

The impact of humanized materials on EFL learner interest

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Tóm tắt

Global textbooks, despite its popularity, have been criticized due to its prioritization of cognitive learning over the affective domain, leading to proposals for material adaptation through the use of humanized materials. This study explored the impact of humanized materials on learner interest in the English as a foreign language classroom compared to textbook activities. Sixteen non-English majored students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University took part in an Alternating Treatment Design experiment. Five humanized activities were developed from five chosen activities in Personal Best B1+ textbook and both types of activities were alternated systematically within and between classes. A six-point Likert scale survey was employed to gather data and statistical analysis was conducted. The results indicated that humanized activities consistently generated higher interest than textbook activities across three dimensions, namely affect, value, and knowledge. Furthermore, humanizing materials can enhance interest in both interesting and non-interesting materials.

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1 Introduction

Global textbooks have been more widely used compared to other kinds of instructional materials; they are prevalent and essential to English language teaching [1]. This widespread use is attributed to the numerous benefits that textbooks bring to teachers and students. For teachers, they provide a clear, well-organized scheme, while for students, they offer the main source of English language exposure that students need and create a sense of autonomy for students. Nevertheless, a large number of textbooks are believed to have numerous drawbacks; since they are designed for global markets, they often do not match the specific interests of local students. In Viet Nam, textbooks remain a well-received resource for English language teaching [2], so to tackle this shortcoming, we have to explore ways to maximize their effectiveness in

achieving educational goals. A remedy to this problem has been proposed as teaching materials. Therefore, this study seeks to improve EFL textbooks by implementing a specific adaptation approach known as humanizing textbook materials.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Learner Interest

Interest is generated by an interaction with an object that has personal importance within a particular context and is composed of three elements: positive affect, value and knowledge [3]. Positive affect relates to favourable feelings associated with the object; value refers to its personal importance; and knowledge is a wish to gain a deeper understanding of it. The significance of each element may differ according to varying stages of interest development. In the initial stages, affect is of

more significance. Later, as students' knowledge about the object increases, value is of higher importance. Interest does not lie within the individual or the object but is generated by the intricate interaction between the different features of the object, the individual, and the setting. In the realm of language learning, this object encompasses linguistic and non-linguistic content, as well as different kinds of activities that students participate in during and outside class hours.

2.2 Humanistic Language Teaching

Humanistic education focuses on educating the whole person to fulfil learners' potential [4]. This approach recognizes the affective dimension of language learning. The key principles include: treating learners as humans rather than just language students, acknowledging both the cognitive and the affective dimensions of their learning experience by considering their emotional responses to the culture, language and learning environment, valuing learners' autonomy and knowledge, prioritizing activities that learners are willing to take part in, encouraging learners to convey their own ideas instead of mimicking model sentences, relying on methods that centered on the individual, and their personal perspectives and experiences are regarded as the foundation for lesson content, language use and communication, and teachers take on the role of facilitators, helping learners in self-discovery.

2.3 Humanized Materials

Humanized materials (or humanistic materials) are conceptualized as materials that make use of and stimulate students' positive emotions and link classroom events – what is happening during the lesson driven by the materials – to learners' minds (e.g. their knowledge, skills, experiences, opinions, thoughts) and learners' lives (e.g. their wants, needs, contexts, and real-world resources) [5]. These materials have two features: (1) they stimulate and make use of positive emotions, and (2) the teaching content is meaningful and relevant to the learners. The first feature consists of three sub-features: Materials should allow learners to feel relaxed by incorporating content which is relevant to learners' cultural backgrounds, should arouse learners' interest and foster enjoyment by using content

which is both novel and easily understandable, and should give room for 'care' by spurring learners to 'share'. The second feature involves four sub-features: Materials should spur learners to make use of their prior experiences and knowledge, should align with learners' wants/needs, should encourage learners to make use of real-life resources, and should facilitate information processing by evoking authentic responses.

