical studies in-depth and identified some of the key aspects of learner-centred humanism in FL teaching in HE.

Previous research suggests that the use of technology is positively associated with autonomy, competence and relatedness (Annamalai et al., 2024), and can have a dual influence, rising and falling with anxiety (Huang & Liu, 2025). The study sheds light on the limits of this dual effect. The affective supporting of technology mostly occurs at the level of autonomy and competence, such as enhancing confidence (Jamshed et al., 2024), offering a safe space for marginalised students (Guan et al., 2025; Hundarenko et al., 2022), as well as easing anxiety with the provision of a non-judgmental space (Korkmaz & Akbıyık, 2024; Guan et al., 2025), which is consistent with the integrated value of cognitive and teaching presence discovered by Li et al. (2024). But there is a paradox in the technology: this support may come at the cost of true relationships, and the anxiety pathway is exactly where relatedness is being lost.

Online learning is superficial and there is no emotional connection between the teacher and their students (Guan et al., 2025). This causes loneliness (Kanoksilapatham, 2021). Social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence are three fundamental characteristics of language learning. Li et al. (2024) argued that the technology-mediated environment lacks existential relatedness (being seen and felt by a real subject), but it can offer functional relatedness (being responded to). Therefore, in order to establish the boundaries of SDT in the context of technology mediated FL education, the essence of the technological paradox is not in the point of good and negative features but in the structural contradiction between autonomy/competence fulfilment and relatedness demands.

In a broader sense, technology can be seen as an "amplifier" of the teaching-learning interactions between people, which increases the opposing forces already present in the human-to-human teaching-learning relationship: autonomy – reliance, and empowerment – the impairment of affectivity. This is an essential conclusion; it is the educational relationships that it provides that are best served by technology's use, not the technology, and these relationships

must be given attention and altered. This prediction is especially relevant in an AI-driven world. This study revealed that technology-provided affective support is especially important for marginalised groups such as low-proficient learners and introverted students (Guan et al., 2025; Hundarenko et al., 2022; Dashkina et al., 2022). However, at the same time, technology can also enhance educational discrepancies as students with lower self-regulation may be more likely to face cognitive challenges when not supported by their teacher (Kanoksilapatham, 2021). AI detection tools may systematically fail to recognise non-native writers (Hadra et al., 2026). Technology is therefore no guarantee of equality, and the inequalities of power and competence between players in educational connections can be magnified by technology.

The findings of this study have reaffirmed that the practice of humanistic FL education is a type of "Bounded Freedom," as empowerment is not a total decentralisation but also entails significant affective costs and capacity limitations (Kanoksilapatham, 2021; Lyu et al., 2025; Mustafa et al., 2025; Guan et al., 2025). This is a more theoretical development of the technological contradiction above and a more comprehensive study of the overall subject of humanistic activity in the technology setting.

Based on this, an integrated interpretation of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Rogers' (1969) notion of the "facilitator" is presented from a humanistic perspective. Although learner autonomy empowerment is one of the key principles of humanism (Rogers, 1969), students explicitly mentioned their lack of autonomy and the need for teacher supervision and external constraints (Kanoksilapatham, 2021), as well as their preference for hybrid models that incorporate some traditional classroom elements (Hundarenko et al., 2022). They also experienced a greater cognitive burden (Guan et al., 2025).

This is consistent with the scaffolding function of Sociocultural Theory when the learners' cognitive skills are not yet established, where the delegation of autonomy alone is not sufficient to enable learning, and the teachers' scaffolding is still required. Meanwhile, the irreplaceable interpersonal nature of second language teacher-student (L2 TT) and peer interactions has been confirmed as a cornerstone of humanistic FL education (Korkmaz & Akbıyık, 2024; Lyu et al., 2025). Yet the quality of these interactions is heavily tied to interactional styles, which may result in negative teacher-student relations when the teachers are authoritarian (Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021) or there is the transmission of anxiety in peer feedback, pointing to the effect. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is not only a cognitive area but also an affective space where learners try to experiment and take chances within the sphere of supportive security.

Learning is seen as a process of 'recognizing and responding' to the affordances (i.e. possibilities) of situations, which can be shaped in the context of education (Schoon, 2018; van Lier, 2010; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). The present study develops this theoretical perspective from a human perspective. Firstly, the main sub-dimension of subjectivity, "Cultural Awakening," means that the agency of the learner in FL learning is reflected not only in the acquisition of skills but, more crucially, in the process of transforming their worldview and cultural viewpoint. This finding not only re-affirms the fundamental importance of humanism in addressing the tension between the development of vocational skills and humanistic literacy (Mielkov et al., 2021) but also the fundamental importance of the emphasis on nurturing the whole person in FL education, which is contrary to the objectification of individuals by technological rationality (Ashworth et al., 2004) and the degradation of human values (Carr et al., 2023).

Second, in contrast to the prior research that focused on characteristics such as the teachers' direction, attitudes towards technology, classroom setting, etc., while assessment has also been discussed in many studies (Liu & Chao, 2017; He et al., 2024; Peng, 2011), this study highlights assessment as a specific benefit of humanistic FL education. This is not for confirming the score, but for cultivating the learners' ability to make autonomous decisions (Lopez-Ozieblo, 2021; Antonova & Tyrkheeva, 2021) and gain intercultural empathetic competence (Uryu, 2025). This study highlights the importance of cultural background as a situational affordance that directly impacts the interpretation and application of "student-centredness" (Borzova et al. 2023; Lyu et al. 2025; Kohnke et al. 2022). It emphasises the need to carefully consider cultural relevance when implementing humanistic education in a globalised context.

5. Conclusion

Three conclusions to this study are presented. Firstly, the concept of language learning as humanistic is redefined as a double commitment to the learner affect and subjectivity, making the 'whole person' an educable object. Second, there is a significant technological paradox; technology fosters feelings of independence and competence but it cannot replicate real emotional resonance, hence a built-in contradiction between "need fulfilment" and "relatedness deprivation." Third, humanistic practice is shown to be "bounded freedom": it is empowerment with affective costs and capacity limits, which highlights the continued significance of the educator's position as a facilitator.

There are a number of limitations to be noted. Only Open Access publications were reviewed, which may have created selection bias. Only Scopus and Web of Science databases were searched, and only English language articles were

included, potentially missing other relevant research in other languages. The 2020-2026 period will pick up post-pandemic changes but may not necessarily show longer-term trends. The results are specific to FL settings in HE, so care needs to be taken when generalising.

Humanistic principles for policymakers should be part of technology-driven reforms so then the relational and affective aspects of language learning are not lost in the efficiency of technology. Multidimensional evaluation systems must consider the consequences of technology on relatedness and social presence and be aware of the potential increase in inequities through technology, such as increased cognitive load for less self-regulated learners or systematic misidentification by AI tools. In the context of educators, PD should foster three capacities: fluency with technology, maintaining an empathetic and facilitative role, and critical awareness of and the ability to counter the inequities in technology.

Finally, significant learning happens in a limited, but humanistically free, zone of support, and educational equality is not about access to technology but about the protection of learning potential.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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