To design humanistic materials, five practical approaches have been proposed: (1) Using learners' personal input, (2) Using local materials, (3) Experientialising materials, (4) Vocationalising materials, (5) Contextualising materials [5].

2.4 Prior Research on Humanizing Materials

Several researchers have suggested humanizing textbooks in their works. One researcher noted that in his 45 years of teaching English, he had encountered innumerable textbooks that needed to be humanized as they did not engage students and relate to the students' lives [6]. He suggested that teachers can humanize textbooks by minimizing non-humanistic content and enhancing sections that help students learn through thinking, feeling and doing.

Likewise, in another study, it is argued that textbook dialogues usually depict an unrealistically idealized world characterized by smooth problem-free interactions and polite, predictable exchanges in the target language [7]. However, this idealized depiction fails to reflect real-life interactions as in the real world we often have to tackle misunderstandings and imperfect behavior when using a foreign language. To address this, the author suggests humanizing textbook dialogues through minor changes, including altering the register, and extending the dialogue. These suggestions help to counteract elements in textbooks that are not humanistic and bring the idea of humanizing materials into practice in English language teaching.

Apart from these studies which directly use the words 'humanistic' or 'humanizing', the concept of humanizing English textbooks has also been explored in recent studies by several researchers even though these terms were not mentioned explicitly. For instance, in Viet Nam, a study on how cultures are represented in Vietnamese EFL textbooks concluded

that textbooks should not only present linguistic content but also foster students' cultural awareness and emotional engagement with the language [8]. Another study suggested that while current textbooks follow a communicative approach, they often lack depth in cultural content and emotional engagement strategies, which indicates a need for improved textbook design that addresses both linguistic skills and the affective dimensions of learning [9].

From the literature review, to date, although scholars acknowledge the importance of humanizing materials and emphasize the need for its consideration in materials development, very few studies have been carried out worldwide and in Viet Nam to elaborate on how to put the idea of humanizing textbooks into practice and to investigate the effects of humanized materials on students' interest. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by proposing to humanize textbook materials and examining the impact of this on EFL students in Nguyen Tat Thanh University (NTTU), Viet Nam. The following research question is addressed:

What are the differences between the learners' interest under the two conditions: textbook activities and humanistic activities?

3 Research Method

3.1 Research Approach and Design

The research approach and design in this study was similar to those used in [5] because it has proven to effectively measure learner interest, increasing the likelihood of obtaining valid results. Quantitative approach was incorporated into an Alternating Treatment Design – ATD. A quantitative approach allows researchers to precisely measure differences in outcomes using standardized tools like Likert-scale surveys, which ensures objective, numerical data for direct comparison between the two types of activity [10]. This approach is also time-efficient and aligns with ATD's structured framework, which requires repeated, balanced exposure to treatments. Two classes, A and B, took part in 5 lessons. In each of these lessons, students were taught using two different types of materials: textbook activities and humanized

activities. These two types of materials were alternated throughout this research, and their sequence was balanced in a systematic way.

After each lesson, students were asked to complete a questionnaire. The 6-point Likert-scale questionnaire from [5] was also adopted as it has been validated and reliability-tested. The items in this questionnaire involved three main elements of interest: affect (items 1, 3 and 4), value (item 5) and knowledge (items 2, 6 and 7).

3.2 Setting and Participants

This study is carried out at NTTU, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, where non-English majored students are required to join several General English courses, each lasting 6-7 weeks and using Personal Best textbooks. Because this study used ATD, a single-subject design, a small sample size was required. Sixteen non-English majored students at the intermediate level (holding an 4.0-5.0 band score in IELTS or equivalent) were chosen from 5 intact classes, all of which followed the same English textbook “Personal Best B1+” for the English curriculum. Of these students, 6 were male and 10 were female, all aged 20 years.

3.3 The materials

Five speaking activities covering general topics and lasting about 30 minutes were chosen from the textbook Personal Best B1+ and then five humanistic activities were designed based on those textbook activities. These humanistic activities were developed by incorporating the features and the conceptualisation of humanistic materials and by using five practical approaches presented in the literature review.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Five data collection sessions were conducted, each involving the students participating in a textbook activity and a humanistic one. Each activity lasted around 30 minutes, starting with a five-minute lead-in and instructions from the teacher, followed by students interaction for 20 minutes, and ending with a five-minute teacher-student interaction. Following this, the students filled out a questionnaire and then after a one-hour break, the same procedure was repeated with the other material. The teacher's role was kept to a minimum so as to isolate the materials as the primary variable affecting student interest.

3.5 Analysis

Data from the survey were entered into SPSS version 20 and analyzed for means and standard deviations. The data trends of the textbook material treatments and the humanistic material treatments were then directly compared. A treatment is considered ‘superior’ if the values of data collection sessions (data-point values) of one treatment consistently differ from those of the other treatment [11]. To assess this consistency, the present study employed the percentage of non-overlapping data (PND) method put forward by [11], in which the researcher compared the first data-point value of the textbook material treatment with that of the humanistic material treatment, and continued this process for all data points. The PND method is particularly suitable when both conditions are tested an equal number of times [12], as was the case in the current paper.

Table 1 Learner Interest during Textbook Activity 1&2 Compared to Humanistic Activity 1&2

	TB1		HM1		Sig.	TB2		HM2		Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD	
Overall mean	3.56	0.63	5.43	0.48	0.000	4.27	0.33	5.46	0.49	0.001

Note: Item 3 is reversed; TB = Textbook activity; HM = Humanistic activity; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; interest is high when $M > 5$, medium when $4 < M \leq 5$, low when $3 < M \leq 4$, very low when $M \leq 3$. With regard to affect, while only about 38% found TB1 partially interesting, all of them agreed or strongly agreed that HM1 was interesting (item 1). Approximately 69% felt bored or partially bored when doing TB1, whereas no participants reported feeling so when doing HM1 (item 3). In addition, only about 38% partially enjoyed doing TB1, as opposed to 100% who enjoyed or completely enjoyed doing HM1 (item 4).

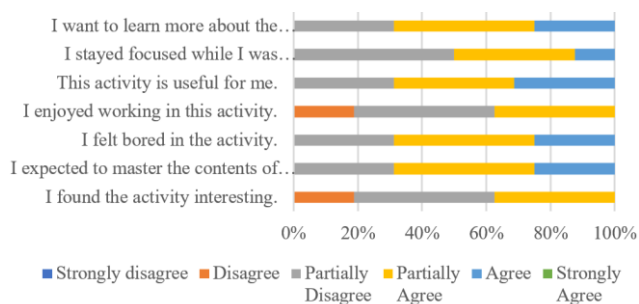


Figure 1 Distribution of learners' responses for textbook activity 1

In addition, Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test is also used to investigate if the difference between learners' interest under each treatment is significant. This test is considered appropriate as it is a test utilized to make comparisons when participants are exposed to multiple conditions [13].

4 Findings

4.1 Learner Interest in Session 1

Table 1 shows that, overall, learners' interest in relation to textbook activity 1 (TB1) was low ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.63$), whereas learners' interest in relation to humanistic activity 1 (HM1) was high ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 0.48$). This difference in interest is also significant as the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test indicated that the p value was lower than 0.05.

Value yields similar results, with approximately 69% considering TB1 useful or partially useful, compared to about 81% who perceived HM1 to be useful or very useful (item 5).

Regarding knowledge, most of the students (roughly 69%) expected or partially expected to master the contents of TB1 and wanted or partially wanted to learn more about the knowledge and skills used in it. However, for the humanistic activity, a higher proportion (about 75%) strongly agreed or agreed that they expected to master the contents and expressed a desire to learn more (item 2 & 7). Additionally, while half of them did not stay focused during TB1, all of them stay focused during HM1 (item 6).

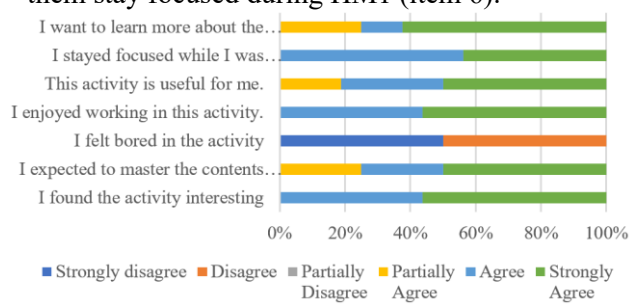


Figure 2. Distribution of learners' responses for humanistic activity 1

4.2 Learner Interest in Session 2

Table 1 indicates that students doing TB2 showed a medium level of interest ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.33$), while students doing HM2 demonstrated a high level of interest ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 0.49$). Moreover, there was a significant difference in interest, with a p value of 0.001.

Regarding affect, while the majority of students (about 69%) only found TB2 partially interesting and partially enjoyed doing it (56,3%), most of them (about 88%) found HM2 interesting or highly interesting and enjoyed or completely enjoyed doing it (items 1&4).

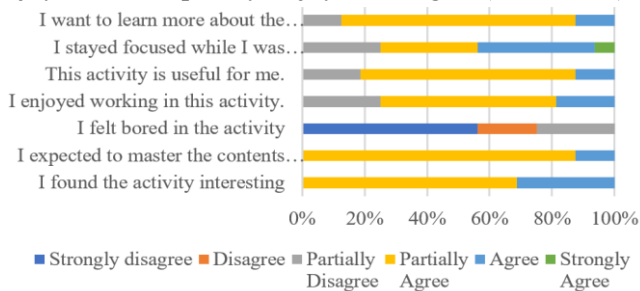


Figure 3 Distribution of learners' responses for textbook activity 2

4.3 Learner Interest in Session 3

Similar to the previous session, in this session, a medium level of interest was reported during TB3 ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.23$), in comparison with a high level of interest during HM3 ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 0.33$). The p value was also lower than 0.05, indicating a significant difference in interest.

Table 2 Learner Interest during Textbook Activity 3&4 Compared to Humanistic Activity 3&4

	TB3		HM3		Sig.	TB4		HM4		Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD	
Overall mean	4.11	0.23	5.17	0.33	0.000	4.00	0.20	5.54	0.14	0.000

Note: Item 3 is reversed; TB = Textbook activity; HM = Humanistic activity; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation

In terms of affect, HM3 elicited more positive responses compared to TB3. Students found HM3 more interesting and enjoyable, with most responses (81-88%) falling into the Agree-Strongly Agree categories (items 1&4). They also did not feel bored during HM3 (100%), as opposed to 31% who partially felt bored during TB3 (item 3).

As for value, over 80% of the students considered HM3 useful (agree and strongly agree), while most of the students (75%) only partially agreed that TB3 was useful (item 5).

More than half (56%) strongly disagreed that they felt bored during TB2 compared to 63% during HM2 (item 3).

In terms of value and knowledge, most of the responses in relation to TB2 (69-88)% fell into the Partially Agree category (except item 6 where responses were spread out). Conversely, those regarding HM2 fell into either the Agree or Strongly Agree category, which indicates learners' certainty about the usefulness of HM2 and its impact on mastery, focus and further learning (items 2, 5, 6 & 7).

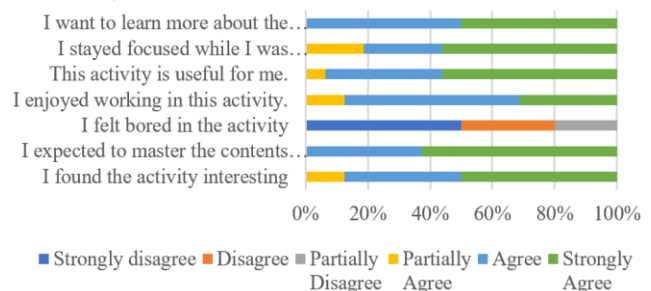


Figure 4 Distribution of learners' responses for humanistic activity 2

Knowledge elicited similar responses, with all students desiring to learn more about the knowledge and skills in HM3 (agree and strongly agree), in comparison with half expressing definite interest and the other half demonstrating partial interest in TB3 (item 7). Over 80% had an expectation or a strong expectation of mastery after participating in HM3, while over half only partially had this expectation after taking part in TB3 (item 2). Furthermore, HM3 also helped students stay more focused (75% agreed and 12.5% strongly agreed) compared to TB3 (50% agreed and 6.3% strongly agreed) (item 6).

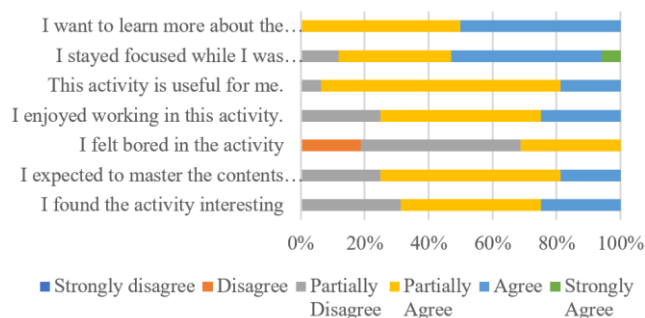


Figure 5. Distribution of learners' responses for textbook activity 3

4.4 Learner Interest in Session 4

As can be seen in Table 2, overall interest in TB4 was low ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.20$), while that in HM4 was high ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 0.14$). This difference in interest was also statistically significant, with a p value of 0.000.

As regards affect, students found HM4 more interesting, with 100% agreeing or strongly agreeing, in contrast to 69% only partially agreeing in TB4 (item 1). There was also a great percentage of students (88%) who did not or feel bored in HM4, as opposed to 93.8% who partially did not feel bored in TB4 (item 3). Additionally, HM4 had more students agreeing or

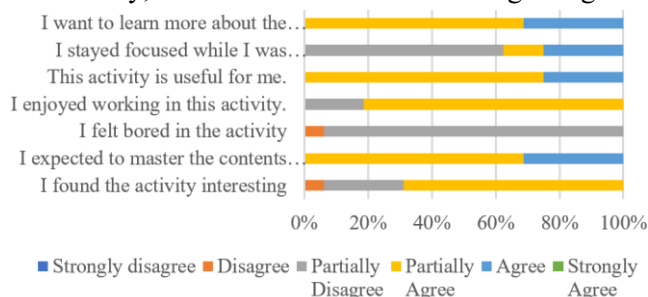


Figure 7. Distribution of learners' responses for textbook activity 4

4.5 Learner Interest in Session 5

Table 3 reveals that students reported a low level of interest in TB5 ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.24$). In contrast, HM5 garnered a high level of interest ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 0.32$), a difference that reached statistical significance ($p = 0.000$)

Table 3 Learner interest during textbook activity 5 compared to humanistic activity 5

	TB5		HM5		Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD	
Overall mean	3.96	0.24	5.22	0.32	0.000

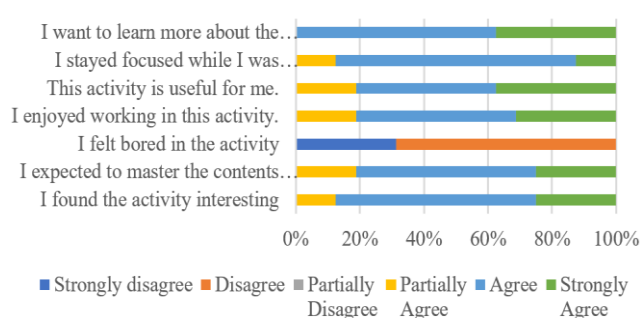


Figure 6. Distribution of learners' responses for humanistic activity 3

strongly agreeing that they enjoyed the activity (100% compared to 0%) (item 4).

As for value, a greater percentage of students appraised HM4 as useful or highly useful compared to TB4, 100% and 25%, respectively (item 5).

A similar trend was also observed in the third component of interest—knowledge. Students expressed a stronger expectation of mastering the content (item 2) and a greater desire to learn more (item 7) after participating in HM4 compared to TB4 (100% vs 31.3% agreeing or strongly agreeing). HM4 also appeared to help students stay more focused (100% vs 25%) (item 6).

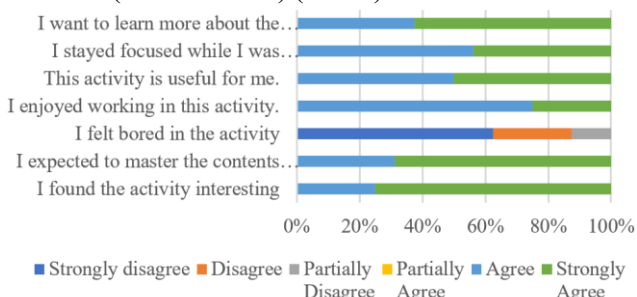


Figure 8. Distribution of learners' responses for humanistic activity 4

Note: Item 3 is reversed; TB = Textbook activity; HM = Humanistic activity; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation. Regarding affect, value and knowledge, most of the responses related to TB5 (roughly 56%-81%) clustered around the Partially Agree category (item 3 was reversed). Conversely, most of the responses for HM5 (approximately 75%-100%) were concentrated in the Agree or Strongly Agree categories. This indicates that HM5 consistently showed better results than TB5 across all assessed components, suggesting a more engaging, valuable, and effective learning experience.

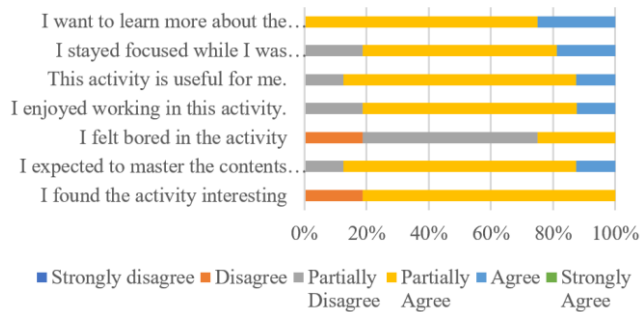


Figure 9 Distribution of learners' responses for textbook activity 5

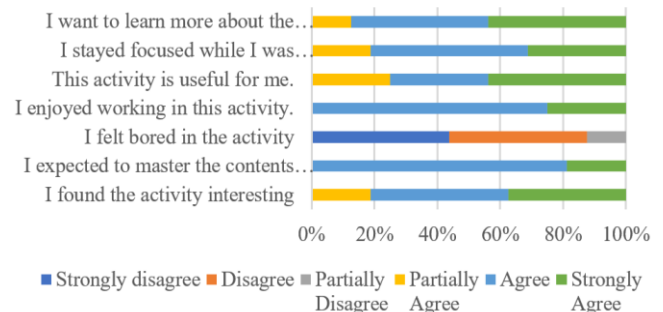


Figure 10. Distribution of learners' responses for humanistic activity 5

5 Discussion

Overall, the level of learner interest regarding textbook activities was quite variable, fluctuating between low (as in TB1, TB4, and TB5) and medium (as in TB2 and TB3). In comparison, humanistic activities consistently garnered a high degree of interest, with HM4 demonstrating the strongest appeal. This is in accordance with prior research which shows that student interest can shift in response to different materials that students had exposure to [5].

Furthermore, it is evident that the students' interest between the two treatments: interest in relation to humanistic activities was invariably greater than interest regarding textbook activities throughout all sessions (PND = 100%). This finding is consistent with what has been found in previous research: humanizing materials can enhance interest in both materials which are not interesting and materials which are already interesting [5].

Additionally, across various dimensions, including affect, value, and knowledge, HM activities consistently outperformed TB activities. HM activities elicited more positive affective responses from students, thus they were seen as more useful and promoted a stronger expectation of mastering the content and a greater desire to learn more. This is in line with previous research which also highlighted the benefits of humanistic education in fostering student-centered learning, enhancing engagement, and promoting holistic development [14].

The increased interest reported in HM activities can be deemed as an important catalyst for improved language

learning outcomes, leading to improvements in specific skills, such as speaking. Empirical studies have shown a positive correlation between learner interest and improved speaking outcomes, whereby students who express a higher level of interest tend to have better speaking scores and greater communicative competence [5, 15].

6. Conclusion

This study investigates the impact of humanized materials on EFL students at NTTU. The results show that humanistic activities consistently generated higher interest than textbook activities across three dimensions, namely affect, value, and knowledge. This increased interest is a crucial precursor to improved language learning outcomes, including specific skills such as speaking ability and communicative competence. These findings provide several practical implications for educators. Given the potential of humanistic activities, teachers should consider integrating these kinds of activities into their lessons to address not just cognitive but also affective dimensions of learning. They should also develop culturally-related materials that resonate with students' experiences so as to further enhance engagement.

Future studies could explore this issue further by exploring directly whether the increased interest generated by humanized activities leads to measurable improvements in language skills, which is regrettably beyond the scope of this paper. A different population could also be investigated, such as elementary school, secondary school or high school students. In addition,

interviews and classroom observations can be conducted in order to gain more insights into the interest experience and longitudinal studies can be carried out so as to determine whether learner interest in humanistic activities can be sustained over time and create sustainable learning motivation. Additionally,

examining the role of teacher training in implementing humanistic activities may reveal strategies for scaling these practices across institutions. These future directions would contribute to a deeper understanding of how humanizing materials can transform EFL education and meet students' diverse needs.

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Tác động của tài liệu thiết kế theo hướng nhân văn lên sự hứng thú của người học tiếng Anh

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Tóm tắt Mặc dù được sử dụng rộng rãi, sách giáo khoa đã bị chỉ trích vì ưu tiên khía cạnh nhận thức hơn là khía cạnh cảm xúc, dẫn tới những đề xuất điều chỉnh sách giáo khoa thông qua việc sử dụng tài liệu thiết kế theo hướng nhân văn hoá. Nghiên cứu này khám phá tác động của tài liệu thiết kế theo hướng nhân văn lên sự hứng thú của học viên trong lớp học tiếng Anh so với tài liệu trong sách giáo khoa. Có 16 sinh viên tiếng Anh không chuyên tại Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành tham gia một thí nghiệm theo thiết kế điều trị luân phiên. Năm hoạt động thiết kế theo hướng nhân văn được phát triển từ năm hoạt động chọn từ sách Personal Best B1+ và cả hai loại hoạt động được luân phiên một cách hệ thống trong từng lớp và giữa các lớp học. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua một bảng khảo sát thang đo Likert sáu mức độ và phân tích thống kê. Kết quả cho thấy hoạt động thiết kế theo hướng nhân văn liên tục đem lại mức độ hứng thú cao hơn so với hoạt động trong sách giáo khoa trên ba khía cạnh: cảm xúc, giá trị và kiến thức. Hơn nữa, việc thiết kế tài liệu theo hướng nhân văn có thể tăng sự hứng thú đối với tài liệu vốn không hấp dẫn và tài liệu đã có sẵn tính hấp dẫn.

Từ khóa sự hứng thú, giảng dạy ngôn ngữ theo hướng nhân văn, sách giáo khoa, tài liệu, tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